

smile again. Before she walked away, she made the yarn doll wave good-bye, too.

Esperanza was glad the girl got off the train and took the silly yarn doll with her. Otherwise, she would have been reminded of her own selfishness and Mama's disapproval for miles to come.

Clicketta, clicketta, clicketta. The song of the locomotive was monotonous as they traveled north, and the hours seemed like Mama's never-ending ball of thread unwinding in front of them. Each morning the sun peeked over one spur of the Sierra Madre, sometimes shining through pine trees. In the evening, it set on the left, sinking behind another peak and leaving pink clouds and purple mountains against the darkening sky. When people got on and off, Esperanza and the others changed their seats. When the car filled up, they sometimes stood. When the car was less crowded, they put their valises under their heads and tried to sleep on the benches.

At every stop, Miguel and Alfonso hurried off

the train with a package. From the window, Esperanza watched them go to a water trough, unwrap an oilcloth, and dampen the bundle inside. Then they would wrap it in the oilcloth again, board the train, and put it carefully back into Alfonso's bag.

"What is in there?" Esperanza finally asked Alfonso, as the train pulled away from yet another station.

"You will see when we get there." He smiled and a knowing look passed between him and Miguel.

Esperanza was annoyed with Alfonso for taking the package on and off the train without telling her what was inside. She was tired of Hor-tensia's humming and weary of watching Mama crocheta, as if nothing unusual were happening to them. But most of all she was bored with Miguel's constant talk about trains. He chatted with the conductors. He got off at every stop and watched the engineers. He studied the train schedule and wanted to report it all to Esperanza. He seemed as happy as Esperanza was irritable.

"When I get to California, I am going to work for the railroad," said Miguel, looking anxiously toward the horizon. They had spread pieces of brown paper in their laps and were eating *pepinos*, cucumbers sprinkled with salt and ground *chiles*.

"I'm thirsty. Are they selling juice in the other car?" asked Esperanza.

"I would have worked at the railroad in Mexico," continued Miguel, as if Esperanza had not tried to change the subject. "But it is not easy to get a job in Mexico. You need *una palanca*, a lever, to get a job at the railroads. I had no connections but your father did. Since I was a small boy, he gave me his word that he would help me. And he would have kept his promise. He . . . he always kept his promises to me."

At the mention of Papa, Esperanza felt that sinking feeling again. She looked at Miguel. He quickly turned his head away from her and looked hard out the window, but she saw that his eyes were damp. She had never thought about how much her papa must have meant to Miguel. It dawned on her that even though Miguel was a ser-

vant, Papa may have thought of him as the son he never had. But Papa's influence was gone. What would happen to Miguel's dreams now?

"And in the United States?" she asked quietly.

"I hear that in the United States, you do not need *una palanca*. That even the poorest man can become rich if he works hard enough."

They had been on the train for four days and nights when a woman got on with a wire cage containing six red hens. The chickens squawked and cackled and when they flapped their wings, tiny russet feathers floated around the car. The woman sat opposite Mama and Hortensia and within minutes she had told them that her name was Carmen, that her husband had died and left her with eight children, and that she had been at her brother's house helping his family with a new baby.

"Would you like *dulces*, sweets?" she asked Esperanza, holding open a bag.

Esperanza looked at Mama, who smiled and nodded her approval.

Esperanza hesitantly reached inside and took out a square of coconut candy. Mama had never permitted her to take candy from someone she didn't know before, especially from a poor person.

"Señora, why do you travel with the hens?" asked Mama.

"I sell eggs to feed my family. My brother raises hens and he gave these to me."

"And you can support your large family that way?" asked Hortensia.

Carmen smiled. "I am poor, but I am rich. I have my children, I have a garden with roses, and I have my faith and the memories of those who have gone before me. What more is there?"

Hortensia and Mama smiled, nodding their heads. And after a few thoughtful moments, Mama was blotting away stray tears.

The three women continued talking as the train passed fields of corn, orange orchards, and cows grazing on rolling hills. They talked as the train traveled through small towns, where peasant children ran after the caboose, just for the sake of running. Soon, Mama was confiding in Carmen,

telling her all that had happened with Papa and Tío Luis. Carmen listened and made clucking noises like one of her hens, as if she understood Mama's and Esperanza's problems. Esperanza looked from Mama to Carmen to Hortensia. She was amazed at how easily Carmen had plopped herself down and had plunged into intimate conversation. It didn't seem correct somehow. Mama had always been so proper and concerned about what was said and not said. In Aguascalientes, she would have thought it was "inappropriate" to tell an egg woman their problems, yet now she didn't hesitate.

"Mama," whispered Esperanza, taking on a tone she had heard Mama use many times. "Do you think it is wise to tell a peasant our personal business?"

Mama tried not to smile. She whispered back, "It is all right, Esperanza, because now we are peasants, too."

Esperanza ignored Mama's comment. What was wrong with her? Had all of Mama's rules changed since they had boarded this train?

When they pulled into Carmen's town, Mama gave her three of the beautiful lace *carpetas* she had made. "For your house," she said.

Carmen gave Mama two chickens, in an old shopping bag that she tied with string. "For your future," she said.

Then Mama, Hortensia, and Carmen hugged as if they had been friends forever.

"Buena suerte, good luck," they said to one another.

Alfonso and Miguel helped Carmen with her packages and the cage of chickens. When Miguel got back on the train, he sat next to Esperanza, near the window. They watched Carmen greet her waiting children, several of the little ones scrambling into her arms.

In front of the station, a crippled Indian woman crawled on her knees, her hand outstretched toward a group of ladies and gentlemen who were finely dressed in clothes like the ones that used to hang in Esperanza's and Mama's closets. The people turned their backs on the begging woman but Carmen walked over and gave her a coin and

some *tortillas* from her bag. The woman blessed her, making the sign of the cross. Then Carmen took her children's hands and walked away.

"She has eight children and sells eggs to survive. Yet when she can barely afford it she gave your mother two hens and helped the crippled woman," said Miguel. "The rich take care of the rich and the poor take care of those who have less than they have."

"But why does Carmen need to take care of the beggar at all?" said Esperanza. "Look. Only a few yards away is the farmer's market with carts of fresh food."

Miguel looked at Esperanza, wrinkled his forehead, and shook his head. "There is a Mexican saying: 'Full bellies and Spanish blood go hand in hand.'"

Esperanza looked at him and raised her eyebrows.

"Have you never noticed?" he said, sounding surprised. "Those with Spanish blood, who have the fairest complexions in the land, are the wealthiest."

Esperanza suddenly felt guilty and did not want to admit that she had never noticed or that it might be true. Besides, they were going to the United States now and it certainly would not be true there.

Esperanza shrugged. "It is just something that old wives say."

"No," said Miguel. "It is something the poor say."

LOS MELONES

CANTALOUPE

They reached the border at Mexicali in the morning. Finally, the train stopped moving and everyone disembarked. The land was dry and the panorama was barren except for date palms, cactus, and an occasional squirrel or roadrunner. The conductors herded everyone into a building where they stood in long lines waiting to pass through immigration. Esperanza noticed that the people in the first cars were escorted to the shortest lines and passed through quickly.

Inside, the air was stagnant and thick with the smell of body odor. Esperanza and Mama, their faces shiny with grime and perspiration, looked tired and wilted and they slumped with even the slight weight of their valises. The closer Esperanza got to the front, the more nervous she became. She looked at her papers and hoped they were in order. What if the officials found