



K-5
Reading
Language Arts

ENGLISH

PERSONAL NARRATIVES



GRADE 4 UNIT 1 | READER

EDITION 1

Grade 4

Unit 1

Personal Narratives

Reader

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Tomás Rivera

The Power of Words

*Tomás Rivera was a famous author, poet, and educator. He was born and raised in Texas in a family of **migrant workers** who traveled often to work on farms. He grew up to be a teacher, a college professor, and the author of many books that showed what life was like in the Hispanic community in the 1940s and 1950s. While not written by him, these tales imagine what life may have been like for Tomás over the years.*

Words can be powerful. I have learned throughout my life that words can be life-changing. As a child, I heard words, I spoke words, and I read words. As I grew older, I put the words in my head onto paper. My words became books. When I was a teacher and professor, my words became teachings to others. When I think back to when I first discovered the power of words, one memory always comes to mind.

I sat on the brick steps right in front of the school in Crystal City, Texas. Many of the other students had raced out of the school building just minutes before. They were **exuberant** and joyful because summer break was beginning. Some of us, though, were not excited, because summer break meant long hours laboring in the scorching sun. I was not the least bit eager to spend my days in temperatures over one hundred degrees, wearing long sleeves and pants to prevent sunburn. Instead of playing in the evenings, I would be resting, worn out from working twelve hours a day. My legs, back, and hands would be too sore to play.

My parents were migrant workers. This meant they had to travel to find work on farms. Every summer, my whole family packed up our things and headed north to the Midwest. We would work all summer to tend the fruits and vegetables there. When we returned to Texas in the winter, my parents worked doing various jobs around town. Some winters they worked on local farms. Many other people in our community were migrant workers, too.

As I stared down at my feet and scraped the bottom of my shoe on the concrete, I heard a familiar voice.

“Hey, Tomás!” It was Alfonso, my friend from school.

“Hey, **Sabio**,” I said in a **sullen** tone.

Alfonso was smiling and holding a stack of books at the same time, a habit which earned him the nickname. He set down his books, greeted me with a handshake, then sat next to me.

I knew that he would soon be traveling to work on the farms with his family, just like me. Most of the time, we made the trip together. I didn’t understand how he could look this happy.

We sat in silence before I mustered up the courage to ask, “How can you be so happy when you know we are about to leave for the summer?”

He thought about it for a minute. Then he gave me a look that showed he knew what I felt. He replied, “Leaving is tough, and the work is hard. I can’t deny that. Still, I try to look on the bright side of things. I feel better when I think about the good more than the bad.”

“What good can come from working in the red-hot sun all day?” I **grumbled**. “While other kids are making plans for their first day off, we are getting ready for a twenty-hour drive to Minnesota. Then, when we get there, we have to work from the time the sun goes up until the sun goes down. We can never just relax and play like the other kids.”

Alfonso caught me by surprise with a quick poke to my side. I winced and looked at him confused, just as the next few pokes came toward me. “Oye brother. What’s with the blues?” he asked, while continuing to poke me left and right. “So sad and so blue.” He sneered, making fake crying sounds to the sound of boo-hoo. Then he finished by saying, “Snap out of it brother!” As I settled down from the onslaught of friendly teasing, I noticed he had taken my mind off the trip. Then he put his hand on my shoulder. “I know there is a lot to be upset about. Leaving home each summer and working all day is really hard. But luckily we have each other. We get to spend all day and night surrounded by our families and friends. We will listen and laugh at your grandfather’s stories. We might have to work, but at least we get to do it together.” Alfonso had a way of knowing just what to say.

I nodded my head and smiled. I hadn’t thought about it that way. I already felt a little better. Before I could think of a way to thank him, Alfonso said, “I think I have just the thing for you.” He shuffled through his stack of books until he found what he was looking for. The cover was shiny and new. It had more pages than I had ever seen in a book. “I found this book yesterday. It was just lying on the sidewalk after school, so I picked it up and turned it in to Mrs. Martinez. She told me to keep it for the summer. I want you to have it, so you can read it in the evenings after working in the fields.”

“Wow, thank you, Alfonso!” I replied. My parents and my grandfather worked hard to help me find books to read, but I had never seen this one before. I realized that the **dread** I felt about summer was being replaced with anticipation. “Don’t you want to read it yourself?”

“I want you to have it, Tomás. I know how much you love to read. Maybe if you keep reading, you could write your own books one day,” said Alfonso.

After Alfonso gave me the book, I felt more hopeful about working in the fields that summer. I saw books and learning as my **refuge** from the hot sun and my sore hands. My mind would be rested even if my body was tired. I will always remember how I felt that day. Alfonso’s words were powerful. Looking back now, I see how supportive and encouraging people such as my friends and family made a world of difference in my life.

Sun and Spinach

The heat of the Texas sun beat down. It warmed the skin of my hands and face as I walked towards Crystal City Middle School in my fresh, crisp, button-down shirt. It wouldn't be my first time entering an eighth-grade classroom, but it would be my first time entering as a teacher. My stomach fluttered and my heart beat rapidly. I hoped the students would like me. For years, I dreamed I could instill a love of reading in young people. I loved to learn about the world through books. I hoped to share this love of learning with my students. While the students were my primary motivation, in the back of my mind I wanted this new career to bring me the joy and **fulfillment** I knew it could.

Heat **shimmered** up from the dusty road as I made the long walk toward the school. My bag was stuffed with my favorite blue pen, some lined paper, and three teaching books from the library. I pulled out a **handkerchief** and wiped the sweat that was rolling down my forehead. I was hot and tired from walking. My shoulders began to slouch. When I looked to my right, I saw the familiar deep green field of spinach leaves. I thought to myself how odd it was that I was walking past the very spinach fields where I had labored as a boy.

Vivid memories took the place of the nervous excitement that filled my mind. I pictured the brown dirt covering my hands as I plucked emerald-colored leaves during the harvest. I could practically smell the earthy scent of the fields and the familiar **stench** of digging

deep down into the dirt. It was both good and unpleasant at the same time. I remembered the rough, gritty feel of the dried dirt at the bottom of my shovel and the “clink” sound when I pushed the shovel into the ground and hit a rock. I could almost feel the smooth softness of the ripe spinach leaves.

It was impossible to think about that time without thinking about the intense Texas heat. It seemed like the sweat rolling down my face would never end. The hot sun made me as thirsty as a dry sponge. I tried to distract myself by praying and singing songs. Yet, my thoughts continuously drifted back to a desire for shade and a cool glass of water. One day I suffered a **sunstroke**. My memory of it is cloudy, but I remember my mother telling me a story to pass the time while I recovered.

The fields reminded me of where I came from. I clutched my bag, and I thought about how I might still be working in the fields if it weren’t for the educational opportunities that I had. My parents’ and my grandfather’s dedication to my education was what allowed me to get to where I am today. Through all of their hard work, they encouraged me to learn as much as I could. Even though my parents never got a formal education, they did everything they could to help me learn. My father found lots of books for me to read by asking neighbors and searching the dump. My grandfather always took me to the library. They wanted me to have an education so that I could **pursue** a career that I loved.

I was inspired by my parents’ strong work **ethic**, and I wanted to follow my passion. My love for reading and writing took me to Southwest Texas State University. There, I decided to become a teacher. I hoped my future students would see that they could be successful in

school, in spite of the challenges they faced outside of it. During my college years I studied hard and read a lot. I even continued to work on farms in the summer while I earned my degree. Thinking about the past and my journey here, I straightened my spine and lifted my head. That very day, I was following my dreams of becoming a teacher and a writer.

I heard the chatter of students in front of the school. I was still a bit nervous for my first day, yet the spinach fields reminded me that I had come so far. Before I knew it, I had arrived at the school. As I put my hand on the wide double doors at the school entrance, I grasped the handle firmly to keep from trembling, **empowered** to take the next step.

Clara Driscoll

Lessons I Learned on a Cattle Drive

*Clara Driscoll was born in St. Mary's, Texas, in 1881, and spent most of her life in the Lone Star State. She was a businesswoman who was involved in giving back to her community. At the age of twenty-two, she joined a women's society called the Daughters of the Republic and advanced their efforts to preserve the Alamo. She paid to **preserve** it, earning her the title "Savior of the Alamo." Though not written by her, this personal narrative is inspired by her dedication to Texas history, and imagines her life as a child and the events that may have shaped the woman she became.*

The red dirt billowed out into a **hazy** dust cloud as the cattle kicked up the dry earth. The April breeze blew gently. It ruffled my fiery red hair as it swirled the dust clouds downwind. For as long as I could remember, my life had revolved around this land. I was born on a cattle ranch owned by my grandaddy, Texas Revolution war hero Daniel O'Driscoll. My first breath was of the clean Texas air.

By the time I was seven years old, I had been on a few cattle drives. I knew how to work hard and stay out of the way when I needed to. Some days I rode in the supply wagon, but sometimes Daddy swung me up with him in the saddle. I could ride just fine on my own, but sitting with Daddy was always better; he made me feel safe. My faith in my daddy was **unwavering**. There was never a better **cattleman**.

While riding together, we passed a farmhouse with the roof missing and walls stained black from smoke. It looked like a fire had gotten out of control and now all that was left were the **remnants** of a once-loved home. “I guess they had to find somewhere else to live,” I casually said. My daddy was quiet for a minute and then replied, “Your granddaddy taught me that a home’s worth isn’t just in the walls or the roof, but the memories that are inside. You can rebuild the walls and roof, but those memories outlive the fire.” That night, I thought about those words as I drifted off to sleep. I wondered if memories moved to new houses as people did.

The sounds of morning woke me up. I pushed aside the canvas from my sleeping wagon and jumped out. Missing breakfast on a cattle drive was **unimaginable**—it was my favorite part of the day! I arrived just in time to see the show. My daddy called out to a passing cattleman, “John, did you pack those pans?”

“No, Mr. Driscoll. I’m sorry, sir.”

“Well now, Travis, you see any pans?” Daddy called to another cattleman.

“No, sir, not a pan in sight.”

My daddy looked up and winked at me because he said the same thing every morning on a cattle drive. It was a Driscoll tradition. “Well, I suppose it’s eggs on a shovel again for breakfast!” I let out a cheer as I watched the eggs get cracked into a giant metal shovel that was hoisted onto the crackling fire. The fire hissed and popped as the eggs cooked. The eggs looked a bit crispy on one end, but from my **perspective** there

will never be a better breakfast than those eggs on a shovel enjoyed in the crisp Texas air.

Later, with the meal hot in my belly and my daddy sitting beside me, I ventured a question: “Daddy, what happens to our memories when we move?” The burned house from the day earlier sat in my mind. I wondered about those people who had lost their home and had to move. I also wondered about our move from Rockport to Corpus Christi a few years back. I liked the ranch. It seemed a shame to lose those memories from the boardinghouse.

My daddy smiled and said, “Our memories live inside of us. You see, my dad—your grandaddy—died a long time ago. I still remember the way he talked about the importance of fighting for what you believe in, just like he fought in the battle San Jacinto for the freedom of Texas. His memory still lives with me.”

That evening, I thought about what Daddy had said about memories living inside of us. I realized I wanted to know more about his memories of my grandfather. Although I never knew him, I thought that maybe my love for Texas had **descended** from him. I asked, “Daddy, will you tell me more about my grandfather and the memories you have of him?”

“I would love nothing more,” Daddy replied. “When I was a young boy, your grandfather would put me on his lap and say, ‘Son, this place is special. Right now it is my job to protect it, but one day it will be yours.’ That meant so much for me to hear. I still remember the way he smelled and how he would pat my back when he gave me a hug. His **legacy** of love, service, and honor made me who I am today. I keep those memories with me everywhere I go.”

“He sounds like an **exceptional** man. I am so glad you have those memories,” I said softly. I thought more about what my father had said

about memories living inside of us. “Do I have memories living inside of me?” I questioned.

“Clara Driscoll, you **preserve** the memory of this land we are living on just by being you. You remember your granddaddy, how he loved this land so much he fought to honor those lost in the Alamo. You remember your mama, who makes **haggard** things beautiful. You remember your daddy, who introduced you to the Texas fields and the animals living on them. If you do this, your memories will always be with you, no matter where you go.”

I closed my eyes and thought about all the memories that must be jumbled up inside of me. I thought back about what Daddy had said. I knew these experiences were making up a piece of me. The red soil seeping under my skin, the landscape claiming my soul, and the legacies of my daddy and granddaddy etched on my heart. I would remember, always.

Glossary

C

cattleman, *n.* a person who tends to cattle

cause, *v.* make happen;

n. the reason that something happens

character trait, *n.* an adjective that describes a character

cloudy, *adj.* unclear

D

descended, *v.* dropped; passed down through family

dread, *v.* to fear

E

effect, *n.* something that results when something else happens

ethic, *n.* set of moral principle

exceptional, *adj.* extraordinary; special

exuberant, *adj.* full of energy and excitement

F

fulfillment, *n.* the achievement of something hoped for

G

grumbled, *v.* complained

H

haggard, *adj.* tired; drained

hazy, *adj.* misty; foggy

L

laboring, *v.* doing a difficult physical job

legacy, *n.* long-lasting impact of certain events in the past

M

migrant workers, *n.* people that move from one place to another for work

P

perspective, *n.* outlook; viewpoint

preserve, *v.* maintain; protect

R

remnants, *n.* remains; leftovers

S

sabio, *adj.* in Spanish, this word means wise, but it is used as a nickname for someone who is smart

scorching, *adj.* having very high temperatures

sequencing, *v.* arranging the important parts of a story in order

shimmered, *v.* shined with a light that seemed to move

stench, *n.* a strong and terrible smell

sullen, *adj.* a sad mood

sunstroke, *n.* a life threatening physical response due to lack of hydration and excessive exposure to heat

T

text structure, *n.* the way authors organize the text

U

unimaginable, *adj.* unthinkable; incredible

unwavering, *adj.* constant; steady

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