

## 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 road-runner. 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

something wrong? Would they send her back to her uncles? Would they arrest her and put her in jail? She reached the desk and handed over the documents.

The immigration official seemed angry for no reason. "Where are you coming from?"

She looked at Mama who was behind her.

"We are from Aguascalientes," said Mama, stepping forward.

"And what is your purpose for entering the United States?"

Esperanza was afraid to speak. What if she said the wrong thing?

"To work," said Mama, handing him her documents as well.

"What work?" demanded the man.

Mama's demeanor changed. She stood up straight and tall and deliberately blotted her face with a handkerchief. She looked directly into the official's eyes and spoke calmly as if she were giving simple directions to a servant. "I am sure you can see that everything is in order. The name of

the employer is written there. People are expecting us."

The man studied Mama. He looked at their faces, then the pages, then their faces again.

Standing tall and proud, Mama never took her eyes from his face.

Why was it taking so long?

Finally, he grabbed the stamp and pounded each page with the words "Mexican National." He shoved their papers at them and waved them through. Mama took Esperanza's hand and hurried her toward another train.

They boarded and waited an hour for all the passengers to get through immigration. Esperanza looked out the window. Across the tracks, several groups of people were being prodded onto another train headed back toward Mexico.

"My heart aches for those people. They came all this way just to be sent back," said Mama.

"But why?" asked Esperanza.

"Many reasons. They had no papers, false ones, or no proof of work. Or there might have been a

problem with just one member of the family so they all chose to go back instead of being separated."

Esperanza thought about being separated from Mama and gratefully took her hand and squeezed it.

Almost everyone had boarded except Alfonso, Hortensia, and Miguel. Esperanza kept looking for them, and she became more anxious with each passing minute. "Mama, where are they?"

Mama said nothing but Esperanza could see worry in her eyes, too.

Finally, Hortensia got on. The train's engines began to chug.

Her voice tense, Esperanza said, "What happened to Alfonso and Miguel?"

Hortensia pointed out the window. "They had to find some water."

Alfonso was running toward the train with Miguel close behind, waving the secret package and grinning. The train slowly started moving as they hopped on.

Esperanza wanted to be angry at them for

making her anxious. She wanted to yell at them for waiting until the very last minute just so they could find water for their package that was probably nonsense anyway. But looking from one to the other, she sat back, limp with relief, happy to have them all together surrounding her, and surprised that she could be so glad to be back on the train.

"Anza, we're here. Wake up!"

She sat up groggily, barely opening her eyes.

"What day is this?" she asked.

"You've been asleep for hours. Wake up! It is Thursday. And we are here in Los Angeles!"

"Look, there they are!" said Alfonso, pointing out the window. "My brother, Juan, and Josefina, his wife. And his children, Isabel and the twins. They have all come."

A *campesino* family waved to them. Juan and Josefina each held a baby about a year old in their arms. It was easy to see that the man was Alfonso's brother, even though he didn't have a mustache.

Josefina was plump with a round face and a complexion that was fairer than Esperanza's. She was smiling and waving with her free hand. Next to her stood a girl about eight years old, wearing a dress that was too big and shoes with no socks. Delicate and frail, with big brown eyes, long braids, and skinny legs, she looked like a young deer. Esperanza couldn't help but think how much she looked like the doll Papa had given her.

There was much hugging among all the relatives.

Alfonso said, "Everyone, this is Señora Ortega and Esperanza."

"Alfonso, please call me Ramona."

"Yes, of course, Señora. My family feels like they know you because we have all written letters about you for years."

Mama hugged Juan and Josefina and said, "Thank you for all you have done for us already."

Miguel teased his cousin, pulling her braids. "Esperanza, this is Isabel."

Isabel looked at Esperanza, her eyes wide with wonder, and in a voice that was soft and whispery

said, "Were you really so very wealthy? Did you always get your way, and have all the dolls and fancy dresses you wanted?"

Esperanza's mouth pressed into an irritated line. She could only imagine the letters Miguel had written. Had he told Isabel that in Mexico they stood on different sides of the river?

"The truck is this way," said Juan. "We have a long ride."

Esperanza picked up her valise and followed Isabel's father. She looked around and was relieved to see that compared to the desert, Los Angeles had lush palms and green grass and even though it was September, roses were still blooming in the flower beds. She took a deep breath. The aroma of oranges from a nearby grove was reassuring and familiar. Maybe it wouldn't be so different here.

Juan, Josefina, Mama, and Hortensia crowded onto the front seat of the rickety truck. Isabel, Esperanza, Alfonso, and Miguel sat in the truck bed with the babies and the two red hens. The vehicle looked like it should be hauling animals

instead of people, but Esperanza had said nothing to Mama. Besides, after so many days on the train, it felt good to stretch out her legs.

The old jalopy rocked and swayed as it climbed out of the San Fernando Valley, weaving up through hills covered with dried-out shrubs. She sat with her back against the cab and the hot wind whipped her loose hair. Alfonso tied a blanket across the wooden slats to make a canopy of shade.

The babies, Lupe and Pepe, a girl and a boy, were dark-eyed cherubs, with thick mops of black hair. Esperanza was surprised at how much they looked alike; the only difference was the tiny gold earrings in Lupe's ears. Pepe crawled into Esperanza's lap and Lupe into Isabel's. When the baby fell asleep against Esperanza, his head slid down her arm, leaving a stream of perspiration. "Is it always so hot here?" she asked.

"My papa says it is the dry air that makes it so hot and sometimes it is even hotter," said Isabel. "But it is better than living in El Centro because now we do not have to live in a tent."

"A tent?"

"Last year we worked for another farm in El Centro in the Imperial Valley, not too far from the border. We were there during the melons. We lived in a tent with a dirt floor and had to carry water. We cooked outside. But then we moved north to Arvin. That's where we're going now. A big company owns the camp. We pay seven dollars a month and my papa says it is worth it to have piped-in cold water and electricity and a kitchen inside. He says the farm is six thousand acres." Isabel leaned toward Esperanza and grinned as if she were telling a big secret. "And a school. Next week, I get to go to school, and I will learn to read. Can you read?"

"Of course," said Esperanza.

"Will you go to school?" asked Isabel.

"I went to private school and started when I was four so I have already passed through level eight. When my grandmother comes, maybe I will go to high school."

"Well, when I go to school, I will learn in English," said Isabel.

Esperanza nodded and tried to smile back. Isabel was so happy, she thought, about such little things.

The brown, barren mountains rose higher and a red-tailed hawk seemed to follow them for miles. The truck rattled up a steep grade past sparse, dry canyons and Esperanza's ears began to feel full and tight. "How much longer?"

"We will stop for lunch soon," said Isabel.

They wove through the golden hills, softly sculpted with rounded tops, until Juan finally slowed the truck and turned down a side road. When they came to an area shaded by a single tree, they piled out of the truck and Josefina spread a blanket on the ground, then unwrapped a bundle of *burritos*, avocados, and grapes. They sat in the shade and ate. Mama, Hortensia, and Josefina chatted and watched the babies while Isabel lay down on the blanket between Alfonso and Juan. She was soon asleep.

Esperanza wandered away from the group, grateful not to be rocking in a truck or a train. She walked to an overlook. Below, canyons plunged to

an *arroyo*, a silver line of water from an unknown river. It was quiet and peaceful here, the sweet silence broken only by the swish of dried grasses from the wind.

With her feet solid on the ground for the first time in many days, Esperanza remembered what Papa had taught her when she was little: If she lay on the land, and was very still and quiet, she could hear the heartbeat of the valley.

"Can I hear it from here, Papa?"

She stretched out on her stomach and reached her arms to the side, hugging the earth. She let the stillness settle upon her and listened.

She heard nothing.

Be patient, she reminded herself, and the fruit will fall into your hand.

She listened again, but the heartbeat was not there. She tried one more time, desperately wanting to hear it. But there was no reassuring thump repeating itself. No sound of the earth's heartbeat. Or Papa's. There was only the prickly sound of dry grass.

Determined, Esperanza pressed her ear harder

to the ground. "I can't hear it!" She pounded the earth. "Let me hear it." Tears burst from her eyes as if someone had squeezed an overripe orange. Confusion and uncertainty spilled forth and became an *arroyo* of their own.

She rolled on her back, her tears worming down her face into her ears. Seeing nothing but the vast sky in dizzying swirls of blue and white, she began to feel as if she were floating and drifting upward. She lifted higher and part of her liked the sensation but another part of her felt untethered and frightened. She tried to find the place in her heart where her life was anchored, but she couldn't, so she closed her eyes and pressed the palms of her hands against the earth, making sure it was there. She felt as if she were falling, careening through the hot air. Her skin perspired and she felt cold and nauseous. She took short breaths, heaving in and out.

Suddenly, the world went black.

Someone hovered over her.

She sat up quickly. How long had she been in the darkness? She held her pounding chest and looked up at Miguel.

"Anza, are you all right?"

She took a deep breath and brushed off her dress. Had she really floated above the earth? Had Miguel seen her? She knew her face was red and blotchy. "I'm fine," she said quickly, wiping the tears from her face. "Don't tell Mama. You know . . . she worries . . ."

Miguel nodded. He sat down close to her. Without asking any questions, he took her hand and stayed with her, the quiet interrupted only by her occasional staccato breaths.

"I miss him, too," Miguel whispered, squeezing her hand. "I miss the ranch and Mexico and Abuelita, everything. And I am sorry about what Isabel said to you. I meant nothing by it."

She stared at the dark brown and purple ridges staggered in the distance and let the ripe tears cascade down her cheeks. And this time, Esperanza did not let go of Miguel's hand.

They were heading down a steep grade on Highway 99 when Isabel said, "Look!"

Esperanza leaned around the side of the truck. As they rounded a curve, it appeared as if the mountains pulled away from each other, like a curtain opening on a stage, revealing the San Joaquin Valley beyond. Flat and spacious, it spread out like a blanket of patchwork fields. Esperanza could see no end to the plots of yellow, brown, and shades of green. The road finally leveled out on the valley floor, and she gazed back at the mountains from where they'd come. They looked like monstrous lions' paws resting at the edge of the ridge.

A big truck blew its horn and Juan pulled over to let it pass, its bed bulging with cantaloupes. Another truck and another did the same. A caravan of trucks passed them, all piled high with the round melons.

On one side of the highway, acres of grapevines stretched out in soldiered rows and swallowed up the arbors. On the other side, fields and fields of dark green cotton plants became a sea of milk-white puffs. This was not a gently rolling landscape like Aguascalientes. For as far as the eye

could travel, the land was unbroken by even a hillock. Esperanza felt dizzy looking at the repeated straight rows of grapes and had to turn her head away.

They finally turned east off the main highway. The truck went slower now and Esperanza could see workers in the fields. People waved and Juan honked the truck horn in return. Then he pulled the truck to the side of the road and pointed to a field that had been cleared of its harvest. Dried, rambling vines covered the acre and leftover melons dotted the ground.

"The field markers are down. We can take as many as we can carry," he called back to them.

Alfonso jumped out, tossed a dozen cantaloupes to Miguel, then stepped up on the running board and slapped the top of the truck for Juan to start again. The melons, warmed by the valley sun, rolled and somersaulted with each bump of the truck.

Two girls walking along the road waved and Juan stopped again. One of them climbed in, a girl about Miguel's age. Her hair was short, black, and



curly and her features were sharp and pointed. She leaned back against the side of the truck, her hands behind her head, and she studied Esperanza, her eyes darting at Miguel whenever she could.

"This is Marta," said Isabel. "She lives at another camp where they pick cotton but it is owned by a different company. Her aunt and uncle live at our camp so she stays with them sometimes."

"Where are you from?" asked Marta.

"Aguascalientes. El Rancho de las Rosas," said Esperanza.

"I have never heard of El Rancho de las Rosas. Is that a town?"

"It was the ranch they lived on," said Isabel proudly, her eyes round and shining. "Esperanza's father owned it and thousands of acres of land. She had lots of servants and beautiful dresses and she went to private school, too. Miguel is my cousin and he and his parents worked for them."

"So you're a princess who's come to be a peasant? Where's all your finery?"

Esperanza stared at her and said nothing.

"What's the matter, silver spoon stuck in your mouth?" Her voice was smart and biting.

"A fire destroyed everything. She and her mother have come to work, like the rest of us," said Miguel.

Confused, Isabel added, "Esperanza's nice. Her papa died."

"Well, my father died, too," said Marta. "Before he came to this country, he fought in the Mexican revolution against people like her father who owned all the land."

Esperanza stared back at Marta, unblinking. What had she done to deserve this girl's insults? Through gritted teeth, she said, "You know nothing of my papa. He was a good, kind man who gave much of his property to his servants."

"That might be so," said Marta. "But there were plenty of the rich who did not."

"That was not my papa's fault."

Isabel pointed to one of the fields, trying to change the subject. "Those people are Filipinos," she said. "They live in their own camp. And see

over there?" She pointed to a field down the road. "Those people are from Oklahoma. They live in Camp 8. There's a Japanese camp, too. We all live separate and work separate. They don't mix us."

"They don't want us banding together for higher wages or better housing," said Marta. "The owners think if Mexicans have no hot water, that we won't mind as long as we think no one has any. They don't want us talking to the Okies from Oklahoma or anyone else because we might discover that they have hot water. See?"

"Do the Okies have hot water?" asked Miguel.

"Not yet, but if they get it, we will strike."

"Strike?" said Miguel. "You mean you will stop working? Don't you need your job?"

"Of course I need my job, but if all the workers join together and refuse to work, we might all get better conditions."

"Are the conditions so bad?" asked Miguel.

"Some are decent. The place you are going to is one of the better ones. They even have *fiestas*. There's a *jamaica* this Saturday night."

Isabel turned to Esperanza. "You will love the

*jamaicas*. We have them every Saturday night during the summer. There is music and food and dancing. This Saturday is the last for this year because soon it will be too cold."

Esperanza nodded and tried to pay attention to Isabel. Marta and Miguel talked and grinned back and forth. An unfamiliar feeling was creeping up inside of Esperanza. She wanted to toss Marta out of the moving truck and scold Miguel for even talking to her. Hadn't he seen her rudeness?

She brooded as they rode past miles of young tamarisk trees that seemed to be the border of someone's property.

"Beyond those trees is the Mexican camp," said Isabel, "where we live."

Marta smirked at Esperanza and said, "Just so you know. This isn't Mexico. No one will be waiting on you here." Then she gave her a phony smile and said, "¿Entiendes? Understand?"

Esperanza stared back at her in silence. The one thing she did understand was that she did not like Marta.