

# LAS GUAYABAS

G U A V A S

They emerged from the fig orchard and continued through a pear grove. When they came into a clearing, they saw Señor Rodríguez waiting with a lantern by the barn doors. They hurried inside. Pigeons fluttered in the rafters. Their wagon was waiting, surrounded by crates of green guavas.

"Did Marisol come?" asked Esperanza, her eyes searching the barn.

"I could tell no one about your departure," said Señor Rodríguez. "When the time is right, I will tell her that you looked for her and said good-bye. Now we must hurry. You need the protection of darkness."

Alfonso, Miguel, and Señor Rodríguez had built another floor in the wagon, higher than the real one and open at the back, with barely enough room between for Mama, Esperanza, and Hortensia to lie down. Hortensia lined it with blankets.

Esperanza had known about the plan, but now she hesitated when she saw the small space.

"Please, can I sit with Alfonso and Miguel?"

"Mija, it is necessary," said Mama.

"There are too many bandits," said Alfonso. "It is not safe for women to be on the roads at night. Besides, your uncles have many spies. Remember? That is why we must take the wagon to Zacatecas and catch the train there, instead of from Aguascalientes."

"Luis has bragged about the engagement to everyone," said Hortensia. "Think how angry he will be when he discovers you have gone. We cannot take the chance of you being seen."

Mama and Hortensia said grateful good-byes to Señor Rodríguez, then slid between the floors of the wagon.

Esperanza reluctantly scooted on her back between them. "When can we get out?"

"Every few hours, we will stop and stretch," said Mama.

Esperanza stared at the wood planks just a few inches from her face. She could hear Alfonso,

Miguel, and Señor Rodríguez dumping crate after crate of guavas onto the floor above them, the almost-ripe fruit rolling and tumbling as it was piled on. The guavas smelled fresh and sweet, like pears and oranges all in one. Then she felt the guavas roll in around her feet as Alfonso and Miguel covered the opening. If anyone saw the wagon on the road, it would look like a farmer and his son, taking a load of fruit to market.

"How are you?" Alfonso asked, sounding far away.

"We are fine," called Hortensia.

The wagon pulled out of the barn and the guavas shifted, then settled. It was dark inside and it felt like someone was rocking them in a bumpy cradle, sometimes side to side and sometimes back and forth. Esperanza began to feel frightened. She knew that with a few kicks of her feet she could get out, but still she felt trapped. Suddenly, she thought she couldn't breathe.

"Mama!" she said, gasping for air.

"Right here, Esperanza. Everything is fine."

"Do you remember," said Hortensia, taking her hand, "when you were only five years old and we hid from the thieves? You were so brave for such a little girl. Your parents and Alfonso and the other servants had gone to town. It was just you and me and Miguel in the house. We were in your bedroom and I was pinning the hem of your beautiful blue silk dress. Do you remember that dress? You wanted it pinned higher so your new shoes would show."

Esperanza's eyes were beginning to adjust to the darkness and to the pitch and roll of the wagon. "Miguel ran into the house because he had seen bandits," said Esperanza, exhaling. She remembered standing on a chair with her arms outstretched like a bird ready for flight while Hortensia fitted the sides of the dress. And she remembered the new shoes, shiny and black.

"Yes," said Hortensia. "I looked out the window to see six men, their faces covered with handkerchiefs, and they all held rifles. They were renegades who thought they had permission to

steal from the rich and give to the poor. But they didn't always give to the poor and they sometimes killed innocent people."

"We hid under the bed," said Esperanza. "And we pulled down the bedcovers so they couldn't see us." She remembered staring straight up at the bed boards. Much like the boards enclosing them in the wagon now. She took another long breath.

"What we didn't know was that Miguel had a big field mouse in his pocket," said Hortensia.

"Yes. He was going to scare me with it," said Esperanza.

The wagon creaked and swayed. They could hear Alfonso and Miguel murmuring above them. The persistent smell of the guavas filled their noses. Esperanza relaxed a little.

Hortensia continued. "The men came into the house and we could hear them opening cupboards and stealing the silver. Then we heard them climb the stairs. Two men came into the bedroom and we saw their big boots through a crack in the bedcover. But we didn't say a word."

"Until a pin poked me and I moved my leg and made a noise."

"I was so frightened they would find us," said Hortensia.

"But Miguel pushed the mouse out from under the bed and it ran around the room. The men were startled but started laughing. And then one of them said, 'It is just a *ratón*. We've got plenty. Let's go,' and they left," said Esperanza.

Mama said, "They took almost all of the silver, but Papa and I only cared that all of you were safe. Do you remember how Papa said that Miguel was very smart and brave and asked him what he wanted for protecting you, his most prized possession?"

Esperanza remembered. "Miguel wanted to go on a train ride."

Hortensia started to hum softly and Mama held Esperanza's hand.

Miguel's reward, that day-long train ride to Zacatecas, seemed like yesterday. Miguel had been eight and Esperanza five. She wore the beautiful

blue silk dress and could still see Miguel standing at the station, wearing a bow tie and practically shining, as if Hortensia had cleaned and starched his entire body. Even his hair was slicked down smooth and his eyes gleamed with excitement. He was mesmerized by the locomotive, watching it slowly pull in. Esperanza had been excited, too.

When the train arrived, all sputtering and blustery, porters had hurried to escort them, showing them the way to their car. Papa took her hand and Miguel's and they boarded, waving good-bye to Alfonso and Hortensia. The compartment had seats of soft leather, and she and Miguel had bounced happily upon them. Later, they ate in the dining car at little tables covered in white linens and set with silver and crystal. When the waiter came and asked if there was anything he could bring them, Esperanza said, "Yes, please bring lunch, now." The men and women dressed in their hats and fancy clothes smiled and chuckled at what must have looked like a doting father and two privileged children. When they arrived in Zacatecas, a woman wrapped in a colorful

*rebozo*, a blanket shawl, boarded the train selling mangoes on a stick. The mangoes were peeled and carved to look like exotic flowers. Papa bought one for each of them. On the return ride, she and Miguel, with their noses pressed against the window, and their hands still sticky from the fresh mango, had waved to every person they saw.

The wagon jostled them now as it hit a hole in the road. Esperanza wished she could get to Zacatecas as fast as she had that day on the train instead of traveling on back roads, hidden in a slow wagon. But this time, she was buried beneath a mountain of guavas and could not wave to anyone. There was no comfort. And there was no Papa.

Esperanza stood at the station in Zacatecas, tugging at the second-hand dress. It didn't fit properly and was the most awful yellow. And even though they had been out of the wagon for some hours, she still smelled like guavas.

It had taken them two days to arrive in

Zacatecas, but finally, that morning, they left the wagon hidden in a thicket of shrubs and trees and walked into town. After the discomfort of the wagon, she was looking forward to the train.

The locomotive arrived pulling a line of cars and hissing and spewing steam. But they did not board the fancy car with the compartments and leather seats or the dining car with the white linens. Instead, Alfonso led them to a car with rows of wooden benches, like church pews facing each other, already crowded with peasants. Trash littered the floor and it reeked of rotting fruit and urine. A man with a small goat on his lap grinned at Esperanza, revealing no teeth. Three barefoot children, two boys and a girl, crowded near their mother. Their legs were chalky with dust, their clothes were in tatters, and their hair was grimy. An old, frail beggar woman pushed by them to the back of the car, clutching a picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Her hand was outstretched for alms.

Esperanza had never been so close to so many peasants before. When she went to school, all of her friends were like her. When she went to

town, she was escorted and hurried around any beggars. And the peasants always kept their distance. That was simply the way it was. She couldn't help but wonder if they would steal her things.

"Mama," said Esperanza, stopping in the doorway. "We cannot travel in this car. It . . . it is not clean. And the people do not look trustworthy."

Esperanza saw Miguel frown as he edged around her to sit down.

Mama took her hand and guided her to an empty bench where Esperanza slid over next to the window. "Papa would never have had us sit here and Abuelita wouldn't approve," she said, stubbornly.

"Mija, it is all we can afford," said Mama. "We must make do. It is not easy for me either. But remember, we are going to a place that will be better than living with Tío Luis, and at least we will be together."

The train pulled out and settled into a steady motion. Hortensia and Mama took out their crocheting. Mama was using a small hook and white

cotton thread to make *carpetas*, lace doilies, to put under a lamp or a vase. She held up her work to Esperanza and smiled. "Would you like to learn?"

Esperanza shook her head. Why did Mama bother crocheting lace? They had no vases or *lámparas* to put on top of them. Esperanza leaned her head against the window. She knew she did not belong here. She was Esperanza Ortega from El Rancho de las Rosas. She crossed her arms tight and stared out the window.

For hours, Esperanza watched the undulating land pass in front of her. Everything seemed to remind her of what she had left behind: the *nopales* reminded her of Abuelita who loved to eat the prickly pear cactus sliced and soaked in vinegar and oil; the dogs from small villages that barked and ran after the train reminded her of Marisol, whose dog, Capitán, chased after trains the same way. And every time Esperanza saw a shrine decorated with crosses, flowers, and miniature statues of saints next to the rails, she couldn't help but wonder if it had been someone's father who

had died on the tracks and if somewhere there was another girl who missed him, too.

Esperanza opened her valise to check on the doll, lifting it out and straightening her clothes. The barefoot peasant girl ran over.

"Mona," she said, and reached up to touch the doll. Esperanza quickly jerked it away and put it back in the valise, covering it with the old clothes.

"¡Mona! ¡Mona!" said the little girl, running back to her mother. And then she began to cry.

Mama and Hortensia both stopped their needles and stared at Esperanza.

Mama looked across at the girl's mother. "I am sorry for my daughter's bad manners."

Esperanza looked at Mama in surprise. Why was she apologizing to these people? She and Mama shouldn't even be sitting in this car.

Hortensia looked from one to the other and excused herself. "I think I will find Alfonso and Miguel and see if they bought *tortillas* at the station."

Mama looked at Esperanza. "I don't think it would have hurt to let her hold it for a few moments."

"Mama, she is poor and dirty . . ." said Esperanza.

But Mama interrupted. "When you scorn these people, you scorn Miguel, Hortensia, and Alfonso. And you embarrass me and yourself. As difficult as it is to accept, our lives are different now."

The child kept crying. Her face was so dirty that her tears washed clean streaks down her cheeks. Esperanza suddenly felt ashamed and the color rose in her face, but she still pushed the valise farther under the seat with her feet and turned her body away from Mama.

Esperanza tried not to look back at the little girl but she couldn't help it. She wished she could tell the little girl's mother that she had always given her old toys to the orphanage, but that this doll was special. Besides, the child would have soiled it with her hands.

Mama reached in her bag and pulled out a ball of blanket yarn. "Esperanza, hold out your hands

for me." She raised her eyebrows and nodded toward the girl. Esperanza knew exactly what Mama intended to do. They had done it many times before.

Mama wrapped the yarn around Esperanza's outstretched hands about fifty times until they were almost covered. Then she slipped a string of yarn through the middle of the loops and tied a tight knot before Esperanza removed her hands. A few inches below the knot, Mama tied another snug knot around all the yarn, forming a head. Then she cut the bottom loops, separated the strands into sections, and braided each section into what looked like arms and legs. She held the yarn doll up, offering it to the little girl. She ran to Mama, smiling, took the doll, and ran back to her own mother's side.

The mother whispered into the girl's ear.

Shyly, she said, "Gracias. Thank you."

"De nada. You're welcome," said Mama.

The woman and the children got off the train at the next stop. Esperanza watched the little girl stop in front of their window, wave to Mama, and

smile again. Before she walked away, she made the yarn doll wave good-bye, too.

Esperanza was glad the girl got off the train and took the silly yarn doll with her. Otherwise, she would have been reminded of her own selfishness and Mama's disapproval for miles to come.

*Clicketta, clicketta, clicketta.* The song of the locomotive was monotonous as they traveled north, and the hours seemed like Mama's never-ending ball of thread unwinding in front of them. Each morning the sun peeked over one spur of the Sierra Madre, sometimes shining through pine trees. In the evening, it set on the left, sinking behind another peak and leaving pink clouds and purple mountains against the darkening sky. When people got on and off, Esperanza and the others changed their seats. When the car filled up, they sometimes stood. When the car was less crowded, they put their valises under their heads and tried to sleep on the benches.

At every stop, Miguel and Alfonso hurried off

the train with a package. From the window, Esperanza watched them go to a water trough, unwrap an oilcloth, and dampen the bundle inside. Then they would wrap it in the oilcloth again, board the train, and put it carefully back into Alfonso's bag.

"What is in there?" Esperanza finally asked Alfonso, as the train pulled away from yet another station.

"You will see when we get there." He smiled and a knowing look passed between him and Miguel.

Esperanza was annoyed with Alfonso for taking the package on and off the train without telling her what was inside. She was tired of Hortensia's humming and weary of watching Mama crochet, as if nothing unusual were happening to them. But most of all she was bored with Miguel's constant talk about trains. He chatted with the conductors. He got off at every stop and watched the engineers. He studied the train schedule and wanted to report it all to Esperanza. He seemed as happy as Esperanza was irritable.



"When I get to California, I am going to work for the railroad," said Miguel, looking anxiously toward the horizon. They had spread pieces of brown paper in their laps and were eating *pepinos*, cucumbers sprinkled with salt and ground *chiles*.

"I'm thirsty. Are they selling juice in the other car?" asked Esperanza.

"I would have worked at the railroad in Mexico," continued Miguel, as if Esperanza had not tried to change the subject. "But it is not easy to get a job in Mexico. You need *una palanca*, a lever, to get a job at the railroads. I had no connections but your father did. Since I was a small boy, he gave me his word that he would help me. And he would have kept his promise. He . . . he always kept his promises to me."

At the mention of Papa, Esperanza felt that sinking feeling again. She looked at Miguel. He quickly turned his head away from her and looked hard out the window, but she saw that his eyes were damp. She had never thought about how much her papa must have meant to Miguel. It dawned on her that even though Miguel was a ser-

vant, Papa may have thought of him as the son he never had. But Papa's influence was gone. What would happen to Miguel's dreams now?

"And in the United States?" she asked quietly.

"I hear that in the United States, you do not need *una palanca*. That even the poorest man can become rich if he works hard enough."



They had been on the train for four days and nights when a woman got on with a wire cage containing six red hens. The chickens squawked and cackled and when they flapped their wings, tiny russet feathers floated around the car. The woman sat opposite Mama and Hortensia and within minutes she had told them that her name was Carmen, that her husband had died and left her with eight children, and that she had been at her brother's house helping his family with a new baby.

"Would you like *dulces*, sweets?" she asked Esperanza, holding open a bag.

Esperanza looked at Mama, who smiled and nodded her approval.

Esperanza hesitantly reached inside and took out a square of coconut candy. Mama had never permitted her to take candy from someone she didn't know before, especially from a poor person.

"Señora, why do you travel with the hens?" asked Mama.

"I sell eggs to feed my family. My brother raises hens and he gave these to me."

"And you can support your large family that way?" asked Hortensia.

Carmen smiled. "I am poor, but I am rich. I have my children, I have a garden with roses, and I have my faith and the memories of those who have gone before me. What more is there?"

Hortensia and Mama smiled, nodding their heads. And after a few thoughtful moments, Mama was blotting away stray tears.

The three women continued talking as the train passed fields of corn, orange orchards, and cows grazing on rolling hills. They talked as the train traveled through small towns, where peasant children ran after the caboose, just for the sake of running. Soon, Mama was confiding in Carmen,

telling her all that had happened with Papa and Tío Luis. Carmen listened and made clucking noises like one of her hens, as if she understood Mama's and Esperanza's problems. Esperanza looked from Mama to Carmen to Hortensia. She was amazed at how easily Carmen had plopped herself down and had plunged into intimate conversation. It didn't seem correct somehow. Mama had always been so proper and concerned about what was said and not said. In Aguascalientes, she would have thought it was "inappropriate" to tell an egg woman their problems, yet now she didn't hesitate.

"Mama," whispered Esperanza, taking on a tone she had heard Mama use many times. "Do you think it is *wise* to tell a peasant our personal business?"

Mama tried not to smile. She whispered back, "It is all right, Esperanza, because now we are peasants, too."

Esperanza ignored Mama's comment. What was wrong with her? Had all of Mama's rules changed since they had boarded this train?

When they pulled into Carmen's town, Mama gave her three of the beautiful lace *carpetas* she had made. "For your house," she said.

Carmen gave Mama two chickens, in an old shopping bag that she tied with string. "For your future," she said.

Then Mama, Hortensia, and Carmen hugged as if they had been friends forever.

"Buena suerte, good luck," they said to one another.

Alfonso and Miguel helped Carmen with her packages and the cage of chickens. When Miguel got back on the train, he sat next to Esperanza, near the window. They watched Carmen greet her waiting children, several of the little ones scrambling into her arms.

In front of the station, a crippled Indian woman crawled on her knees, her hand outstretched toward a group of ladies and gentlemen who were finely dressed in clothes like the ones that used to hang in Esperanza's and Mama's closets. The people turned their backs on the begging woman but Carmen walked over and gave her a coin and

some *tortillas* from her bag. The woman blessed her, making the sign of the cross. Then Carmen took her children's hands and walked away.

"She has eight children and sells eggs to survive. Yet when she can barely afford it she gave your mother two hens and helped the crippled woman," said Miguel. "The rich take care of the rich and the poor take care of those who have less than they have."

"But why does Carmen need to take care of the beggar at all?" said Esperanza. "Look. Only a few yards away is the farmer's market with carts of fresh food."

Miguel looked at Esperanza, wrinkled his forehead, and shook his head. "There is a Mexican saying: Full bellies and Spanish blood go hand in hand."

Esperanza looked at him and raised her eyebrows.

"Have you never noticed?" he said, sounding surprised. "Those with Spanish blood, who have the fairest complexions in the land, are the wealthiest."

Esperanza suddenly felt guilty and did not want to admit that she had never noticed or that it might be true. Besides, they were going to the United States now and it certainly would not be true there.

Esperanza shrugged. "It is just something that old wives say."

"No," said Miguel. "It is something the poor say."

## LOS MELONES CANTALOUPE S

They reached the border at Mexicali in the morning. Finally, the train stopped moving and everyone disembarked. The land was dry and the panorama was barren except for date palms, cactus, and an occasional squirrel or road-runner. The conductors herded everyone into a building where they stood in long lines waiting to pass through immigration. Esperanza noticed that the people in the first cars were escorted to the shortest lines and passed through quickly.

Inside, the air was stagnant and thick with the smell of body odor. Esperanza and Mama, their faces shiny with grime and perspiration, looked tired and wilted and they slumped with even the slight weight of their valises. The closer Esperanza got to the front, the more nervous she became. She looked at her papers and hoped they were in order. What if the officials found

something wrong? Would they send her back to her uncles? Would they arrest her and put her in jail?

She reached the desk and handed over the documents.

The immigration official seemed angry for no reason. "Where are you coming from?"

She looked at Mama who was behind her.

"We are from Aguascalientes," said Mama, stepping forward.

"And what is your purpose for entering the United States?"

Esperanza was afraid to speak. What if she said the wrong thing?

"To work," said Mama, handing him her documents as well.

"What work?" demanded the man.

Mama's demeanor changed. She stood up straight and tall and deliberately blotted her face with a handkerchief. She looked directly into the official's eyes and spoke calmly as if she were giving simple directions to a servant. "I am sure you can see that everything is in order. The name of

the employer is written there. People are expecting us."

The man studied Mama. He looked at their faces, then the pages, then their faces again.

Standing tall and proud, Mama never took her eyes from his face.

Why was it taking so long?

Finally, he grabbed the stamp and pounded each page with the words "Mexican National." He shoved their papers at them and waved them through. Mama took Esperanza's hand and hurried her toward another train.

They boarded and waited an hour for all the passengers to get through immigration. Esperanza looked out the window. Across the tracks, several groups of people were being prodded onto another train headed back toward Mexico.

"My heart aches for those people. They came all this way just to be sent back," said Mama.

"But why?" asked Esperanza.

"Many reasons. They had no papers, false ones, or no proof of work. Or there might have been a

problem with just one member of the family so they all chose to go back instead of being separated."

Esperanza thought about being separated from Mama and gratefully took her hand and squeezed it.

Almost everyone had boarded except Alfonso, Hortensia, and Miguel. Esperanza kept looking for them, and she became more anxious with each passing minute. "Mama, where are they?"

Mama said nothing but Esperanza could see worry in her eyes, too.

Finally, Hortensia got on. The train's engines began to chug.

Her voice tense, Esperanza said, "What happened to Alfonso and Miguel?"

Hortensia pointed out the window. "They had to find some water."

Alfonso was running toward the train with Miguel close behind, waving the secret package and grinning. The train slowly started moving as they hopped on.

Esperanza wanted to be angry at them for

making her anxious. She wanted to yell at them for waiting until the very last minute just so they could find water for their package that was probably nonsense anyway. But looking from one to the other, she sat back, limp with relief, happy to have them all together surrounding her, and surprised that she could be so glad to be back on the train.

Anza, we're here. Wake up!"

She sat up groggily, barely opening her eyes. "What day is this?" she asked.

"You've been asleep for hours. Wake up! It is Thursday. And we are here in Los Angeles!"

"Look, there they are!" said Alfonso, pointing out the window. "My brother, Juan, and Josefina, his wife. And his children, Isabel and the twins. They have all come."

A *campesino* family waved to them. Juan and Josefina each held a baby about a year old in their arms. It was easy to see that the man was Alfonso's brother, even though he didn't have a mustache.

Josefina was plump with a round face and a complexion that was fairer than Esperanza's. She was smiling and waving with her free hand. Next to her stood a girl about eight years old, wearing a dress that was too big and shoes with no socks. Delicate and frail, with big brown eyes, long braids, and skinny legs, she looked like a young deer. Esperanza couldn't help but think how much she looked like the doll Papa had given her.

There was much hugging among all the relatives.

Alfonso said, "Everyone, this is Señora Ortega and Esperanza."

"Alfonso, please call me Ramona."

"Yes, of course, Señora. My family feels like they know you because we have all written letters about you for years."

Mama hugged Juan and Josefina and said, "Thank you for all you have done for us already."

Miguel teased his cousin, pulling her braids. "Esperanza, this is Isabel."

Isabel looked at Esperanza, her eyes wide with wonder, and in a voice that was soft and whispery

said, "Were you really so very wealthy? Did you always get your way, and have all the dolls and fancy dresses you wanted?"

Esperanza's mouth pressed into an irritated line. She could only imagine the letters Miguel had written. Had he told Isabel that in Mexico they stood on different sides of the river?

"The truck is this way," said Juan. "We have a long ride."

Esperanza picked up her valise and followed Isabel's father. She looked around and was relieved to see that compared to the desert, Los Angeles had lush palms and green grass and even though it was September, roses were still blooming in the flower beds. She took a deep breath. The aroma of oranges from a nearby grove was reassuring and familiar. Maybe it wouldn't be so different here.

Juan, Josefina, Mama, and Hortensia crowded onto the front seat of the rickety truck. Isabel, Esperanza, Alfonso, and Miguel sat in the truck bed with the babies and the two red hens. The vehicle looked like it should be hauling animals

instead of people, but Esperanza had said nothing to Mama. Besides, after so many days on the train, it felt good to stretch out her legs.

The old jalopy rocked and swayed as it climbed out of the San Fernando Valley, weaving up through hills covered with dried-out shrubs. She sat with her back against the cab and the hot wind whipped her loose hair. Alfonso tied a blanket across the wooden slats to make a canopy of shade.

The babies, Lupe and Pepe, a girl and a boy, were dark-eyed cherubs, with thick mops of black hair. Esperanza was surprised at how much they looked alike; the only difference was the tiny gold earrings in Lupe's ears. Pepe crawled into Esperanza's lap and Lupe into Isabel's. When the baby fell asleep against Esperanza, his head slid down her arm, leaving a stream of perspiration. "Is it always so hot here?" she asked.

"My papa says it is the dry air that makes it so hot and sometimes it is even hotter," said Isabel. "But it is better than living in El Centro because now we do not have to live in a tent."

"A tent?"

"Last year we worked for another farm in El Centro in the Imperial Valley, not too far from the border. We were there during the melons. We lived in a tent with a dirt floor and had to carry water. We cooked outside. But then we moved north to Arvin. That's where we're going now. A big company owns the camp. We pay seven dollars a month and my papa says it is worth it to have piped-in cold water and electricity and a kitchen inside. He says the farm is six thousand acres." Isabel leaned toward Esperanza and grinned as if she were telling a big secret. "And a school. Next week, I get to go to school, and I will learn to read. Can you read?"

"Of course," said Esperanza.

"Will you go to school?" asked Isabel.

"I went to private school and started when I was four so I have already passed through level eight. When my grandmother comes, maybe I will go to high school."

"Well, when I go to school, I will learn in English," said Isabel.



Esperanza nodded and tried to smile back. Isabel was so happy, she thought, about such little things.

The brown, barren mountains rose higher and a red-tailed hawk seemed to follow them for miles. The truck rattled up a steep grade past sparse, dry canyons and Esperanza's ears began to feel full and tight. "How much longer?"

"We will stop for lunch soon," said Isabel.

They wove through the golden hills, softly sculpted with rounded tops, until Juan finally slowed the truck and turned down a side road. When they came to an area shaded by a single tree, they piled out of the truck and Josefina spread a blanket on the ground, then unwrapped a bundle of *burritos*, avocados, and grapes. They sat in the shade and ate. Mama, Hortensia, and Josefina chatted and watched the babies while Isabel lay down on the blanket between Alfonso and Juan. She was soon asleep.

Esperanza wandered away from the group, grateful not to be rocking in a truck or a train. She walked to an overlook. Below, canyons plunged to

an *arroyo*, a silver line of water from an unknown river. It was quiet and peaceful here, the sweet silence broken only by the swish of dried grasses from the wind.

With her feet solid on the ground for the first time in many days, Esperanza remembered what Papa had taught her when she was little: If she lay on the land, and was very still and quiet, she could hear the heartbeat of the valley.

"Can I hear it from here, Papa?"

She stretched out on her stomach and reached her arms to the side, hugging the earth. She let the stillness settle upon her and listened.

She heard nothing.

Be patient, she reminded herself, and the fruit will fall into your hand.

She listened again, but the heartbeat was not there. She tried one more time, desperately wanting to hear it. But there was no reassuring thump repeating itself. No sound of the earth's heartbeat. Or Papa's. There was only the prickly sound of dry grass.

Determined, Esperanza pressed her ear harder.

to the ground. "I can't hear it!" She pounded the earth. "Let me hear it." Tears burst from her eyes as if someone had squeezed an overripe orange. Confusion and uncertainty spilled forth and became an *arroyo* of their own.

She rolled on her back, her tears worming down her face into her ears. Seeing nothing but the vast sky in dizzying swirls of blue and white, she began to feel as if she were floating and drifting upward. She lifted higher and part of her liked the sensation but another part of her felt untethered and frightened. She tried to find the place in her heart where her life was anchored, but she couldn't, so she closed her eyes and pressed the palms of her hands against the earth, making sure it was there. She felt as if she were falling, careening through the hot air. Her skin perspired and she felt cold and nauseous. She took short breaths, heaving in and out.

Suddenly, the world went black.

Someone hovered over her.

She sat up quickly. How long had she been in the darkness? She held her pounding chest and looked up at Miguel.

"Anza, are you all right?"

She took a deep breath and brushed off her dress. Had she really floated above the earth? Had Miguel seen her? She knew her face was red and blotchy. "I'm fine," she said quickly, wiping the tears from her face. "Don't tell Mama. You know . . . she worries . . ."

Miguel nodded. He sat down close to her. Without asking any questions, he took her hand and stayed with her, the quiet interrupted only by her occasional staccato breaths.

"I miss him, too," Miguel whispered, squeezing her hand. "I miss the ranch and Mexico and Abuelita, everything. And I am sorry about what Isabel said to you. I meant nothing by it."

She stared at the dark brown and purple ridges staggered in the distance and let the ripe tears cascade down her cheeks. And this time, Esperanza did not let go of Miguel's hand.

They were heading down a steep grade on Highway 99 when Isabel said, "Look!"

Esperanza leaned around the side of the truck. As they rounded a curve, it appeared as if the mountains pulled away from each other, like a curtain opening on a stage, revealing the San Joaquin Valley beyond. Flat and spacious, it spread out like a blanket of patchwork fields. Esperanza could see no end to the plots of yellow, brown, and shades of green. The road finally leveled out on the valley floor, and she gazed back at the mountains from where they'd come. They looked like monstrous lions' paws resting at the edge of the ridge.

A big truck blew its horn and Juan pulled over to let it pass, its bed bulging with cantaloupes. Another truck and another did the same. A caravan of trucks passed them, all piled high with the round melons.

On one side of the highway, acres of grapevines stretched out in soldiered rows and swallowed up the arbors. On the other side, fields and fields of dark green cotton plants became a sea of milk-white puffs. This was not a gently rolling landscape like Aguascalientes. For as far as the eye

could travel, the land was unbroken by even a hillock. Esperanza felt dizzy looking at the repeated straight rows of grapes and had to turn her head away.

They finally turned east off the main highway. The truck went slower now and Esperanza could see workers in the fields. People waved and Juan honked the truck horn in return. Then he pulled the truck to the side of the road and pointed to a field that had been cleared of its harvest. Dried, rambling vines covered the acre and leftover melons dotted the ground.

"The field markers are down. We can take as many as we can carry," he called back to them.

Alfonso jumped out, tossed a dozen cantaloupes to Miguel, then stepped up on the running board and slapped the top of the truck for Juan to start again. The melons, warmed by the valley sun, rolled and somersaulted with each bump of the truck.

Two girls walking along the road waved and Juan stopped again. One of them climbed in, a girl about Miguel's age. Her hair was short, black, and

curly and her features were sharp and pointed. She leaned back against the side of the truck, her hands behind her head, and she studied Esperanza, her eyes darting at Miguel whenever she could.

"This is Marta," said Isabel. "She lives at another camp where they pick cotton but it is owned by a different company. Her aunt and uncle live at our camp so she stays with them sometimes."

"Where are you from?" asked Marta.

"Aguascalientes. El Rancho de las Rosas," said Esperanza.

"I have never heard of El Rancho de las Rosas. Is that a town?"

"It was the ranch they lived on," said Isabel proudly, her eyes round and shining. "Esperanza's father owned it and thousands of acres of land. She had lots of servants and beautiful dresses and she went to private school, too. Miguel is my cousin and he and his parents worked for them."

"So you're a princess who's come to be a peasant? Where's all your finery?"

Esperanza stared at her and said nothing.

"What's the matter, silver spoon stuck in your mouth?" Her voice was smart and biting.

"A fire destroyed everything. She and her mother have come to work, like the rest of us," said Miguel.

Confused, Isabel added, "Esperanza's nice. Her papa died."

"Well, my father died, too," said Marta. "Before he came to this country, he fought in the Mexican revolution against people like her father who owned all the land."

Esperanza stared back at Marta, unblinking. What had she done to deserve this girl's insults? Through gritted teeth, she said, "You know nothing of my papa. He was a good, kind man who gave much of his property to his servants."

"That might be so," said Marta. "But there were plenty of the rich who did not."

"That was not my papa's fault."

Isabel pointed to one of the fields, trying to change the subject. "Those people are Filipinos," she said. "They live in their own camp. And see

over there?" She pointed to a field down the road. "Those people are from Oklahoma. They live in Camp 8. There's a Japanese camp, too. We all live separate and work separate. They don't mix us."

"They don't want us banding together for higher wages or better housing," said Marta. "The owners think if Mexicans have no hot water, that we won't mind as long as we think no one has any. They don't want us talking to the Okies from Oklahoma or anyone else because we might discover that they have hot water. See?"

"Do the Okies have hot water?" asked Miguel.

"Not yet, but if they get it, we will strike."

"Strike?" said Miguel. "You mean you will stop working? Don't you need your job?"

"Of course I need my job, but if all the workers join together and refuse to work, we might all get better conditions."

"Are the conditions so bad?" asked Miguel.

"Some are decent. The place you are going to is one of the better ones. They even have *fiestas*. There's a *jamaica* this Saturday night."

Isabel turned to Esperanza. "You will love the

*jamaicas*. We have them every Saturday night during the summer. There is music and food and dancing. This Saturday is the last for this year because soon it will be too cold."

Esperanza nodded and tried to pay attention to Isabel. Marta and Miguel talked and grinned back and forth. An unfamiliar feeling was creeping up inside of Esperanza. She wanted to toss Marta out of the moving truck and scold Miguel for even talking to her. Hadn't he seen her rudeness?

She brooded as they rode past miles of young tamarisk trees that seemed to be the border of someone's property.

"Beyond those trees is the Mexican camp," said Isabel, "where we live."

Marta smirked at Esperanza and said, "Just so you know. This isn't Mexico. No one will be waiting on you here." Then she gave her a phony smile and said, "*¿Entiendes?* Understand?"

Esperanza stared back at her in silence. The one thing she did understand was that she did not like Marta.