

LOS AGUACATES
A V O C A D O S

Esperanza's breath made smoky vapors in front of her face as she waited for the truck to take her to the grapevines. She shifted from foot to foot and clapped her gloved hands together and wondered what was so new about the New Year. It already seemed old, with the same routines. She worked during the week. She helped Hortensia cook dinner in the late afternoons. In the evenings she helped Josefina with the babies and Isabel with her homework. She went to see Mama on Saturdays and Sundays.

She huddled in the field near a smudge pot to keep warm and mentally counted the money she would need to bring Abuelita here. Every other week, with the small amounts she saved, she bought a money order from the market and put it in her valise. She figured that if she kept working until peaches, she would have enough for

Abuelita's travel. Her problem then would be how to reach Abuelita.

The men went down the rows first, pruning the thick grapevines and leaving a few long branches or "canes" on each trunk. She followed, along with others, and tied the canes on the taut wire that was stretched post to post. She ached from the cold and had to keep moving all day long to stay warm.

That night, as she soaked her hands in warm water, she realized that she no longer recognized them as her own. Cut and scarred, swollen and stiff, they looked like the hands of a very old man.

"Are you sure this will work?" asked Esperanza, as she watched Hortensia cut a ripe avocado in half.

"Of course," said Hortensia, removing the big pit and leaving a hole in the heart of the fruit. She scooped out the pulp, mashed it on a plate, and added some glycerine. "You have seen me make this for your mother many times. We are lucky to have the avocados this time of year. Some friends of Josefina brought them from Los Angeles."

Hortensia rubbed the avocado mixture into Esperanza's hands. "You must keep it on for twenty minutes so your hands will soak up the oils."

Esperanza looked at her hands covered in the greasy green lotion and remembered when Mama used to sit like this, after a long day of gardening or after horseback rides with Papa through the dry mesquite grasslands. When she was a little girl, she had laughed at Mama's hands covered in what looked like *guacamole*. But she had loved for her to rinse them because afterward, Esperanza would take Mama's hands and put the palms on her own face so she could feel their suppleness and breathe in the fresh smell.

Esperanza was surprised at the simple things she missed about Mama. She missed her way of walking into a room, graceful and regal. She missed watching her hands crocheting, her fingers moving nimbly. And most of all, she longed for the sound of Mama's strong and assured laughter.

She put her hands under the faucet, rinsed off the avocado, and patted them dry. They felt

better, but still looked red and weathered. She took another avocado, cut it in half, swung the knife into the pit and pulled it from the flesh. She repeated Hortensia's recipe and as she sat for the second time with her hands smothered, she realized that it wouldn't matter how much avocado and glycerine she put on them, they would never look like the hands of a wealthy woman from El Rancho de las Rosas. Because they were the hands of a poor *campesina*.

It was at the end of grape-tying when the doctor stopped Esperanza and Miguel in the hallway of the hospital before they could reach Mama's room.

"I asked the nurses to alert me when they saw you coming. I'm sorry to tell you that your mother has pneumonia."

"How can that be?" said Esperanza, her hands beginning to shake as she stared at the doctor. "I thought she was getting better."

"This disease, Valley Fever, makes the body

tired and susceptible to other infections. We are treating her with medications. She is weak. I know this is hard for you, but we'd like to ask that she have no visitors for at least a month, maybe longer. We can't take a chance that she will contract another infection from any outside germs that might be brought into the hospital."

"Can I see her, just for a few moments?"

The doctor hesitated, then nodded, and walked away.

Esperanza hurried to Mama's bed and Miguel followed. Esperanza couldn't imagine not seeing her for so many weeks.

"Mama," said Esperanza.

Mama slowly opened her eyes and gave Esperanza the smallest smile. She was thin and frail. Her hair was strewn and bedraggled. And her face was so white that it seemed to fade into the sheets, as if she would sink into the bed and disappear forever. Mama looked like a ghost of herself.

"The doctor said I can't come to visit for a while."

Mama nodded, her eyelids slowly falling back down, as if it had been a burden to keep them up. Esperanza felt Miguel's hand on her shoulder.

"Anza, we should go," he said.

But Esperanza would not move. She wanted to do something for Mama to help make her better. She noticed the brush and hairpins on the bedside table.

She carefully rolled Mama on her side and gathered all of her hair together. She brushed it and plaited it into a long braid. Wrapping it around Mama's head, she gently pinned it into place. Then she helped Mama lie on her back, her hair now framing her face against the white linens, like a braided halo. Like she used to wear it, in Aguascalientes.

Esperanza bent down close to Mama's ear. "Don't worry, Mama. Remember, I will take care of everything. I am working and I can pay the bills. I love you."

Mama said softly, "I love you, too." And as Esperanza turned to leave, she heard Mama whisper, "No matter what happens."

"You need to get away from the camp, Esperanza," said Hortensia as she handed her the grocery list and asked her to go to the market with Miguel. "It is the first of spring and it's beautiful outside."

"I thought you and Josefina always looked forward to marketing on Saturday," said Esperanza.

"We do, but today we are helping Melina and Irene make *enchiladas*. Could you go for us?"

Esperanza knew they were trying to keep her occupied. Mama had been in the hospital for three months and Esperanza hadn't been allowed to visit for several weeks. Since then, Esperanza hadn't been acting like herself. She went through the motions of living. She was polite enough, answering everyone's questions with the simplest answers, but she was tormented by Mama's absence. Papa, Abuelita, Mama. Who would be next?

She crawled into bed as early as possible each night, curled her body into a tight ball, and didn't move until morning.

She knew Josefina and Hortensia were worried about her. She nodded to Hortensia, took the list, and went to find Miguel.

"Be sure you tell Miguel to go to Mr. Yakota's market!" Hortensia called after her.

Hortensia had been right about the weather. The fog and grayness had gone. The valley air was crisp and clean from recent rains. They drove along fields of tall, feathery asparagus plants that she would soon be packing. Citrus groves displayed their leftover fruit like decorations on Christmas trees. And even though it was still cool, there was an expectancy that Esperanza could smell, a rich loamy odor that promised spring.

"Miguel, why must we always drive so far to shop at the Japanese market when there are other stores closer to Arvin?"

"Some of the other market owners aren't as kind to Mexicans as Mr. Yakota," said Miguel. "He stocks many of the things we need and he treats us like people."

"What do you mean?"

"Esperanza, people here think that all Mexicans are alike. They think that we are all uneducated, dirty, poor, and unskilled. It does not occur to them that many have been trained in professions in Mexico."

Esperanza looked down at her clothes. She wore a shirtwaist dress that used to be Mama's and before that, someone else's. Over the dress was a man's sweater with several buttons missing, which was also too big. She leaned up and looked in the mirror. Her face was tanned from the weeks in the fields, and she had taken to wearing her hair in a long braid like Hortensia's because Mama had been right — it was more practical that way. "Miguel, how could anyone look at me and think I was uneducated?"

He smiled at her joke. "The fact remains, Esperanza, that you, for instance, have a better education than most people's children in this country. But no one is likely to recognize that or take the time to learn it. Americans see us as one big, brown group who are good for only manual labor. At this market, no one stares at us or treats us like

outsiders or calls us 'dirty greasers.' My father says that Mr. Yakota is a very smart businessman. He is getting rich on other people's bad manners."

Miguel's explanation was familiar. Esperanza's contact with Americans outside the camp had been limited to the doctor and the nurses at the hospital, but she had heard stories from others about how they were treated. There were special sections at the movie theater for Negroes and Mexicans. In town, parents did not want their children going to the same schools with Mexicans. Living away from town in the company camp had its advantages, she decided. The children all went to school together: white, Mexican, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino. It didn't seem to matter to anyone because they were all poor. Sometimes she felt as if she lived in a cocoon, protected from much of the indignation.

Miguel pulled the truck into the parking lot at the market. "I'll meet you. I'm going to talk about railroad jobs with those men gathered on the corner."

Esperanza went inside. Mr. Yakota was from

Tokyo and the store had all sorts of Japanese cooking ingredients like seaweed and ginger, and a fresh fish counter with fish that still had their heads. But there were Mexican products, too, like *masa de harina* for tamales, *chiles* for salsa, and big bags of dried beans for *frijoles*. There was even cow's intestine in the meat case for *menudo*. And other specialties, like *chorizo* and pigs' feet. Esperanza's favorite part of the store was the ceiling that was crowded with a peculiar combination of Japanese paper lanterns and *piñatas* shaped like stars and donkeys.

There was a small tissue donkey that Esperanza had not noticed before. It was like the one Mama had bought her a few years ago. Esperanza had thought it so cute that she had refused to break it, even though it had been filled with sweets. Instead, she had hung it in her room above her bed.

A clerk walked by and impulsively, she pointed to the miniature *piñata*. "Por favor," she said. "Please."

She bought the other things she needed, including another money order. That was one more

benefit of Mr. Yakota's market: She could buy money orders there.

She was waiting in the truck when Miguel came back.

"Another money order? What do you do with them all?" asked Miguel.

"I save them in my valise. They are for such small amounts but together, they'll be enough to someday bring Abuelita here."

"And the *pinata*? It's not anyone's birthday."

"I bought it for Mama. I'm going to ask the nurses to put it near her bed, so she'll know that I'm thinking of her. We can stop by the hospital on the way back. Will you cut a hole in the top for me so I can put the caramels inside? The nurses can eat them."

He took out his pocket knife and made an opening in the *pinata*. While Miguel drove, Esperanza began feeding in the caramels.

Not far down the main road, they approached an almond grove, the trees flush with gray-green leaves and white blossoms. Esperanza noticed a girl and a woman walking hand in hand, each

with a grocery bag in her other arm. She couldn't help but think what a nice scene it made, with the two women framed against so many spring blossoms.

Esperanza recognized one of them. "I think that is Marta."

Miguel stopped the truck, then slowly backed up. "We should give her a ride."

Esperanza reluctantly nodded, remembering the last time they'd given her a lift, but she opened the door.

"Esperanza and Miguel, *que buena suerte*. What good luck," said Marta. "This is my mother, Ada. Thanks for the ride."

Marta's mother had the same short, curly black hair but hers was sprinkled with gray.

Miguel got out and put all the groceries in the truck bed so they could sit in the front.

Ada said, "I heard about your mother and I've been praying for her."

Esperanza was surprised and touched. "Thank you, I'm grateful."

"Are you coming to our camp?" asked Miguel.

"No," said Marta. "As you probably know, I'm not welcome there. We're going a mile or so up the road to the strikers' farm. We were tossed out of the migrant workers' camp and were told either to go back to work or leave. So we left. We aren't going to work under those disgusting conditions and for those pitiful wages."

Ada was quiet and nodded when Marta talked about the strike. Esperanza felt a twinge of envy when she noticed that Marta never let go of her mother's hand.

"There are hundreds of us together at this farm, but thousands around the county and more people join our cause each day. You are new here, but in time, you'll understand what we're trying to change. Turn left," she said, pointing to a dirt road rutted with tire marks.

Miguel turned down the path bordered in cotton fields. Finally, they reached several acres of land surrounded by chain-link fencing and barbed wire, its single opening guarded by several men wearing armbands.

"Aquí. Right here," said Ada.

"What are the guards for?" asked Esperanza.

"They're for protection," said Marta. "The farmer who owns the land is sympathetic to us but a lot of people don't like the strikers causing trouble. We've had threats. The men take turns at the entrance."

Miguel pulled the truck to the side of the road and stopped.

There were only ten wooden toilet stalls for hundreds of people and Esperanza could smell the effects from the truck. Some people lived in tents but others had only burlap bags stretched between poles. Some were living in their cars or old trucks. Mattresses were on the ground, where people and dogs rested. A goat was tied to a tree. There was a long pipe that lay on top of the ground and a line of water spigots sticking up from it. Near each spigot were pots and pans and campfire rings, the makings of outdoor kitchens. In an irrigation ditch, women were washing clothes, and children were bathing at the same time. Clotheslines ran everywhere. It was a great jumble of humanity and confusion.

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Esperanza could not stop looking. She felt hypnotized by the squalor but Marta and her mother didn't seem the least bit embarrassed.

"Home, sweet home," said Marta.

They all climbed out of the truck, but before Marta and Ada could retrieve their groceries, a *campesino* family coming from the opposite direction approached them. The children were dirty and skinny and the mother held an infant, who was crying.

"Do you have food so that I can feed my family?" said the father. "We were thrown out of our camp because I was striking. My family has not eaten in two days. There are too many people coming into the valley each day who will work for pennies. Yesterday I worked all day and made less than fifty cents and I cannot buy food for one day with that. I was hoping that here, with others who have been through the same . . ."

"You are welcome here," said Ada.

Esperanza reached into the truck bed and opened the large bag of beans. "Hand me your hat, Señor."

The man handed over his large sun hat and she filled it with the dried beans, then gave it back to him.

"*Gracias, gracias,*" he said.

Esperanza looked at the two older children, their eyes watery and vacant. She lifted the *piñata* and held it out to them. They said nothing but hurried toward her, took it, and ran back to their family.

Marta looked at her. "Are you sure you aren't already on our side?"

Esperanza shook her head. "They were hungry, that's all. Even if I believed in what you are doing, I must take care of my mother."

Ada put her hand on Esperanza's arm and smiled. "We all do what we have to do. Your mother would be proud of you."

Miguel handed them their bags, and they walked toward the farmer's field. Before they reached the gate, Marta suddenly turned and said, "I shouldn't be telling you this, but the strikers are more organized than they appear. In a few weeks, during asparagus, things are going to happen all

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over the county. We're going to shut down everything, the fields, the sheds, the railroad. If you have not joined us by then, be very careful." Then she hurried to catch up with her mother.

As Miguel and Esperanza rode back to Arvin, neither of them said a word for many miles. Marta's threat and the guilt of having a job weighed heavily on Esperanza's mind. "Do you think they are right?" she asked.

"I don't know," said Miguel. "What the man said is true. I have heard that there will be ten times the people here looking for jobs in the next few months, from Oklahoma, Arkansas, Texas, and other places, too. And that they are poor people like us, who need to feed their families, too. If so many come and are willing to work for pennies, what will happen to us? But until then, with so many joining the strikes, I might be able to get a job at the railroad."

Esperanza's mind wrestled with Miguel's words. For him, the strike was an opportunity to work at the job he loved and to make it in this

country, but for her, it was a threat to her finances, Abuelita's arrival, and Mama's recuperation. Then there was the matter of her own safety. She thought of Mama and Abuelita, and she knew there was only one thing for her to do.

Esperanza studied her hands a few nights later as she walked toward the cabin and hoped Hortensia had a few more avocados. It was later than usual. She had been weeding asparagus in a far field so she had been on the last truck. When she arrived at the cabin, everyone was crowded around the small table. There were fresh *tortillas* on a plate and Hortensia was stirring a pan of *machaca*, scrambled eggs with shredded meat, onions, and peppers. It was Miguel's favorite but they usually ate it for breakfast.

"What is the occasion?" asked Esperanza.

"I got a job in the machine shop at the railroad."

"Oh, Miguel! That's good news!"

“So many railroad workers have joined the strikers. I know it might be temporary but if I do a good job, maybe they will keep me.”

“That is right,” said Alfonso. “You do good work. They will see it. They will keep you.”

Esperanza sat down and listened to Miguel tell the others about the job, but she wasn't hearing his words. She was seeing his eyes, dancing like Papa's when he used to talk about the land. She watched Miguel's animated face, thinking that at last, his dream was coming true.