

Esperanza Rising



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PAM MUÑOZ RYAN

Pam Muñoz Ryan was born in Bakersfield, California. A rocky home situation meant that her mother remarried, and her family moved around town—throughout her childhood, books were a refuge for the young Pam. After college she took a job as a bilingual teacher, and eventually became the director of an early childhood education program in Southern California. When she took a writing class during a part-time master's degree program, a teacher encouraged her to pursue writing. After facing several rejections from agents and publishers, Muñoz Ryan hit her stride and began publishing picture books and, later, novels for young adults. The author of over twenty books for young readers of all ages, Muñoz Ryan has been the recipient of awards, grants, and prizes from the American Library Association and the Newbery Medal, PEN USA, and the New York Historical Society. She lives with her family outside of San Diego.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The events of *Esperanza Rising* straddle two major historical moments of the 20th century, the first being the late years and fallout of the Mexican Revolution, which broke out in 1910 and introduced a period of rebellion, civil war, and struggle between the wealthy landowners and the impoverished masses of Mexico. Esperanza's wealthy rancher father's death in an attack by "bandits," then, is alluded to as a politically-motivated attack symbolically suggesting the hatred, jealousy, and anger that was directed at landowners at the time. When Esperanza and her family flee to California for a better life, they find themselves smack in the middle of the Great Depression, a staggering financial crisis that affected the entire globe, and whose effects in America resulted in the displacement of countless individuals as they fought one another for opportunities at farms and work camps across the nation. Muñoz Ryan also uses her novel to call attention to lesser-known historical events from the time period: the rise of strikes in the California agricultural fields during the 1930s, as well as the Mexican Repatriation of the 1930s and 40s. An act of federal legislation called the Deportation Act allowed the Immigration Bureau, through "sweeps" across the valleys and farms of California, to deport upwards of half a million Mexicans and Mexican-Americans.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many other children's books explore the painful and devastating period of the Great Depression through the stories

of young people who were forced to adapt to the strange, uncertain period. Doris Gates's *Blue Willow* tells the story of a girl named Janey, who is uprooted from her home when her father becomes an itinerant worker, while Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust* follows an Oklahoma girl named Billie Jo who, like Esperanza, must contend with the death of a parent, the aftereffects of a terrible fire, and the threat of debilitating dust storms. Few novels for children set during the Mexican Revolution have been written, but Laura Esquivel's 1989 novel [Like Water for Chocolate](#), set during the second decade of the 20th century against the backdrop of the revolution, also involves a family of Mexican women who struggle with loss, forbidden love, and a fire that eventually burns their family's ranch to the ground.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Esperanza Rising*
- **When Written:** Late 1990s
- **Where Written:** Southern California
- **When Published:** 2000
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young adult literature; coming-of-age tale
- **Setting:** Aguascalientes, Mexico; San Joaquin Valley, California
- **Climax:** Miguel steals the money orders that Esperanza has been saving in her valise. Everyone suspects he has run off with the funds, but, days later, he returns from Mexico—with Esperanza's Abuelita, whom he has rescued from the clutches of Esperanza's evil uncles Luis and Marco.
- **Antagonist:** Tío Luis, Tío Marco, Marta
- **Point of View:** Close third person

EXTRA CREDIT

The Real Esperanza. *Esperanza Rising* is a work of fiction, but Pam Muñoz Ryan cites her own grandmother—also named Esperanza Ortega—as the inspiration for the titular character, and the hard journey she undertakes. Muñoz Ryan's grandmother came from Mexico to America after her father's death during the Great Depression and found work on a company farm, leaving behind a life of luxury and grandeur. Muñoz Ryan's mother—also named Esperanza—was born on that very farm.



PLOT SUMMARY

Thirteen-year-old Esperanza Ortega lives a life of abundance

and luxury on her father Sixto's sprawling vineyard, El Rancho de las Rosas. It is 1930, and in Aguascalientes, Mexico, the pain and tumult of the Mexican Revolution has at last begun to subside—or at least the sheltered Esperanza believes. She and her family enjoy a lush, beautiful life full of happiness and plenty, and Esperanza hopes that she will never have to leave her family's ranch—even as she grows increasingly aware of an invisible “river” that divides her from others, such as her housemaid Hortensia's teenage son, Miguel. The day before Esperanza's birthday, at the start of the grape harvest, she picks flowers in her father's rose garden and waits for him to come home from a day in the fields. When he doesn't arrive, though, Esperanza and her mother grow worried. Hortensia sends her husband Alfonso—the boss of all the field workers and Sixto's good friend—out with Miguel to look for Papa. While the family sits up and waits, Esperanza's Abuelita comforts her with a **crocheting** lesson, in which she urges Esperanza not to be afraid of starting over in the face of a mistake. Papa's older stepbrothers, the shady Luis and Marco, come by the house to offer their good wishes, but Esperanza is wary of their presence. Late that night, Alfonso and Miguel at last return with Papa's body in the back of their wagon. He has been killed by a group of bandits—though Papa was a kind, generous man who loved the land and all of the people he employed to work on it, many people in Mexico harbor resentment towards wealthy landowners like Sixto.

As Papa's funeral—and Esperanza's birthday—fly by, all is a hazy storm of grief and commotion. Marco and Luis come by the house each day to meet with lawyers and “take care of the family business,” but in a meeting to settle Sixto's will, it becomes clear that they are trying to take over his land and wealth. Luis proposes marriage to Esperanza's mother Ramona in an attempt to secure control of the ranch—and bolster his upcoming campaign for governor—but Ramona refuses, telling him that she will never agree to marry him. That night, Esperanza is awoken by Ramona shaking her—the house is on fire. Ramona, Esperanza, Abuelita, Miguel, Hortensia, and Alfonso escape with their lives, but the house and the vineyard are burnt to the ground by morning. Luis arrives to “comfort” Ramona—and to offer her a chance to reconsider his proposal—and it becomes clear that he and Marco have burned the ranch down in an attempt to blackmail Ramona. She tells Luis she'll consider his offer, but once he leaves the ranch, she privately meets with Alfonso, Hortensia, Miguel, and Esperanza to come up with a plan for how they can escape Luis's clutches. Alfonso and Hortensia, now out of a job on the ranch, declare their intent to travel to California and join Alfonso's brother and his family working on a company farm. They offer Ramona the chance to come with them, but warn her that the work will be physical and demanding. Ramona says she's ready for anything. The next day, she tells Luis that she accepts his proposal, but over the next several days, schemes with the group and with her neighbor, Señor Rodriguez, to devise an

escape plan. Esperanza is devastated to learn that they'll have to leave the frail Abuelita behind, but as they part ways, Abuelita reminds Esperanza that life is a series of “mountains and valleys,” just like in crochet.

Late one night, Esperanza and the others hastily set out on their journey. They will be taking a wagon to the nearby town of Zacatecas to board a train there, away from the watchful eyes of Esperanza's powerful uncles. At the station, though, Esperanza is shocked and horrified to realize she and her family will be travelling in steerage with “peasants.” Ramona urges Esperanza to understand that they, too, are now poor peasants, and no better than anyone else on the train—but Esperanza clings to Papa's final present to her, a beautiful porcelain doll, and refuses to accept her fate.

After an arduous journey, Esperanza, Ramona, and the others arrive in California. They're greeted by Alfonso's family—his brother and sister-in-law Juan and Josefina, and their children Isabel, Lupe, and Pepe. Isabel, a girl of eight, wants to hear all of Esperanza's stories about her beautiful life back in Mexico and how rich she once “was.” Esperanza insists she's still rich, and is just awaiting the arrival of her wealthy Abuelita. After arriving at the farm, Esperanza is shocked by the pitiful living conditions—there is no indoor plumbing, and the cabin she, Ramona, Hortensia, Miguel, and Alfonso must share is small and drafty. Esperanza meets a girl named Marta, who teases her for being a “princess,” and Esperanza worries she'll never be happy again. The next morning, as Mama and Hortensia go to work in the fields, Isabel helps Esperanza learn her way around the camp, and introduces her to some of their neighbors including the kindly Irene and Melina. When Isabel tries to instruct Esperanza in some housework, she is amazed to realize how little Esperanza knows about taking care of herself, and endeavors to teach her to watch the babies, do laundry, cook, and clean house. Meanwhile, Miguel and Alfonso reveal that they have salvaged some stems from Papa's beloved rose garden and replanted them out back in hopes they'll bloom. A large *fiesta* in the middle of camp is a nice distraction for everyone, but quickly grows serious when the radical Marta takes center stage and announces that a strike for better wages and conditions will be starting soon. Many boo her out of the party, but it's clear that she has a strong group of supporters behind her.

Just as Esperanza gets a handle on caring for the babies and keeping house all day, the arrival of a terrible dust storm shakes things up. Mama falls ill with Valley Fever, an infection of the lungs, and is taken into the hospital to recover. Esperanza fears the worst, and falls into a depression. She knows she must work to bring some money in, though, and begins going to work at the packing shed with Hortensia and Josefina. Rumors of the strike have spread throughout the camp, and anxieties are high. Though white Americans from places like Oklahoma are willing to work for pennies, threatening the Mexican workers' job

stability, participating in a strike for fairer wages and better housing could put them out of a job entirely and force them to roam about migrant camps looking for work. Esperanza understands the value of the strike, but is determined to keep working no matter what. Even though the work is difficult and has transformed Esperanza's hands into cracked, dry claws, she is determined to save enough money to bring Abuelita to America.

On the weekends, Esperanza visits Mama—but one day, she's told that the infection has worsened and Mama cannot have any visitors. Miguel takes Esperanza into town to cheer her up, but when they run into Marta and her mother on the way back, Esperanza is filled with jealousy. In the midst of Esperanza's misery, Marta looks forward to the start of the strike while Miguel celebrates having at last secured a job as a railroad mechanic. The strike begins, and Esperanza and her fellow workers are tormented daily for crossing the picket line, but remain desperate to hold onto their jobs. When at last *la migra*, or the immigration police, arrive at the farm to deport anyone caught striking, Esperanza helps Marta disguise herself as a worker—but when she and Miguel go to check up on Marta the next day, they can't find any sign of her or her mother anywhere.

As Isabel and Miguel suffer racist treatment at work and school, Esperanza grows increasingly frustrated with the conditions she's found herself in. One night, she explodes and vents to Miguel about how life is not better in America for anyone. Miguel urges Esperanza to remain positive, but she cruelly tells him she won't stand for his blind hope. The morning after their argument, Esperanza wakes to find that Miguel has left the farm to look for railroad work in northern California. She is overcome with guilt and worry—but is momentarily distracted when she receives the good news that Mama has recovered enough to return home. On Mama's first day back, Esperanza opens her valise to show her mother all the money she's worked so hard to save—but is shocked when she finds that all of her funds are gone. Everyone believes that Miguel has stolen the money, and Alfonso promises to pay Esperanza back.

Mama grows stronger, and Papa's roses begin to bloom at last. Things are easy and nice for a change—and then one day Alfonso receives word that Miguel is returning by bus to Los Angeles. Everyone goes to the station to meet him, concerned and confused—but they are delighted when he steps off the bus with none other than Abuelita. Miguel took Esperanza's money to go to Mexico and retrieve her, and as they all arrive back at the farm and reunite Abuelita and Ramona, a happiness fills their humble home.

The day before her fourteenth birthday, Esperanza asks Miguel to drive her out to the foothills—she wants to listen for the earth's heartbeat, a tradition she and her father began when she was small. As Esperanza urges Miguel to lie down in the

grass with her and listen for the sounds of the earth, she pictures herself floating high in the air, looking down on all her loved ones, and at last crossing a torrential river to land, with Miguel, on the other side. At Esperanza's birthday celebration, there are no presents to open, but the house is filled with love, joy, and warmth. Esperanza teaches Isabel to crochet, and repeats Abuelita's most important lesson: in the face of difficulty or mistakes, one must never be afraid to start all over again.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Esperanza Ortega – Esperanza Ortega is the novel's protagonist, whose name is the Spanish word for “hope.” At the start of the book, at thirteen years old, she is being raised in the lap of luxury on her father Sixto's sprawling Aguascalientes ranch, El Rancho de las Rosas. Esperanza's servants call her “la reina,” or the queen, because of her fancy clothes, refined disposition, and pampered lifestyle. Esperanza is used to bossing others around, getting her way, and being showered in attention, gifts, and affection by everyone around her. This all changes, however, when Sixto is killed by bandits one evening on the outskirts of the ranch. Quickly, Esperanza and her mother are plunged into poverty and desperation, compounded by the fact that her father's brothers, Luis and Marco, conspire to force Esperanza's mother Ramona to marry Luis so that the two of them can have access to Sixto's land and fortune. When Ramona refuses and their house and ranch burn to the ground, Ramona “relents” and tells Luis she accepts his proposal—but secretly begins working on a way to get herself and Esperanza out of Mexico for good. When they travel to California to work on a company farm in the San Joaquin Valley alongside their former servants Hortensia, Alfonso, and Miguel, Esperanza is miserable—she cannot understand why they are riding in steerage class on the train, or why her mother is socializing with “peasants.” Ramona tries to make Esperanza understand that their lives have changed—they, too, are now peasants—but Esperanza resists, refusing to believe that she and her mother won't soon return to their luxurious lives in Mexico. As the novel unfolds, Esperanza learns what it means to do a hard day's work, to make friends with those she previously believed were separated from her by a vast “river,” or class divide, and to be a part of a solid, supportive community. As Esperanza breaks through the barriers of her own fears and prejudices and begins working hard on the farm, she learns that wealth is more than materialism, that the unfairness of the world can be mitigated by love and community, and that even in the deepest pits of loss and grief, hope and rebirth can be found and achieved.

Ramona Ortega / Mama – Esperanza's mother Ramona is a spirited woman who would do anything for the good of her

family. She is a woman of strong values who refuses to capitulate to blackmail and coercion in the wake of her husband's death, and instead makes the decision that will allow her and her daughter to live freely, even if it means living in poverty. Though Esperanza is unhappy with (and even at times disgusted by) the conditions on the company farm they travel to in California, Ramona accepts her new life with grace, grit, and gusto—at least for a while. When Ramona falls ill with Valley Fever in the wake of a terrible dust storm, the depression and pain she has been ignoring ever since Sixto's death resurface, and she is hospitalized. Ramona's journey dovetails with Esperanza's to show that while being ruled by one's pain and grief is not conducive to hope and rebirth, neither is hiding one's true feelings and smothering them down deep. Ramona eventually recovers and returns to the company farm, demonstrating her resilience and her commitment to striving for hope even in her darkest moments.

Sixto Ortega / Papa – Esperanza's father, Sixto, appears only briefly in the novel—very early on, he's killed by bandits while riding on the outskirts of his ranch, El Rancho de las Rosas. Sixto, though, is a compassionate and caring man who deeply loves the earth, and tries to instill in Esperanza a sense of gratitude for all its blessings. Though the men who killed him—and others throughout the novel, notably the radical Marta—see Sixto's status as a wealthy landowner as a sign that he must have been inherently cruel or corrupt, Esperanza knows in her heart that her father was a good man who treated his family, his servants, and his workers well. Still, after his death, Esperanza is forced to question what wealth truly is—whether it comes from money and material things, or whether one's "wealth" can be comprised of the strength of their relationship and the goodness of their deeds.

Abuelita – Ramona's mother, known to Esperanza only as Abuelita, is a kind, patient, and gracious woman who teaches Esperanza how to **crochet** and passes along important proverbs and wisdom—reminding her early on in the novel that one should never be afraid to start over. Her wisdom comes in handy when Esperanza and Ramona are plunged into poverty, grief, and loss, and must undertake a long, arduous journey—while leaving the weak, frail Abuelita behind in Mexico in the care of a local convent. While in California, Ramona and Esperanza long to be reunited with Abuelita, and though it takes a long time for them to all meet again, when Miguel at last brings Abuelita north of the border, their reunion is a happy one. Though Esperanza and Ramona are living difficult lives, their time in California is enriched by Abuelita's arrival, demonstrating the importance of family, community, and togetherness.

Tío Luis – Papa's eldest stepbrother and the president of the local bank. A conniving, cruel man who, together with his younger brother Marco, takes advantage of Sixto's death as a path towards acquiring the dead man's land, wealth, and even

his wife Ramona. Through blackmail, violence, and insidious cruelty, Luis attempts to extort Ramona into accepting his marriage proposal, which will assure him political power as he embarks on his campaign for governor. Luis is a petty and vengeful man, and though Ramona and Esperanza are able to escape his and Marco's clutches, the two women remain haunted by how quickly and violently their own "family" turned against them in their time of need.

Tío Marco – Papa's older stepbrother and the mayor of the town. Not quite as smart as Luis, his older brother, he follows the elder man around like a "donkey," and does anything and everything Luis tells him to. Together, the brothers swoop in in the wake of Sixto's death pretending to offer help and empathy—but in reality, conspire together to coerce Ramona into a marriage with Luis in order to seize control of Sixto's land and finances.

Alfonso – The boss of all the field-workers on El Rancho de las Rosas and Sixto's close friend and companion. Alfonso has a sad, moody appearance, but is enthusiastic and kind on the inside. He once restored a neglected **rose garden** on the property to its former glory, and he and Sixto often work side-by-side as equals despite the fact that Alfonso is, essentially, the Ortega family's servant. After El Rancho de las Rosas burns to the ground in the wake of an attack by Luis and Marco, Alfonso offers to bring Ramona and Esperanza to work alongside him and his family on a company farm in California, where his brother Juan and sister-in-law Josefina have worked for years. Alfonso and Hortensia's kindness, hospitality, and generosity towards Ramona and Esperanza in their time of need show that they are more than servants—they are family.

Hortensia – Alfonso's wife, Miguel's mother, and the Ortega family's housekeeper, Hortensia is a Zapotec Indian from Oaxaca who takes good care of Esperanza and her entire family and truly loves the Ortegas. Hortensia is almost a second mother to Esperanza, and when Sixto dies, she and her family bring Esperanza and Ramona along with them to California to shelter them from the cruel plots of Luis and Marco. Empathetic, giving, and loving, Hortensia and her family's relationship with the Ortegas shows how class, wealth, and privilege are on one level only constructs: what's more important are the relationships one cultivates and the love, support, and care one provides others in their times of need.

Miguel – The sixteen-year-old son of Alfonso and Hortensia, Miguel and Esperanza have been friends and playmates since they were small. Sixto has always doted on Miguel, and Miguel, a mechanical whiz kid, works hard on the ranch, helping Sixto to fix "anything with a motor" on all of Rancho de las Rosas. When they were younger Esperanza was often jealous of the bond between Miguel and her Papa, though she also harbored a crush on the boy and once even declared her intention to marry him. As Esperanza grew older, though, she began to understand that "a deep **river**" ran between the two of them—Esperanza is

“la reina” and Miguel is, and always will be, her family’s servant. This all changes after Sixto’s death, when Esperanza finds herself plunged into poverty and Miguel’s equal at last—though the absence of a “river” between them does not make her happy. While Esperanza harbors dreams of returning to her life of luxury, Miguel attempts to impress upon Esperanza the need for acceptance, and grows frustrated with her when she continues to act as if she’s better than him even as they work side by side on the company farm in California. Despite the tensions between them, Esperanza and Miguel are friends and confidants—until Esperanza believes Miguel has stolen the money orders she’s been saving up in her valise and run away to Northern California to work on the railroads. Miguel soon returns, though, with Abuelita in tow—he has gone on a perilous journey to Mexico to retrieve her for Ramona and Esperanza. By the end of the novel, Esperanza at last manages to realize that there is no “river” between her and Miguel—and that there never was.

Marta – A teenage girl who lives and works on a neighboring farm owned by a different company picking cotton. Marta has worked hard all her life, and teases Esperanza brutally for being a “princess” who’s playacting at being a “peasant.” Marta has no sympathy for Esperanza’s having lost her father—Marta’s own father died fighting in the Mexican Revolution against wealthy landowners like Sixto. Marta’s fiery passion for politics and staunch dedication to pursuing workers’ rights for herself and her fellow farmers through organized resistance and striking is emblematic of the novel’s thematic message of activism and solidarity—but when Marta gets in over her head, she winds up having to turn to Esperanza for help in a moment of unlikely connection.

Isabel – Juan and Josefina’s eight-year-old daughter. She is transfixed by Esperanza from the first moment she sees her, and constantly begs the older girl to tell stories of her luxurious, beautiful life in Mexico. Isabel, raised in poverty, clearly longs for the escapism these tales offer her—but despite her yearning for the comfort and beauty in Esperanza’s tales, Isabel is a proud and present member of her family. Dreamy, caring, and, despite her youth, in many ways a kind of mentor to Esperanza, Isabel represents the younger generation’s high hopes for their futures—and the importance of friendship, togetherness, and community.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Juan – Alfonso’s brother. A hardworking farmer who loves his family.

Josefina – Juan’s wife, and Hortensia and Alfonso’s sister-in-law.

Lupe and Pepe – Juan and Josefina’s twin one-year-old babies. When Isabel goes off to school, Esperanza finds herself in charge of the children, and looking after them helps her

establish a sense of purpose on the farm—and teaches her a lot about taking care of others.

Irene – An older woman who lives and works on the farm in California.

Melina – A young woman who works on the farm in California. Though not very much older than Miguel and Esperanza, she already has a husband and a child and is wise beyond her years.

Silvia – Isabel’s best friend.

Marisol Rodriguez – Esperanza’s best friend in Aguascalientes.

Señor Rodriguez – Marisol’s father. A longtime friend of Sixto and the Ortega family, Señor Rodriguez owns a fruit farm which neighbors the Ortega ranch.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



WEALTH, PRIVILEGE, AND CLASS

Esperanza Ortega is a pampered, spoiled only child whose servants teasingly call her *la reina*—the queen. When her father, a wealthy rancher, dies after being attacked by bandits outside their family’s ranch in Aguascalientes, Mexico, Esperanza, her mother Ramona, and her Abuelita (grandmother) lose everything. Plunged into poverty, Esperanza must confront—and overcome—her misconceptions about class, poverty, and the “river” that she believes divides her from “peasants” and servants. Over the course of the novel, Esperanza realizes that she is not above hard work, and that no one is better than anyone else because of how much money they make or what kind of clothes they wear. Through Esperanza’s journey, Pam Muñoz Ryan argues that true wealth is not based on material possessions, but rather comes from the love in one’s life—and the good within.

Muñoz Ryan uses Esperanza’s father’s painful death as a catalyst for the story of Esperanza’s “fall” from a position of privilege to one of poverty and desperation. As Esperanza travels with her mother and her former servants—now her equals in the search for paying work on a company farm in California—she comes to see the first twelve years of her life through new eyes, and begins to understand the larger meaning and purpose of what it means to be “wealthy.” In the novel’s early chapters, Esperanza’s life is rich in both love and material things. She has fine silk dresses, expensive porcelain dolls, and has never lifted a finger to do a simple task for herself. Her maid Hortensia bathes her each day, and though Esperanza nurses a childhood crush on Hortensia and her

husband Alfonso's son, Miguel, Esperanza begins to believe that there is a "deep river" that runs between them—though she never puts it into words, it clearly represents the class divide. Esperanza is thoughtlessly cruel in the novel's early chapters: she rejects Miguel's friendship, telling him that they can never be truly close because of the "river," and spends her days thinking narcissistically about her possessions and the attention that is lavished on her from both her family and her servants.

After Esperanza's father is killed, her father's stepbrothers, Luis and Marco—powerful men in their village—conspire to secure their late brother's wealth by marrying Luis off to Ramona and moving onto El Rancho de las **Rosas**, becoming the proprietors of the lucrative, thriving ranch. Ramona accepts Luis's proposal, but secretly concocts a plan to take Esperanza and flee across the border alongside their longtime servants Hortensia, Alfonso, and Miguel. The journey is difficult, and Esperanza is horrified to find that she and her mother must travel in the steerage class on the train rather than the luxurious first-class cabins she remembers from a previous trip in her childhood. Ramona, who has accepted her new circumstances with both grace and grit, tries to impress upon Esperanza that they, too, are "peasants" now, and that their lives are going to be different—but even when they arrive at the company camp, settle into their barracks, and begin backbreaking work in the field, Esperanza refuses to accept that her "new" life is anything but temporary.

When Esperanza begins growing embarrassed by her inability to perform simple tasks, such as feeding babies and sweeping with a broom, she decides that she must accept her fate and come to terms with her new normal. Esperanza leans into the tasks that once revolted her with newfound gusto, and she begins to actually enjoy her time on the farm with Hortensia, Alfonso, Miguel, and the rest of their family, including the young Isabel, who begs Esperanza to lull her to sleep every night with tales of her life's former luxury. Once embarrassed by her new "peasant" life, Esperanza finds herself embarrassed now to tell these stories, and to recall that she had so much when so many people—people she'd never even known existed—had so little all along.

When Ramona is hospitalized with Valley Fever, Esperanza becomes anxious, sad, and desperate to bring Abuelita—who has remained behind in Mexico to gather her strength—to America. Esperanza's life is truly impoverished for the first time since her arrival in California not because of her financial circumstances, but because of the emotional pain of losing Papa and worrying over Mama. Esperanza begins to realize that it is the people in her life and the memories they share—not the things she has, or the clothes she wears—that have made her wealthy. The novel's earlier chapters are thus cast in a new light: Esperanza, nourished by the love of her mother, father, grandmother, and even the hardworking servants who

sacrificed their own happiness for hers, felt richer because of these things. Esperanza reaches the low point of her misery over Mama's condition when she gives away one of her precious porcelain dolls, which she had previously refused to allow a peasant girl on the train to play with, to Isabel. This moment symbolizes that Esperanza has, through her pain and suffering, come to realize that her possessions mean nothing without those she loves around her.

Throughout the novel, in moments of despair, Esperanza shuts her eyes and pictures herself floating high above herself, apart from the grief and pain that wrack her body and soul. Towards the end of the novel—after Esperanza has learned a great deal about the true nature of wealth and privilege and (through her dealings with the fiery Marta, who campaigns for workers' rights throughout the camps) the illusion of the class divide, she finds herself "floating" for the last time. In the midst of her vision, she sees herself flying "over a river, a thrusting torrent that cut through the mountains." This moment symbolizes that Esperanza has at last learned that the "river" that seemed to divide her from Miguel, and her wealthy family from the rest of the world, only appeared difficult and fearful to cross. Now on the other side—and surrounded by her friends and family in a new place—Esperanza has at last learned that it is one's family, friends, and service to others that defines one's wealth.



GRIEF AND LOSS

Though the early pages of Pam Muñoz Ryan's *Esperanza Rising* are filled with joy and vitality, very quickly, a staggering and violent loss upends Esperanza Ortega's world and plunges her and her family into grief, poverty, and danger. As Esperanza, her mother Ramona, and her Abuelita consider how they can rebuild from the literal and figurative ashes of loss, Muñoz Ryan suggests that though grief and loss are debilitating, destabilizing forces, no life is without them. As Esperanza learns what different kinds of grief and loss look like to different people, she comes to understand that she is not alone, and her journey reflects Muñoz Ryan's argument that the surest way of understanding, processing, and overcoming feelings of grief is to find community and camaraderie in the love and friendship of others.

The story of *Esperanza Rising* is the story of a family learning to cope with grief and loss not just of their beloved patriarch, but of their entire way of life. The grief Esperanza and her mother feel after Sixto Ortega's death is compounded by their sense of disorientation and hopelessness in losing their material wealth and being forced to flee Mexico to work on a farm in California. It is only through the strength and support of their friends, new and old, that they are able to begin to overcome their grief. When Esperanza, Ramona, and Abuelita lose Papa, they are plunged into unimaginable grief—but at least they have one another. However, when Sixto's stepbrothers Luis and Marco begin a veritable campaign of terrorism meant to bully and

scare Ramona into marrying Luis, thus ceding Sixto's hard-earned wealth and land to his brothers' joint custody, their feelings of isolation and paranoia begin. The first part of the novel, then, is meant to show how grief and loss are bearable when there is a sense of camaraderie and community to be found—when those things are absent, grief is amplified, and becomes, in Esperanza and Ramon's case, unimaginable to overcome.

When Esperanza and Ramona successfully flee Mexico for California with the help of their former servants Hortensia, Alfonso, and Miguel, they are forced to leave behind the frail Abuelita. Their sense of loneliness increases, and though Ramona puts on a brave face and urges Esperanza to see the possibilities in their new life, it is not long before their feelings of grief catch up with them, with devastating consequences. Though Esperanza is initially smothered by her grief, she slowly begins to adjust—however begrudgingly—to life on the farm. Just when Esperanza seems on the upswing, though, Ramona falls ill with Valley Fever, and her doctors hospitalize her while informing Esperanza that Ramona's depression is making her sickness worse. Esperanza had drawn what little strength she'd managed to muster from her mother—now, in Ramona's absence, Esperanza must learn to lean on her larger community for support in the face of a new sense of grief: the grief of being separated from her mother and unsure of when, or if, they'll be reunited.

Ultimately, a perceived betrayal on Miguel's part—he steals the money orders Esperanza has been working hard to save and leaves the farm—is revealed to be an act of compassion and love when he returns, days later, with Abuelita in tow: he has gone to Mexico to bring her back and provide Ramona and Esperanza alike with a renewed sense of family, community, and hope. Esperanza and Ramona are struggling to feel a true sense of belonging in California without Abuelita when Miguel bravely goes back across the border to fetch her. Though they have both been putting on a brave face—for one another and for their generous hosts—Ramona has recently slipped into an illness compounded, her doctors inform Esperanza, by her sense of depression and suffering. Even the brave Ramona struggles against the isolating, debilitating forces of grief, and finds herself able to ward them off successfully only when reunited with her mother—and bolstered by the knowledge that her friends and her community, specifically Miguel, were looking out for her all along.

Grief, by nature, is isolating. The pain of loss creates a reticence to form new connections, for fear of having to go through even more suffering should another loss follow. However, as Esperanza and Ramona draw strength from their friends and their new community in California, they realize that the only way to overcome grief is to let others in. Only by opening themselves up to new connections and seeking strength from those around them can they begin to hope again and discover

how to make their way through their new world.



HOPE AND REBIRTH

Esperanza Ortega's picture-perfect life on a lush, sprawling ranch in Mexico is upended in mere days when her father dies after being attacked by bandits, and her corrupt, lecherous uncles, Luis and Marco, burn the ranch house to the ground after Esperanza's grieving mother Ramona rejects Luis's sudden marriage proposal—a proposal meant to consolidate his wealth and power in the town where they all live. Esperanza and her mother are at the depths of their grief, confusion, and pain when they decide to follow their former servants to California to search for work. Though the journey they undertake is difficult, painful, and disorienting, it sets in motion a new beginning, and provides Esperanza—whose name is the Spanish word for “hope”—and her mother with the chance to make a fresh start on their own terms. Through the emotional and physical voyages these two women make, Muñoz Ryan suggests that one need not “be afraid to start over.”

Though Esperanza faces many challenges both personal and practical, the novel is at its heart the story of her search for hope in the face of pain and a new start even from the ashes, literal and metaphorical, of her childhood in Mexico. Esperanza's life in Mexico is uprooted in a matter of days when her father Sixto dies and her uncles, hoping to extort political allegiance and money from Ramona, burn El Rancho de las Rosas to the ground. In the aftermath, Esperanza fears she will never know happiness again. She and her mother escape to America with the help of their servants and begin a new life on a farm in California—but with both emotional and physical toil in front of her with no end in sight, Esperanza has a hard time finding hope and sharing in her mother's graceful acceptance of the chance they've been given to rebuild their lives. Rebirth is frightening to Esperanza. To pull herself out of her sullen, angry rut and commit to building a new life in America means admitting that her old life is over: something she definitely does not want to do. She insists to anyone who will listen that she'll soon return to Mexico and resume her life of happiness and luxury, but ultimately must admit to herself that the only way to recapture the happiness of her youth is to begin the painful journey of starting over and surrendering to hope, faith, and the unknown.

Pam Muñoz Ryan reinforces the theme of hope and rebirth—and foreshadows Esperanza's ultimate victory over her fears—through several major and minor symbols, most notably Papa's **roses, crocheting**, and the legendary bird, the phoenix. Papa's roses—which Miguel and Alfonso salvage from the fire that destroyed El Rancho de las Rosas and replant in California—take a long time to bloom, and for a while Esperanza fears they will never take root. But just as she and her extended family slowly, reluctantly put down roots and

start to “bloom” in California, so too do the roses. Through the symbol of Abuelita’s crocheting, which requires the knitter to maneuver the needles and thread up and down to the “bottom of the valley,” constantly taking several steps forward and one step back, Muñoz Ryan signifies the pain of hope and rebirth. Abuelita warns Esperanza that though she may find herself at the “bottom of the valley” in her real life, she will soon “be at the top of a mountain again.” Only after Esperanza traverses many mountains and valleys alike will the problems of her life, big and small, make sense. Abuelita also tells Esperanza that it is okay to start over when she’s frustrated, and that she should never be afraid to do so, symbolizing the leap of faith required of all situations that make rebirth and renewal ultimately possible. The phoenix, a bird that is reborn from its ashes after it periodically combusts throughout its many lifetimes, serves as a symbol of Esperanza and Ramona’s ability to rise from the ashes of their destroyed home—and razed emotional lives—in the wake of Papa’s death. Abuelita reminds Esperanza of the legend of the phoenix in the wake of Papa’s death, and, at the end of the novel, Esperanza briefly imagines herself as riding on the “wings of the phoenix” as she looks around her and realizes that despite all she has faced, she has more goodness in her life now than she ever had back in Mexico.

Esperanza ultimately realizes that though it is frightening to admit one has lost everything—and that toughening up and beginning the process of rebuilding can often seem impossible—life is indeed a series of peaks and valleys, and hope is a skill one cultivates rather than a distant star one pins one’s dreams to. Esperanza ultimately embodies the spirit of optimism, courage, and faith that her name calls her to rise up into, and conquers her fears of starting anew in the face of uncertainty. As the novel ends, she is even able to spread the wisdom she has learned to others: as she helps Isabel with her crocheting, Esperanza bids the frustrated child: “Do not ever be afraid to start over.”



ACTIVISM AND SOLIDARITY

When Esperanza Ortega and her mother, Ramona, arrive in California to work on a company farm harvesting and preparing fruits and vegetables, they are forced to leave behind the privileged world they once knew. On the farm, a burgeoning labor movement is taking place, and workers, led by the young but fierce Marta, are preparing to strike to demand better wages and living conditions. As Esperanza works to shed her attachment to her own wealth, privilege, and classism, the importance of workers’ rights and solidarity against oppressors becomes evident to her and her family. Set against the backdrop of the Great Depression and the fallout of the Mexican Revolution, Pam Muñoz Ryan argues through *Esperanza Rising* that activism is a healthy, necessary part of any society, whether on a large or small scale, and that solidarity with one’s friends, peers, and

workers in the face of unfairness and persecution is of paramount importance.

Esperanza’s fall from a position of wealth and privilege to one of poverty and desperation at first disorients, embarrasses, and upsets her. Once she accepts her new circumstances as permanent, though, she starts learning how to take care of herself and others and realizing what it means to do an honest day’s work. Esperanza quickly becomes aware of the injustices her fellow workers face—injustices based in the racism, greed, and corruption of people in the kinds of powerful positions that Esperanza and her family once held. Though Esperanza at first feels as if she and her mother are somehow separate from their fellow workers at the California company camp—or are only there “temporarily”—she soon realizes that no lucky twist of events is going to save her and her mother from poverty. Rather than dreaming of ways to escape her circumstances, Esperanza realizes, over the course of the novel, that she must join together with her fellow friends and workers (and even make friends with adversaries, such as the fiery but often cruel Marta) to make the best of their situation—and to try to secure a better future through organized resistance against corrupt bosses, unfair wages, and unlivable conditions. Muñoz Ryan draws her young readers’ attention to the fact that demonstrating on behalf of workers’ rights is complicated and often frightening; racism and corruption can render even a well-organized, committed strike useless or even harmful. Esperanza and her fellow Mexican workers are deeply aware that the wages they’re making aren’t fair—but also know that striking for more money and better housing could lead their racist, money-hungry bosses to give their jobs to the desperate white workers from “places like Oklahoma,” which have been devastated by the Depression and the Dust Bowl. Esperanza and her fellow migrant workers also face the constant threat of deportation—something the white American workers on the farm will never have to worry about.

Esperanza, Hortensia, Alfonso, and Alfonso’s brother and sister-in-law, Juan and Josefina, ultimately decide not to strike—they know that strikers will be unfairly targeted, and are afraid to lose their jobs or be forced back to Mexico under the federal government’s recently-passed Deportation Act. Marta, meanwhile, becomes the voice of the movement and faces exactly what Esperanza and the others feared as a result of her brash outspokenness. Though Esperanza and Marta have had their differences—and though Marta cruelly teased the pampered Esperanza upon her arrival at the farm—they lay aside the tensions between them at the end of the novel, when Esperanza helps to shield Marta from forced deportation when the much-anticipated workers’ strike goes horribly awry. Esperanza sees the corruption of “sending people away from their own ‘free country’ because they had spoken their minds,” and decides to help disguise Marta as a worker so that she can avoid deportation. In the wake of the strike, having seen their

fellow workers defeated and deported, Esperanza, Hortensia, Josefina, and the others have mixed feelings about having crossed the picket line and not contributed to the strike. They are grateful to have kept their jobs, but they are aware that the conflict is not over, and that when another strike inevitably comes, they will all be forced to “decide all over again” whether or not to fight for what’s right, even in the face of fear, corruption, and the threat of losing all they’ve been working towards.

In many ways, *Esperanza Rising* is a radical book. It places importance not on material wealth but rather spiritual and emotional wealth, shows how in the wake of grief and loss, corrupt and individuals often swoop in to take advantage of bereaved people, and, perhaps most importantly, dedicates a lot of narrative real estate to the importance of workers’ rights, the injustice of racist policies that disproportionately affect immigrants and migrant workers in search of a better future, and the ways in which periods of enormous historical suffering are often only redeemed by the lessons they teach about the need for solidarity and togetherness in the face of structural inequality. *Esperanza Rising* is a book about how the promise of hard work for fair pay in the American imagination is, all too often, nothing but a fallacy, and about how in order to combat this cruel truth, people of all backgrounds must come together to stand up for what’s right.

Mexico, Esperanza approaches the start of her thirteenth year surrounded by beautiful toys and dolls, dressed in finery, and attended to day and night by servants and maids who call her “la reina,” or the queen. As Esperanza grows older, she has come to understand that a “river” separates her from her servants—even her friend, playmate, and crush, the sixteen-year-old Miguel, who works alongside his father Alfonso on Esperanza’s wealthy father Sixto’s ranch. Esperanza even tells Miguel about the “river” in an attempt to explain her feelings—creating an even greater distance between them. Esperanza somewhat foolishly believes that she, as a wealthy young girl, is somehow separate from the peasants and servants who occupy the ranch and the land around it. After Sixto dies and she herself is plunged into poverty—pushed, so to speak, to the other side of the river—she begins to understand that the divides of wealth, class, and privilege are manufactured and false, constructed only to keep the rich rich and the poor poor, their experiences of life never used to help enrich the others’ journey. Towards the end of the novel, after having learned some hard lessons about the nature of wealth, the importance of community, solidarity, and workers’ rights, and the need to overcome one’s prejudices and false beliefs, Esperanza at last envisions herself floating up over the “river” with ease. Though it once seemed to be a “thrusting torrent” which divided her from others, she has now seen it for what it is, and has risen above it once and for all.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



CROCHETING

“Ten stitches up to the top of the mountain. Add one stitch. Nine stitches down to the bottom of the valley. Skip one.” So go Esperanza’s Abuelita’s crocheting lessons, symbolic sessions in which Abuelita attempts to impress upon Esperanza, the importance of seeing that life is a series of peaks and valleys rather than a straight line. There will always be setbacks, pitfalls, and skipped or missed chances and opportunities—nevertheless, perseverance is paramount, and one must never be “afraid to start over.” Throughout the novel, the act of crocheting, and the blankets and scarves Esperanza and Abuelita make both together and apart, serve as symbols of life’s randomness and the importance of both triumph and tragedy in building one’s character and finding one’s place in the world.



THE RIVER

Growing up in the lap of luxury on the beautiful, sprawling Rancho de las Rosas in Aguascalientes,



PAPA'S ROSES

When Esperanza, Ramona, and their former servants Hortensia, Alfonso, and Miguel flee El Rancho de las Rosas—in Spanish, “the ranch of the roses”—for California, Miguel and Alfonso bring along a mysterious package. When their group arrives in California, Miguel and Alfonso reveal that they have brought along a surprise for Esperanza and Ramona that will keep them connected to the home they loved so much before Sixto’s cruel stepbrothers Luis and Marco burned it to the ground: they have salvaged the stems from some of Sixto’s roses, which Alfonso helped him to plant and grow years before. Alfonso plants the roses outside their group’s cabin in California, and while Esperanza waits for them to grow, the promise of new blooms is symbolic of Esperanza’s hope in the face of pain and desire for rebirth, as painful as change, adaptation, and moving on in the face of loss may be.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scholastic edition of *Esperanza Rising* published in 2000.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☛ “He is just a little late,” said Mama. And part of Esperanza’s mind believed her. But the other part scolded him.

“Mama, the neighbors warned him just last night about bandits.”


Mama nodded and bit the corner of her lip in worry. They both knew that even though it was 1930 and the revolution in Mexico had been over for ten years, there was still resentment against the large landowners.

“Change has not come fast enough, Esperanza. The wealthy still own most of the land while some of the poor have not even a garden plot. There are cattle grazing on the big ranches yet some peasants are forced to eat cats. Papa is sympathetic and has given land to many of his workers. The people know that.”

“But Mama, do the bandits know that?”

“I hope so,” said Mama quietly. “I have already sent Alfonso and Miguel to look for him. Let’s wait inside.”

Related Characters: Esperanza Ortega, Ramona Ortega / Mama (speaker), Sixto Ortega / Papa

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 11-12

Explanation and Analysis


On the night before Esperanza’s thirteen birthday, her beloved Papa, Sixto, fails to return from a ride with his *vaqueros* across the sprawling expanse of his vineyard, El Rancho de las Rosas. As Esperanza and Mama grow worried about Papa’s late return, they worry that something terrible has befallen him—a bandit attack. Many of the bandits who roam Aguascalientes hold fast to revolutionary ideals and remain scornful of and antagonistic towards the wealthy landowners throughout the town. Though Esperanza is conscious of the bad feelings towards landowners, she lives a sheltered life of luxury and has rarely had to worry about bandits or peasants actually impacting her life—now, though, as the sun goes down, she and Mama fear the worst.


☛ “Now watch. Ten stitches up to the top of the mountain. Add one stitch. Nine stitches down to the bottom of the valley. Skip one.”

Esperanza picked up her own crochet needle and copied Abuelita’s movements and then looked at her own crocheting. The tops of her mountains were lopsided and the bottoms of her valleys were all bunched up.

Abuelita smiled, reached over, and pulled the yarn, unraveling all of Esperanza’s rows. “Do not be afraid to start over,” she said.

Related Characters: Esperanza Ortega, Abuelita (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 14-15


Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Esperanza’s wise and distinguished Abuelita instructs her in the art of crocheting. Crocheting is more than a pastime for these two—for Abuelita, the lessons are a valuable chance to teach Esperanza important life lessons. Here, Abuelita tries to impress upon Esperanza two important facts. The first is that life is a series of mountains and valleys, and one must “skip” around and travel up, down, and around as life throws its confusions and curveballs. The second is that in the face of a mistake or an insurmountable problem, one must never be afraid to start over. Though it is frightening to begin again, tragedy, conflict, and strife often offer the chance for rebirth and renewed hope.

☛ Now that [Esperanza] was a young woman, she understood that Miguel was the housekeeper’s son and she was the ranch owner’s daughter and between them ran a deep river. Esperanza stood on one side and Miguel stood on the other and the river could never be crossed. In a moment of self-importance, Esperanza had told all of this to Miguel. Since then, he had spoken only a few words to her. When their paths crossed, he nodded and said politely, “*Mi reina*, my queen,” but nothing more. There was no teasing or laughing or talking about every little thing. Esperanza pretended not to care, though she secretly wished she had never told Miguel about the river.

Related Characters: Miguel, Esperanza Ortega

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Esperanza reflects on her relationship with Miguel, the son of two of her parents’ servants. Miguel and Esperanza are just a couple years apart in age, and were very close as children. As they have grown older, though, and as Esperanza has begun to develop feelings tinged with romance for Miguel, she has become conscious of the

“river” that divides them: the fact that Esperanza is destined to be a wealthy lady of the house, while Miguel was born a servant and will probably be one all his life. The class divisions in Mexico are stiff and fraught, and as Esperanza brushes up against the “river” for the first time in her life, she fumbles her attempt to discuss this obstacle with Miguel and winds up offending and distancing him.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☛☛ “My father and I have lost faith in our country. We were born servants here and no matter how hard we work we will always be servants. Your father was a good man. He gave us a small piece of land and a cabin. But your uncles . . . you know their reputation. They would take it all away and treat us like animals. We will not work for them. The work is hard in the United States but at least there we have a chance to be more than servants.”

“But Mama and Abuelita . . . they need . . . we need you.”


“My father says we won’t leave until it is necessary.” He reached over and took her hand. “I’m sorry about your papa.”

His touch was warm and Esperanza’s heart skipped. She looked at her hand in his and felt the color rushing to her face. Surprised at her own blush, she pulled away from him. She stood and stared at the roses.

An awkward silence built a wall between them. She glanced quickly at him. He was still looking at her, with eyes full of hurt. Before Miguel left her there, he said softly, “You were right, Esperanza. In Mexico we stand on different sides of the river.”

Related Characters: Esperanza Ortega, Miguel (speaker), Tío Marco, Tío Luis, Sixto Ortega / Papa, Abuelita, Ramona Ortega / Mama, Alfonso

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 36-37

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Miguel and Esperanza share a moment in Papa’s rose garden. Papa has died, and while the adults discuss what is to be done about Esperanza’s uncles’ attempt to commandeer his home, property, and wife, Esperanza and Miguel escape outside. Miguel discusses his family’s plans to move on and seek work in America, where there is the chance that they can make something of themselves one day. Esperanza can hardly comprehend Miguel’s desire to leave—she assumed that they would

always live together at El Rancho de las Rosas, and that the dynamic between them would never change. Rather than being happy for Miguel and his family because of the chance they have to advance in the world, Esperanza is resentful and sad, and Miguel once again feels misunderstood, condescended to, and rebuffed.



Chapter 3 Quotes

☛☛ Abuelita squeezed Esperanza’s hand. “Do not be afraid to start over. When I was your age, I left Spain with my mother, father, and sisters. A Mexican official had offered my father a job here in Mexico. So we came. We had to take several ships and the journey lasted months. When we arrived, nothing was as promised. There were many hard times. But life was also exciting. And we had each other. Esperanza, do you remember the story of the phoenix, the lovely young bird that is reborn from its own ashes?”

Esperanza nodded. Abuelita had read it to her many times from a book of myths.

“We are like the phoenix,” said Abuelita. “Rising again, with a new life ahead of us.”

Related Characters: Abuelita (speaker), Esperanza Ortega

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 49-50

Explanation and Analysis

After Tío Luis and Tío Marco burn Rancho de las Rosas to the ground in an attempt to force Ramona to accept Tío Luis’s proposal of marriage—a move meant to consolidate land, wealth, and power prior to his campaign for governor—Mama and Esperanza secretly conspire to flee Mexico and travel with their former servants to America, where they’ll work on a company farm. Though Esperanza knows her family has no choice—to stay in Mexico and capitulate to Tío Luis would be calamitous and dangerous for both her and Mama—she is not looking forward to the change at all, and is surly and fearful. Abuelita, however, reminds her of her previous lesson about never being afraid to start over, and reminds Esperanza of her own experience making a big, frightening change when she herself was a young girl. Abuelita finishes her lesson by inspiring Esperanza to get excited about the chance for rebirth and renewal—like the phoenix, reborn from its own ashes, Esperanza too now has the chance to rise from the literal ashes of her former life.

Chapter 4 Quotes


☛☛ Mama looked at Esperanza. “I don’t think it would have hurt to let her hold [the doll] for a few moments.”


“Mama, she is poor and dirty . . .” said Esperanza.

But Mama interrupted. “When you scorn these people, you scorn Miguel, Hortensia, and Alfonso. And you embarrass me and yourself. As difficult as it is to accept, our lives are different now.”

The child kept crying. Her face was so dirty that her tears washed clean streaks down her cheeks. Esperanza suddenly felt ashamed and the color rose in her face, but she still pushed the valise farther under the seat with her feet and turned her body away from Mama.

Related Characters: Esperanza Ortega, Ramona Ortega / Mama (speaker), Alfonso, Hortensia, Miguel

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

On the train from Mexico to the California border, Esperanza and Mama are forced to sit in the steerage class because they can no longer afford luxurious things like first-class seats. Esperanza is devastated and even disgusted by the change in her circumstances, and refuses to accept that she is no longer the wealthy, privileged daughter of a rancher but a peasant just like the poor people around her. When a little peasant girl tries to play with Esperanza’s doll, she rudely snatches it away and stuffs it in her suitcase. In this passage, Mama reprimands her for “scorn[ing]” those who she perceives as less fortunate—Mama and Esperanza, too, are peasants now, and to act like they are better than the people all around them is only an “embarrass[ment].”

Chapter 7 Quotes

☛☛ Isabel gasped. “It’s beautiful. Is that our statue?”

Josefina nodded. “But the roses come from far away.”

Esperanza searched Miguel’s face, her eyes hopeful. “Papa’s?”

“Yes, these are your papa’s roses,” said Miguel, smiling at her.



Alfonso had dug circles of earth around each plant, casitas, little houses, that made moats for deep watering. Just like he had done in Aguascalientes.


“But how?” Esperanza remembered the rose garden as a blackened graveyard.

“After the fire, my father and I dug down to the roots. Many were still healthy. We carried the cuttings from Aguascalientes. And that’s why we had to keep them wet. We think they will grow. In time, we will see how many bloom.”

Esperanza bent closer to look at the stems rooted in mulch. They were leafless and stubby, but lovingly planted.

Related Characters: Miguel, Esperanza Ortega, Josefina, Isabel (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 123-124

Explanation and Analysis

After arriving at the company camp and beginning a grueling work schedule on the farm, Mama and Esperanza receive a pleasant surprise from Miguel and Alfonso: the men salvaged some of Papa’s roses from El Rancho de las Rosas, and have planted them at their new “home” in hopes that they’ll bloom. Papa’s roses represent hope, rebirth, and renewal—even in the dark times that lie ahead of Esperanza and her mama, the roses will come to symbolize the fond memories of home that have followed them to California, and that will help them keep the faith even when all seems utterly lost. The roses aren’t just important to Mama and Esperanza—for Miguel, Hortensia, and Alfonso, too, they are reminiscent of home and emblematic of the hope for a brighter future.

Esperanza went to one of the washtubs, put her hands out to her sides, and waited. Josefina looked at Hortensia and raised her eyebrows.

Isabel said, “Esperanza, what are you doing?”

Mama walked over to Esperanza and said softly, “I’ve been thinking that you are old enough to bathe yourself, don’t you think?”


Esperanza quickly dropped her arms and remembered Marta’s taunting voice saying, “No one will be waiting on you here.”

“Yes, Mama,” she said, and for the second time in two days, she felt her face burning as everyone stared at her.

Hortensia came over, put her arm around Esperanza and said, “We are accustomed to doing things a certain way, aren’t we, Esperanza? But I guess I am not too old to change. We will help each other. I will unbutton the buttons you cannot reach and you will help Isabel, yes? Josefina, we need more hot water in these tubs. *Andale*, hurry.”

As Hortensia helped her with her blouse, Esperanza whispered, “Thank you.”

Related Characters: Hortensia, Esperanza Ortega, Ramona Ortega / Mama, Isabel (speaker), Marta

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 126-127

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Esperanza prepares to take her first bath since arriving in California. She is used to the way things were once done back in Aguascalientes, though, and as she approaches the washtub she waits for Hortensia—her former maid—to help her disrobe and bathe. Esperanza is embarrassed when her mother tells her she’s “old enough” to bathe herself (in reality, a gentler way of reminding Esperanza that Hortensia is no longer her servant and in charge of helping her with simple tasks.) However, the kind and loving Hortensia, knowing what a difficult time Esperanza has had adjusting to the loss of her wealth and privilege, softens the blow by suggesting they all help one another. She instills a sense of community and camaraderie in Esperanza while also easing the transition a bit for her, and making her feel more at home.

Marta and some of her friends stood in the bed of a truck that was parked nearby, each of them holding up one of the tiny kittens.

“This is what we are!” she yelled. “Small, meek animals. And that is how they treat us because we don’t speak up. If we don’t ask for what is rightfully ours, we will never get it! Is this how we want to live?” She held the kitten by the back of the neck, waving it high in the air. It hung limp in front of the crowd. “With no decent home and at the mercy of those bigger than us, richer than us?”

Related Characters: Marta (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 131-132

Explanation and Analysis

When Esperanza, Isabel, and the rest of their group attend a *fiesta* one weekend, the party is interrupted by the radical teenager Marta and a group of fellow radicals from a nearby camp. Marta—whose father died fighting in the Mexican Revolution against wealthy landowners like Sixto—compares her fellow workers to a weak, defenseless kitten in order to point out all they risk in refusing to strike. Even though many workers know they need better wages and fairer housing, they are afraid to strike for fear of losing their jobs to droves of desperate Oklahomans arriving from the dust bowl every day—and they boo Martha and her friends off the stage and out of the party.

Chapter 8 Quotes

“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?

Related Characters: Irene (speaker), Abuelita, Ramona Ortega / Mama, Esperanza Ortega

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 146-147


Explanation and Analysis

As news of the strike's formation spreads throughout the camp, Esperanza and her friends and neighbors all have conflicting feelings about the movement. Irene represents the perspective of many: she sympathizes with the strikers' goals and even wants the same things they do, but also understands that for some, their jobs are too precious and too necessary to risk losing. Irene knows that there is no chance she'll join the strike—she is the only one bringing in any money in her family, and is already living on borrowed favors from the generosity of her former servants. The threat of having her job taken by a white person from Oklahoma looms above her head at all times, and in joining the strike she'd essentially be abandoning the position she's worked so hard for. Muñoz Ryan includes the subplot about the strike to show the importance of workers' rights and solidarity alongside the pain and tumult of actually having to sacrifice one's livelihood for a greater good: the situation is nuanced and complicated, and a radical part of this young adult novel.

“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.

Related Characters: Esperanza Ortega, Alfonso (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis


The day after a terrible dust storm hits the farm, covering everything, even the insides of the cabins, in a thick coating of brown dirt, all of the workers across the camp are required to go back to the fields immediately. This shows that the workers are indeed enduring terrible and even perilous conditions—and yet so many of them need the jobs so badly that they put themselves in harm's way each and every day, sacrificing their health and well-being for the

good of their families. Esperanza is shocked that life as usual goes on the day after the storm, but also is beginning to understand just how vital these jobs are to her family, friends, and fellow workers.

Chapter 9 Quotes

“The blanket grew longer. And Mama grew more pale. Women in the camp brought her extra skeins of yarn and Esperanza didn't care that they didn't match. Each night when she went to bed, she put the growing blanket back over Mama, covering her in hopeful color.”

Related Characters: Esperanza Ortega, Ramona Ortega / Mama

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis

When Mama falls ill with Valley Fever, a terrible lung infection, in the weeks after the dust storm, Esperanza takes on the role of caregiver, and hardly leaves her poor Mama's side. As she looks after her, she takes up work on Abuelita's unfinished crocheted blanket—as she works and works on the piece tirelessly, women from all over the camp bring her mismatched yarn to add to her collection. Crocheting—a symbol of hope, perseverance, and determination in the face of grief and loss—gives Esperanza the strength to keep going, and with each “hopeful color” she weaves into the blanket, she hopes to strengthen both her and Mama's resolve just a little bit more.



☛ “What was Christmas like at El Rancho de las Rosas?”

Isabel never tired of Esperanza’s stories about her previous life.

Esperanza stared up at the ceiling, searching her memories. “Mama decorated with Advent wreaths and candles. Papa set up the nativity on a bed of moss in the front hall. And Hortensia cooked for days. There were empanadas filled with meat and sweet raisin tamales. You would have loved how Abuelita decorated her gifts. She used dried grapevines and flowers, instead of ribbons. On Christmas Eve, the house was always filled with laughter and people calling out, ‘*Feliz Navidad!*’ Later, we went to the *catedral* and sat with hundreds of people and held candles during midnight mass. Then we came home in the middle of the night, still smelling of incense from the church, and drank warm *atole de chocolate*, and opened our gifts.”

Isabel sucked in her breath and gushed, “What kind of gifts?” “I . . . I can’t remember,” said Esperanza, braiding the yarn doll’s legs. “All I remember is being happy.”

Related Characters: Esperanza Ortega, Isabel (speaker), Abuelita, Hortensia, Sixto Ortega / Papa, Ramona Ortega / Mama

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 173-174

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Esperanza tells Isabel about her life back on El Rancho de las Rosas. The young Isabel frequently asks Esperanza to regale her with tales of her sumptuous, luxurious life back in Mexico—living on the company farm is the only thing Isabel has ever known, and these fantasies are like fairy tales to her. As Esperanza talks about the lavish and warm Christmases gone by, though, she has trouble remembering the gifts she received or the luxuries in which she indulged—all she remembers, she admits to Isabel, is the feeling of being happy. Esperanza is beginning to realize that what she loved most about her life back in Mexico wasn’t the silk dresses or pretty toys or delicious food—it was the feeling of being safe and warm, surrounded by her loved ones.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☛ Hortensia rubbed the avocado mixture into Esperanza’s hands. “You must keep it on for twenty minutes so your hands will soak up the oils.”

Esperanza looked at her hands covered in the greasy green lotion and remembered when Mama used to sit like this, after a long day of gardening or after horseback rides with Papa through the dry mesquite grasslands. When she was a little girl, she had laughed at Mama’s hands covered in what looked like guacamole. But she had loved for her to rinse them because afterward, Esperanza would take Mama’s hands and put the palms on her own face so she could feel their suppleness and breathe in the fresh smell.

[...]

[Esperanza] put her hands under the faucet, rinsed off the avocado, and patted them dry. They felt better, but still looked red and weathered. She took another avocado, cut it in half, swung the knife into the pit and pulled it from the flesh. She repeated Hortensia’s recipe and as she sat for the second time with her hands smothered, she realized that it wouldn’t matter how much avocado and glycerine she put on them, they would never look like the hands of a wealthy woman from El Rancho de las Rosas. Because they were the hands of a poor *campesina*.

Related Characters: Hortensia (speaker), Ramona Ortega / Mama, Esperanza Ortega

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 181-182

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the kind Hortensia helps Esperanza to soothe her cracked, scarred, aching hands—transformed through months and months of hard physical labor—using a remedy she once used on Mama back in Aguascalientes. Esperanza has fond memories of the avocado “lotion,” and hopes that it will help to transform her hands back into the soft beautiful things they once were. When she rinses the mixture off, however, she sees that the avocados have done nothing—her hands are now the hands of a farm worker. Esperanza has changed in many good ways since starting work, but this passage metaphorically shows just how much she’s lost, and how irrevocably different she is now after all she’s endured.

Chapter 11 Quotes

Several immigration officials accompanied by police began searching the platform, turning over boxes and dumping out field bins. Hortensia was right. They ignored the workers in their stained aprons, their hands still holding the green asparagus. Finding no strikers on the dock, they jumped back down and hurried to where a crowd was being loaded onto the buses.

"¡Americana! ¡Americana!" yelled one woman and she began to unfold some papers. One of the officials took the papers from her hand and tore them into pieces. "Get on the bus," he ordered.



"What will they do with them?" asked Esperanza.

"They will take them to Los Angeles, and put them on the train to El Paso, Texas, and then to Mexico," said Josefina.

"But some of them are citizens," said Esperanza.

"It doesn't matter. They are causing problems for the government. They are talking about forming a farm workers' union and the government and the growers don't like that."

Related Characters: Josefina, Esperanza Ortega (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 206

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, immigration officers descend upon the camp to arrest and deport any strikers they can get their hands on. As Esperanza and her fellow workers watch the madness unfold, they sadly lament that the corrupt police will punish anyone caught organizing and resisting, thus "causing problems for the government." The government's cruelty towards immigrants—and especially immigrant workers who threaten to grow stronger together—is a major problem which persists to this very day, and as Esperanza sees the cruelty being perpetrated before her very eyes, she understands at last just how much she has to lose should she step even a toe out of line.

Esperanza lay in bed that night and listened to the others in the front room talk about the sweeps and the deportations.

"They went to every major grower and put hundreds of strikers on the buses," said Juan.


"Some say they did it to create more jobs for those coming from the east," said Josefina. "We are lucky the company needs us right now. If they didn't, we could be next."

"We have been loyal to the company and the company will be loyal to us!" said Alfonso.

"I'm just glad it's over," said Hortensia.

"It is not over," said Miguel. "In time, they will be back, especially if they have families here. They will reorganize and they will be stronger. There will come a time when we will have to decide all over again whether to join them or not."

Related Characters: Miguel, Hortensia, Alfonso, Josefina, Juan (speaker), Esperanza Ortega

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 210



Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Miguel, Hortensia, Alfonso, and their family discuss the strike. Though it is now officially over, and many strikers have been punished and deported, Miguel knows that it won't be long before another movement starts up on the farm. The struggle of the workers to unite and fight for better wages and fairer treatment has only just begun—and though Miguel and his family, as well as Esperanza, crossed the picket line and avoided striking for fear of losing their jobs this time, he knows that there will be a day in the future when they will be forced to reevaluate where their allegiances lie, and what is truly important to them.

Chapter 12 Quotes

“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?”

Related Characters: Esperanza Ortega (speaker), Isabel, Miguel

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 221-222

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Esperanza—who has been working hard, keeping her head down, and holding her feelings inside even as she has watched her mother suffer Valley Fever and seen Miguel, Isabel, and others fall prey to racist, classist rules and regulations on the farm—finally lets her true feelings out. She laments to Miguel how unfair things are in America, and chides him for having believed that things would be better in America than they were in Mexico. Esperanza, of course, cannot understand the difference in structural prejudices between Mexico and America. While in America *la migra* threatens deportation and white workers take up all the good jobs, the class system in Mexico prevents any kind of advancement at all. Esperanza, from her privileged point of view, refuses to see this nuance and instead focuses only on how terrible things in America are. She has a point—but she is showing her privilege and speaking down to Miguel, disappointing him just as he’d begun to believe she’d changed and expanded her point of view.

“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.”

Related Characters: Esperanza Ortega, Miguel (speaker), Abuelita, Ramona Ortega / Mama

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 223-224

Explanation and Analysis

As Miguel and Esperanza’s fight continues, she teases and berates him for his “blind hope” and “optimism.” Even before they all left Mexico together, Miguel had waxed poetic about the opportunities that awaited him and his family in America—but since following him and his family here, all Esperanza has known is embarrassment, pain, and suffering. Now, angry and sad because of the injustices she has witnessed befalling her mother, her friends, Isabel, Miguel, and countless others on the farm, she lambasts Miguel for persevering in the face of barrier after barrier and believing himself to be better than he is. Miguel, though—disgusted and disappointed—turns right back around and slams Esperanza for continuing to believe that she is somehow better than him, or that she should be exempt from the sufferings he has known.



Chapter 13 Quotes

☛☛ [Esperanza] 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 cacophony 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.

Related Characters: Marta, Ramona Ortega / Mama, Abuelita, Isabel, Sixto Ortega / Papa, Miguel, Esperanza Ortega

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 250

Explanation and Analysis

In this highly symbolic passage, Esperanza and Miguel have driven out to the foothills on the day before her birthday so that Esperanza can listen for the earth's heartbeat—a pastime she and Papa used to share many years ago. Now, as Esperanza lies in the grass and lets her mind drift, she envisions herself floating high above the San Joaquin Valley. In her vision she sees those she loves and those she has lost; she encounters symbols of hope and rebirth, and at last flies over a swift-moving river—the river which once represented the barrier between her and Miguel. Esperanza has come to understand at last that all humans are equal, and that the poor and downtrodden are deserving of the same love and respect afforded to the well-off and carefree. Esperanza has seen strikes, forced deportations, disease, and pain on the company farm—but rather than allowing herself to become buried in grief, she instead surrenders herself to hope, renewal, and a sense of

gratitude for the lessons about the dignity of the human spirit she has learned.


☛☛ 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.

Related Characters: Miguel, Melina, Irene, Isabel, Juan, Josefina, Alfonso, Hortensia, Abuelita, Ramona Ortega / Mama, Esperanza Ortega

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 251-252

Explanation and Analysis

In the final scene of the novel, Esperanza wakes up on her fourteenth birthday to the rituals she anticipated so excitedly one year ago. Everything is different now—her Papa is gone, the beautiful gifts she once loved to receive are no longer affordable, and she lives on a company farm rather than her treasured Rancho de las Rosas—but Esperanza has learned to overlook all of these painful facts and instead give thanks for what she does have. She is surrounded by people who love her, and has learned to appreciate the simpler things in life. Esperanza is not the spoiled, pampered princess she once was—she is a young woman who has known love, loss, and tragedy, and she is stronger, wiser, and a better friend and daughter because of all she's been through.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE: AGUASCALIENTES, MEXICO 1924

Six-year-old Esperanza Ortega walks with her father, Sixto, through the ripe vineyards on their sprawling valley ranch, El Rancho de las Rosas. Sixto tells Esperanza that the valley “breathes and lives,” and that when one lies down on the land, one can feel its heartbeat. At the end of a row of grapes, the two of them lie face-down on a grassy knoll, and Sixto urges Esperanza to be still and patient. After a few moments, Esperanza hears a thud “rushing in her ears.” She smiles at her Papa, and he smiles back, knowing she has felt the earth breathing.

This prologue introduces the respectful and caring relationship between Esperanza and her Papa, and shows the genuine love that both of them have for the earth and the natural world around them.



CHAPTER 1: LAS UVAS (GRAPES)

Six years later, Esperanza—now nearly thirteen—carefully accepts a sharp knife from the hands of her Papa and does the honor of cutting the first cluster of grapes from where it hangs heavy on the vine to announce the start of grapes season. It is August, and everyone who lives and works on El Rancho de las Rosas is gathered on the field—Esperanza’s family, their servants, the cattle-wranglers, or *vaqueros*, and the field-workers, or *campesinos*.

This passage places Esperanza at the center of everyone’s attention. It shows that she is the apple of her father’s eye, allowed to perform ritual honors to the congratulations of all her parents’ employees. Esperanza feels joyful and beloved in this moment.



Esperanza cuts the grapes from the vine and passes them to Papa, who kisses them and holds them aloft for all to see. He declares that it is harvest time, and the *campesinos* start their work throughout the vineyard. Esperanza runs into the arms of her loving Papa and Mama, Ramona, and declares that this is her favorite time of year—not only is it the start of the grape harvest, but in a few weeks, it will be her thirteenth birthday.

The harvest time, a time of bounty for the ranch, is also a time of bounty for Esperanza personally as she looks forward to her birthday and all the treats, attention, and affection it will bring her.



Esperanza knows that on her birthday there will be a large *fiesta*, or party, and that her best friend Marisol Rodriguez will come over with her family to celebrate. Any time Esperanza and Marisol get together, they daydream aloud together about their futures: their *Quinceañeras*, or debutante parties, which will be held when they’re fifteen years old, and the suitors who will court them soon after. Secretly, Esperanza hopes that even if she does marry, she can live at El Rancho de las Rosas forever—she cannot “imagine living anywhere [else.] Or with any fewer servants. Or without being surrounded by the people who adore her.”

Though Esperanza enjoys daydreaming about the future to some extent, her reticence to picture herself ever moving away from her parents’ ranch shows just how attached she is to this part of her life—she is so happy that she never wants to leave, grow, or change. This of course foreshadows the fact that things are about to change drastically for Esperanza very soon.



Three weeks later, Esperanza is in Papa's **rose** garden, picking flowers for the *fiesta*. Papa has promised to meet her there. When she bends down to pick a large red bloom, a "vicious thorn" pricks her thumb, and she begins bleeding. Esperanza knows that a prick from a thorn is a bad omen, but tries to ignore the "premonition." As she carefully clips the rose and adds it to her basket, she notices that the sun is setting. Papa always comes home from working with the *vaqueros* before sundown, and Esperanza wonders where he could be.

Tomorrow is Esperanza's birthday, and she tries to distract herself with happy thoughts of the attention and affection that will be lavished on her throughout the day. She can't wait to be awoken at sunrise by her family and servants serenading her with *Las Mañanitas*, the birthday song, or to run downstairs afterwards and open her gifts. She knows she'll have linens from Mama and a beautiful porcelain doll from Papa—he gets her one every single year.

Esperanza heads inside—her thumb is still bleeding. When she shows it to her mother, Mama says, "Bad luck," but Esperanza knows that bad luck could simply mean a small spill or accident. Esperanza can tell, though, that Mama has noticed Papa's absence too, and senses that she is worried. Esperanza and Mama are both aware that though it is 1930 and the revolution in Mexico has been over for a long time, there is "still resentment against the large landowners." Even though Papa is generous and has given land to many of his workers, Esperanza knows that the bandits who roam the valley don't know such things.

In the study, Esperanza's grandmother, her Abuelita, calls Esperanza to her for a **crocheting** lesson. Abuelita is a frail but distinguished woman who commands the respect—but also the affection—of all who meet her. When Abuelita asks Esperanza what happened to her thumb, Esperanza tells her that a rose pricked her. Abuelita sagely replies, "There is no rose without thorns." Esperanza knows her Abuelita means, really, that "there [is] no life without difficulties."

Abuelita instructs Esperanza in **crocheting**, explaining that she must make "ten stitches up to the top of the mountain" and then "nine stitches down to the bottom of the valley." Esperanza is dismayed by her own poor crocheting skills, but Abuelita comforts her and reminds her that she should not be "afraid to start over."

Though roses are primarily a symbol of hope, regrowth, and rebirth throughout the novel, Esperanza's prick in this passage is also a harbinger of bad things to come. The full-blooming roses represent the apex, or highest point, of Esperanza's joy and affluence; she is about to fall from grace, just as the ripe blooms are about to wither and die.



Esperanza thrives on attention and affection, and uses the promise of a day that is all about celebrating her to try and hold off the nervous feelings she's having as a result of Papa's absence and the rose's bad omen.



This passage sets up one of the book's central preoccupations: wealth, privilege, and class. Esperanza and her family are wealthy in a very poor country torn apart by fighting and revolution: to many, her family and people like them are the enemy. Though Esperanza knows that her father and mother are good people, activists and revolutionaries see only their cause and the suffering of those they are fighting for, and see anyone wealthy as inherently evil.



Abuelita is full of wisdom and patience, and urges Esperanza not to fret about her injury or the bad omen: sometimes, Abuelita says, bad things will happen, and they are beyond anyone's control.



The act of crocheting is symbolic throughout the novel for the series of triumphs and setbacks—or "mountains" and "valleys"—that make up any life.



The housemaid Hortensia comes in with a plate of sandwiches for Abuelita, Esperanza, and Mama, and urges them not to worry—her husband Alfonso and son Miguel have ridden out to the edge of the ranch to search for Papa, and she is certain they'll bring him home soon. Alfonso is the boss of all the field-workers and Papa's "close friend and companion."

Miguel is Hortensia and Alfonso's sixteen-year-old son, and he and Esperanza have been friends all their lives. Esperanza is frequently jealous of Miguel because he gets to go out to the fields with Papa each day. When she was little, Esperanza harbored dreams of marrying Miguel. Now that she is older, though, she believes that a "deep **river**" runs between them—she is the ranch owner's daughter, and Miguel is the housekeeper's son. One day recently, Esperanza explained this to Miguel, and since then they have barely spoken. Each time they see each other he only nods and calls her *Mi reina*, or "my queen."

Hours later, there is still no sign of Alfonso, Miguel, and Papa. A pair of riders approach, but it is only Tío Luis and Tío Marco—Papa's older stepbrothers. Luis is the bank president, and Marco is the town mayor. Esperanza does not like either of her uncles, and knows her Mama doesn't either. Luis tells Ramona that he brings with him bad news, and holds out Papa's special engraved silver belt buckle. Luis tells Ramona and Esperanza that he and Marco will wait with them "in [their] time of need," and Esperanza is offput by this sudden show of kindness from her uncles—they have never been particularly nice to her or her mother.

Abuelita, Hortensia, and Mama light candles and pray for Papa's safe return. Esperanza continues **crocheting** and tries to think of the exciting celebrations tomorrow, but worry keeps intruding. At last, Mama sees a lantern approaching out the window—she runs out to the courtyard, and soon a wagon comes into view. As the wagon comes closer, it is clear that Miguel and Alfonso are driving it—and that there is a body in the back, covered in a blanket. Alfonso is crying. Mama faints, and Esperanza feels herself release a "tormented cry" before falling to her knees.

Though Hortensia and Alfonso—and their son Miguel—are in the Ortegás' employ, they genuinely care about them, and are their good friends. This tension between employment and family will figure heavily in the novel as it progresses.



Though Esperanza has feelings for Miguel, she is aware of the class divide between them, and the perils of crossing it. Esperanza's conception of the "river" between her and Miguel will haunt both of them as the novel goes on—and as they find themselves struggling to figure out whether the river's existence is enough to stand in the way of their friendship after all.



The arrival of Luis and Marco is an oddity rather than a comfort. Esperanza senses something off about the way the men are behaving, cluing readers into the fact that they, too, should be suspicious of the stepbrothers' motives.



Alfonso and Miguel return with Papa's body, setting in motion the waves of anger, grief, and loss that will calibrate the rest of the novel. Just hours ago, everything in Esperanza's life was perfect—now, there is the chance that she will lose everything.



CHAPTER 2: LAS PAPAYAS (PAPAYAS)

When Esperanza wakes up the next morning, she thinks she can hear Papa and the others singing to her—but as she rises up out of her dreams, she realizes that she is alone in her parents' bed, and recalls the horrible events of the previous evening. After Alfonso returned home with Papa's body, he told Esperanza and Mama that Papa and his *vaqueros* had been ambushed by bandits, who'd killed them and stolen their boots, saddles, and horses.

Esperanza wraps a shawl around her shoulders and goes downstairs to find the house totally empty. There is a knock on the front door—it is Señor Rodríguez, Marisol's father and a rancher on a neighboring piece of land. When Esperanza opens the door for him, he happily explains that Papa has ordered some papayas from his farm for the *fiesta* today. Esperanza breaks down in tears as she tells Señor Rodríguez—one of Papa's oldest friends—that her father is dead. Hortensia appears and puts her arms around Esperanza, comforting her as she sobs.

Papa's funeral masses last for three full days, and the ranch is full of people who have come from far and wide to pay their respects. Each night, however, the house empties, and Esperanza, Mama, and Abuelita are left alone to comfort one another through their lonely tears. One morning, Mama urges Esperanza to open her birthday gifts. Though Esperanza receives many beautiful things, the only gift she has any interest in is Papa's—a porcelain doll in a fine white lace dress.

In the days after the funeral, Marco and Luis come by the house every day to hole up in Papa's study and "take care of the family business." One day, a lawyer comes by to settle Papa's estate. Esperanza cannot keep up with all the talk of loans, property, and investments, and as her mind and eyes wander, she sees that Tío Luis is wearing Papa's belt buckle. Esperanza begins crying angry tears, sensing that something is terribly wrong.

The lawyer informs Ramona that though Sixto left the house and the yearly income from the grapes to her and Esperanza, the land—not usually left behind to women—has been given to Luis, the banker on Sixto's loans. Luis slides a piece of paper across the desk and offers to purchase the ranch house for Ramona. When she looks at the amount he has offered her, Ramona scoffs—she knows the house is worth twenty times his offer. Luis admits that he predicted Ramona would say no, and now offers her a "solution" to her situation: he proposes that the two of them get married. Luis tells Ramona that together they could be a "very powerful couple"—he has been thinking of campaigning for governor.

Esperanza's fear about the bandits came true. Papa, as a wealthy rancher and landowner, was a prime target for the bandits—though whether they were motivated by simple greed or revolutionary retribution can never be known.



Esperanza must relive the pain of her father's death over and over again as news of his passing spreads throughout the town.



Esperanza's shiny gifts have lost all their luster—she hardly cares about the beautiful things she receives, and wants only to cling to the gift that brings her closer to her memories of Papa.



Tío Luis donning Papa's belt buckle shows two things: it demonstrates that Luis wishes to replace Papa as head of the ranch (and possibly head of the family), and that he may even have had a hand in his death.



Luis's true motivations at last become known. Whether or not he was behind Papa's death, he wants to take advantage of Ramona and Esperanza's loss in order to bolster his own personal wealth and public image. The vulture-like Luis has perhaps had designs on his brother's property—and wife—for years, and has at last seized his opportunity to take control of both.



After a pause, Mama says that she is offended by Luis's offer, and Luis's face "harden[s.]" He tells Ramona that she will regret her decision—her house is now on his property, and he "can make things difficult" for her and Esperanza. After Luis and Marco leave, the lawyer advises Ramona to be careful—Luis is a "devious, dangerous man." Ramona, however, tells the lawyer to deliver a message to Luis: that she will "never, ever" change her mind about marrying him.

Though Ramona is aware of Luis's threats—and his power within the community—she stands staunchly by her decision and refuses to relent to bullying.



That evening, Mama, Abuelita, Esperanza, Hortensia, and Alfonso discuss what they should do. Abuelita has money in the bank—though Luis would probably prevent her from taking it out. Esperanza suggests they borrow money from their friends the Rodriguezes, but Alfonso warns her that Luis and Marco are "powerful and corrupt," and will make things "difficult" for anyone in the community who tries to help the Ortegas. As the conversation goes around "in circles," Esperanza goes out to the **rose** garden to be alone.

Though Ramona is a strong woman, she lives in a society that disadvantages her, in spite of her husband's wealth and property. As she faces down the options in front of her, she realizes that Luis was right—he can indeed make things difficult for her. The painful conversation makes Esperanza's head spin, and she excuses herself to the rose garden to get away from the pain.



After a little while, Miguel comes outside to sit with her. It is the first time they've been alone or even talked since Papa's death. Miguel points out which **roses** belong to Esperanza, and which ones belong to him—when they were little, Papa planted special variations for each of them that have now grown into large, tangled bushes.

Papa's roses—a symbol of hope and rebirth—have blossomed over the years as Miguel and Esperanza have grown older. This shows that they have flourished separately but alongside one another.



Miguel confides in Esperanza that he and his family are thinking of leaving for the United States to work—there is no room for social advancement in Mexico, and even if Alfonso and Hortensia did try to make a life for themselves on the small piece of land Sixto gave them, Luis would simply take it away. Miguel takes Esperanza's hand and tells her how sorry he is for her loss, but the embarrassed Esperanza pulls her hand away. As Miguel stands up to leave, he tells her that she was right all along—here in Mexico, they will always "stand on different sides of the **river**."

Though Miguel tries to get closer to Esperanza in this scene and have a moment of real connection with her, she is still wary of forming a deeper connection with him. Miguel's forlorn realization that he and Esperanza are indeed from fundamentally different worlds—despite the fact that they all but grew up in the same house—helps him accept the fact that he and his family will soon be moving away to seek their fortunes in America.



Esperanza goes up to her room, dresses for bed, and looks out her window at the valley below. She whispers to herself that no matter how bad things get, she "won't ever leave" the ranch. As a breeze lifts a "familiar, pungent smell" onto the wind, she looks down into the courtyard and spots the box Señor Rodriguez delivered on the day of Papa's death—the papayas inside are now overripe and rotting.

Even though her father is gone, Esperanza still loves her home and the land around it, and is determined to stay forever. The smell of the overripe papayas, though, symbolizes that a sweet thing is about to turn sour.



CHAPTER 3: LOS HIGOS (FIGS)

Esperanza wakes up from a series of frightening nightmares to the sound of someone calling her name. When she opens her eyes, Mama is standing above her, shaking her—the house is on fire. Esperanza grabs her new porcelain doll while Mama ties a wet rag over each of their mouths. As they run downstairs, Mama screams that no one can find Abuelita, but Alfonso urges them to hurry—the house is being enveloped in thick smoke.

Outside in the courtyard, things are even more chaotic. Horses, loose from their corrals, are running wild across the vineyard, while servants and field-workers scurry every which way, leaving the ranch en masse. Esperanza feels dizzy and wonders if she is dreaming—she watches as sparks from the house blow over to the stables and catch them alight, too; everything is burning.

Miguel carries Abuelita out of the house. Abuelita is alive but weak, and has sustained an injury to her ankle. Abuelita holds up her bag of **crocheting**—she managed to get it out safely. Esperanza’s family and Miguel’s all huddle together and watch as the fire spreads to the vineyard, and El Rancho de las Rosas burns.

The next morning, after a sleepless night spent in the servants’ cabins, Esperanza goes out to the rubble hoping to find some of her things to salvage. Everything, though, has turned to ash—even Papa’s **rose** garden has burned up, leaving only flowerless stems behind.

Soon, Esperanza spots Luis and Marco approaching on horseback. They ride right up to Mama and apologize for her having suffered “another sadness in so short a time.” Luis tells Ramona that he has come to give her another chance to reconsider his proposal—together, he says, they could build a new house on the ranch, even bigger and more beautiful than the one that has burned. If Ramona prefers, though, she is free to deny Luis’s proposal and live in the servants’ quarters—“as long as another tragedy does not happen to their homes as well.”

As soon as Esperanza realizes that the house is on fire, it becomes clear that the blaze is no coincidence—it is a deliberate tactic meant to force Esperanza and her family from their home.



The chaos outside mirrors the chaos Esperanza feels within: first she lost her father, and now she is losing not just her home but the ranch surrounding it, as well.



Even in the face of death and destruction, Abuelita saves her crocheting from the fire—in spite of it all, her craft is a symbol of perseverance in the face of difficulty or even defeat.



This passage makes it seem as if the rose garden has been completely decimated in order to mirror Esperanza’s internal state—she feels as if all hope is lost.



This passage makes it clear that Luis and Marco were behind the fire, and that they are trying to threaten and manipulate Ramona into accepting Luis’s offer. Even as they backhandedly apologize for her losses, they implicitly threaten “another tragedy” in the same breath.



After a quiet moment, Ramona meekly tells Luis that she will consider his proposal. Luis, delighted, tells Ramona he'll return in a few days for her answer. As he turns to leave, Esperanza shouts that she hates Luis—he turns around, and tells her that he'll start looking into boarding schools where he can send his new “daughter” so that she can learn some manners. As Luis leaves, Esperanza screams at Ramona, and asks what she has done—Ramona tells Esperanza, though, that she knows what she is doing, and hurries her, Alfonso, Hortensia, and Miguel back into the cabin so that they can talk privately.

Inside, Mama and Alfonso discuss what options the Ortegas have. If they choose to stay on the ranch in the servants' quarters, those will surely burn next—with no income, Ramona and Esperanza would have to depend on the charity of others, but due to Marco and Luis's influence they'd probably have no friends or allies. Hortensia speaks up and says that together, she and Alfonso have decided to go to the United States to look for work on a “big farm in California,” where Alfonso's brother works. Mama asks if she and Esperanza could come along, and though Esperanza insists they couldn't leave Abuelita, Abuelita says she could stay at a nearby convent where two of her sisters live until she is strong enough to join them.

Esperanza still doesn't like the plan, but Mama tells her that if they stay, they will be separated by Luis's cruel plans. Esperanza agrees at last that going to California is the only option. Abuelita says she'll find a way to discreetly get Esperanza and Ramona new papers for the border crossing. Though Hortensia and Miguel warn Mama that there is only fieldwork in California, she insists she is strong enough to undertake it.

Sensing Esperanza's worry, Abuelita squeezes her hand and reminds her: “Do not ever be afraid to start over.” She tells Esperanza that when she herself was a young girl she came to Mexico from Spain—though the journey was scary, it was also exciting. Abuelita also reminds Esperanza of the story of the phoenix—a legendary bird who is reborn from its own ashes.

The next day, the nuns come to take Abuelita away to the convent. As she bids Esperanza farewell, Abuelita reminds her granddaughter that life is a series of “mountains and valleys,” and that after Esperanza has “lived many mountains and valleys,” they will be together again. The nuns leave Ramona and Esperanza with a trunk containing their papers and clothes from the poor box—Esperanza is confused about why they are going to donate clothes to the poor “at a time like this,” but Mama explains that the clothes are for them—they, now, are poor.

Though Esperanza fears that her mother is giving in and capitulating to Luis's demands, it seems as if Ramona in fact has a plan. Luis, though, makes clear his hatred of Esperanza—and what fate will befall her if she and her mother do actually stay in Mexico.



Faced with two equally painful options—stay behind in Mexico and marry Luis, or abandon the ranch and seek the unknown in a strange new country—Ramona wants to choose the option that allows her and Esperanza to remain in charge of their own hearts, bodies, and fates.



Even though Ramona knows that traveling to Mexico will mean forfeiting the wealth and privilege she and Esperanza have been lucky enough to enjoy, she insists that she is ready to work hard alongside her former servants—anything is better than marrying the cruel, corrupt Luis and forfeiting herself to him.



Abuelita's role in the novel is often to remind Esperanza of the importance of perseverance, hope, and rebirth. Without Abuelita, Esperanza would not know to expect a series of “mountains and valleys” from her life.



Things continue to change rapidly and frighteningly as Abuelita is taken away and Esperanza is informed that the luxurious, beautiful clothes and toys she once owned will perhaps never come her way again.



Over the next few days, Mama and Esperanza plot in secret with Señor Rodríguez—the only person in town they can trust—and craft an escape plan. When Luis comes back to the ranch, Mama tells him that she plans to accept his proposal—a ruse meant to throw him off. There are conditions to her acceptance though: she tells Luis that he must begin replanting and rebuilding immediately, as the servants need their jobs, and that he must supply them with a wagon so that they can go visit Abuelita at the convent. As Luis agrees to these terms and happily rides away, Esperanza wishes she would be around to “see his face when he realize[s] that they [have] escaped.”

One night, Mama wakes Esperanza before dawn and they leave in the wagon, taking only what they can carry. Esperanza takes a small valise filled with clothes and her porcelain doll from Papa. Miguel and Alfonso lead them through the burnt grape rows to the Rodríguez ranch. At the edge of the fig orchard that separates the two plots of lands, Mama and Esperanza take one last look at El Rancho de las Rosas, and then hurry onward. Esperanza stomps figs beneath her feet the rest of the way to the Rodríguezes’.

CHAPTER 4: LAS GUAYABAS (GUAVAS)

Señor Rodríguez hurries Mama, Hortensia, and Esperanza into a secret compartment in the wagon specially built for them. It is not safe for women to be seen on the road at night because of bandits, and Luis and Marco’s spies could be anywhere—Señor Rodríguez explains that they will need to travel to Zacatecas so that they can safely board a train bound for the border there. Señor Rodríguez wishes them all luck on their journey, and as Esperanza settles in, she can hear the men above dumping guavas onto the floor above them.

As they set out on their journey, Esperanza is nervous, but Hortensia comforts her by reminding her of a night when bandits came to the house to loot it—and Esperanza, Mama, Miguel, and Hortensia all hid under a bed upstairs. When the bandits got to the bedroom, everyone was terrified, but Miguel, who’d caught a field mouse in his pocket, set it loose and spooked the bandits, who soon left. When Papa came back from work and heard about Miguel’s bravery, he offered him anything he wanted as a reward for rescuing Esperanza—and Miguel said he wanted to go on a train ride.

Mama sneakily talks Luis into unwittingly providing the means of her own escape: a wagon. Though the plans she’s making are dangerous, and could have devastating effects for her and Esperanza if they’re caught, Mama relies on the goodness and friendship of her neighbors in pursuit of her and her daughter’s freedom.



As Esperanza leaves her burnt, mangled home behind, she is filled not with hope for rebirth or excitement about the future, but anger and resentment for those whose lives have been unmoored by tragedy.



As Esperanza, Hortensia, and Ramona hide in a secret compartment in the wagon, they are intimately aware of how dangerous the journey they’re undertaking could be for all of them—and yet their freedom is worth any price.



Even when she was a wealthy “queen” back at El Rancho de las Rosas, Esperanza was no stranger to dangerous situations—as she recalls how Miguel saved her in her childhood, she fondly remembers her Papa’s gratitude, and her own.



One day, Esperanza and Miguel both got all dressed up, and Papa took them on a train ride to Zacatecas. They sat in compartments with seats of soft black leather and ate delicious food in the fancy dining car. As Esperanza recalls the memory, she wishes that she were once again riding to Zacatecas with Papa—not in an uncomfortable secret compartment covered by guavas.

The luxury of Esperanza's last journey to Zacatecas is contrasted against this painful and uncomfortable one to show just how angered and disgusted she is by the shift in the circumstances of her life.



Two days later, Esperanza, Mama, Hortensia, Alfonso, and Miguel at last arrive in Zacatecas. As Esperanza stretches while waiting for the train, she looks forward to the comfort of a compartment after so many hours in the cramped little wagon. When the train pulls up, though, Esperanza and her mother board alongside Miguel, Alfonso, and Hortensia—onto a train car filled with peasants. Esperanza is horrified and asks Mama why they aren't traveling in first class. Mama explains that this is all they can afford, and the disgruntled Esperanza takes her seat on an uncomfortable wooden bench.

Esperanza is in for another rude awakening as she boards the train in Zacatecas—she is no longer going to live and travel in the lap of luxury, and must learn to accept that her family is no longer wealthy or “special.”



When Esperanza takes her doll out of her suitcase to play with it, a dirty peasant girl comes up to her and asks to see the doll. Esperanza yanks the doll away and puts it back into her valise, and the little girl starts to cry. Ramona apologizes to the peasant girl's mother for her own daughter's “bad manners.” Quietly, Ramona tells Esperanza that when she scorns “these people,” she scorns Miguel, Hortensia, and Alfonso, too. Mama takes out her **crocheting** bag and makes a yarn doll for the little girl, who accepts the gift happily. At the next stop, when the little girl and her mother get off the train, Esperanza is relieved that she doesn't have to be “reminded of her own selfishness and Mama's disapproval for miles to come.”

Esperanza's cruelty towards the small peasant girl on the train shows that she believes she is better than the common people who surround her. Ramona reminds her that such an attitude is not only unbecoming or cruel, but now additionally self-hating—Esperanza and the little peasant girl she has “scorned” are of the same class, and neither of them is better than the other. Esperanza will have to keep learning this difficult lesson time and time again as the novel unfolds—she is reluctant to let go of her former life.



At each stop the train makes, Miguel and Alfonso hurry off with a mysterious package, and then hurry back on just before the train pulls out of the station. Esperanza asks to know what's in the package, but Alfonso says she has to wait to see until they arrive in California. Though Esperanza grows more and more irritable with each stop, Miguel enjoys the train journey, and declares his desire to work on the railroad once they get to California. In America, Miguel says, “even the poorest man can become rich if he works hard enough.”

Esperanza is annoyed by Miguel's optimism. She is unable to understand that while she is undergoing a painful transition and the loss of her wealth and standing, Miguel believes he is standing on the precipice of great change and the opportunity to at last make something of himself in a new place.



When a woman gets onto the train with a cage full of hens, whose eggs she sells to feed her family, Mama and Hortensia begin talking and gossiping with her, sharing their life stories even though the woman is a complete stranger. The woman says that even though she's poor, she is "rich" because she has her family, her garden, and "the memories of those who have gone before [her.]" Mama, moved to tears, tells the woman of their family's recent loss. Esperanza quietly suggests that Mama not "tell a peasant [their] personal business," but Mama whispers back that "now [they] are peasants, too." When the woman reaches her stop, she gifts Ramona two of her chickens, wishing her good luck on her new journey. The women embrace like they are old friends while the flabbergasted Esperanza looks on.

After the woman gets off the train, Esperanza watches out the window as she gives some money to a "crippled Indian woman." Miguel watches too, and remarks that "the rich take care of the rich and the poor take care of those who have less than they have." He also notes that "Full bellies and Spanish blood go hand in hand"—the fair-skinned people of Spanish descent are often wealthy and privileged, while dark-skinned and indigenous Mexicans have less. Esperanza tells Miguel that's just "something that old wives say," but Miguel retorts that it's "something the poor say."

CHAPTER 5: LOS MELONES (CANTALoupES)

The train reaches the border the next morning, and Esperanza and her fellow passengers are corralled into a hot, tightly-packed building to pass through immigration. Though at the front of the line, the immigration official gives Mama a hard time for a moment, she insists that all of their papers are in order and they are entering California to work. He at last stamps their papers and waves them through. While the two of them wait to be reunited with Miguel, Hortensia, and Alfonso, they watch as many people are sent back across the border because of problems with their papers or proof of work.

After another train ride, Esperanza wakes up to find that they have all arrived in Los Angeles. Alfonso excitedly points out the window. His brother Juan and his wife Josefina have come with their children—infant twins and a young girl—to welcome them all to America. After Alfonso and his family reunite, he introduces them to Esperanza and Ramona—he explains that his family already feels they know them because of all the letters he and Hortensia have written about them over the years. When Miguel introduces Esperanza to his little cousin, Isabel, the eight-year-old girl immediately begins asking Esperanza about her luxurious life back in Mexico, her fancy dolls and clothes, and how she "always [got] her way."

Esperanza did not learn her lesson through her interaction with the little peasant girl—now, as she watches her mother interact with a poor stranger, she again tries to act like she and Ramona are somehow above such interactions, but Ramona is quick to once again remind Esperanza that there is no difference between them and anyone else in their compartment. Esperanza is full of anger and bitterness, but Ramona is accepting her new circumstances and the start of a strange journey with grit, grace, and an open heart and mind.



Esperanza has a lot to learn about the way the world really operates. Miguel, though, having lived his whole life as a "peasant," knows that the entire world is rigged against the poor, the indigenous, and the disabled—he is trying to help Esperanza see the truth and stop living in her fantasy world as gently but firmly as he can.



This passage is the first moment in which Muñoz Ryan introduces her readers to the difficult, often racist treatment immigrants face at the border. Though Ramona is able to talk her way through, many are not as lucky, and face the end of their journey before it's even really begun.



Alfonso's family greet and welcome Ramona and Esperanza with open arms. The young Isabel is particularly entranced by their new guests—and longs to hear Esperanza's fanciful stories of wealth and privilege which must seem, to Isabel, like fairy tales; so distant and far-off that they couldn't possibly be real.



Everyone follows Juan, Josefina, and Isabel to their truck, and as they get in, Juan warns them all that there is still a long ride ahead. As they set off, Esperanza looks out the window at the lush Los Angeles landscape and feels grateful for the room in the truck to stretch her legs. She holds the twin babies—Pepe and Lupe—and listens to Isabel’s stories about the company camp where they all live. The farm is over six thousand acres, and their family pays seven dollars a month to live on the property in a cabin with water, electricity, a kitchen, and access to a school, where Isabel will soon start classes.

When the group stops for lunch, Esperanza wanders away and looks out on the valleys and plains. Remembering Papa’s lesson from years ago, she lies down on the ground and places her ear to the dirt, hoping to hear the earth’s heartbeat. Though she waits patiently, she hears nothing, and begins screaming and crying in frustration. She shuts her eyes and feels herself careening out of control. After she calms down a bit, she realizes that Miguel is standing over her—he asks if she’s all right, and then admits that he, too, misses Sixto, “the ranch and Mexico and Abuelita, everything.” Miguel takes Esperanza’s hand, and this time, she does not let go.

The group arrives at the company farm in the San Joaquin Valley. As they head into camp, a girl about Miguel’s age waves at Juan, and he stops to pick her up in his truck. Isabel introduces the girl as Marta, and explains that though she “lives at another camp where they pick cotton,” her aunt and uncle live on this farm and she often stays with them. When Isabel introduces Esperanza to Marta, she explains that Esperanza is from a huge, beautiful ranch where she “had lots of servants and beautiful dresses and went to private school.” Marta teases Esperanza for being a “princess” and asks where all her “finery” is. Miguel urges Marta not to tease Esperanza, who has just lost her father. Marta retorts that her father died, too—fighting in the Mexican Revolution against wealthy landowners like Esperanza’s father.

Trying to change the subject, Isabel points out all the different kinds of people who work in the fields—Filipinos, Japanese, and people from Oklahoma. Marta says that the camp purposely keeps people of different ethnicities separate—“they don’t want us banding together for higher wages or better housing,” she explains, before going on to say that if necessary, workers must strike for better conditions—even if it means risking their jobs.

Marta admits, though, that the conditions on this farm are not so bad—there are even large *fiestas* each Saturday night during the summer. As the truck approaches the Mexican camp, Marta teasingly tells Esperanza that “no one will be waiting on [her] here” before hopping out of the truck.

Though Isabel excitedly shares stories about her home, Esperanza is less than impressed by the idea of living and working in a place where running water is a luxury.



This passage shows that Esperanza feels disconnected from the earth, from her past, and from her memories of Papa. She is frightened, isolated, and in pain—it is only through Miguel’s friendship and empathy that she is able to gather herself together and summon the strength to complete the journey to the camp.



This passage introduces Marta—a feisty and sometimes even petty or cruel radical who has no interest in or patience for Esperanza’s past as the daughter of a wealthy landowner. Marta scorns the wealthy just as Esperanza scorns the poor—the two are opposites, and Marta will emerge as the major antagonist (but a perhaps justified one) of the novel’s latter half through her constant digs at Esperanza and her derision of the systems that perpetuate divides in wealth, class, and privilege.



Despite her youth, Marta can see clearly the systems that keep her people oppressed and demoralized, and wants to do something to change things no matter the risk. In this way, she is like Esperanza and Ramona—backed into a corner, she knows she must either risk everything or lose her independence standing for nothing at all.



Marta gets one last dig at Esperanza in before leaving the group—she wants to remind the girl that her former wealth means nothing here, something that Esperanza already knows all too well.



CHAPTER 6: LAS CEBOLLAS (ONIONS)

As they arrive at the Mexican camp and get out of the truck, Esperanza surveys the small wooden cabins—they are not even as nice as the servants' cabins back on El Rancho de las Rosas, and one large wooden building provides the toilets for the entire group of homes. A foreman shows Esperanza and her mother to a small cabin with two rooms, and Esperanza asks if this is theirs or Hortensia, Alfonso, and Miguel's—Ramona explains that they will all share this cabin together. As Mama begins unpacking, she sings a little tune, and Esperanza asks how Mama can sing and be happy when they are “living like horses.”

Mama shuts the door to their room and orders Esperanza to sit down. She explains that had they stayed in Mexico, they would have had only one choice: to be separated, and miserable. Here, they have two choices: to be together and miserable, or together and happy. Mama declares that she has chosen to be happy, and urges Esperanza to choose the same—and to be grateful for the favors their former servants have “bestowed upon [them.]”

As Mama goes back to her packing, Isabel enters the room and sits with Esperanza. She asks the older girl to tell her a story of being “so very rich”—Esperanza replies that she is “still rich,” and simply awaiting the arrival of Abuelita and her money. Her new situation, she assures Isabel, is only temporary. Isabel leaves the room and Esperanza falls asleep, wondering how she'll ever be happy or grateful “when she ha[s] never been more miserable.”

Esperanza wakes early the next morning, having slept through dinner and most of the night. It is nearly dawn, and in the kitchen, Mama and Hortensia are eating breakfast and drinking coffee—they already have work today. Mama explains that Isabel and Esperanza will look after Lupe and Pepe while the grown-ups work picking and packing grapes. Esperanza says that she wants to work, too, and Mama tells her that she will have a job—every afternoon, she will sweep the camp platform used for meetings and dances in exchange for a rent deduction.

Esperanza is not just saddened now, but actually angry—and outwardly cruel—about the conditions she and Ramona have found themselves in. She seems to have learned nothing on their long train journey, even though Ramona tried to impress upon her that to “scorn” those who were once of a different class than them is now to scorn themselves.



Things are terrible for Ramona and Esperanza—they have lost everything in a matter of weeks. The one thing they still have, though, is each other, and Ramona urges Esperanza to understand just how vital that is.



Even after yet another intimate talk with Ramona about their new circumstances, Esperanza is still unable to believe that she is not “still rich,” and incapable of feeling anything other than abject misery and self-pity.



In spite of her unhappiness, Esperanza does want to prove her worth through hard work. Ramona assures her that she will be able to make herself useful around the house and the camp without going into the fields.



After the women leave for work and Esperanza and Isabel finish feeding the babies breakfast, they each pick up one of the twins and set out so that Isabel can show Esperanza around the camp. She points out the platform and where the brooms are stored, and walks through the rows of cabins greeting neighbors. Isabel introduces Esperanza to her best friend, Silvia, and Esperanza feels a pang of longing for her own best friend Marisol. Isabel also introduces Esperanza to two women, Irene and Melina, who have already heard all about Esperanza's journey. As Isabel and Esperanza head home to change the babies, Isabel explains that "everyone in camp knows each other's business."

Back at their own cabin, Isabel teaches Esperanza how to change the babies and wash their diapers. Esperanza is reluctant to scrub the dirty diapers, and when Isabel realizes that she doesn't know how to wash clothes at all, she becomes alarmed—next week, Isabel says, she'll be going off to school, and Esperanza will be home alone with the babies and the laundry. Esperanza promises that she will learn fast. Isabel asks if Esperanza knows how to sweep—embarrassed, Esperanza says she does, but deep down has no clue.

After the washing is done, Esperanza goes out the platform to sweep it. Once she has the broom in her hand, though, she realizes that she is clueless—she tries and tries but cannot make the broom move the way she wants it to. She soon becomes aware of Marta and some other girls pointing at her and laughing, calling her "Cinderella." Mortified, she runs back to her cabin and sits on the bed, confiding in Isabel at last that she does not know how to do any housework at all. Esperanza worries she'll never be afraid to show her face outside again—the whole camp will by now know of her failure.

Miguel enters the room with a dustpan and broom and teaches Esperanza the proper and efficient way to sweep. Isabel giggles as she watches the lesson. When it's over, Esperanza thanks Miguel for his help, and he replies, "At your service, *mi reina*." He is not teasing her, though—his voice is kind. Esperanza asks Miguel if he secured a railroad job—he replies that he's frustrated because the railroads will only hire Mexicans to lay track and dig ditches. Miguel, an accomplished mechanic, wants to work in the fields instead until someone will give him a chance.

Miguel leaves, and Isabel asks Esperanza once more to tell her about her life "as a queen" in Mexico. Struck with inspiration, Esperanza agrees to tell Isabel all the stories she wants—if Isabel will teach her how to pin diapers, wash, sweep, clean, and cook.

In the light of a new day, Esperanza has, for the first time, a mildly optimistic outlook about her new life as she lets Isabel show her around the camp—a small, isolated place where everyone knows everyone, and where word travels fast.



Esperanza is afraid to become the butt of Isabel's jokes or the object of her derision by admitting that she doesn't know how to do simple tasks. Rather than facing the truth, she chooses to bury her shame and insist that she's capable of doing things she's never done before, isolating herself even further than she needs to.



Esperanza attempts to do something she's never done before, and pretty much fails—because it's such a simple task, the other girls make fun of her and point out how her life of wealth and luxury hasn't prepared her for any work at all. This is a turning point for Esperanza as she realizes just how much her past is holding her back from thriving in her new world.



Miguel is facing just as many difficulties as Esperanza, just on a different scale and for different reasons. He is one of the few who does not tease her for her lack of knowledge of basic cleaning skills—he wants her to learn and thrive, and extends empathy, kindness, and even a reminder that even when forced into a new setting, it is not a bad thing for Esperanza to remember who she used to be and where she came from.



Even as Esperanza leaves behind more and more of her past with every day, she is keeping it alive in her memory and in Isabel's mind.



CHAPTER 7: LAS ALMENDRAS (ALMONDS)

That night, everyone returns from the field with aches and pains—especially Mama, whose first day of work in the fields has been particularly hard. Still, Mama gets to work cooking with the other women, and Esperanza lends a hand, too. After dinner, Miguel and Alfonso tell Ramona and Esperanza that they have a surprise to show them. They follow the two men out behind the cabin to an old washtub which has been set on its side, transformed into “a little shrine around a plastic statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe.” At the base of the shrine, Miguel and Alfonso have planted a few stems salvaged from Papa’s **rose** garden—they kept them damp and safe all the way to California. Alfonso and Miguel are hopeful that “in time,” they will bloom.

The next morning, all of the women bring big washtubs into one cabin so that they can take baths before the *fiesta* that evening. When it is Esperanza’s turn, she holds her arms out and waits for Hortensia to take her clothes off and help her into the bath—but Mama comes over to Esperanza and explains that Hortensia is no longer their servant, and Esperanza is old enough to bathe herself. Sensing Esperanza’s embarrassment, Hortensia gently tells the girl that they all help each other here—she begins undoing the buttons Esperanza can’t reach, and asks Esperanza to help Isabel get into the water.

After a refreshing bath, Esperanza and Isabel dress in their nicest clothes for the party and help Josefina shell some almonds for a dessert she’s making. Esperanza expresses her nervousness about going to the party—she is worried that Marta and the others will tease her—but Isabel insists she should “get it over with” and laugh along with any jokes people make at her expense. Isabel admits that Marta is a grating presence at these parties for everyone—she is always trying to rile people up and get them talking about a strike.

That night, the center of camp is full of people who have come from neighboring camps, to join the party. People dance and sing together, and someone even brings a box full of a litter of new kittens for adoption. Marta, however, seizes one of the kittens and holds it up in front of a crowd, declaring that their group of workers are “small, meek animals” who allow themselves to be taken advantage of by the camp bosses. She announces that there will be a strike in two weeks, at the peak of cotton season. She urges all the Mexican workers to join the movement. People from the crowd begin heckling Marta, though, urging her to go back to her own camp—as Marta and her friends hop into the back of a truck and drive off, they can be heard chanting *huelga*, or “strike,” over and over.

After a long, tough day of work, Miguel and Alfonso serve up a thoughtful and delightful surprise that symbolizes their high hopes not just for their own futures, but for Ramona and Esperanza’s happiness and prosperity as well.



Esperanza is still adjusting to the fact that Hortensia, Miguel, and Alfonso are now her and her mother’s equals. Hortensia, though, understands how difficult these changes are for Esperanza, and with grace and empathy turns the moment into a lesson about how now they can all be of help to one another.



Even in rare moments of leisure and happiness at the camp, the pressures of the workers’ hard jobs and unfair pay cannot be fully ignored, and the more radical workers among the group insist on making their voices heard.



Marta is devoted to her radical ideas, and committed to getting others on her side—even in the midst of a banal social gathering. She knows that if she gets enough people talking, she will hopefully be able to effect real change in the camp, and even though she’s booed away from the party, she has a small but devoted group of supporters who share her idealistic passion.



Back at the cabin, Esperanza asks Josefina why Marta is so angry. Josefina explains that Marta and her mother travel for work all over the state and often end up in migrant camps, where the conditions are terrible. On the company camp, where things are relatively good, many workers are afraid to strike for fear of losing their jobs to the droves of desperate Oklahomans coming in every day, even though they know that they deserve higher wages for their work. That night, in bed, when Isabel asks Esperanza for another story about her fancy life in Mexico, Esperanza feels guilty when she thinks about the “richness of her life in Aguascalientes” compared to the pain and toil of Marta’s life.

Later, when Mama comes to bed, she tells Esperanza how proud she is of her for working hard and learning to adjust to their new lives. Tomorrow, she says, they’ll go to church. Esperanza says she’ll pray for Miguel to find a job and for Abuelita to get well soon and come to America. When she asks Mama what she’ll pray for, Mama replies that she’ll pray for Esperanza to be strong “no matter what happens.”

CHAPTER 8: LAS CIRUELAS (PLUMS)

On Monday morning, Esperanza walks Isabel to the bus stop, and Isabel reminds Esperanza of the babies’ schedule for the day. Esperanza assures Isabel there is nothing to worry about—she’s been well prepared. Back at the cabin, Esperanza plays with the babies and sets some beans to simmer on the stove for dinner. She is proud of herself for a successful morning.

That afternoon, when it is time to feed Lupe and Pepe their lunch, Esperanza mashes some ripe plums, and the babies eat every bite of the sweet fruit. After their nap, though, both babies wake up having soiled their diapers with runny brown liquid. By the time Esperanza changes and cleans both of them, she smells the beans burning on the stove. She adds some water and stirs them, but as she attends to dinner, the babies cry and soil their diapers again. Esperanza realizes that the plums must have been too much for their stomachs. She remembers that when she was little and feeling sick, Hortensia used to boil rice water to soothe her stomach. For the rest of the afternoon, Esperanza boils rice water and feeds it to the babies in spoonfuls, eventually settling their stomachs.

Esperanza has harbored bad feelings towards Marta, but is now beginning to understand how much she has suffered and endured. Esperanza feels sympathy—if not empathy—for Marta, and for the first time comes to see how her own wealth and privilege back in Mexico were in many ways unfair compared to the plight of so many millions of people living in poverty all around her.



Esperanza and Mama are grateful to have one another to lean on, even though times are tough and their situation is still precarious and unpredictable.



As Esperanza’s first day in charge of the house gets started, she is confident in her ability to keep things under control using the skills and tips Isabel has taught her.



Esperanza was doing well with her morning tasks, but as the day demands more and more of her, she finds herself losing control of the situation. She is able to calm herself down, though, and draw upon some important wisdom from her childhood—wisdom that unexpectedly saves the day.



When Isabel comes home from school and sees the huge pile of soiled diapers, she chides Esperanza for feeding the babies raw plums, but Esperanza, exasperated, says that there's a lot she still doesn't know. She tells Isabel about the rice water, and Isabel congratulates her on doing the right thing. That night, after a dinner of slightly burnt beans, Esperanza heads off to bed exhausted.

Each day, Esperanza gets a little bit better at all of her tasks: caring for the babies, preparing dinner, and doing laundry. Her days are busy, but her hard work makes her proud. Irene and Melina, who are mother and daughter, often come over in the afternoons to chat and **crochet**. One afternoon, Melina tells Esperanza that today is the day of the strike—but everyone from their camp has agreed to ignore it and continue working. Irene says she sees both sides of the conundrum, and Esperanza reflects on how badly Mama needs her job.

Just then, a blast of hot wind enters the room through the open window—the babies are frightened. Irene stands up and looks outside—she sees a brown cloud heading over the mountains and announces that a dust storm is approaching. As the women shut up the doors and windows, stuff rags in the cracks in the walls, and try to calm the babies, a sound “like a gentle rain” thrums on the roof as grains of sand blast against the cabin. The babies eventually fall asleep, but even after the wind stops raging, the dust continues swirling in the hot, stagnant air.

Soon after the storm stops, the others return—Isabel has been bused home from school, and Mama and the others have been brought in from the fields on trucks. Everyone is covered in brown dust, and Mama cannot stop coughing, though she assures Esperanza that she's feeling fine. That evening, everyone takes turns rinsing off in the sink—they will have to go back to work tomorrow in spite of the storm, because the grapes in the field are still ripe and ready to be picked.

A few days later, Mama is looking pale and feeling lightheaded. Though Hortensia suggests Mama go to see a doctor, she insists she's fine and just needs to lie down. That evening, though, Esperanza cannot wake the feverish Mama up from her nap, and Hortensia calls an American doctor to come take a look at her. After a brief exam, the doctor tells everyone that Mama has Valley Fever—an infection of the lungs caused by dust spores to which some, for unknown reasons, are more vulnerable than others.

This passage shows that though Esperanza still has a lot to learn, there are important skills she does have—skills she was able to learn even during her privileged life back in Mexico.



Esperanza begins finding happiness, fulfillment, and friendship in her life in the camp against all odds. Crocheting remains a reminder of life's unpredictability even as Esperanza's life takes on a strangely peaceful monotony.



Esperanza's first dust storm happens, luckily, while she's safe inside and surrounded by people who know what to do. Still, she can sense its power to destroy and destabilize life on the farm. The dust storm is a reminder of the “Dust Bowl,” which was a devastating accompaniment to the Great Depression in America.



Even extreme conditions such as dust storms don't stop the clock on the company farm—workers are expected to endure harsh conditions, regroup, and keep going no matter what.



Mama has already lost so much and suffered so deeply, but now a new challenge comes along to further destabilize her new life and threaten her well-being.



The doctor tells Hortensia and Esperanza that they will need to keep her fever down as the disease works its way out of her body. He tells them that it isn't contagious, and that once Mama fights it off, she will be immune to it forever. Esperanza asks how long it will be until Mama is well. The doctor grimly replies that "if she survives," it might take up to six months for Mama to regain her full strength. Esperanza is gripped with fear—she has already lost her Papa, and cannot lose her mother, too.

The doctor does not lie to Esperanza about how serious Mama's condition is, and is frank with her about the possibility that Mama will not survive. This is almost more than Esperanza can bear, and she becomes determined not to lose her mother, too.



CHAPTER 9: LAS PAPAS (POTATOES)

For weeks, Esperanza hardly leaves Mama's side, feeding and bathing her and attending to her every need. As a November chill settles over the farm, the doctor returns and tells Esperanza that Mama's condition hasn't changed. One evening, Mama calls for Abuelita's blanket, and Esperanza retrieves it from her valise and brings it into Mama's room. Esperanza realizes how badly Mama needs her own mother. That night, Esperanza starts **crocheting** the unfinished blanket, moving up over mountains and down into valleys. As the days go by, the blanket grows longer, and women from all over camp bring Esperanza new skeins of yarn to add to her stash. Mama remains listless, though, and often weeps in silence. Esperanza worries that "after all her hard work in getting them there," Mama has at last "given up."

As Esperanza faces the most difficult challenge she's had to shoulder yet—caring for her sick mother—she turns to Abuelita's lessons from crocheting for strength, and a reminder that sometimes one must go into a "valley" before arriving at the top of a "mountain." The whole community comes together in support of Esperanza in her time of grief, but Esperanza remains fearful that nothing can pull her mother back from the brink of succumbing to her illness.



A few weeks later, the fields frost over and Mama's breathing grows more labored. The doctor comes back and says that Mama should be in the hospital—not only is she ill and weak, but she's depressed. Esperanza begins crying, afraid that "the hospital is where people go to die," but Hortensia assures her that Mama is going to the hospital to get better. Esperanza asks what the doctor meant when he said that mama was depressed, and Hortensia explains that Mama has lost a lot of things in just a few months—the strain on her body and her heart have made her feel "helpless."

Ramona has been strong, staunch, and seemingly indomitable ever since the death of her husband—never once has she given into fear or self-pity. Now, though, everything seems to have become too much for her, and she succumbs not just to her illness but to the pain, sadness, and grief she has been holding back this whole time.



As the doctor takes Mama off to the hospital, Esperanza worries that she has failed her mother in some way, and becomes determined to write to Abuelita. Hortensia warns her that her uncles will surely be monitoring the mail, but Esperanza knows she has to do something. Late that night, she goes out to the small shrine out back and prays for the Virgin to show her a way to help Mama.

Esperanza feels alone and uncertain of what to do. She wants help, but knows she is all but barred from asking for it from her Abuelita. With nowhere to turn, Esperanza goes out to the shabby little rose garden—a symbol of her fledgling hopes—to pray.



The next evening, Esperanza, knowing she has to find a way to bring some money in, asks Miguel to help her find some work so that she can earn money and help bring Abuelita to America. Miguel worries that Esperanza will get in trouble for being too young to legally work, but Esperanza is determined. Miguel suggests Esperanza go to work cutting potato eyes with Hortensia and Josefina for the next few weeks—if she’s good at that job, they’ll hire her to tie grapes and pack asparagus.

A few days later, Esperanza is bundled in a small wooden shed with Josefina, Hortensia, and a group of other women. They are wrapped in blankets, shawls, and gloves, and clutch warm bricks to their bellies as they cut out potato eyes for planting. Esperanza quietly listens as the women discuss a renewed plan to strike in the spring. The women worry that strikers will be sent back to Mexico by *la migra*—immigration authorities. On the other hand, there are also rumors that any Mexicans who cross the picket line and continue to work will be vulnerable to violence. Esperanza knows how much depends on her being able to secure a job in the spring, and decides that nothing—and no one—will stand in her way.

A few nights before Christmas, Esperanza helps Isabel make a yarn doll for Silvia. Isabel asks what Christmases were like at El Rancho de las Rosas, and asks Esperanza to describe the beautiful gifts she received. Esperanza admits that she can’t remember her specific presents—“all [she] remember[s] is being happy.”

On Christmas day, Esperanza visits Mama in the hospital. During the visit, however, Mama sleeps deeply and doesn’t even wake at the sound of Esperanza’s voice as Esperanza tells her all she’s missing back at the camp. The only present Esperanza has been able to find for her mother is a smooth round stone. As she leaves the hospital, she sets it on Mama’s nightstand, kisses her forehead, and tells her not to worry—Esperanza says she herself “will take care of everything.”

CHAPTER 10: LOS AGUACATES (AVOCADOS)

In January, Esperanza waits outside in the cold for the truck that will take her to tie grapevines. Though it is a new year, nothing feels new—it “already seem[s] old.” During the week she works during the days and cooks dinner in the afternoons, then helps with the babies and Isabel’s homework each night. On the weekends, she goes to visit Mama. Every other week, she buys a money order from the market and saves it in her valise—if she keeps working until peach season, she thinks, she will save enough for Abuelita’s travel.

Esperanza is done pitying herself—she is ready to put her privileged outlook aside, keep her head down, and work hard for the good of her family. She has matured greatly since coming to California.



Muñoz Ryan accomplishes something difficult with great compassion here—she shows how complicated and nuanced striking for better rights, conditions, and compensation can be. Esperanza is essentially on her own, and knows she can’t lose the job she’s worked hard to earn—she doesn’t want to strike because of all she stands to lose, even though she sees the potential for helping the greater good that the strike could accomplish.



This passage shows that perhaps Esperanza never was made happy or comforted by material things: it was always about the love and comfort she found in her family, and now that has been taken away from her, too. She didn’t realize what she had until she lost it.



This sad, painful moment contrasts the beautiful tales of warm, happy family Christmas celebrations Esperanza told Isabel with the reality of what Esperanza’s life has become: a painful, lonely, burdensome series of tests and trials.



Esperanza feels bogged down by her routine, unable to escape the constraints of her hard new life. Even so, she has adapted to its demands, and has begun to come up with ways to strategize, save, and still conserve some measure of hope that all of her hard work will soon pay off.



That night, after work, Esperanza soaks her frozen, cracked hands in a bowl of water. She barely recognizes them as her own. Hortensia makes a paste of avocado and glycerine for Esperanza to coat her hands in—after long days of horseback riding back in Aguascalientes, Mama used to swear by this same cure. When she rinses the paste off twenty minutes later, though, her hands look the same.

One afternoon, Esperanza and Miguel go to visit Mama at the hospital, but her doctor stops them from going down the hall to her room. Mama has gotten worse, and to minimize the chances of her contracting another infection, she is not allowed any visitors for a month. Esperanza begs to see her mother quickly, and the doctor relents. Esperanza rushes into the room, where her ghost-pale mother lies limp on the bed. Esperanza tries to talk to Mama, but Mama is too weak to talk back. Before leaving, Esperanza braids Mama's thin, scraggly hair into a long plait and tells her she loves her. As she leaves, Mama whispers back thinly, "I love you, too."

Three weeks later, it is the first day of spring, and Hortensia urges Esperanza to take advantage of the nice weather and get out of camp for the day. Esperanza herself has been depressed and withdrawn since she's been barred from visiting Mama, and she knows that everyone is worried about her. Esperanza takes a grocery list from Hortensia's hands and goes to fetch Miguel so that they can go to a nearby Japanese market—the proprietor, Mr. Yakota, is kind to Mexicans when few other shop owners in town are. On the ride over, Miguel explains that many Americans see Mexicans as "one big, brown group who are good for only manual labor"—kind people like Mr. Yakota are a rarity here.

While Miguel talks to some men about a railroad job outside, Esperanza goes into the market and looks around. There are many Mexican specialty foods available, and even a paper *piñata*. Esperanza purchases it along with the groceries and her money order, and when she comes out of the store, Miguel asks her what she's doing with all the money orders she buys. Esperanza explains that she's saving them in her valise so that someday she can bring Abuelita to America. The *piñata*, she says, is for Mama—when she's allowed to visit again, she wants to hang it in her mother's hospital room.

On the way back to camp, Miguel and Esperanza see Marta and her mother walking down the road, and stop to give them a ride. Marta confesses that they have been "tossed out" of the migrant workers' camp, and are now going up to work at the strikers' farm. Esperanza feels a "twinge of envy" seeing Marta together with her mother. Even though she knows that they are going through a difficult time, at least they have one another.

Esperanza's cracked, swollen hands show how hard she's working, and how much the hard work and difficult conditions she's facing are slowly changing her, for better and for worse.



Just when Esperanza thought things couldn't get any worse, some more bad news comes her way: she will not be able to visit Mama any more, and will be totally alone and isolated from her family now as she makes her way on the farm.



Esperanza knows that everyone around her is worried, so she tries her best to let herself be cheered up instead of retreating further into her own worry and misery. Even on a free, sunny day, though, she and Miguel find their actions and plans dictated by the racist, prejudiced systems and people around them.



Even in the midst of hard times, Esperanza is trying to allow herself small moments of hope and joy. Though she can't do anything very nice for herself, she tries to do nice things for others: saving money on Abuelita's behalf, and purchasing a treat for her sick mother.



Even though Marta and her mother are facing miserable conditions and eviction from their home, they have one another—Esperanza is all alone, and envious of this one advantage Marta has over her.



Miguel and Esperanza drop Marta and her mother off at the strikers' farm, where the conditions seem bleak. Marta and her mother, though, are excited to be at their new home. Marta asks Esperanza if she's sure she isn't "on [their] side," Esperanza responds calmly that she must take care of her own mother. Marta tells her and Miguel that in a few weeks, during the asparagus season, "things are going to happen all over the county." Fields and railroads will be shut down and a strike will be in full effect—"If you have not joined us by then," Marta says, "be very careful."

A few nights later, Esperanza arrives home from a hard day's work to find a splendid meal—Miguel's favorite dinner—laid out in the kitchen. Miguel announces that he's finally secured a job in the machine shop at the railroad. So many railroad workers have joined the strike, he says, that a mechanic position at last opened up. As Esperanza watches Miguel talk about his new job, his "dancing" eyes remind her of how Papa's looked "when he used to talk about the land."

CHAPTER 11: LOS ESPÁRRAGOS (ASPARAGUS)

As the weeks go by, Esperanza realizes that the strikers are "more organized than ever." They hand out fliers, paint their slogans on old barns, and hold meetings regularly. Though Esperanza continues to work, she grows nervous—and her neighbors do, too. Asparagus season is approaching, and the vegetables must be picked before the high heat comes in June. Esperanza and the others know that the strikers' plan is to strike just as the "tender stalks" become ready for plucking.

When Esperanza, Hortensia, and Josefina arrive at the packing shed on the first day of the strike, they are met by a picket line of women booing and urging them to join the strike. Esperanza is frightened and intimidated, and wishes she could explain to the women how badly she needs her job—but she knows her voice alone does not matter to them. That night at dinner, Esperanza and the other women compare their days with Alfonso, Juan, and Miguel's—their workdays, too, were affected by the strike.

Marta says goodbye to Miguel and Esperanza with a final warning—she wants them to be prepared for the full force of the strikers' action to come down upon them, and gives them one last chance to join together with the protestors in solidarity.



The strike works to Miguel's advantage, at last permitting him to take a job he loves. His passion and happiness remind Esperanza of Papa—she feels, through Miguel, the first glimmer of genuine excitement she's felt in a very long time.



As the strike becomes more and more of a reality and threatens Esperanza and her fellow workers' ability to do their jobs, tensions are high, and the entire camp is on edge waiting to see what will happen at the start of asparagus season. The bitter, tough vegetable is symbolic of the strike's tough and bitter nature.



Just as Esperanza could not ever impress upon the bandits who killed her father that he wasn't like the other rich, cruel landowners of his class, she cannot possibly impress upon these strikers her individual needs and problems.



As the strike goes on, the women in the packing shed find “surprises” in the crates of asparagus they’re sorting—rats, broken glass, snakes, and razor blades all make their way mysteriously into the boxes of produce. There is nothing anyone can do about the strikers, though—America is a free country, and as long as no one catches them doing anything harmful or illegal, their campaign will continue. Alfonso states that things will soon get better, but Miguel thinks they’ll get worse—workers from desperate plains states have been flocking to the farms offering to take the strikers’ jobs for even lower wages and worse conditions.

One day, Esperanza is packing asparagus when she notices something strange. The strikers’ chanting, which has become the background noise of her days, suddenly ceases. The other women notice, too, and as they look out the window, they see a caravan of buses and police cars outside—Josefina shouts that “immigration” has arrived to do a “sweep.” The strikers flee and scatter to escape *la migra*. Esperanza worries that the officials will come for her and the others, but Hortensia explains that the company needs them, and will guard them.

As Esperanza watches strikers being loaded onto the buses, Josefina explains that regardless of citizenship status, they will all be sent back to Mexico—they are causing problems for the government by talking about forming a farm workers’ union, and the government doesn’t like dissent. Josefina tells Esperanza that it’s time to get back to work—and to “feel thankful” that they are not the ones getting pushed onto the bus.

Esperanza realizes that she needs more elastics to bundle the asparagus. She goes out to the dock behind the shed to retrieve them. Huddled in between a “maze of tall crates,” she finds Marta, who begs Esperanza not to tell anyone she’s there—she has to take care of her mother, and cannot be caught. Though Esperanza thinks of how mean Marta has been to her, she knows that she can’t play a role in separating the girl from her mother. Esperanza quietly retrieves a spare apron and some burlap sacks from a nearby hook and gives them to Marta, so that she will look like a worker and be able to sneak past *la migra*. Marta thanks Esperanza—and apologizes for misjudging her.

The strike is a volatile, nuanced issue that threatens to tear apart the entire camp. There are many variables at play, and though the strike aims to strengthen the precarious position of the workers on the farm, in reality, many believe it will only weaken what little autonomy the workers have and destabilize their claims to their jobs.



In this passage, it becomes clear that the strikers have much more to lose than just their jobs—their new lives in America are being taken away from them because they chose to exercise their “right” to free speech. For the underprivileged workers, though, the “rights” of white, wealthy Americans don’t seem to apply.



The Americans’ cruel deportation policy separates families, erases opportunities for growth and advancement, and sends innocent people back into potentially dangerous situations they left behind to come start a new life.



Even though Marta has been cruel to Esperanza in the past, Esperanza knows that she cannot turn Marta in—she has to do what’s right, and do what she can to prevent Marta from becoming another faceless victim of the Americans’ cruel deportation policy. This passage shows that Esperanza has really learned to empathize with people different from her, and has come to see the inherent dignity and worth of every person, no matter their class, privilege, or beliefs.



That night, Esperanza lies in bed, listening to the adults in the next room talk about the strike. There are rumors that the police arrested and deported the strikers simply to make more jobs for the white Americans coming in from the east. Hortensia is relieved that the strike is over, but Miguel says it isn't—in time, the strikers will regroup, reorganize, and come back even stronger, and their family will soon be faced again with the choice of whether or not to join them. Esperanza cannot stop thinking about Marta, and whether she made her way back to the strikers' farm without being caught.

The next morning, Esperanza asks Miguel to drive her to the strikers' farm before the start of work. When they arrive, the camp is basically abandoned. Miguel notes that immigration has been here, too. Esperanza looks across the field but sees no sign of Marta anywhere. She hopes quietly that Marta and her mother are together, wherever they are.

CHAPTER 12: LOS DURAZNOS (PEACHES)

In addition to praying for Abuelita and Mama at the little shrine in the back yard, Esperanza now begins praying for Marta. One night, Isabel comes out back with her and begins praying, too—she tells Esperanza that she is praying to be made the Queen of the May at the May Day festival at school. The honor is given to the girl with the highest grades—and Isabel is the only one in her class with straight A's. Inside, Esperanza tells Josefina about Isabel's cute prayer, but Josefina sadly says that the school "always find[s] a way to choose a blonde, blue-eyed queen." Esperanza's heart hurts for Isabel.

A week later, Esperanza has grown sick of looking at asparagus all day. Isabel's class is announcing the Queen of the May tomorrow—and news has come to the camp that the company is building a new section for workers from Oklahoma. The Oklahomans will have indoor toilets and hot water—plus a swimming pool, which the Mexican camp residents will only be allowed to swim in one day a week, just before cleaning.

Miguel comes in and announces that a group of men from Oklahoma showed up to the railroad and said they'd work for half the Mexicans' wages—the railroad hired them all on the spot. As a result, Miguel has been let go as a mechanic and is now being forced to dig ditches and lay tracks. Esperanza can't believe Miguel allowed himself to be treated that way, but Miguel needs to bring home the money for his family.

This passage shows how the goals of the strike were taken advantage of by the white bosses hoping to clear space for other white Americans in need of work. The Mexican workers' attempts to better their lives through organized resistance were quashed—all in the name of perpetuating racism, classism, and the ongoing suppression and oppression of marginalized migrant workers.



The novel never resolves what became of Marta and her mother, but Esperanza has learned enough to know that, in all likelihood, the only thing that really matters is whether or not Marta and her mother have one another to lean on for support and hope.



Though the hopeful young Isabel has big dreams for herself, she has no idea about the classist, racist systems of prejudice that rule everything around her. Esperanza is heartbroken to know that she will have to watch Isabel, sooner rather than later, suffer and learn this the hard way.



The racist policies surrounding the Mexican workers' use of their white neighbors' pool show that the Mexicans are seen, as Miguel earlier suggested, only in terms of how their labor can benefit their white bosses—their humanity is denied at every turn.



This passage shows how desperate white workers unseated their hardworking Mexican counterparts from their jobs—and demonstrates the racist systems that allowed, and continue to allow, such unfairness to happen.



Esperanza, filled with rage, runs out of the cabin, slamming the door behind her. Miguel follows her out to the vineyard and asks what's wrong. Esperanza angrily begins venting about how unfair everything is. Miguel and his family left Mexico for a "better life," but racism and poor conditions hold them back from achieving anything. Isabel, too, faces cruelty and discrimination at school, and all around them, Mexicans are being rounded up and deported. Esperanza asks Miguel if their new lives here are really any better than they were in Mexico.

Miguel thoughtfully replies that in Mexico, he was a second-class citizen—he would have always been on "the other side of the **river**." Here, he has a small chance to become more. He tells Esperanza that she will never understand this distinction. Esperanza retorts that Miguel is still a second-class citizen because he lets others take advantage of him. She urges him to stand up for himself. Miguel responds that Esperanza has begun to sound like the strikers. Esperanza begins to cry. She closes her eyes and imagines herself falling, hoping that if she never opens them again, she can "fall all the way back to Mexico."

Miguel places a hand on Esperanza's arm and assures her that "everything will work out." Esperanza backs away from him and tells him she "can't stand [his] blind hope." She has no proof that things will get better—her life is a mess. Miguel continues to state that all they can do is keep trying. Esperanza cruelly urges Miguel to "look at [him]self" and see that he is not "on the other side of the **river**"—he is "still a peasant." Defeated and disgusted, Miguel accuses Esperanza of thinking that she is still "a queen."

The next morning, Miguel is gone—he has left to go to Northern California to work on the railroad. Esperanza is worried for Miguel, and too ashamed of the cruel things she said in the vineyard to tell anyone that Miguel's leaving is secretly her fault. She goes outside to the statue to pray for Miguel, and sees that the **roses** have begun to bloom.

The next day, when Esperanza comes home from work, she finds a miserable Isabel at home crying. She reveals that she was not chosen as the Queen of the May. To comfort Isabel, Esperanza pulls her beautiful white porcelain doll from her valise and gives it to the young girl. Isabel protests, but Esperanza insists that her Papa would not want the doll "buried inside a valise" with no one to play with. Esperanza urges Isabel to take the doll to school and show all her friends—being Queen of the May only lasts a day, but this doll will be Isabel's for a long time to come.

Esperanza has given up everything in the hopes that coming to America would offer her and her mother a chance to start anew. She was bolstered by Miguel and his family's hopeful declarations that America would provide them all new opportunities for growth and advancement—but all Esperanza has found in America is racism, prejudice, pain, and suffering.



When faced with a tough discussion—a discussion about wealth, privilege, and the "river" that has divided her from Miguel all her life—Esperanza wishes she could simply will herself away from the confrontation. She has grown a lot these last few months, but still has some prejudiced, unfair ideas about class and social status that cause Miguel harm.



This passage highlights how Esperanza has, despite all she has learned, retained the part of herself that still believes her new life to be a temporary one. She speaks condescendingly to Miguel about his goals for his own life, and he in return points out just how foolish and cruel Esperanza sounds when she acts as if she is better than him.



Despite the painful fight with Miguel and his subsequent departure from camp, the roses out back start to bloom—signifying that even in this dark time, there is still the chance that Esperanza will be able to find hope and renewal.



By individualizing and amplifying the instances of injustice and racism her characters face, Muñoz Ryan shows how painful and demoralizing such prejudices can be—and how they have, arguably, only intensified over the course of the twentieth century.



A few days later, Esperanza and Hortensia visit the hospital to check on Mama. Good news awaits them—the doctor says that Mama has improved. She will be able to leave the hospital in a week and continue building up her strength at home. Esperanza is at last allowed to go into her mother’s room and see her, and Mama seems much better. She embraces Esperanza and remarks on how “mature” she’s grown. Hortensia brags about how skilled and useful Esperanza has become, and Mama declares that she is proud of Esperanza for all she’s shouldered.

Things are difficult back at the camp, and Esperanza is faced with innumerable setbacks and injustices, but at last a bright spot of good news reenters her life as Mama receives the all-clear to return “home.”



All week, Esperanza, Hortensia, and Josefina prepare for Mama’s return, making the house neat and clean. That Saturday, Mama returns, and receives visitors from all over the camp. The day is a joyful one—but that night, the conversation turns to Miguel, and Esperanza confesses that she said some cruel things to Miguel and pushed him away. Mama assures Esperanza that Miguel knows she didn’t mean the things she said, and will return soon. To lighten the mood, Esperanza decides to show Mama all the money orders she’s been saving up to bring Abuelita to America—when she opens up her valise, though, she is stunned. The money orders are all gone.

Esperanza is feeling terribly guilty about the things she said to Miguel, and even Mama’s return is not enough to distract her from the knowledge of how much pain and suffering she’s caused. All of that is flipped on its head, though, when she realizes that the money orders—from the hiding-place that she’d told only Miguel about—are missing.



CHAPTER 13: LAS UVAS (GRAPES)

Everyone agrees that Miguel must have taken the money orders. Alfonso promises to repay the money, but Esperanza remains angry with Miguel for disrespecting all her hard work and stealing from her. Meanwhile, Mama gets stronger every day, and Esperanza’s work sorting peaches, plums, and nectarines allows her to eat a lot of sweet fruit. One day, Alfonso comes by the shed—Esperanza is worried that something has happened to Mama, but Alfonso insists that Mama is all right. He has received a message from Miguel, asking them all to meet him at the bus station in Bakersfield this afternoon.

This passage shows how despite her anger with Miguel, Esperanza has grown. This time, when she suffers a loss, she doesn’t let her whole life get derailed by it: she is still able to see the hope and sweetness all around her, even in the midst of circumstances she once despised.



Esperanza, Hortensia, and Alfonso ride down to Los Angeles in the heat to await Miguel’s arrival. When his bus finally comes, he steps off the bus looking tired and ruffled. He hugs his parents and then turns to Esperanza. Rather than apologizing for stealing from her, he tells her that he has “brought [her] proof that things will get better.” He turns around to help the last passenger on the bus off—it is Abuelita.

Though returning Abuelita to her family does not completely erase everyone’s fears and problems, Miguel knows that Esperanza is deeply in need of some “proof” that life is worth living, and that hope and happiness can still be found. Here, he delivers her that proof.



Esperanza can hardly believe her eyes. She is overcome with emotion as she embraces her grandmother and breathes in her familiar scent. Miguel admits that he took Esperanza’s money orders and used them to get back to Mexico so that he could bring Abuelita over the border.

Esperanza was so angry with Miguel that she didn’t consider the possibility that he had taken the money in order to help her—now she sees what a true, devoted friend he really is.



Everyone returns to the camp, and though Esperanza asks for Mama right away, Josefina tells her Ramona is sleeping. Esperanza introduces Abuelita to everyone and shows her around, wondering what the old woman must think of the “sad conditions”—all Abuelita wants, though, is to be taken to her daughter. Esperanza shows Abuelita outside to where Mama is napping in the shade of a tree, a stack of **crocheting** materials at her side. Abuelita gently wakes her daughter, and the two embrace tearfully.

Esperanza retrieves her grandmother’s blanket from inside and shows her all the **crocheting** work she has done, then sits down with Abuelita so that they can finish the final stitches together. Abuelita talks about what has been going on all this time in Mexico. She reveals that she could hardly go to the market without Luis and Marco’s spies following her. Abuelita had been tormented for months by “premonition[s]” that something was wrong with Ramona, but because of Luis and Marco’s intense grip on the town, she had no way of finding out what was happening in America. One day, a nun brought Abuelita a note from Miguel, fished from the poor box—the note told of his plan to get her out of Mexico for good.

That night Miguel and Señor Rodriguez came to collect her from the convent and take her to the train station—Miguel stayed by her side the entire trip north. As Esperanza and Abuelita finish **crocheting** the blanket, she thinks of the “mountains and valleys” they have both traversed during their year apart.

A few weeks later, it is nearly Esperanza’s birthday. She asks Miguel to drive her out to the foothills at sunrise. At the top of a plateau, Esperanza looks out over the valley. She tells Miguel that if one lies down on the ground and waits patiently, one can feel the earth’s heartbeat. Together they lie down, and soon, Esperanza feels the familiar thumping in her ears. Esperanza closes her eyes and imagines herself floating and gliding over the earth, serene and unafraid. As she flies, she sees herself swooping over the valley and the camp, Papa’s **rose** blooms, and all of her friends and family. She imagines flying over a **river**—on the other side she sees an image of her and Miguel on the day of their train trip, as children, to Zacatecas. Back on the ground at last, Esperanza reaches for Miguel’s hand and holds it tight.

Abuelita doesn't seem to especially care about where she is or how she lives—she only wants to be reunited with her family, whom she has dearly missed during her lonely year back in Aguascalientes.



This passage shows how even though Miguel set out to retrieve Abuelita to help Esperanza and Ramona’s pain ease, he also rescued her from a dangerous, difficult situation. Miguel is revealed to be not a thief or a liar, but a hero who risked his own safety for the happiness of his loved ones.



Things haven't been easy for Abuelita, either, but she and Esperanza have both emerged onto a new “mountaintop” together after a year of painful highs and lows.



In this highly symbolic, almost dreamlike scene, Miguel and Esperanza at last arrive, together, on the same side of the “river.” Esperanza realizes that the river was never really an obstacle at all—she was simply afraid of abandoning the trappings of wealth that kept her pampered and isolated. Now, with Miguel’s help, she has at last realized that all people are equal in value, and the only divides between them are imagined or constructed.



On the morning of her fourteenth birthday, Esperanza wakes up to all of her friends and family serenading her from beneath the window outside. Though there are no gifts for her to open, she enjoys a beautiful breakfast with everyone she loves. At the end of the meal, as dessert is served, Esperanza teaches Isabel how to **crochet**. Isabel is frustrated with her poor needlework, but Esperanza urges her friend to never “be afraid to start over.”

Esperanza at last gets the joyous celebration she was denied the previous year. Though there are no presents or luxurious foods, Esperanza doesn't care—she is surrounded by her loved ones, and has gained something more valuable than any present: the skills to be resilient in the face of pain and optimistic in even the darkest of times.





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