

LAS CIRUELAS

P L U M S

As they walked to the bus stop, Isabel recited a list of concerns to Esperanza, sounding exactly as Josefina and Mama had sounded earlier that morning.

“Put Pepe down for a nap first, and when he falls asleep, put Lupe down. Otherwise they will play and never go to sleep. And Lupe will not eat bananas . . .”

“I know,” said Esperanza, repositioning Pépe on her hip.

Isabel handed her Lupe and climbed the steps of the yellow bus. She found a seat and waved from the window. Esperanza wondered who was more worried, she or Isabel?

Esperanza struggled to carry both babies back to the cabin. Thank goodness Isabel had already helped her feed and dress them. She settled them on a blanket on the floor with some tin cups and wood blocks, then put the beans into a big pot on

the stove. Hortensia had prepared them earlier with a big onion and a few cloves of garlic and instructed Esperanza to stir them occasionally and let them cook on low heat, adding more water throughout the day. She stirred the beans and watched Lupe and Pepe play. I wish Abuelita could see me, she thought. She would be proud.

Later, Esperanza looked for something to feed the babies for lunch. A bowl of ripe plums sat on the table. They should be soft enough to eat, she thought. She took several, removed the pit and mashed them with a fork. Both babies loved them, reaching for more after each spoonful. Esperanza mashed another three plums and they gobbled every bite. She let them have their fill until they started fussing and reaching for their bottles of milk.

"Enough of lunch," said Esperanza, cleaning their faces and gratefully thinking that it would soon be nap time. She slowly changed their wet diapers, remembering all of Josefina's and Isabel's instructions. She put Pepe down first with his

bottle, as directed, and when he fell asleep, she put Lupe next to him. Esperanza lay down, too, wondering why she was so tired, and she dozed.

She woke up to Lupe's whimpering and an atrocious smell. Brown liquid leaked from her diaper. Esperanza picked her up and carried her out of the room so she wouldn't wake Pepe. She changed her into a dry diaper and rolled the soiled one into a ball and put it by the door until she could take it to the toilets. When she put Lupe back down, Pepe was sitting up in bed, in the same condition. She repeated the diaper changing. With both babies clean, she left them in the bed and dashed to the toilets to rinse the diapers. Then she ran back to the cabin.

A different smell greeted her. The beans! She had forgotten to add more water. When she checked the pot, they appeared to be scorched only on the bottom, so she poured in water and stirred them.

The babies cried and never went back to sleep. Both dirtied their diapers again. The wadded pile

by the door grew. They must be ill, worried Esperanza. Did they have the flu or was it something they ate? No one else had been sick recently. What had they eaten today? Only their milk and the plums. "The plums," she groaned. They must have been too hard on their stomachs.

What did Hortensia give her when she was a child and was sick? She tried to remember. Rice water! But how did she make it? Esperanza put a pot on the stove and added a cup of rice. She wasn't sure how much water to add but she remembered that when rice didn't come out soft Hortensia always said it needed more water. She added plenty and boiled the rice. Then she poured off the water and let it cool. She sat on the floor with the babies and fed them teaspoons of rice water all afternoon, counting the minutes until Isabel walked through the door.

"What happened?" said Isabel when she arrived and saw the pile of diapers by the door.

"They were sick from the plums," said Esperanza, nodding toward the plate still on the table where she had mashed them.

"Oh, Esperanza, they are too young for raw plums! Everyone knows that plums must be cooked for babies," said Isabel.

"Well, I am not everyone!" yelled Esperanza. She dropped her head and put her hands over her face. Pepe crawled into her lap, making happy gurgling noises.

She looked at Isabel, already sorry for screaming at her. "I didn't mean to yell. It was a long day. I gave them some rice water and they seem to be fine now."

Sounding surprised, Isabel said, "That was exactly the right thing to do!"

Esperanza nodded and let out a long sigh of relief.

That night, no one mentioned the number of rinsed and wrung diapers in the washtub outside the door. Or the beans that were obviously burnt or the pan of rice in the sink. And no one questioned Esperanza when she said that she was exhausted and wanted to go to bed early.

The grapes had to be finished before the first fall rains and had to be picked *rápido*, quickly, so now there were no Saturdays or Sundays in the week, just workdays. The temperature was still over ninety each day, so as soon as Isabel's bus left for school, Esperanza took the babies back to the cabin. She fixed their bottles of milk and let them play while she made the beds. Then she followed Hortensia's instructions for starting dinner before turning to the laundry. She was amazed at the hot, dry air. Often, by the time she had filled the clotheslines that were strung between the trees, she had only minutes to rest before the valley sun dried the clothes crisp and they were ready to fold.

Irene and Melina came over after lunch and Esperanza spread a blanket in the shade. Esperanza liked Melina's company. In some ways, she was a young girl, sometimes playing with Isabel and Silvia, or telling Esperanza gossip as if they were school friends. In other ways, she was grown up, with a nursing baby and a husband, and preferring to crochet with the older women in the evenings.

"Do you crochet?" Melina asked.

"I know a little, but only a few stitches," said Esperanza, remembering Abuelita's blanket of zigzag rows that she had been too preoccupied to unpack.

Melina laid her sleeping baby girl on the blanket and picked up her needlework. Irene cut apart a fifty-pound flour sack that was printed with tiny flowers, to use as fabric for dresses.

Esperanza tickled Pepe and Lupe and they laughed.

"They adore you," said Melina. "They cried yesterday when I watched them for the few minutes it took you to sweep the platform."

It was true. Both babies smiled when Esperanza walked into the room, always reaching for her, especially Pepe. Lupe was good-natured and less demanding, but Esperanza learned to watch her closely, as she often tried to wander away. If she turned her back for a minute, Esperanza found herself frantically searching for Lupe.

Esperanza rubbed Lupe's and Pepe's backs,

hoping they would go to sleep soon, but they were restless and wouldn't settle even though they had their bottles. The afternoon sky looked peculiar, tinged with yellow, and there was so much static in the air that the babies' soft hair stuck out.

"Today is the day of the strike," said Melina. "I heard that they were going to walk out this morning."

"Everyone was talking about it last night at the table," said Esperanza. "Alfonso said he is glad that everyone from our camp agreed to continue working. He is proud that we won't strike."

Irene continued working on the flour sack and shaking her head. "So many Mexicans have the revolution still in their blood. I am sympathetic to those who are striking, and I am sympathetic to those of us who want to keep working. We all want the same things. To eat and feed our children."

Esperanza nodded. She had decided that if she and Mama were to get Abuelita here, they could not afford to strike. Not now. Not when they so

desperately needed money and a roof over their heads. She worried about what many were saying: If they didn't work, the people from Oklahoma would happily take their jobs. Then what would they do?

A sudden blast of hot wind took the flour sack from Irene's hand and carried it to the fields.

The babies sat up, frightened. Another hot blast hit them, but kept on, and when the edges of the blanket blew up, Lupe reached for Esperanza, whining.

Irene stood up and pointed to the east. The sky was darkening with amber clouds and several brown tumbleweeds bounced toward them.

A roil of brown loomed over the mountains.

"¡Una tormenta de polvo! Dust storm!" said Irene. "Hurry!"

They picked up the babies and ran inside. Irene closed the door and began shutting the windows.

"What's happening?" asked Esperanza.

"A dust storm, like nothing you have seen before," said Melina. "They are awful."

"What about Mama and Hortensia and the others? Alfonso and Miguel . . . they are in the fields."

"They will send trucks for them," said Irene.

Esperanza looked out the window. Thousands of acres of tilled soil were becoming food for *la tormenta* and the sky was turning into a brown swirling fog. Already, she could not see the trees just a few yards away. Then the sound began. Softly at first, like a gentle rain, then harder as the wind blasted the tiny grains of sand against the windows and metal roofs. The dirt showed against the cabin, pitting everything in its path.

"Get away from the window," warned Irene. "The dirt and wind can break the glass."

The finer dust seeped inside and they tried to seal the door by stuffing rags under it. Esperanza couldn't stop thinking about the others. Isabel was at school. The teachers would take care of her. But Mama, Hortensia, and Josefina were in the open shed. She hoped the trucks would bring them soon. And the fields. She could only imag-

ine. Alfonso and Juan and Miguel, could they breathe?

Irene, Melina, and Esperanza sat on the mattress in the front room trying to calm the babies. There was no relief from the heat in the closed room and soon the air was hazy. Irene dampened some towels so they could wipe the babies' and their own faces. When they talked to one another, they tasted the earth.

"How long does it last?" asked Esperanza.

"Sometimes hours," said Irene. "The wind will stop first. And then the dust."

Esperanza heard a meowing from the door. She ran to it and, pushing hard against the wind, opened it a crack. Isabel's kitten, Chiquita, darted in. There was no trace of her orange fur. The cat was powdered brown.

The babies finally fell asleep, drowsy from the heavy air. Irene was right. The wind stopped, but the dust still swirled as if propelled by its own power. Irene and Melina left with Melina's baby, covered beneath a blanket, and rushed to their cabin.

Esperanza waited, nervously pacing the room and worrying about the others.

The school bus came first.

Isabel burst into the cabin, crying, "¡Mi gata, Chiquita!"

Esperanza hugged her. "She is fine but very dirty and hiding under the bed. Are you all right?"

"Yes," said Isabel. "We got to sit in the cafeteria all afternoon and play games with erasers on our heads. But I was worried about Chiquita."

The door opened again and Mama walked into the cabin, her skin covered with an eerie brown chalkiness, and her hair dusted, like the cat's fur.

"Oh, Mama!"

"I am fine, *mija*," she said, coughing.

Hortensia and Josefina followed and Isabel put her hands on her cheeks in worried surprise. "You . . . you look like raccoons," she said. All of their faces had circles of pink around their eyes where they had squinted against the dust.

"The trucks could not find their way to the shed so all we could do was sit and wait," said

Hortensia. "We hid behind some crates and buried our heads but it did not help much."

Josefina took the babies next door and Mama and Hortensia began washing their arms in the sink, making muddy water. Mama continued to cough.

"What about Alfonso and Juan and Miguel?" asked Esperanza.

"If the trucks could not get to us, they could not get to the fields. We will have to wait," said Hortensia, exchanging a worried look with Mama.

A few hours later, Juan, Alfonso, and Miguel arrived, their clothes stiff and brown, all of them coughing and clearing their throats every few minutes. Their faces were so encrusted with dry dirt that they reminded Esperanza of cracked pottery.

They took turns rinsing in the sink, the pile of brown clothes growing in the basket. When Esperanza looked outside, she could almost see the trees, but the dust was still thick in the air. Mama had a coughing spasm and Hortensia tried to settle her with a glass of water.

When the adults all finally sat down at the

table, Esperanza asked, "What happened with the strike?"

"There was no strike," said Alfonso. "We heard that they were all ready. And that there were hundreds of them. They had their signs. But the storm hit. The cotton is next to the ground and the fields are now buried in dirt and cannot be picked. Tomorrow, they will have no jobs because of an act of God."

"What will we do tomorrow?" asked Esperanza.

"The grapes are higher off the ground," said Alfonso. "The trunks of the vines are covered but the fruit was not affected. The grapes are ready and cannot wait. So *mañana*, we will go back to work."

The next morning, the sky was blue and calm and the dust had left the air. It had settled on the world, covering everything like a suede blanket. Everyone who lived at the camp shook out the powdery soil, went back to work, and came home again, as if nothing had happened.

In a week, they finished cutting the grapes. Then while they finished packing the grapes, they

were already talking about preparing for potatoes. The camp routine repeated itself like the regimented rows in the fields. Very little seemed to change, thought Esperanza, except the needs of the earth. And Mama. Mama had changed. Because after the storm, she never stopped coughing.

"Mama, you're so pale!" said Esperanza.

Mama carefully walked into the cabin as if she were trying to keep her balance and slumped into a chair in the kitchen.

Hortensia was bustling behind her. "I am going to make her chicken soup with lots of garlic. She had to sit down at work today because she felt faint. But it is no wonder because she is not eating. Look at her, she has lost weight. She has not been herself since that storm and that was a month ago. I think she should go to the doctor."

"Mama, listen to her," pleaded Esperanza.

Mama looked at her weakly, "I am fine. Just tired. I'm not used to the work. And I've told you, doctors are very expensive."

"Irene and Melina are coming over after dinner to crochet," said Esperanza. She thought that would cheer Mama.

"You sit with them," said Mama. "I'm going to lie down until the soup is ready because I have a headache. Then after dinner, I'll go straight to bed and get a good rest. I'll be fine." She coughed, got up, and slowly walked from the room.

Hortensia looked at Esperanza, shaking her head.

A few hours later, Esperanza stood over Mama.

"Your soup is ready, Mama."

But she didn't move. "Mama, dinner," said Esperanza, reaching for her arm and gently shaking her. Mama's arm was burning, her cheeks were flushed red, and she wasn't waking.

Esperanza felt panic squeezing her and she screamed, "Hortensia!"

The doctor came. He was American, light and blond, but he spoke perfect Spanish.

"He looks very young to be a doctor," said Hortensia.

"He has come to the camp before and people trust him," said Irene. "And there are not many doctors who will come out here."

Alfonso, Juan, and Miguel sat on the front steps, waiting. Isabel sat on the mattress, her eyes worried. Esperanza could not sit still. She paced near the bedroom door, trying to hear what was going on inside.

When the doctor finally came out, he looked grim. He walked over to the table where all the women sat. Esperanza followed him.

The doctor signaled for the men and waited until everyone was inside.

"She has Valley Fever."

"What does that mean?" asked Esperanza.

"It's a disease of the lungs that is caused by dust spores. Sometimes, when people move to this area and aren't used to the air here, the dust spores get into their lungs and cause an infection."

"But we were all in the dust storm," said Alfonso.

"When you live in this valley, everyone inhales the dust spores at one time or another. Most of the

time, the body can overcome the infection. Some people will have no symptoms at all. Some will feel like they have the flu for a few days. And others, for whatever reason, cannot fight the infection and get very sick."

"How sick?" asked Hortensia.

Esperanza sat down.

"She may have a fever on and off for weeks but you must try to keep it down. She will cough and have headaches and joint aches. She might get a rash."

"Can we catch it from her? The babies?" asked Josefina.

"No," said the doctor. "It isn't contagious. And the babies and young children have probably had a mild form of it already, without you even knowing. Once the body fights off the infection, it doesn't get it again. For those who live here most of their lives, they are naturally immunized. It is hardest on adults who move here and are not accustomed to the agricultural dust."

"How long until she is well?" asked Esperanza.

The doctor's face looked tired. He ran his hand through his short blond hair.

"There are some medicines she can take, but even then, if she survives, it might take six months for her to get her full strength back."

Esperanza felt Alfonso behind her, putting his hands on her shoulders. She felt the blood drain from her face. She wanted to tell the doctor that she could not lose Mama, too. That she had already lost Papa and that Abuelita was too far away. Her voice strangled with fear. All she could do was whisper the doctor's uncertain words, "If she survives."