

# LOS DURAZNOS

P E A C H E S

Chapter 13

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 n . . . 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 shoed 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.