

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 reclining 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 asparagus, 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 cophony 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.

*"Éstas 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."