

Part of

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Chapter 3-3

The Winding Path

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As I reflect, the greatest literary influence of my life was a man who could not read. My grandfather's Christmas gift each year was a two-dollar bill stuffed inside a white bank envelope; my name poorly misspelled on the outside. I recall thinking, in a child's way, that this was odd, but I kept that notion to myself. I also recollect the musky scents of tilled earth and tobacco that clung to his overalls. Mostly, though, I remember his silence. He died of lung cancer, bent in body from the great efforts of growing the very leaf that consumed him. His passing left behind only one of six children, land in fallow, and a stubborn mule who would know another man's yoke.

I am not sure my quiet grandfather ever read a bedtime story, was encouraged by a kind teacher, or experienced the magic of the written word in his tender years. Robbed of childhood, he learned as a farm boy that one could not consume more than the dust or mud and his sun-freckled hands might yield. I always felt he wanted something more for me, to give me something he could not. And more of me, as I did of him.

As a schoolboy, I gravitated to the adventures of Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and the sentimentality of Gipson's *Old Yeller*. Entering college, I supposed these early reads and others like them had led me onto the literary path. Now a late careerist, I know that my dusty grandfather most inspired my desire to share the gift of literacy in classrooms. Teaching can be a difficult task, something like farming. Arduous, filled with lonely failings, consuming. To those I have studied with, I owe much debt and gratitude. Yet, my formal education did not germinate into my compulsion and that excited, little nervous feeling I get before each semester's first class, each newly planned lecture, and the anticipation of our 16-week journey. No, that feeling comes with the energy of wary students entering a new setting and the powerful responsibility I embrace—the responsibility to convey that their most important technological tool is the effective use of language.

I am guided in my classroom journeys by the sensibilities and work ethic handed down by the laconic farmer who quietly passed on the belief that there is goodness in the soil and hope in spring's verdant wood. I think of him some predawn mornings when the alarm rings too soon, and a groggy voice in my head wants to hit the snooze button, but I rise. Because he did, work would not wait on a farm, as in the classroom. There must have been hundreds of stories he could have told from that depression era, "early to bed and early to rise" farm days. Snakes in the corn field, the sweet green smell of barley just topped, a breech calf saved. The first kiss he stole from grandma. All those stories were never told, never written. Lost.

I was lucky to be born better off. I have only feared the poverty and urgency my grandfather knew every day, and my interests have been allowed to grow beyond soil and seed. Yet, the work is still about the harvest. My college journey has wound through Nashville, Franklin, Sewanee, Murfreesboro, Greenville, Tampa, Tallahassee, and recently back to Murfreesboro. This winding path has morphed from sidewalk to interstate, from job to passion, and introduced me to hundreds and hundreds of fellow teachers and students. Diverse, yes, but just like me, too. Every one of them has stories to tell. Everyone has but 26 letters and a few punctuation marks to tell stories of love, joy, fear, and pain.

I believe that good stories need good storytellers. Under the shallow surface of my grandfather's silence was the love and humor he could not verbalize but that I now can for him and for me. I am his harvest, and the students I am privileged to teach are mine. I trust that poverty and violence will always exist and thrive in places where truth and education do not. And that good will grow if we keep planting hope.