

The Walk

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Her feet were swollen and bleeding, and numb from the pain and the cold. She took another small step. And another. And one more. She no longer felt the agony of the first few hours and now saw everything through a haze. Her three children were in sight just ahead; her husband was to her right. They were moving at Consuelo's pace, which was barely moving at all. She saw Mario smiling at her and smiled back. It wasn't much of a smile on the outside, but inside she was dancing. Her plan had worked!

They'd always gone on the pilgrimage to San Juan de los Lagos together, since long before the kids were born. Mario had actually been going every year since he was a baby with his mother and father and all his brothers and sisters. Clara and Don Lupe were old now, but they still went every year. How could they not go? How else were they going to say thank you to La Virgen—thank you for Mario's health. And maybe ask for a little something while they were there, maybe a few more customers for Don Lupe's serapes and weavings. His looms could work harder.

Mario had been sick. He got a fever last winter and was half delirious for days. He'd been getting better slowly, but had very little energy and had to rest often. Though still weak, he became obsessed with just one idea. "I'm going to San Juan to thank La Virgen, Consuelo. I have to go!"

She tried to reason with him—they'd have to walk for nine days! What if he should die along the way? "Without you, Mario, our children have no future." But it was no good, he was a stubborn man. "Very well, then," she said. "I also want to thank La Virgen, from the bottom of my heart, so I will walk to San Juan with you, as always. But this time, to show her my sincerity, I'll go barefoot."

Just before dawn one morning in January they walked through the silent streets of San Miguel, then hiked down to cross the lake by the light of the moon. Consuelo felt the first icy bite of the cobbles on the

soles of her naked feet and drew a sharp breath. Not for the first time (or the last), she wondered if she'd be able to go through with her plan. But there was no going back. Not now.

At daybreak they joined the main body of the pilgrimage, a huge river of people from all over the country, many from as far away as Mexico City. Some had been walking for more than twenty days. The land was rough and sparse, dry and stony and dusty. Later that morning they came to the first stop at Xochonostle, and made camp along the dry river bed, a great swarm of pilgrims taking refuge from the heat of the day. Girls from the village came bearing gifts of *gorditas del horno* and sweet *tamales*. The village children came and sat around the tents and the campfires, watching everything and talking just a little.

They rested during the afternoon, and later on after the moon rose they were on the move again. It wasn't really cold that night, but the temperature dropped as they approached the next stop at La Sauceda ranch. Consuelo's feet were raw and bloody and she washed them as soon as they made camp. They throbbed so much she could hardly sleep. She lay on her back, her hands knotted into fists, knowing she needed rest for the next day's ascent of El Cubilete, the mountain with the *Cristo* at the top, a gateway along the pilgrim's path. A few hours later they were off again. They walked across an old cornfield in the moonlight, waking every dog in town and setting off a barking frenzy, then stopped at Santa Teresa for breakfast. *Café de olla* never tasted so good. Consuelo watched Mario limp along beside her, leaning heavily on a stick. He looked pale, but as determined ever. Around the forecourt of the mountain statue there were little food stalls, and kids and dogs and donkeys. Pilgrims were perched all over the hillside, lighting cooking fires, gathering stones to weigh down their shelters, making chili sauce in a *molcajete*, and talking about the day.

The trip to San Juan means many things to many people. Some days are filled with hardship and some filled with beauty. The pilgrims walked for about ten hours a day across open fields, sometimes on dirt roads, sometimes for short periods on paved roads, through valleys and over hills and mountains. It could get cold in the hours before dawn, but later in the morning the sun was hot. Dust stuck to their sweaty skin and burrowed into wrinkles and folds. It scratched their eyeballs and parched their throats. But at this point none of

those things mattered any more. People were moving at different speeds, some purposeful, some serene, some lost in meditation, some watching their children, some holding hands. Everyone overtook and passed Consuelo and Mario who inched along at her top rate of one agonizing step after another. They stopped now and then, for a cup of fresh orange juice, squeezed by hand, four pesos. Or a *caballito*, a mug of coffee with a shot of brandy or tequila, for medicinal purposes. Or a bowl of hot *atole*. One day they camped outside Leon, the leather capital of Mexico. "There are more shoe stores here than there are churches in Puebla," said Don Lupe, who had been everywhere. Then, stiff from the cold and from lying on the hard ground, they were up and off again, their faces ghostly in the moonlight, a thousand dying campfires glowing in the dark behind them. There was now such a stream of humanity that they were almost never walking on their own. There was always someone passing them, calling out encouragement. "*¡Adelante caminante!*"

It took the women no time at all to organize their kitchen once they got to the last campsite at Aguas del Obispo. Everyone had a job: fetch water, find some flat stones, get a fire going, chop vegetables. Doña Clara made Consuelo lie beside her so that she could dice tomatoes and cilantro with her feet wrapped in a damp towel. The young woman called out to her children, "Rogelio, María del Carmen, get your little sister and come sit with me." All three came and snuggled up to their mother.

"Leave the tomatoes to me," said Clara. "Be with your children. They will restore you like nothing else can." She patted her daughter-in-law's shoulder. "And, tell me again, *m'ija*, why exactly are you walking barefoot to San Juan?" Consuelo was hugging Carmen and Elenita with her eyes closed. "To thank La Virgen for Mario's health."

Clara nodded. "Yes, that's what you've said from the beginning. I just ask because it could be how a clever wife might force her husband *que está malito* to walk as slowly as possible, right?" She paused. "Such a good idea for my stubborn son!" And she smiled. "So I'll thank La Virgen when we get to San Juan, but right now I'm saying thank you to my brave daughter."

Consuelo reached over and squeezed Clara's arm, her eyes still closed, a little moisture showing on the lower lids. "Without Mario, what would my children do?"

By one thirty in the morning they were on the last stretch, just fifteen more kilometers to San Juan, and there was a new energy among the walkers, a muted sense of urgency, everyone was ready to reach the end of the road and bring their journey to a climax. The endless column of people snaked from horizon to horizon. Consuelo smiled at her husband through her haze. "Nearly there," she whispered, and her own words seemed to give her strength. "*Ya llegamos*," he whispered back. A little while later they came over a ridge and saw the small town of San Juan below them, the blue and orange neon crosses glowing on the roof of *la iglesia*, and above it the great vaulted night sky, studded with stars and a gleaming half moon.

Don Lupe and the rest of the family had waited for them beside the road, and waved as they came into sight. Clara hurried forward and put Consuelo's arm around her shoulders. "Lean on me, *m'ija*. *¡Ya llegamos!*" They limped into the pre-dawn mass and stood crammed together with their fellow pilgrims. The church was taking them in shifts, a few hundred at a time. Standing in the dusty crush of humanity, Consuelo heard a rushing in her ears, and felt her head lift up towards the high ceiling, spinning in the golden light from the stained glass windows. She heard none of the service, but when it was over people embraced each other and wept through their smiles. Barely aware of being on her feet, she was carried along by the joyous crowd that surged to the large doors and spilled out into the courtyard. Her family walked past a ragged pile of abandoned crutches and walking sticks, and Mario threw his stick onto the heap. He took Consuelo's hand and together they limped up the hill to the bus station.