

LOS DURAZNOS

P E A C H E S

Now, along with her prayers for Abuelita and Mama, Esperanza prayed for Marta and her mother at the washtub grotto. Papa's roses, although still short and squat, had promising tight buds, but they weren't the only flowers there. She often found that someone had put a posy of sweet alyssum in front of the statue, or a single iris, or had draped a honeysuckle vine over the top of the tub. Lately, she had seen Isabel there every evening after dinner, kneeling on the hard ground.

"Isabel, are you saying a novena?" asked Esperanza when she found her at the statue, yet again one night. "It seems you have been praying for at least nine days."

Isabel got up from her dedication and looked up at Esperanza. "I might be Queen of the May. In two weeks, on May Day, there is a festival at my school and a dance around a pole with colored

ribbons. The teacher will choose the best girl student in the third grade to be queen. And right now, I am the only one who has straight As."

"Then it might be you!" said Esperanza.

"My friends told me that it is usually one of the English speakers that is chosen. The ones who wear nicer dresses. So I'm going to pray every day."

Esperanza thought about all the beautiful dresses she had outgrown in Mexico. How she wished she could have passed them on to Isabel. Esperanza began to worry that she would be disappointed. "Well, even if you are not the queen, you will still be a beautiful dancer, right?"

"Oh, but Esperanza. I want so much to be the queen! I want to be *la reina*, like you."

She laughed. "But regardless, you will always be our queen."

Esperanza left her there, devoutly praying, and went into the cabin.

"Has a Mexican girl ever been chosen Queen of the May?" she asked Josefina.

Josefina's face took on a disappointed look and

she silently shook her head no. "I have asked. They always find a way to choose a blonde, blue-eyed queen."

"But that's not right," said Esperanza. "Especially if it is based on grades."

"There is always a reason. That is the way it is," said Josefina. "Melina told me that last year the Japanese girl had the best marks in the third grade and still they did not choose her."

"Then what is the point of basing it on marks?" asked Esperanza, knowing there was no answer to her question. Her heart already ached for Isabel.

A week later Esperanza put yet another bundle of asparagus on the table after work. The tall and feathery asparagus plants seemed to be as unrelenting as Isabel's desire to be queen. The workers picked the spears from the fields and a few days later, the same fields had to be picked again because new shoots were already showing their heads. And Isabel talked of nothing else, except

the possibility of wearing the winner's crown of flowers on her head.

"I hate asparagus," said Isabel, barely looking up from her homework.

"During grapes, you hate grapes. During potatoes, you hate potatoes. And during asparagus, you hate asparagus. I suppose that during peaches, you will hate peaches."

Isabel laughed. "No, I love peaches."

Hortensia stirred a pot of beans and Esperanza took off the stained apron she wore in the sheds and put on another. She began measuring the flour to make *tortillas*. In a few minutes, she was patting the fresh dough that left her hands looking as if she wore white gloves.

"My teacher will choose the Queen of the May this week," said Isabel. Her entire body wiggled with excitement.

"Yes, you have told us," said Esperanza, teasing her. "Do you have anything new to tell us?"

"They are making a new camp for people from Oklahoma," said Isabel.

Esperanza looked at Hortensia. "Is that true?"

Hortensia nodded. "They announced it at the camp meeting. The owner of the farm bought some army barracks from an old military camp and is moving them onto the property not too far from here."

"They get inside toilets and hot water! And a swimming pool!" said Isabel. "Our teacher told us all about it. And we will all be able to swim in it."

"One day a week," said Hortensia, looking at Esperanza. "The Mexicans can only swim on Friday afternoons, before they clean the pool on Saturday mornings."

Esperanza pounded the dough a little too hard. "Do they think we are dirtier than the others?"

Hortensia did not answer but turned to the stove to cook a *tortilla* on the flat black *comal* over the flame. She looked at Esperanza and held her finger to her mouth, signaling her not to discuss too much in front of Isabel.

Miguel walked in, kissed his mother, then

picked up a plate and a fresh *tortilla* and went to the pot of beans. His clothes were covered in mud that had dried gray.

"How did you get so dirty?" asked Hortensia.

Miguel sat down at the table. "A group of men showed up from Oklahoma. They said they would work for half the money and the railroad hired all of them." He looked into his plate and shook his head. "Some of them have never even worked on a motor before. My boss said that he didn't need me. That they were going to train the new men. He said I could dig ditches or lay tracks if I wanted."

Esperanza stared at him, her floured hands in midair. "What did you do?"

"Can you not tell from my clothes? I dug ditches." His voice was sharp but he continued eating, as if nothing were wrong.

"Miguel, how could you agree to such a thing?" said Esperanza.

Miguel raised his voice. "What would you have me do instead? I could have walked out. But I would have no pay for today. Those men from

Oklahoma have families, too. We must all work at something or we will all starve."

A temper Esperanza did not recognize raged to the surface. Then, like the irrigation pipes in the fields when the water is first turned on, her anger burst forth. "Why didn't your boss tell the others to dig the ditches?!" She looked at the dough she was holding in her hand and threw it at the wall. It stuck for an instant, and then slowly slid down the wall, leaving a darkened trail.

Isabel's serious eyes darted from Miguel to Esperanza to Hortensia. "Are we going to starve?"

"No!" they all answered at the same time.

Esperanza's eyes were on fire. She stamped out of the cabin, slamming the door, and walked past the mulberry and the chinaberry trees to the vineyard. She hurried down a row, then cut over to another.

"Esperanza!"

She heard Miguel's voice in the distance but she didn't answer. When she got to the end of one row, she moved up to another.

"Anza!"

She could hear him running down the rows, catching up with her.

She kept her eyes on the tamarisk trees in the far distance and walked faster.

Miguel eventually caught her arm and pulled her around. "What is the matter with you?"

"Is this the better life that you left Mexico for? Is it? Nothing is right here! Isabel will certainly not be queen no matter how badly she wants it because she is Mexican. You cannot work on engines because you are Mexican. We have gone to work through angry crowds of our own people who threw rocks at us, and I'm afraid they might have been right! They send people back to Mexico even if they don't belong there, just for speaking up. We live in a horse stall. And none of this bothers you? Have you heard that they are building a new camp for Okies, with a swimming pool? The Mexicans can only swim in it on the afternoon before they clean it! Have you heard they will be given inside toilets and hot water? Why is that,

Miguel? Is it because they are the fairest in the land? Tell me! Is this life really better than being a servant in Mexico?"

Miguel looked out over the grapes where the sun set low on the horizon, casting long shadows in the vineyard. He turned back to her.

"In Mexico, I was a second-class citizen. I stood on the other side of the river, remember? And I would have stayed that way my entire life. At least here, I have a chance, however small, to become more than what I was. You, obviously, can never understand this because you have never lived without hope."

She clenched her fists and closed her eyes tight in frustration. "Miguel, do you not understand? You are still a second-class citizen because you act like one, letting them take advantage of you like that. Why don't you go to your boss and confront him? Why don't you speak up for yourself and your talents?"

"You are beginning to sound like the strikers, Esperanza," said Miguel coldly. "There is more than one way to get what you want in this

country. Maybe I must be more determined than others to succeed, but I know that it will happen. *Aguántate tantito y la fruta caerá en tu mano.*"

The words stopped her as if someone had slapped her face. Papa's words: Wait a little while and the fruit will fall into your hand. But she was tired of waiting. She was tired of Mama being sick and Abuelita being far away and Papa being dead. As she thought about Papa, tears sprang from her eyes and she suddenly felt weary, as if she had been clinging to a rope but didn't have the strength to hold on any longer. She sobbed with her eyes closed and imagined she was falling, with the wind whooshing past her and nothing but darkness below.

"Anza."

Could I fall all the way back to Mexico if I never opened my eyes again?

She felt Miguel's hand on her arm and opened her eyes.

"Anza, everything will work out," he said.

Esperanza backed away from him and shook her head, "How do you know these things, Miguel?"

Do you have some prophecy that I do not? I have lost everything. Every single thing and all the things that I was meant to be. See these perfect rows, Miguel? They are like what my life would have been. These rows know where they are going: Straight ahead. Now my life is like the zigzag in the blanket on Mama's bed. I need to get Abuelita here, but I cannot even send her my pitiful savings for fear my uncles will find out and keep her there forever. I pay Mama's medical bills but next month there will be more. I can't stand your blind hope. I don't want to hear your optimism about this land of possibility when I see no proof!"

"As bad as things are, we have to keep trying."

"But it does no good! Look at yourself. Are you standing on the other side of the river? No! You are still a peasant!"

With eyes as hard as green plums, Miguel stared at her and his face contorted into a disgusted grimace. "And you still think you are a queen."

The next morning, Miguel was gone.

He had told his father he was going to northern California to look for work on the railroad. Hortensia was confused and worried that he would leave so suddenly, but Alfonso reassured her. "He is determined. And he is seventeen now. He can take care of himself."

Esperanza was too ashamed to tell anyone what was said in the vineyard and she secretly knew Miguel's leaving was her fault. When she saw Hortensia's anxiety, Esperanza felt the heavy responsibility for his safety.

She went to Papa's roses and when she saw the first bloom, her heart ached because she wished she could run and tell Miguel. *Please, Our Lady, she prayed, don't let anything happen to him or I will never be able to forgive myself for the things I said.*

Esperanza kept her mind off Miguel by working hard and concentrating on Isabel. When Esperanza saw a lug of early peaches come into the

shed, she set aside a bag to bring home to her. She just had to have them, especially today.

As she walked down the row of cabins after work, she could see Isabel in the distance, waiting for her. Isabel sat up straight, primly, with her small hands folded in her lap, her eyes searching the row. When she saw Esperanza, she jumped up and ran toward her. As she got closer, Esperanza could see the tear streaks on her cheeks.

Isabel threw her arms around Esperanza's waist. "I did not win Queen of the May!" she said, sobbing into the folds of her skirt. "I had the best grades but the teacher said she chose on more than just grades."

Esperanza wanted desperately to make it up to her. She picked her up and held her. "I'm sorry, Isabel. I'm so sorry that they did not choose you!" She put her down and took her hand and they walked back to the cabin.

"Have you told the others? Your mother?"

"No," she sniffed. "They are not home yet. I was supposed to go to Irene and Melina's but I wanted to wait for you."

Esperanza took her into the cabin and sat on the bed next to her. "Isabel, it does not matter who won. Yes, you would have made a beautiful queen but that would have lasted for only one day. A day goes by fast, Isabel. And then it is over."

Esperanza bent down, pulled her valise from under the bed, and opened it. The only thing left inside was the porcelain doll. She had shown it to Isabel many times, telling her the story of how Papa had given it to her. Although a little dusty, the doll still looked lovely, its eyes hopeful like Isabel's usually were.

"I want you to have something that will last more than one day," said Esperanza. She lifted the doll from the valise and handed it to Isabel. "To keep as your own."

Isabel's eyes widened. "Oh . . . no, Esperanza," she said, her voice still shaky and her face wet with tears. "Your papa gave her to you."

Esperanza stroked Isabel's hair. "Do you think my papa would want her buried inside a valise all this time with no one playing with her? Look at her. She must be lonely. She is even getting dusty!"

And look at me. I am much too old for dolls. People would make fun of me if I carried her around, and you know how I hate it when people laugh at me. Isabel, you would be doing me and my papa a favor if you would love her."

"Really?" said Isabel.

"Yes," said Esperanza. "And I think that you should take her to school to show all your friends, don't you agree? I'm sure none of them, not even the Queen of the May, has ever owned anything as beautiful."

Isabel cradled the doll in her arms, her tears drying on her face. "Esperanza, I prayed and prayed about being Queen of the May."

"Our Lady knew that being queen would not last, but that the doll would be yours for a long time."

Isabel nodded, a small smile beginning. "What will your mama say?"

Esperanza hugged her, "I have a meeting with the doctor this week so if he lets me, I will ask her. But I think that Mama would be very proud

that she belongs to you." Then, grinning, she held out the bag of peaches. "I hate asparagus, too."

Esperanza and Hortensia waited in the doctor's office. Hortensia sat and tapped her foot, and Esperanza paced, looking at the diplomas on the wall.

Finally, the door swung open and the doctor walked in, then scooted behind his desk and sat down.

"Esperanza, I have good news," he said. "Your mother's health has improved and she'll be well enough to leave the hospital in a week. She is still a little depressed but I think she needs to be around all of you. Please remember, though, that once she goes home, she will have to rest to build up her strength. There is still a chance of a relapse."

Esperanza started laughing and crying at the same time. Mama was coming home! For the first time in the five months since Mama had entered the hospital, Esperanza's heart felt lighter.

The doctor smiled. "She has been asking for her crochet needles and yarn. You can see her now for a few minutes if you like."

Esperanza ran down the hospital halls with Hortensia behind her to Mama's bedside, where they found her sitting up in bed. Esperanza flung her arms around her neck. "Mama!"

Mama hugged her then held her at arm's length and studied her. "Oh, Esperanza, how you've grown. You look so mature."

Mama still looked thin but not so weak. Esperanza felt her forehead and there was no fever.

Mama laughed at her. It wasn't a strong laugh but Esperanza loved the sound.

Hortensia pronounced that her color was good and promised to purchase more yarn so that it would be waiting when she came home. "You would not believe your daughter, Ramona. She always gets called to work in the sheds, she cooks now, and takes care of the babies as well as their own mother."

Mama reached up, pulled Esperanza to her chest, and hugged her. "I am so proud of you."

Esperanza hugged Mama back. When the visiting hour was over, she hated to leave but kissed Mama and said her good-byes, promising to tell her everything as soon as she came home.

All week they prepared for Mama's homecoming. Hortensia and Josefina scrubbed the little cabin until it was almost antiseptic. Esperanza washed all the blankets and propped the pillows in the bed. Juan and Alfonso cushioned a chair and several crates under the shade trees so that Mama could recline outside during the hot afternoons.

On Saturday, as soon as Esperanza helped Mama from the truck, she wanted a quick tour of Papa's roses and she got weepy when she saw the blooms. Visitors came all afternoon, but Hortensia would only let people stay a few minutes, then she shooed them away for fear Mama wouldn't get her rest.

That night, Isabel showed Mama the doll and how she was taking care of it and Mama told her that she thought Isabel and the doll belonged together. When it was time for bed, Esperanza carefully lay down next to Mama, hoping she wouldn't disturb her, but Mama moved closer and put her arms around Esperanza, and held her tightly.

"Mama, Miguel is gone," she whispered.

"I know, *mija*. Hortensia told me."

"But Mama, it was my fault. I got angry and told him he was still a peasant and then he left."

"It could not have been all your fault. I'm sure he knows you didn't mean it. He'll come back soon. He couldn't be away from his family for long."

They were quiet.

"Mama, we've been away from Abuelita for almost a year," said Esperanza.

"I know," said Mama quietly. "It does not seem possible."

"But I've saved money. We can bring her soon. Do you want to see how much?" Before Mama

could answer, Esperanza turned on the light, checking to make sure she hadn't woken Isabel. She tiptoed to the closet and took out her valise. She grinned at Mama, knowing how proud she would be of all the money orders. She opened the bag and her mouth dropped open. She couldn't believe what she saw. She tipped the valise upside down and shook it hard.

It was empty. The money orders were gone.

LAS UVAS

GRAPE S

Miguel was the only one who could have taken the money orders. No one doubted that. Alfonso apologized to Esperanza, but Mama graciously said that Miguel must have needed the money to get to northern California. Alfonso promised the money would be paid back, one way or another, and Esperanza knew it would be, but she was angry with Miguel. How dare he go into her valise and take what was not his. And after all her hard work.

Mama seemed to get a little stronger every day, although she still took many naps. Hortensia was happy that she was eating well, and every day Esperanza brought home just-picked fruit to tempt her.

A few weeks later, Esperanza stood on the shed dock in the morning and marveled at the peaches, plums, and nectarines that poured into the shed.

"How will we ever sort them all?" she asked.

Josefina laughed. "One piece at a time. It gets done."

They started with the small white clingstone peaches and then the larger yellow Elbertas. Mama loved the white peaches so Esperanza set aside a bag for her. Then after lunch, they sorted the Flaming Gold nectarines. Later that afternoon they would still have to sort a few bushels of plums.

Esperanza loved the elephant-heart plums. Mottled green on the outside and bloodred on the inside, they were tangy and sweet at the same time. She stood in the midsummer sun during her lunch break and ate one, bent over so the juice wouldn't run down her chin.

Josefina called to her. "Mira," she said. "Look. There's Alfonso. What is he doing here?"

Alfonso was talking to one of the supervisors. He had never left the fields in the middle of the day and come to the sheds.

"Something must be wrong," said Esperanza.

"Maybe it is the babies?" said Josefina and she hurried toward him.

Esperanza could see them talking and slowly began walking toward them, leaving the line of women and the stacks of lugs and plums. She tried to read from Josefina's expressions whether something was wrong. Then Josefina turned to look at her.

Esperanza felt the blood drain from her face and she suddenly knew why Alfonso was here. It had to be Mama. The doctor had said she could have a relapse. Something must have happened to her. Esperanza suddenly felt weak but she kept walking. "Is it Mama?"

"No, no. I didn't mean to alarm you, Esperanza, but I need you to come with me. Hortensia is in the truck."

"But it's so early."

"It's okay, I talked to the supervisor."

She followed him to the truck. Hortensia was waiting inside. "We got a message from Miguel," she said. "We are to meet him at the bus station in Bakersfield at three o'clock. He said he is coming from Los Angeles and that we should bring you. That's all we know."

"But why would he want me to come?" asked Esperanza.

"I can only hope that it's to apologize for his actions," said Hortensia.

It was over a hundred degrees. Hot wind whipped inside the cab. Esperanza felt the perspiration sliding down her skin beneath her dress. It felt strange to be riding to town on a workday, breaking her routine in the sheds. She kept thinking of all the elephant hearts that the others would have to pack shorthanded.

Hortensia squeezed her hand. "I can't wait to see him," she said.

Esperanza offered a tight smile.

They arrived at the bus station and sat on a bench in front. The clerks all spoke to one another in English, their hard, sharp words meaning nothing to Esperanza. It always startled her when she heard English and she hated not knowing what people were saying. Someday she would learn it. She strained to hear each announcement that was made, finally hearing the words she was waiting for, "Los Angeles."

A silver bus turned the corner and pulled into the bay in front of the station. Esperanza searched through the passengers seated on the bus but couldn't see Miguel. She and Hortensia and Alfonso stood up and watched everyone get off. And then, finally, there was Miguel standing in the doorway of the bus. He looked tired and rumpled but when he saw his parents, he jumped from the steps, grabbing his mother and hugging her, then his father, clapping him on the back.

He looked at Esperanza and smiled. "I have brought you proof that things will get better," he said.

She looked at him, trying to be angry. She didn't want him to think she was glad to see him. "Did you bring back what you have stolen?"

"No, but I brought you something better."

Then he turned to help the last passenger from the bus, a small, older woman trying to get down the steep steps. The sun, reflecting off the shiny bus, glinted in Esperanza's eyes. She shaded them with her hand, trying to imagine what Miguel was talking about.

For a moment, she saw *un fantasma*, a ghost of Abuelita walking toward her, with one arm reaching out to her and the other pressing on a wooden cane.

"Esperanza," said the ghost.

She heard Hortensia suck in her breath.

Suddenly, Esperanza knew that her eyes were not deceiving her. Her throat tightened and she felt as if she couldn't move.

Abuelita came closer. She was small and wrinkled, with wisps of white hair falling out of her bun at the back of her head. Her clothes looked mussed from travel, but she had her same white lace handkerchief tucked into the sleeve of her dress and her eyes brimmed with tears. Esperanza tried to say her name but couldn't. Her throat was cramping from her emotions. She could only reach out for her grandmother and bury her head in the familiar smell of face powder, garlic, and peppermint.

"Abuelita, Abuelita!" she cried.

"*Aquí estoy*. I am here, *mi nieta*. How I have missed you."

Esperanza rocked her back and forth, daring to believe that it was true, looking at her through tears to make sure she was not dreaming. And laughing finally. Laughing and smiling and holding her hands. Then Hortensia and Alfonso took their turns.

Esperanza looked at Miguel.

"How?" she asked.

"I needed to have something to do while I waited for work. So I went for her."

After they pulled into camp, they escorted Abuelita into their cabin where they found Josefina, Juan, and the babies waiting.

"Josefina, where's Mama?"

"It was warm so we settled her in the shade. She fell asleep. Isabel is sitting with her. Is everything all right?"

Hortensia introduced Abuelita to Juan and Josefina, whose faces lit up. Esperanza then watched her grandmother look around the tiny room that now held pieces of their new life. Isabel's pictures on the wall, a bowl of peaches on the table, the babies' toys underfoot, Papa's

roses in a coffee can. Esperanza wondered what Abuelita thought of the sad conditions, but she just smiled and said, "Please take me to my daughter."

Esperanza took Abuelita's hand and led her toward the trees. She could see Mama sitting in the shade near the wooden table. A quilt was spread on the ground nearby where the babies usually played. Isabel was running back from the vineyard, her hands full of wildflowers and grapevines. She saw Esperanza and ran toward her and Abuelita.

Isabel stopped in front of them, her face flushed and smiling.

"Isabel, this is Abuelita."

Isabel's eyes widened and her mouth popped open in surprise. "Do you really walk barefoot in the grapes and carry smooth stones in your pockets?"

Abuelita laughed, reached deep into the pocket of her dress, pulled out a flat, slick stone and gave it to Isabel. She looked at it in amazement, then handed Abuelita the wildflowers.

"I think you and I will be good friends, Isabel, yes?"

Isabel nodded and stepped aside so Abuelita could go to her daughter.

There was no way to prepare Mama.

Esperanza watched Abuelita walk to where Mama slept, resting on the makeshift lounge. She was framed by the vineyard, the grapes ripe and ready to drop.

Abuelita stopped a few feet from Mama and looked at her.

A stack of lace *carpetas* was at Mama's side as well as her crochet needle and thread. Abuelita reached out and stroked her hair, gently pulling the loose strands away from Mama's face and smoothing them against her head.

Softly, Abuelita said, "Ramona."

Mama did not open her eyes, but said as if she was dreaming, "Esperanza, is that you?"

"No, Ramona, it is me, Abuelita."

Mama slowly opened her eyes. She stared at Abuelita with no reaction, as if she was not really seeing her at all. Then she lifted her hand and

reached out to touch her mother's face, making sure that the vision was true.

Abuelita nodded, "Yes, it is me. I have come."

Abuelita and Mama uttered no words that anyone could understand. It was their own language of happy exclamations and overwhelming emotions. Esperanza watched them cry and she wondered if her own heart would burst from so much joy.

"Oh, Esperanza!" said Isabel, jumping up and down and clapping. "I think my heart is dancing."

Esperanza barely choked out the whisper, "Mine, too." Then she picked up Isabel and spun her around in her arms.

Mama would not let go of Abuelita. She scooted over and made Abuelita sit next to her and held on to her arms as if she might disappear.

Suddenly, Esperanza remembered her promise, ran back to the cabin and returned, carrying something in her arms.

"Esperanza," said Abuelita, "Could that possibly be my blanket? Did you finish it?"

"Not yet," she said, unfolding the blanket.

Mama held one end, and Esperanza pulled the other end. It reached from the chinaberry tree to the mulberry. It could have covered three beds. They all laughed. The yarn was still connected, waiting for the last row to be finished.

They all gathered on the quilt and at the table. Esperanza sat down and pulled the massive blanket next to her, took the needle, and began crocheting the final stitches.

When Mama could finally speak, she looked at Abuelita and asked the same thing Esperanza had asked, "How did you get here?"

"Miguel," said Abuelita. "He came for me. Luis and Marco have been impossible. If I went to the market, one of their spies would follow me. I think they thought you were still in the area and would eventually come back for me."

Ten stitches up to the top of the mountain.

Esperanza listened to Abuelita tell Mama about how infuriated Tío Luis had been when he found out they were gone. He'd become obsessed with finding them and questioned all of their neighbors, including Señor Rodríguez. They had

even come to the convent to question her sisters. But no one told him anything.

Add one stitch.

A few months after they left, she'd had a premonition that something was wrong with Mama. The feeling would not let go of her so she lit candles every day for months and prayed for their safety.

Nine stitches down to the bottom of the valley.

Then one day, when she had almost given up hope, she found an injured bird in the garden that she did not think would fly again, but the next morning when she approached it, the bird lifted into the sky. She knew it was a sign that whatever had been wrong, was better.

Skip one stitch.

Then one of the nuns brought her a note that someone had left in the poor box addressed to her. It had been from Miguel. He suspected that Abuelita was being watched so he delivered his notes after dark, telling her of his plan.

Ten stitches up to the top of the mountain.

Miguel and Señor Rodríguez came in the

middle of the night and took her to the train station. It was all very exciting. And Miguel didn't leave her side once during the entire trip. He brought her all the way here.

Add one stitch.

He said that Ramona and Esperanza needed her.

"He was right," said Mama, her eyes teary again, gratefully looking at Miguel.

Mountains and valleys. Mountains and valleys. So many of them, thought Esperanza. When a strand of her hair fell into her lap, she picked it up and wove it into the blanket, so that all of the happiness and emotion she felt at this moment would go with it forever.

When Esperanza told Abuelita their story, about all that had happened to them, she didn't measure time by the usual seasons. Instead, she told it as a field worker, in spans of fruits and vegetables and by what needed to be done to the land.

They had arrived in the valley at the end of the grapes: Thompson seedless, Red Malagas, and the

blue-black Ribiers. Mama breathed in the dust at the end of the grapes and that's when she got sick. Then it had been time to prune the grapes and get ready for potatoes. Working potatoes was the heart of winter and the cold that dampened the bones. And during potato eyes, Mama had gone to the hospital. There had been no months with names, only the time of tying canes amidst the ghosts of grapes and gray days that never warmed. But afterward came the anticipation of spring and a valley pregnant with needs: graceful as paragus, ripening vineyards, and groaning trees. Then early peaches called, crickets in the fields started their nightly symphonies, and Mama came home. Abuelita arrived during plums. And now the grapes were delivering another harvest and Esperanza was turning another year.

A few days before her birthday, Esperanza begged Miguel to drive her to the foothills before sunrise. There was something she wanted to do. She woke in the dark and tiptoed from the cabin.

They followed the dirt road that headed east and parked when they could go no farther.

In the gray light, they could see a small footpath to a plateau.

When they got to the top, Esperanza looked out over the valley. The cool, almost-morning air filled her senses. Below, she could see the white roofs of the cabins in straight rows, the fields beginning to take form, and over the eastern mountains, a hopeful brightening.

She bent over and touched the grass. It was cool but dry. She lay down on her stomach and patted the ground next to her. "Miguel, did you know that if you lie on the ground and stay very still, you can feel the earth's heart beating?"

He looked at her skeptically.

She patted the ground again.

Then he lay down as she was, facing her.

"Will this happen soon, Esperanza?"

"*Aguántate tantito y la fruta caerá en tu mano.* Wait a little while and the fruit will fall into your hand."

He smiled and nodded.

They were still.

She watched Miguel watching her.

And then she felt it. Beginning softly. A gentle thumping, repeating itself. Then stronger. She heard it, too. *Shoomp. Shoomp. Shoomp.* The earth's heartbeat. Just like she had felt it that day with Papa.

Miguel smiled and she knew that he felt it, too.

The sun peeked over the rim of a distant ridge, bursting the dawn onto the waiting fields. She felt its warmth washing over her and turned on her back and faced the sky, staring into the clouds now tinged with pink and orange.

As the sun rose, Esperanza began to feel as if she rose with it. Floating again, like that day on the mountain, when she first arrived in the valley. She closed her eyes, and this time she did not careen out of control. Instead, she glided above the earth, unafraid. She let herself be lifted into the sky, and she knew that she would not slip away. She knew that she would never lose Papa or El Rancho de las Rosas, or Abuelita or Mama, no matter what happened. It was as Carmen, the egg

woman, had said on the train. She had her family, a garden full of roses, her faith, and the memories of those who had gone before her. But now, she had even more than that, and it carried her up, as on the wings of the phoenix. She soared with the anticipation of dreams she never knew she could have, of learning English, of supporting her family, of someday buying a tiny house. Miguel had been right about never giving up, and she had been right, too, about rising above those who held them down.

She hovered high above the valley, its basin surrounded by the mountains. She swooped over Papa's rose blooms, buoyed by rosehips that remembered all the beauty they had seen. She waved at Isabel and Abuelita, walking barefoot in the vineyards, wearing grapevine wreaths in their hair. She saw Mama, sitting on a blanket, a cacophony of color that covered an acre in zigzag rows. She saw Marta and her mother walking in an almond grove, holding hands. Then she flew over a river, a thrusting torrent that cut through the mountains. And there, in the middle of the

wilderness, was a girl in a blue silk dress and a boy with his hair slicked down, eating mangoes on a stick, carved to look like exotic flowers, sitting on a grassy bank, on the same side of the river.

Esperanza reached for Miguel's hand and found it, and even though her mind was soaring to infinite possibilities, his touch held her heart to the earth.

*"Estas son las mañanitas que cantaba el Rey David
a las muchachas bonitas; se las cantamos aquí.*

Despierta, mi bien, despierta. Mira que ya amaneció.

Ya los pajaritos cantan, la luna ya se metió.

These are the morning songs which King David used to sing
to all the pretty girls; we sing them here to you.

Awake, my beloved, awake. See, it is already dawn.

The birds are already singing, the moon has already gone."

On the morning of her birthday, Esperanza heard the voices coming from outside her window. She could pick out Miguel's, Alfonso's, and Juan's.

She sat up in bed and listened. And smiled. Esperanza lifted the curtain. Isabel came over to her bed and looked out with her, clutching her doll. They both blew kisses to the men who sang the birthday song. Then Esperanza waved them inside, not to open gifts, but because she could already smell coffee coming from the kitchen.

They gathered for breakfast: Mama and Abuelita, Hortensia and Alfonso, Josefina and Juan, the babies and Isabel. Irene and Melina came, too, with their family. And Miguel. It wasn't exactly like the birthdays of her past. But it would still be a celebration, under the mulberry and chinaberry trees, with newborn rosebuds from Papa's garden. Although there were no papayas, there was cantaloupe, lime, and coconut salad. And *machaca burritos* topped with lots of laughter and teasing. At the end of the meal, Josefina brought out a *flan de almendras*, Esperanza's favorite, and they sang the birthday song to her again.

Isabel sat next to Abuelita at the wooden table. They each held crochet hooks and a skein of

yarn. "Now watch, Isabel. Ten stitches up to the top of the mountain."

Abuelita demonstrated and Isabel carefully copied her movements.

The needle rocked awkwardly and at the end of her beginning rows, Isabel held up her work to show Esperanza. "Mine is all crooked!"

Esperanza smiled and reached over and gently pulled the yarn, unraveling the uneven stitches. Then she looked into Isabel's trusting eyes and said, "Do not ever be afraid to start over."