



Esperanza Rising

by Pam Muñoz Ryan (262 pages)

Ryan uses the experiences of her own Mexican grandmother as the basis for this compelling story of immigration and assimilation, not only to a new country but also into a different social class. Esperanza thought she'd always live with her family on their ranch in Mexico--she'd always have fancy dresses, a beautiful home, and servants. But a sudden tragedy forces Esperanza and Mama to flee to California during the Great Depression and to settle in a camp for Mexican farm workers. Esperanza isn't ready for the hard labor, financial struggles, or lack of acceptance she now faces. When their new life is threatened, Esperanza must find a way to rise above her difficult circumstances--Mama's life, and her own, depend on it.

AGUASCALIENTES, MEXICO

1924

“Our land is alive, Esperanza,” said Papa, taking her small hand as they walked through the gentle slopes of the vineyard. Leafy green vines draped the arbors and the grapes were ready to drop. Esperanza was six years old and loved to walk with her papa through the winding rows, gazing up at him and watching his eyes dance with love for the land.

“This whole valley breathes and lives,” he said, sweeping his arm toward the distant mountains that guarded them. “It gives us the grapes and then they welcome us.” He gently touched a wild tendril that reached into the row, as if it had been waiting to shake his hand. He picked up a handful of earth and studied it. “Did you know that when you lie down on the land, you can feel it breathe? That you can feel its heart beating?”

“Papi, I want to feel it,” she said.

“Come.” They walked to the end of the row,

where the incline of the land formed a grassy swell.

Papa lay down on his stomach and looked up at her, patting the ground next to him.

Esperanza smoothed her dress and knelt down. Then, like a caterpillar, she slowly inched flat next to him, their faces looking at each other. The warm sun pressed on one of Esperanza's cheeks and the warm earth on the other.

She giggled.

"Shhh," he said. "You can only feel the earth's heartbeat when you are still and quiet."

She swallowed her laughter and after a moment said, "I can't hear it, Papi."

"Aguántate tantito y la fruta caerá en tu mano," he said.

"Wait a little while and the fruit will fall into your hand. You must be patient, Esperanza."

She waited and lay silent, watching Papa's eyes. And then she felt it. Softly at first. A gentle thumping. Then stronger. A resounding thud, thud, thud against her body.

She could hear it, too. The beat rushing in her ears. *Shoomp, shoomp, shoomp.*

She stared at Papa, not wanting to say a word. Not wanting to lose the sound. Not wanting to forget the feel of the heart of the valley.

She pressed closer to the ground, until her body was breathing with the earth's. And with Papa's. The three hearts beating together.

She smiled at Papa, not needing to talk, her eyes saying everything.

And his smile answered hers. Telling her that he knew she had felt it.

LAS UVAS

G R A P E S

six years later

Papa handed Esperanza the knife. The short blade was curved like a scythe, its fat wooden handle fitting snugly in her palm. This job was usually reserved for the eldest son of a wealthy rancher, but since Esperanza was an only child and Papa's pride and glory, she was always given the honor. Last night she had watched Papa sharpen the knife back and forth across a stone, so she knew the tool was edged like a razor.

"*Cuidate los dedos*," said Papa. "Watch your fingers."

The August sun promised a dry afternoon in Aguascalientes, Mexico. Everyone who lived and worked on El Rancho de las Rosas was gathered at the edge of the field. Esperanza's family, the house servants in their long white aprons, the *vaqueros* already sitting on their horses ready to ride out to the cattle, and fifty or sixty *campesinos*, straw hats in their hands, holding their own knives

ready. They were covered top to bottom, in long-sleeved shirts, baggy pants tied at the ankles with string, and bandanas wrapped around their foreheads and necks to protect them from the sun, dust, and spiders. Esperanza, on the other hand, wore a light silk dress that stopped above her summer boots, and no hat. On top of her head a wide satin ribbon was tied in a big bow, the tails trailing in her long black hair.

The clusters were heavy on the vine and ready to deliver. Esperanza's parents, Ramona and Sixto Ortega, stood nearby, Mama, tall and elegant, her hair in the usual braided wreath that crowned her head, and Papa, barely taller than Mama, his graying mustache twisted up at the sides. He swept his hand toward the grapevines, signaling Esperanza. When she walked toward the arbors and glanced back at her parents, they both smiled and nodded, encouraging her forward. When she reached the vines, she separated the leaves and carefully grasped a thick stem. She put the knife to it, and with a quick swipe, the heavy cluster of grapes dropped into her waiting hand. Esperanza

walked back to Papa and handed him the fruit. Papa kissed it and held it up for all to see.

"*¡La cosecha!*" said Papa. "Harvest!"

"*¡Ole! ¡Ole!*" A cheer echoed around them.

The *campesinos*, the field-workers, spread out over the land and began the task of reaping the fields. Esperanza stood between Mama and Papa, with her arms linked to theirs, and admired the activity of the workers.

"Papi, this is my favorite time of year," she said, watching the brightly colored shirts of the workers slowly moving among the arbors. Wagons rattled back and forth from the fields to the big barns where the grapes would be stored until they went to the winery.

"Is the reason because when the picking is done, it will be someone's birthday and time for a big *fiesta*?" Papa asked.

Esperanza smiled. When the grapes delivered their harvest, she always turned another year. This year, she would be thirteen. The picking would take three weeks and then, like every other

year, Mama and Papa would host a *fiesta* for the harvest. And for her birthday.

Marisol Rodríguez, her best friend, would come with her family to celebrate. Her father was a fruit rancher and they lived on the neighboring property. Even though their houses were acres apart, they met every Saturday beneath the holm oak on a rise between the two ranches. Her other friends, Chita and Bertina, would be at the party, too, but they lived farther away and Esperanza didn't see them as often. Their classes at St. Francis didn't start again until after the harvest and she couldn't wait to see them. When they were all together, they talked about one thing: their *Quinceañeras*, the presentation parties they would have when they turned fifteen. They still had two more years to wait, but so much to discuss — the beautiful white gowns they would wear, the big celebrations where they would be presented, and the sons of the richest families who would dance with them. After their *Quinceañeras*, they would be old enough to be courted, marry, and become *las*

patronas, the heads of their households, rising to the positions of their mothers before them. Esperanza preferred to think, though, that she and her someday-husband would live with Mama and Papa forever. Because she couldn't imagine living anywhere other than El Rancho de las Rosas. Or with any fewer servants. Or without being surrounded by the people who adored her.



It had taken every day of three weeks to put the harvest to bed and now everyone anticipated the celebration. Esperanza remembered Mama's instructions as she gathered roses from Papa's garden.

"Tomorrow, bouquets of roses and baskets of grapes on every table."

Papa had promised to meet her in the garden and he never disappointed her. She bent over to pick a red bloom, fully opened, and pricked her finger on a vicious thorn. Big pearls of blood pulsed from the tip of her thumb and she automatically thought, "bad luck." She quickly wrapped her hand in the corner of her apron and dismissed

the premonition. Then she cautiously clipped the blown rose that had wounded her. Looking toward the horizon, she saw the last of the sun disappear behind the Sierra Madre. Darkness would settle quickly and a feeling of uneasiness and worry nagged at her.

Where was Papa? He had left early that morning with the *vagueros* to work the cattle. And he was always home before sundown, dusty from the mesquite grasslands and stamping his feet on the patio to get rid of the crusty dirt on his boots. Sometimes he even brought beef jerky that the cattlemen had made, but Esperanza always had to find it first, searching his shirt pockets while he hugged her.

Tomorrow was her birthday and she knew that she would be serenaded at sunrise. Papa and the men who lived on the ranch would congregate below her window, their rich, sweet voices singing *Las Mañanitas*, the birthday song. She would run to her window and wave kisses to Papa and the others, then downstairs she would open her gifts. She knew there would be a porcelain doll from

Papa. He had given her one every year since she was born. And Mama would give her something she had made: linens, camisoles or blouses embroidered with her beautiful needlework. The linens always went into the trunk at the end of her bed for *algún día*, for someday.

Esperanza's thumb would not stop bleeding. She picked up the basket of roses and hurried from the garden, stopping on the patio to rinse her hand in the stone fountain. As the water soothed her, she looked through the massive wooden gates that opened onto thousands of acres of Papa's land.

Esperanza strained her eyes to see a dust cloud that meant riders were near and that Papa was finally home. But she saw nothing. In the dusky light, she walked around the courtyard to the back of the large adobe and wood house. There she found Mama searching the horizon, too.