

LAS PAPAS  
P O T A T O E S

Esperanza almost never left Mama's side. She sponged her with cool water and fed her teaspoons of broth throughout the day. Miguel offered to take over the sweeping job for her, but Esperanza wouldn't let him. Irene and Melina arrived each morning, to check on Mama and to take the babies. Alfonso and Juan put up extra layers of newspaper and cardboard in the bedroom to keep out the November chill and Isabel drew pictures to hang on the walls because she did not think the newspaper looked pretty enough for Mama.

The doctor came back a few weeks later with more medicine. "She is not getting worse," he said, shaking his head. "But she is not getting better, either."

Mama drifted in and out of fitful sleep and sometimes she called out for Abuelita. Esperanza could barely sit still and often paced around the small room.

One morning, Mama said weakly, "Esperanza . . ."

Esperanza ran to her and took her hand.

"Abuelita's blanket . . ." she whispered.

Esperanza pulled her valise from under the bed. She had not opened it since before the dust storm and saw that the fine brown powder had even found its way deep inside. As it had found its way into Mama's lungs.

She lifted out the crocheting that Abuelita had started the night Papa died. It seemed like a lifetime ago. Had it only been a few months? She stretched out the zigzag rows. They reached from one side of Mama's bed to the other, but were only a few hands wide, looking more like a long scarf than the beginnings of a blanket. Esperanza could see Abuelita's hairs woven in, so that all her love and good wishes would go with them forever. She held the crocheting to her face and could still smell the smoke from the fire. And the faintest scent of peppermint.

Esperanza looked at Mama, breathing uneasily, her eyes closed. It was clear she needed Abuelita.

They both needed her. But what was Esperanza to do? She picked up Mama's limp hand and kissed it. Then she handed the strip of zigzag rows to Mama, who clutched it to her chest.

What had Abuelita told her when she'd given her the bundle of crocheting? And then she remembered. She had said, "Finish this for me, Esperanza . . . and promise me you'll take care of Mama."

After Mama fell asleep, Esperanza picked up the needlework and began where Abuelita had left off. Ten-stitches up to the top of the mountain. Add one stitch. Nine-stitches down to the bottom of the valley, skip one. Her fingers were more nimble now and her stitches were more even. The mountains and valleys in the blanket were easy. But as soon as she reached a mountain, she was headed back down into a valley again. Would she ever escape this valley she was living in? This valley of Mama being sick?

What else had Abuelita said? After she had lived many mountains and valleys they would be together again. She bent over her work, intent,

and when her hair fell into her lap, she picked it up and wove it into the blanket. She cried when she thought of the wishes that would go into the blanket forever.

Because she was wishing that Mama would not die.

The blanket grew longer. And Mama grew more pale. Women in the camp brought her extra skeins of yarn and Esperanza didn't care that they didn't match. Each night when she went to bed, she put the growing blanket back over Mama, covering her in hopeful color.

Lately, it seemed Esperanza could not interest Mama in anything. "Please, Mama," she begged, "you must eat more soup. Please Mama, you must drink more juice. Mama, let me comb your hair. It will make you feel better."

But Mama was listless and Esperanza often found her weeping in silence. It was as if after all her hard work in getting them there, her strong and determined mother had given up.

The fields frosted over and Mama began to have trouble breathing. The doctor came again, with worse news. "She should be in the hospital. She's very weak but more than that, she is depressed and needs nursing around the clock if she is to get stronger. It is a county hospital so you would not have to pay, except for doctor bills and medicines."

Esperanza shook her head no. "The hospital is where people go to die." She began to cry. Isabel ran to her crying, too.

Hortensia walked over and folded them both into her arms. "No, no, she is going to the hospital to get better."

Hortensia wrapped Mama in blankets and Alfonso drove them to Kern General Hospital in Bakersfield. The nurses would let Esperanza stay with Mama only a few minutes. And when Esperanza kissed her good-bye, Mama didn't say a word, but just shut her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

Riding home in the truck that evening, Esperanza stared straight into the alley of light

made from the truck's headlamps, feeling as if she were in a trance. "Hortensia, what did the doctor mean when he said that Mama was depressed?"

"In only a few months, she has lost her husband, her home, her money. And she is separated from her mother. It is a lot of strain on her body to cope with so many emotions in such a short time. Sometimes sadness and worry can make a person sicker. Your mother was very strong through your father's death and her journey here. For you. But when she got sick, everything became too much for her. Think of how helpless she must feel." Hortensia took out her handkerchief and blew her nose, too upset to continue.

Esperanza felt like she had failed Mama in some way and wanted to make it up to her. Mama had been strong for her. Now it was her turn to be strong for Mama. She must show her that she didn't need to worry anymore. But how? "Abuelita. I must write to Abuelita."

Hortensia shook her head. "I'm sure your uncles are still watching everything that goes in and out of the convent and probably the post office, too.

But maybe we can find someone going to Aguascalientes who can carry a letter."

"I have to do something," said Esperanza, holding back tears. Hortensia put her arm around Esperanza. "Don't worry," she said. "The doctors and nurses know what she needs and we will take care of one another."

Esperanza didn't say what she really thought, that what Mama really needed was Abuelita. Because if sadness was making Mama sicker, then maybe some happiness would make her better. She just had to figure out a way to get her here.

When she got back to camp, she went behind the cabin to pray in front of the washtub grotto. Someone had knit a shawl and draped it over Our Lady's shoulders and the sweetness of the gesture made Esperanza cry. "Please," she said through her tears. "I promised Abuelita I would take care of Mama. Show me how I can help her."

The next day, Esperanza pulled a heavy shawl around her shoulders and waited for Miguel to

come home from the fields. She paced in the area where the trucks unloaded, and wrapped the wool tighter against the early winter cold. She had been thinking all day about what to do. Ever since Mama had first become sick over a month ago, they had no money coming in. The doctor's bills and medicines had used up most of what they'd saved. Now there were more bills. Alfonso and Hortensia offered to help but they had done so much already and they did not have much to spare. Besides, she could not accept their charity forever.

Abuelita's ankle was probably healed by now, but if she hadn't been able to get her money out of Tío Luis's bank, then she would have no money with which to travel. If Esperanza could somehow get money to Abuelita, then maybe she could come sooner.

When Miguel jumped off one of the trucks, she called to him.

"What have I done to deserve this honor, *mi reina?*" he said, smiling and walking toward her.

"Please, Miguel, no teasing. I need help. I need to work so I can bring Abuelita to Mama."

He was quiet and Esperanza could tell he was thinking. "But what could you do? And who would take care of the babies?"

"I could work in the fields or in the sheds and Melina and Irene have already offered to watch Pepe and Lupe."

"It's only men in the fields right now, and you're not old enough to work in the sheds."

"I am tall. I'll wear my hair up. They won't know."

"The problem is that it's the wrong time of year. They aren't packing anything right now. Not until asparagus in the spring. My mother and Josefina are going to cut potato eyes for the next three weeks. Maybe you can go with them?"

"But it is just three weeks," said Esperanza. "I need more work than that!"

"Anza, if you're good at cutting potato eyes, they will hire you to tie grapes. If you are good at tying grapes, they will hire you for asparagus. That's how it works. If you're good at one thing, then they hire you for another."

She nodded. "Can you tell me one more thing, Miguel?"

"Claro. Certainly."

"What are potato eyes?"

Esperanza huddled with Josefina, Hortensia, and a small group of women waiting for the morning truck to take them to the sheds. A thick tulle ground fog that hugged the earth settled in the valley, surrounding them, as if they stood within a deep gray cloud. There was no wind, only silence and penetrating cold.

Esperanza bundled in all the clothing that she could put on, old wool pants, a sweater, a ragged jacket, a wool cap, and thick gloves over thin gloves, all borrowed from friends in the camp. Hortensia had shown her how to heat a brick in the oven and bundle it in newspaper, and she hugged it to her body to keep warm as they rode on the truck.

Since the driver could only see a few yards

ahead, the truck rumbled slowly on the dirt roads. They passed miles of naked grapevines, stripped of their harvest and bereft of their leaves. Fading into the mist, the brown and twisted trunks looked frigid and lonely.

The truck stopped at the big packing shed. It was really one long building with different open-air sections, as long as six train cars. The railroad tracks ran along one side, and docks for trucks ran along the other. Esperanza had heard Mama and the others talk about the sheds. How they were busy with people; women standing at long tables, packing the fruit; trucks coming and going with their loads fresh from the fields; and workers stocking the train cars that would later be hooked to a locomotive to take the fruit all over the United States.

But cutting potato eyes was different. Since nothing was being packed, there wasn't the usual activity. Only twenty or so women gathered in the cavernous shed, sitting in a circle on upturned crates, protected from the wind by only a few stacks of empty boxes.

The Mexican supervisor took their names.

With all the clothing they were wearing, he barely looked at their faces. Josefina had told Esperanza that if she was a good worker, the bosses would not concern themselves with her age, so she knew she would have to work hard.

Esperanza copied everything that Hortensia and Josefina did. When the women put the hot bricks between their feet to keep them warm while they worked, so did she. When they took off their outer gloves and worked in thin cotton ones, she did the same. Everyone had a metal bin sitting behind them. The field-workers brought cold potatoes and filled up their bins. Hortensia took a potato and then, with a sharp knife, she cut it into chunks around the dimples. She tapped her knife on one of the dimples. "That is an eye," she whispered to Esperanza. "Leave two eyes in every piece so there will be two chances for it to take root." Then she dropped the chunks into a burlap sack. When the sack was full, the field-workers took it away.

"Where do they take them?" she asked Hortensia.

"To the fields. They plant the eye pieces and then the potatoes grow."

Esperanza picked up a knife. Now she knew where potatoes came from.

The women began chatting. Some knew each other from camp. And one of them was Marta's aunt.

"Is there any more talk of striking?" asked Josefina.

"Things are quiet now, but they are still organizing," said Marta's aunt. "There is talk of striking in the spring when it is time to pick. We are afraid there will be problems. If they refuse to work, they will lose their cabins in the migrant camps. And then where will they live? Or worse, they will all be sent back to Mexico."

"How can they send all of them back?" asked Hortensia.

"Repatriation," said Marta's aunt. "*La Migra* — the immigration authorities — round up people who cause problems and check their papers. If they are not in order, or if they do not happen to

have their papers with them, the immigration officials send them back to Mexico. We have heard that they have sent people whose families have lived here for generations, those who are citizens and have never even been to Mexico."

Esperanza remembered the train at the border and the people being herded on to it. She had been thankful for the papers that Abuelita's sisters had arranged.

Marta's aunt said, "There is also some talk about harming Mexicans who continue to work."

The other women sitting around the circle pretended to concentrate on their potatoes, but Esperanza noticed worried glances and raised eyebrows.

Then Hortensia cleared her throat and said, "Are you saying that if we continue to work during the spring, your niece and her friends might harm us?"

"We are praying that does not happen. My husband says we will not join them. We have too many mouths to feed. And he has told Marta she

cannot stay with us. We can't risk being asked to leave the camp or losing our jobs because of our niece."

Heads nodded in sympathy and the circle was silent, except for the sounds of the knives cutting the crisp potatoes.

"Is anyone going to Mexico for *La Navidad*?" asked another woman, wisely changing the subject. Esperanza kept cutting the potato eyes but listened carefully, hoping someone would be going to Aguascalientes for Christmas. But no one seemed to be traveling anywhere near there.

A worker refilled Esperanza's metal bin with another load of cold potatoes. The rumbling noise brought her thoughts back to what Marta's aunt had said. If it was true that the strikers would threaten people who kept working, they might try and stop her, too. Esperanza thought of Mama in the hospital and Abuelita in Mexico and how much depended on her being able to work. If she was lucky enough to have a job in the spring, no one was going to get in her way.

A few nights before Christmas, Esperanza helped Isabel make a yarn doll for Silvia while the others went to a camp meeting. Ever since Esperanza had taught Isabel how to make the dolls, it seemed there was a new one born each day, and *monas* of every color now sat in a line on their pillows.

"Silvia will be so surprised," said Isabel. "She has never had a doll before."

"We'll make some clothes for it, too," said Esperanza.

"What was Christmas like at El Rancho de las Rosas?" Isabel never tired of Esperanza's stories about her previous life.

Esperanza stared up at the ceiling, searching her memories. "Mama decorated with Advent wreaths and candles. Papa set up the nativity on a bed of moss in the front hall. And Hortensia cooked for days. There were *empanadas* filled with meat and sweet raisin *tamales*. You would have loved how Abuelita decorated her gifts. She used

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dried grapevines and flowers, instead of ribbons. On Christmas Eve, the house was always filled with laughter and people calling out, 'Feliz Navidad.' Later, we went to the *catedral* and sat with hundreds of people and held candles during midnight mass. Then we came home in the middle of the night, still smelling of incense from the church, and drank warm *atole de chocolate*, and opened our gifts."

Isabel sucked in her breath and gushed, "What kind of gifts?"

"I . . . I can't remember," said Esperanza, braiding the yarn doll's legs. "All I remember is being happy." Then she looked around the room as if seeing it for the first time. One of the table legs was uneven and had to be propped by a piece of wood so it wouldn't wobble. The walls were patched and peeling. The floor was wood plank and splintery and no matter how much she swept, it never looked clean. The dishes were chipped and the blankets frayed and no amount of beating could remove their musty smell. Her other life seemed like a story she had read in a book a long

time ago, *un cuento de hadas*, a fairy tale. She could see the illustrations in her mind: the Sierra Madre, El Rancho de las Rosas, and a carefree young girl running through the vineyard. But now, sitting in this cabin, the story seemed as if it were about some other girl, someone Esperanza didn't know anymore.

"What do you want for Christmas this year?" asked Isabel.

"I want Mama to get well. I want more work. And . . ." She stared at her hands and took a deep breath. After three weeks of potato eyes, they were dried and cracked from the starch that had soaked through her gloves. ". . . I want soft hands. What do you want, Isabel?"

Isabel looked at her with her big doe eyes and said, "That's easy. I want anything!" Esperanza nodded and smiled. Admiring the completed doll, she handed it to Isabel, whose eyes, as usual, were excited.

They went to bed, Isabel in her cot, and Esperanza in the bed that she and Mama had slept in. She turned toward the wall, yearning for the

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holidays of her past, and repeated what was becoming a nightly ritual of silent tears. She didn't think anyone ever knew that she cried herself to sleep, until she felt Isabel patting her back.

"Esperanza, don't cry again. We will sleep with you, if you want."

Who? She turned toward Isabel, who was holding the family of yarn dolls.

Esperanza couldn't help but smile and lift the covers. Isabel slid in beside her, arranging the dolls between them.

Esperanza stared into the dark. Isabel had nothing, but she also had everything. Esperanza wanted what she had. She wanted so few worries that something as simple as a yarn doll would make her happy.

On Christmas Day Esperanza walked up the front steps of the hospital while Alfonso waited in the truck. A couple passed her carrying gifts wrapped in shiny paper. A woman hurried by, carrying a

poinsettia plant and wearing a beautiful red wool coat with a rhinestone Christmas tree pinned to the lapel. Esperanza's eyes riveted on the coat and the jewelry. She wished she could give Mama a warm red coat and a pin that sparkled. She thought of the gift she had in her pocket. It was nothing more than a small smooth stone that she had found in the fields while weeding potatoes.

The doctor had moved Mama to a ward for people with long-term illnesses. There were only four other people on the floor and the patients were spread out, their occupied beds scattered among the rows of bare mattresses in the long room. Mama slept and didn't wake even to say hello. Nevertheless, Esperanza sat next to her, crocheted a few rows on the blanket and told Mama about the sheds and Isabel and the strikers. She told her that Lupe and Pepe could almost walk now. And that Miguel thought that Papa's roses showed signs of growth.

Mama didn't wake to say good-bye either. Esperanza tucked the blanket around her, hoping

that the color from the blanket would slowly seep into Mama's cheeks.

She put the stone on the night table and kissed Mama good-bye.

"Don't worry. I will take care of everything. I will be *la patrona* for the family now."