

Aguascalientes, Mexico 1924

by Pam Muñoz Ryan

"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.

5 "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?"

10 "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
15 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."

20 "*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*.

25 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.

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

The Friend Who Changed My Life

by Pam Muñoz Ryan

I hated being the new kid at school. I was in the fifth grade and my family had moved to a new neighborhood. Already with a size 9 shoe, my feet were an awkward atrocity. My curly brown hair, the result of the religious use of pink rubber curlers, stayed wholesomely off my face with hair clips. How was I to know that straight ponytails and short, blunt bangs were the rage at this school? Since I hadn't yet adopted the no-socks look, my sense of style didn't mesh, either. I wanted to fit in, but I didn't have the all-necessary confidence. To escape, I walked around with my nose in a book. Unfortunately, I wore my vulnerability like a brand-new pair of milk-white Keds – all too ready to be scuffed. A bully took advantage.

Her name was Theresa. She was tiny, wiry, and loud, with blond bangs and the mandatory tightly-pulled-back ponytail. I swore she walked with a deliberate swagger just to get her ponytail to swing back and forth. For a reason unknown to me, she decided that I was worthy of her undivided attention, and every day she waltzed up to me and kicked me in the shins or the back of the legs. I could expect a wallop any time I was off guard, while I was standing in line to go to class after a recess, on my way out of the girls' bathroom, or as I pushed my lunch tray along the counter in front of the cafeteria ladies. *Bam!* Theresa was smart and quick. No teacher ever saw her, and my legs were black, blue, purple, and green within a week.

My mom noticed the marks, but I pacified her by saying that I played on the jungle gym at recess and had bruised them on the bars. I could tell from my mom's expression that she was suspicious of my story. She made me promise I'd play somewhere else. I knew that if I kept coming home with mottled legs one of my parents would eventually go to my teacher. I could only imagine the price I'd have to pay among the other kids if I was seen as both the new kid and a crybaby tattletale.

I used to lie in bed every night dreading school and trying to figure out complicated routes to walk from one place to another so Theresa couldn't get to me easily. I had a convoluted method of getting to my classroom, which involved walking outside the fenced school yard and entering the grounds at the opposite end of the campus, then working my way through the kindergarten playground. At recess and lunch I stayed in the open spaces on the grassy field because if I saw Theresa coming, I could at least run.

One day, Theresa chased me on the playground, about to close in with yet another successful attack. Frantically, I ran away from her, glancing back every few seconds to see where she was. I looked to one side and was relieved when I didn't see her. Thinking she had given up, I stopped abruptly and turned around, unaware that Theresa had been running full-speed toward me from the other side. She didn't expect my sudden stop and collided into me and bounced toward the ground. A group of kids standing nearby laughed. Angry, Theresa got up and began kicking me with a fury, over and over. A scrape on my knee reopened and blood trickled down my leg. As much as I wanted to, I didn't cry. I just stood there and took it.

40 Mary Lou, also in the fifth grade, was the tallest and biggest girl in the entire school, including the sixth graders. She wasn't fat but was sturdy and big-boned and strong. Her red hair, thousands of freckles, and fair skin gave her a gentle giant appearance. Still, no one ever messed with her. When Mary Lou shoved her way through the crowd of kids and took my elbow, everyone backed away, including Theresa.

Mary Lou ushered me to the girls' bathroom. As I stood there, shaking, she took a wad of paper towels, wet them, handed them to me, and pointed to my bloodied leg.

"So, Theresa's been bothering you."

45 I nodded, hoping that the next words out of Mary Lou's mouth would be, *Well, I'm going to take care of her for you.* I had visions of having a personal hero to protect me – fantasies of Mary Lou escorting me around the school with a protective arm over my shoulder, clobbering anyone who came near me.

50 Instead, Mary Lou said, "You can't let her keep doing this to you. She's never going to stop unless you make her stop. Get it?"

I didn't really get it, but I nodded.

"Listen, she's a pain. But if you don't stick up for yourself, things will get worse. You know that, don't you?"

55 How could it get worse? I was already paralyzed with fear and had turned into a whipping post for some girl who was half my size. Besides, what did Mary Lou mean about sticking up for myself? Did she want me to *fight* Theresa? That idea terrified me more than being kicked every day.

"I'm not kidding," said Mary Lou. "And if you don't do something, I'm going to start hitting you, too. Understand?" She made a fist and held it in front of my face.

60 I thought about Mary Lou's size and weight and gulped. Things could *definitely* get worse. "Yes," I whispered.

"Okay then, get back out there."

Now? Did she mean stand up for myself right now?

65 I walked back to the playground with Mary Lou smugly following behind. I couldn't see a way out of the situation. In front of me was Theresa and in back of me was Mary Lou. The first bell rang and kids began to assemble in their assigned lines on the blacktop in front of the classrooms. In a few minutes, the second bell would ring and teachers would walk out and get their students for class. The yard duty teacher was out on the grassy field blowing her whistle and rounding up the stragglers. As usual, no teachers would be around to witness my destruction.

70 Theresa stood in a huddle of girls. Mary Lou nudged me toward her. I had never started a fight before in my life. I had never hit anyone and didn't have an inkling of what to do. My insides shook worse than my outsides. When Theresa saw me approaching, she set her mouth in a grim line, marched toward me, and swung her leg back to haul off and kick me. I jumped back to avoid the kick. I made a fist and flailed my arm wildly, in some sort of ridiculous motion. *Pop!* In a miraculous blow, I caught Theresa in the nose and blood sprayed across her clothes. I don't know which of us was more surprised.

I don't remember what happened next. I know we brawled on the blacktop. Gritty sand scraped the bare skin on my arms. (I would notice the burns later.) As we rolled over and over, tiny pebbles embedded in my face. One of them made a substantial puncture that didn't heal for weeks. (The pock remained for years.) I'm not sure who separated us and broke it up. In a matter of minutes, someone retrieved the yard duty teacher, and she corralled and ceremoniously walked us to the principal's office. I, the nice girl, the good girl, was going to the principal's office for fighting. Devastated, I hung my head.

85 Sitting on the bench outside the principal's office and waiting to be called in, I worried about several things. Would the school tell my parents? What would my punishment be? What would Theresa do to get back at me? What would the other kids think? Branded, I was now a bad girl.

The yard duty teacher deposited us in two chairs, side by side, in the principal's office and placed the referral slip on his desk. Our principal was a balding man, with glasses and a kind, grandfatherly face. He seemed happy to see us.

90 Smiling, he said, "Well, girls, I want you to put your heads together and decide what your punishment should be while I make a phone call."

He picked up the phone, and as he made his call, I stared at his desk. I realized I could read the referral slip upside down. The yard duty teacher had written: *Benched for one week.*

95 Theresa leaned toward me and whispered, remorsefully, "I guess we should be benched for two weeks." She felt worse than I had suspected.

I glared at her and shook my head no.

The principal put down the phone. "Well, young ladies?"

"We should be benched for a week," I blurted.

100 "I agree... and I don't want to see you back here anytime soon." He signed the referral and sent us back to class.

"How did you know to say one week?" Theresa asked on our way back to class.

"I could read what the yard duty teacher put on the slip. Upside down," I told her.

"Wow, you can read upside down?" Theresa said, her ponytail swinging like a pendulum.
I didn't answer her.

105 That night I told my mother that I fell, trying to jump rope double Dutch.

Theresa and I were confined at every recess and lunchtime to the same green bench next to the stucco wall of the cafeteria building. It was indisputably the Bad Kids' Bench. Kindergartners and first graders had to file by to get to their classrooms and they always gave us a wide berth, their orderly line snaking away from us, then back in formation, as if our badness might be contagious. The bench faced the playground so the entire recess population could see who was *not privileged* enough to play. The yard duty teacher could keep an eye on us, too, in case we decided to jump up and sneak in a hopscotch game. Indignant and humiliated, I refused to talk to Theresa, who didn't seem to have any inhibitions about being chatty.

115 She bragged to me about all sorts of things, but I was aloof until she said, "My mom takes me to the *big* downtown library every Tuesday after school."

I rode my bike to the small branch library near my house every weekend, but my parents both worked full-time and couldn't always manage after-school activities or driving to the main branch. The *big* library had a hundred times the selection of the branch library and a huge children's room with comfy pillows. They sometimes had puppet shows, story times, free
120 bookmarks, and writing contests.

"Yep, every single Tuesday I go to the *big* downtown library to check out as many books as I like."

125 Before I could pretend I didn't care, I said, "You're lucky." I was suddenly jealous of Theresa, but I didn't want her to know how much. So I returned to my determined martyrdom. Instead of listening to her, I stared at the dirt and ignored her prattle.

The week was over soon enough. The principal never called my parents. The other kids didn't seem to care that I had been disciplined on the Bad Kids' Bench. In fact, I actually detected a subtle reverence from some of my classmates. From then on, Theresa left me alone and Mary Lou was my widely acknowledged ally. I didn't know how I'd ever repay her.

130 A few weeks passed and one of the girls in our class had a slumber party. All the fifth-grade girls were invited. The barrage of females descended on the birthday girl's house with sleeping bags, pillows, and overnight cases.

Mary Lou and I set up our sleeping bags right next to each other. The night progressed happily... until someone suggested we tell ghost stories.

135 I hated ghost stories. I had far too active of an imagination, which always took me much farther than the storytelling. I couldn't seem to turn off the dark, scary world. If I saw even a slightly scary movie on television, my stomach would churn for days and I'd have to sleep with my bedside lamp on all night. Mary Lou must have felt the same, because she moved closer to me. We huddled together behind the avid listeners with our pillows almost covering our faces. There was no way *not* to listen. One girl told a particularly gruesome tale about a tree whose giant branches turned into fingers and could grab and capture children. Most of the girls squealed and clutched one another in mock terror before they ended up giggling. Already fraught with anxiety, I couldn't imagine how I would get through the night. I suddenly wanted to be in my own house, in my own bed, with my parents down the hall and my trusty bedside lamp. There didn't seem to be any way out of the situation that wasn't humiliating. At least Mary Lou was by my side.

145 Suddenly, Mary Lou started crying. "I'm scared," she said. "I want to go home."

Mary Lou had read my mind but had voiced it with her own tears.

One of the girls said, "Don't be such a baby!"

Others chimed in, "Mary Lou's a scaredy-cat!"

150 "I'm calling my parents," said Mary Lou through her giant sniffles.

"The baby's calling her mommy and daddy," the girls chanted.

I shivered in my sleeping bag, my stomach sick with fear. Sick that Mary Lou was leaving. Sick that I was next to a window, with a tree looming on the other side.

155 Mary Lou headed toward the phone and didn't seem to care about the taunting. She called her parents with her chin up, set down the phone, and methodically began packing up her things.

My sleeping area looked bare without Mary Lou's sleeping bag and blanket. A tree branch brushed against the window from the wind. I was convinced it was the same tree from the story and that I would be its next victim.

160 I stood up and began rolling up my sleeping bag. "I'm going home, too. Mary Lou, can your dad give me a ride?"

I heard more giggles.

Then, from across the room, a small voice said, "Me, too?"

Mary Lou nodded.

165 I secretly celebrated. I knew that we'd suffer the consequences of the gossip and finger-pointing at school on Monday, but now I didn't care. There was safety in numbers. As I dragged my things into the hallway, I saw the third person.

It was Theresa.

170 The three of us huddled on the front porch waiting for Mary Lou's dad. In a final gesture of belittlement, one of the girls turned off the porch light so we had to wait on the front steps in the dark, directly under the tree with the sprawling branches. On the other side of the door, the party howled with laughter. I was never so grateful to see station wagon headlights.

175 Mary Lou's dad headed toward Theresa's house first. On the way, we were mostly quiet, but I felt happy. Happy I was going home to my own room. Happy that Mary Lou's tearful exit scene had been watered down by our group departure. I was puzzled, though, that Theresa had been frightened, too. She always seemed so confident, so tough.

In front of Theresa's house, she climbed out of the car and said, "So do you guys want to go to the *big* library with me after school on Tuesdays? My mom drives me and she could drive you, too."

180 *I would love to go to the big downtown library on Tuesdays after school, I thought. But with Theresa?* My mind battled with my emotions.

Theresa eagerly continued. "My mom can call your moms to... you know... make sure it's okay and everything."

I hesitated. "Are you going?" I asked Mary Lou.

"I can't," she said. "But you should go if you want to."

185 Theresa sounded sincere enough.

Mary Lou nudged me in the backseat as if to say, *Go!*

I finally nodded.

190 It was a strange camaraderie, given our history. Theresa and I shared many trips to the library together on Tuesdays. I've often wondered if, in some convoluted way, Theresa's abuse had been an attempt to get my attention. She liked the library and I always had my nose in a book, so she targeted me. Too bad for my legs that she didn't have better social skills!

195 Mary Lou is still my hero. If a person believes in the domino effect, the premise that one action triggers another, then I am deeply indebted to her. If she had never made me stand up to Theresa, I would have existed on the outskirts of fifth-grade society, always defenseless. I would have never gained Mary Lou's respect or become her friend. I wouldn't have gone home with her that night at the slumber party. Instead, I would have suffered through my worst imaginings. And if it weren't for Mary Lou, I might not have had the opportunity or courage to accept Theresa's invitation to the *big* library on Tuesdays, which fueled my affection for books in a dramatic way. After all, I was entering the enemy's camp.

200 It's sometimes easier to be brave if you have someone with whom you can stand beside or who
you know is always standing behind you. Being Mary Lou's friend was always comforting, even
when she revealed her own vulnerability. Big, strong people have fears (as do tiny, wiry people),
and it often takes more courage to reveal a weakness than to cover it up. She was confident,
determined, fair-minded, and unafraid of her emotions. I was her antithesis: naive, insecure, and
205 desperately wanting to be a part of something. Mary Lou fit in because she didn't try to be
anything but herself.

I wanted to be just like her.

The Party

by Pam Muñoz Ryan

It didn't take me long to figure out that I wasn't invited to the party. I got off the bus and saw my friends huddled under the tree where we all stood every morning before the first bell. There were six of us; Theresa, Becky, Barbara, Carol, Kim, and me. I can't even say that we were close friends. We had come from different elementary schools and never fit with the predictable middle school jocks, pops, or nerds. We were flotsam and jetsam that washed under a tree in front of the library and became an entity by default and by simply standing together.

The circle seemed tighter as I approached; the flittering of small white envelopes being hastily stuffed into backpacks and binders gave it away. I knew as well as the entire universe that Bridget's party was this weekend. Bridget was one of the pops, the popular ones and the anti-thesis of me. She was thin and wore clothes that looked like they came straight from the pages of magazines. She had that hair—red, and cut into a perfect page, smoothed into a bowl around her face, and every shade of shoes to match even her wildest outfits. She had a select group of followers who squealed and hugged each other between every class, as if they hadn't seen each other in years. We all wanted to be like her or them and being invited to her party meant elevation in the school pecking order. To not be invited meant standing in stagnant water.

My stomach churned, and I hoped that Bridget was still holding an envelope with my name on it to be delivered later. But my friends' shuffling feet and furtive glances guaranteed my fate. Their too-eager hellos told me that everyone already knew who was invited and who wasn't.

"Hi," I responded, but that one word already sounded hollow with disappointment.

Becky, always the diffuser of uncomfortable moments, said, "Hey, did you get all the algebra homework done?"

"Everything but the last problem," I mumbled.

"Here, want to see the answer?" Eagerly, maybe out of guilt, she gratuitously flipped open her binder before I could tell her it didn't matter.

I pretended to be interested in her calculations but my head swam with that sinking feeling that there was something wrong with me. That I wasn't worthy.

Thankfully, the bell rang and I hurried toward English. When I passed the cafeteria, the impending lunch smells followed me, and I felt nauseous by the time I reached class, but I knew it wasn't from the aroma of creamed turkey and overcooked green beans. I couldn't concentrate on the short story we were supposed to be reading in class, but I had no trouble attending to the faux wood grain on my desk and wondering if I could dissolve into it and disappear.

Why hadn't she invited me? My feet were too big? No. Maybe. My face was broken out? Who wants someone with acne at her party? Why did she invite every person in my group except

me? I tried to think of any interactions I'd had with Bridget recently. A few days earlier, we'd
35 been partners during a sixth-period project. I was intent on getting the project done and
impressing her with the grade we could get, and she was intent on looking at teen magazines.
She barely spoke to me except to say, "You're so serious. You know, you should smile more."

By the end of second period, I had overheard all the details about the party. They were going
40 bowling. It was a sleepover. There was going to be a scavenger hunt. They were renting scary
movies and were going to stay up all night. Each time someone mentioned the party, I smiled
weakly and nodded.

During third period, Meredith, one of the drama club girls, who wasn't invited and didn't care,
asked me if I was going to Bridget's party.

Instead of saying no, I found myself repeating tidbits that I'd heard earlier. "Her dad is taking
45 everyone to IHOP for breakfast. They're taking two big vans so everyone will fit." I said it with
authority. As if I was going, too.

Meredith said, "I wish she'd invited me so I could tell her no. She is such a brat. And all that
phony hugging. What's that all about, anyway?"

Where did Meredith get her confidence? I wondered.

50 At lunch, I sat with my group at our usual table, and they politely avoided the subject. When Kim
got up to take her tray, she said, "I'm going shopping tomorrow after school. Anybody want to
come?"

But I knew what they would be shopping for, so I said, "I can't. I'm busy."

Becky hung behind and walked with me to dump our trays.

55 "I heard Bridget could only invite so many people."

"Whatever," I said, "See you later." I didn't look at Becky. I couldn't look at her because if I saw
any pity or kindness in her eyes, I'd start crying, so I pretended to look for something seemingly
important in my backpack until she left.

60 Maybe she didn't invite me because of my hair. It's so long and stringy. Maybe it's my coat. It is
pretty ugly compared to some of the other girls' coats. I should have bought another color. But
what does it really matter? None of my clothes match. I'm way too tall but there isn't anything I
can do about that, and she couldn't not invite someone to a party because they were too tall,
could she? Maybe I should smile and hug more but I just can't get into hugging people unless I
know them really well. Probably if I'd smiled more, I would have been invited.

65 I hated Bridget. I hated her more for having the ability to make my life miserable. I wanted to go
home. I felt sick. As I changed classes, I averted my eyes from everyone I knew so I wouldn't
have to smile. So I wouldn't have to pretend that I was likable.

70 By fifth period, the news was out. Three girls that had been invited to the party couldn't go because of the overnight band trip. They rushed up to Bridget to tell her the sad news, and one of them cried, proving what a good friend she was and how much she wanted to go. They gave back their invitations. I passed the crier between classes and saw her injured, yet superior look. After all, she had been invited.

75 Then, the whispers began, like tiny wisps of drifting clouds, about who might be chosen in their places. I walked to sixth period, trailing behind Bridget, hanging back and watching hopeful faces laughing a little too loudly as they passed her. I counted nine girls who smiled and said hello to her on the short walk between classes. They might as well have been saying, "Choose me. Choose me."

80 After school, Becky found me in the bus lines. Breathlessly, she said, "Bridget asked Barbara at lunch who else she should invite, and Barbara said you. And Kim just told me that she just heard Bridget say she was going to *maybe* invite you to her party. Call me, okay?" She held up both hands with fingers crossed, then hurried toward her bus.

There was still a chance. But what did Becky mean when she'd said Bridget was *maybe* going to invite me. Was there a condition?

85 Over all the heads, I could see the red hair bobbing toward the bus lines, then stopping. I heard Bridget laughing. She moved to another group and there was another burst of laughter.

Kids began crunching forward to board the bus.

90 So what if I don't go the party. I'm still me whether I go or not. And it's just for one night. So what's the big deal? My thoughts were spinning. Bridget headed toward my line, weaving through the crowd, and it did seem as if she was headed toward me. I pretended to not notice and looked straight ahead at the bus.

I felt a hand on my arm.

I turned my head.

Bridget held out an invitation. "Will you come to my party?"

95 I looked at the small envelope, relishing the moment. But my mind was a jumble. Now she wanted me to come to her party, but she hadn't wanted me in the beginning. I am an afterthought. I am not on the A list. I'm just filling a space so the vans will be full. I need to smile more.

Take it, I thought. You know you want to go. Take it.

100 The crowd was moving me now, and I was only a few feet from the bus steps. Bridget moved with me as I inched forward, still offering the invitation. I looked at the envelope. The original

The Party by Pam Muñoz Ryan

name had been scribbled out but my name hadn't even been written in its place. If I didn't take it, I was sure that it would go to someone else.

I put my foot on the first step of the bus, then looked at her.

I hesitated.

105 Someone behind me yelled, "Get on the bus!"

I took a deep breath and gave her my answer.

And then, I smiled.

Los Higos

by Pam Muñoz Ryan

The wind blew hard that night and the house moaned and whistled. Instead of dreaming of birthday songs, Esperanza's sleep was filled with nightmares. An enormous bear was chasing her, getting closer and closer and finally folding her in a tight embrace. Its fur caught in her mouth, making it hard to breathe. Someone tried to pull the bear away but couldn't. The bear squeezed harder until it was smothering Esperanza. Then when she thought she would suffocate, the bear grabbed her by the shoulder and shook her until her head wagged back and forth.

Her eyes opened, then closed again. She realized she was dreaming and for an instant, she felt relieved. But the shaking began again, harder this time.

10 Someone was calling her.

"Esperanza!"

She opened her eyes.

"Esperanza! Wake up!" screamed Mama. "The house is on fire!"

Smoke drifted into the room.

15 "Mama, what's happening?"

"Get up, Esperanza! We must get Abuelita!"

Esperanza heard Alfonso's deep voice yelling from somewhere downstairs.

"Señora Ortega! Esperanza!"

20 "Here! We are here!" called Mama, grabbing a damp rag from the washbowl and handing it to Esperanza to put over her mouth and nose. Esperanza swung around in a circle looking for something, anything, to save. She grabbed the doll. Then she and Mama hurried down the hall toward Abuelita's room, but it was empty.

"Alfonso!" screamed Mama. "Abuelita is not here!"

25 "We will find her. You must come now. The stairs are beginning to burn. Hurry!"

Esperanza held the towel over her face and looked down the stairs. Curtains flamed up the walls. The house was enveloped in a fog that thickened toward the ceiling. Mama and Esperanza crouched down the stairs where Alfonso was waiting to lead them out through the kitchen.

30 In the courtyard, the wooden gates were open. Near the stables, the *vaqueros* were releasing the horses from the corrals. Servants scurried everywhere. Where were they going?

"Where's Abuelita? Abuelita!" cried Mama.

Esperanza felt dizzy. Nothing seemed real. Was she still dreaming? Was this her own imagination gone wild?

Miguel grabbed her. "Where's your mother and Abuelita?"

35 Esperanza whimpered and looked toward Mama. He left her, stopped at Mama, then ran toward the house.

The wind caught the sparks from the house and carried them to the stables. Esperanza stood in the middle of it all, watching the outline of her home silhouetted in flames against the night sky. Someone wrapped a blanket around her. Was she cold? She did not know.

40 Miguel ran out of the burning house carrying Abuelita in his arms. He laid her down and Hortensia screamed. The back of his shirt was on fire. Alfonso tackled him, rolling him over and over on the ground until the fire was out. Miguel stood up and slowly took off the blackened shirt. He wasn't badly burned.

Mama cradled Abuelita in her arms.

45 "Mama," said Esperanza, "Is she...?"

"No, she is alive, but weak and her ankle ... I don't think she can walk," said Mama.

Esperanza knelt down. "Abuelita, where were you?"

Her grandmother held up the cloth bag with her crocheting and after some minutes of coughing, whispered, "We must have something to do while we wait."

50 The fire's anger could not be contained. It spread to the grapes. The flames ran along the deliberate rows of the vines, like long curved fingers reaching for the horizon, lighting the night sky.

Esperanza stood as if in a trance and watched El Rancho de las Rosas burn.

55 Mama, Abuelita, and Esperanza slept in the servants' cabins. They really didn't sleep much, but they didn't cry either. They were numb, as if encased in a thick skin that nothing could penetrate. And there was no point in talking about how it happened. They all knew that the uncles had arranged the fire.

60 At dawn, still in her nightgown, Esperanza went out among the rubble. Avoiding the smoldering piles, she picked through the black wood, hoping to find something to salvage. She sat on an adobe block near what used to be the front door, and looked over at Papa's rose garden.

Flowerless stems were covered in soot. Dazed and hugging herself, Esperanza surveyed the surviving victims: the twisted forms of wrought-iron chairs, unharmed cast-iron skillets, and the mortars and pestles from the kitchen that were made from lava rock and refused to burn. Then she saw the remains of the trunk that used to sit at the foot of her bed, the metal straps still intact. She stood up and hurried toward it, hoping for *un milagro*, a miracle. She looked closely, but all that remained were black cinders.

There was nothing left inside, for someday.

Esperanza saw her uncles approaching on horseback and ran to tell the others. Mama waited on the steps of the cabin with her arms crossed, looking like a fierce statue. Alfonso, Hortensia, and Miguel stood nearby.

"Ramona," said Tío Marco, remaining on his horse. "Another sadness in so short a time. We are deeply sorry."

"I have come to give you another chance," said Tío Luis. "If you reconsider my proposal, I will build a bigger, more beautiful house and I will replant everything. Of course, if you prefer, you can live here with the servants, as long as another tragedy does not happen to their homes as well. There is no main house or fields where they can work, so you see that many people's lives and jobs depend upon you. And I am sure you want the best for Esperanza, do you not?"

Mama did not speak for several moments. She looked around at the servants who had gathered. Now, her face did not seem so fierce and her eyes were damp. Esperanza wondered where the servants would go when Mama told Tío Luis no.

Mama looked at Esperanza with eyes that said, "forgive me." Then she dropped her head and stared at the ground. "I will consider your proposal," said Mama.

Tío Luis smiled. "I am delighted! I have no doubt that you will make the right decision. I will be back in a few days for your answer."

"Mama, no!" said Esperanza. She turned to Tío Luis and said, "I hate you!"

Tío Luis ignored her. "And Ramona, if Esperanza is to be my daughter, she must have better manners. In fact, today I will look into boarding schools where they can teach her to act like a lady." Then he turned his horse, dug his spurs into the animal, and rode away.

Esperanza began to weep. She grabbed Mama's arm and said, "Why? Why did you tell him that?"

But Mama was not listening to her. She was looking up, as if consulting the angels.

Finally, she said, "Alfonso. Hortensia. We must talk with Abuelita. Esperanza and Miguel, come inside, you are old enough to hear the discussions."

Los Higos by Pam Muñoz Ryan

"But Mama ..."

95 Mama took Esperanza by the shoulders and faced her. "*Mija*, my daughter, do not worry. I know what I am doing."

They all crowded into Hortensia and Alfonso's tiny bedroom where Abuelita was resting, her swollen ankle propped on pillows. Esperanza sat on Abuelita's bed while Mama and the others stood.

100 "Alfonso, what are my options?" said Mama.

"If you don't intend to marry him, Señora, you cannot stay here. He would burn down the servants' quarters next. There will be no income because there are no grapes. You would have to depend on the charity of others, and they would be afraid to help you. You could move to some other part of Mexico, but in poverty. Luis's influence is far-reaching."

105 The room was quiet. Mama looked out the window and tapped her fingers on the wooden sill.

Hortensia went to Mama's side and touched her arm. "You should know that we have decided to go to the United States. Alfonso's brother has been writing to us about the big farm in California where he works now. He can arrange jobs and a cabin for us, too. We are sending the letter tomorrow."

110 Mama turned and looked at Abuelita. With no words spoken, Abuelita nodded.

"What if Esperanza and I went with you? To the United States," said Mama.

"Mama, we cannot leave Abuelita!"

Abuelita put her hand on Esperanza's. "I would come later, when I am stronger."

"But my friends and my school. We can't just leave! And Papa, what would he think?"

115 "What should we do, Esperanza? Do you think Papa would want me to marry Tío Luis and let him send you to a school in another city?"

120 Esperanza felt confused. Her uncle said he would replace everything as it was. But she could not imagine Mama being married to anyone but Papa. She looked at Mama's face and saw sadness, worry, and pain. Mama would do anything for her. But if Mama married Tío Luis, she knew that everything would not really be as it was. Tío Luis would send her away and she and Mama wouldn't even be together.

"No," she whispered.

"You are sure that you want to go with us?" said Hortensia.

125 "I am sure," said Mama, her voice stronger. "But crossing the border is more difficult these days. You have your papers but ours were lost in the fire and they forbid anyone to enter without a visa."

"I will arrange it," said Abuelita. "My sisters, in the convent. They can discreetly get you duplicates."

130 "No one could know about this, Señora," said Alfonso. "We would all have to keep it a secret if you come. This will be a great insult to Luis. If he finds out, he will prevent you from leaving the territory."

A tiny smile appeared on Mama's tired face. "Yes, it would be a great insult to him, wouldn't it?"

"In California there is only fieldwork," said Miguel.

"I am stronger than you think," said Mama.

135 "We will help each other." Hortensia put her arm around Mama.

140 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."

145 When she realized she was crying, Esperanza wiped her eyes with her shawl. Yes, she thought. They could have a home in California. A beautiful home. Alfonso and Hortensia and Miguel could take care of them and they'd be rid of the uncles. And Abuelita would join them, as soon as she was well. Still sniffing and caught up in their affection and strength, Esperanza said, "And ... and I could work, too."

They all looked at her.

150 And for the first time since Papa died, everyone laughed.

The next day Abuelita's sisters came for her in a wagon. The nuns, dressed in their black and white habits, gently lifted Abuelita into the back. They pulled a blanket under her chin and Esperanza went to her and held her hand. She remembered the night that Alfonso and Miguel brought Papa home in the wagon. How long ago was that? She knew that it had only been a few weeks, but it seemed like many lifetimes ago.

Esperanza tenderly hugged and kissed Abuelita.

Los Higos by Pam Muñoz Ryan

160 “*Mi nieta*, we won’t be able to communicate. The mail is unpredictable and I’m sure your uncles will be watching my correspondence. But I will come, of that you can be certain. While you are waiting, finish this for me.” She handed Esperanza the bundle of crocheting. “Look at the zigzag of the blanket. Mountains and valleys. Right now you are in the bottom of the valley and your problems loom big around you. But soon, you will be at the top of a mountain again. After you have lived many mountains and valleys, we will be together.”

Through her tears Esperanza said, “Please get well. Please come to us.”

“I promise. And you promise to take care of Mama for me.”

165 Next it was Mama’s turn. Esperanza could not watch. She buried her head in Hortensia’s shoulder until she heard the wagon pulling away. Then she went to Mama and put her arms around her. They watched the wagon disappear down the path until it was a speck in the distance, until even the dust was gone.

That’s when Esperanza noticed the old trunk with the leather straps that the nuns had left.

170 “What is in the trunk?” she asked.

“Our papers to travel. And clothes from the poor box at the convent.”

“The poor box?”

“People donate them,” said Mama, “for others who cannot afford to buy their own.”

“Mama, at a time like this, must we worry about some poor family who needs clothes?”

175 “Esperanza,” said Mama. “We have little money and Hortensia, Alfonso, and Miguel are no longer our servants. *We* are indebted to *them* for our finances and our future. And that trunk of clothes for the poor? Esperanza, it is for us.”

Señor Rodriguez was the only person they could trust. He came after dark for secret meetings, always carrying a basket of figs for the grieving family to disguise his real reason for visiting.

180 Esperanza fell asleep each night on a blanket on the floor, listening to the adults’ hushed voices and mysterious plans. And smelling the plentiful piles of white figs that she knew would never be eaten.

At the end of the week Esperanza was sitting on the small step to Hortensia and Alfonso’s cabin when Tío Luis rode up. He remained on his horse and sent Alfonso to bring Mama.

185 In a few moments, Mama walked toward them, drying her hands on her apron. She held her head high and looked beautiful, even dressed in the old clothes from the poor box.

“Luis, I have considered your proposal and in the interest of the servants and Esperanza, I will marry you, in due time. But you must begin replanting and rebuilding immediately, as the servants need their jobs.”

190 Esperanza was quiet and stared at the dirt, hiding the smirk on her face.

Tío Luis could not contain his grin. He sat up straighter. "I knew you would come to your senses, Ramona. I will announce the engagement at once."

Mama nodded, almost bowing. "One more thing," she said. "We will need a wagon to visit Abuelita. She is at the convent in La Purísima. I must see to her every few weeks."

195 "I will send one over this afternoon," said Tío Luis, smiling. "A new one. And those clothes, Ramona! They are not fitting for a woman of your stature, and Esperanza looks like a waif. I will send a dressmaker next week with new fabrics."

In the nicest way possible, Esperanza looked up and said, "Thank you, Tío Luis. I am happy that you will be taking care of us."

200 "Yes, of course," he said, not even glancing at her.

Esperanza smiled at him anyway, because she knew she would never spend a night in the same house with him and he would never be her stepfather. She almost wished she would be able to see his face when he realized that they had escaped. He wouldn't be grinning like a proud rooster then.

205 The night before the dressmaker was scheduled to come, Mama woke Esperanza in the middle of the night, and they left with only what they could carry. Esperanza held a valise filled with clothes, a small package of *tamales*, and her doll from Papa. She and Mama and Hortensia were wrapped in dark shawls to blend in with the night.

210 They could not take a chance of walking on the roads, so Miguel and Alfonso led them through the grape rows, weaving across Papa's land toward the Rodríguez ranch. There was enough moonlight so that they could see the outlines of the twisted and charred trunks, the burnt-out vines rolling in parallel lines toward the mountains. It looked as if someone had taken a giant comb, dipped it in black paint, and gently swirled it across a huge canvas.

215 They reached the fig orchard that separated Papa's land from Señor Rodríguez's. Alfonso, Hortensia, and Miguel walked ahead. But Esperanza held back, and pulled on Mama's hand to keep her there for a moment. They turned to look at what used to be El Rancho de las Rosas in the distance.

220 Sadness and anger tangled in Esperanza's stomach as she thought of all that she was leaving: her friends and her school, her life as it once was, Abuelita. And Papa. She felt as though she was leaving him, too.

As if reading her mind, Mama said, "Papa's heart will find us wherever we go." Then Mama took a determined breath and headed toward the sprawling trees.

Esperanza followed but hesitated every few steps, looking back. She hated leaving, but how could she stay?

225 With each stride, Papa's land became smaller and smaller. She hurried after Mama, knowing that she might never come back to her home again, and her heart filled with venom for Tío Luis. When she turned around one last time, she could see nothing behind her but a trail of splattered figs she had resentfully smashed beneath her feet.

A Paddling of Ducks

by Pam Muñoz Ryan

We had already put away the dinner dishes from Wednesday chicken bake and Owen started racing through his second-grade homework like a horse on a tear. People were usually fooled by his looks and though he was low in school due to being born with his head tilted to one side by his looks and though he was low in school due to being born with his head tilted to one side and scrunched down next to his shoulder. It had straightened a little after surgeries at Children's Hospital, but he still talked with a permanent frog voice because of something inside being
5 pinched. One of his legs was shorter than the other so he walked like a rocking horse, but other than that, he was just fine. Contrary to people's first opinions, he got the best grades in his class.

Gram, in her usual polyester pantsuit and running shoes, was doing her weekly hair set, rolling
10 what little blue hair she had on those new bristle curlers that require no hairpins. (I was not being mean about her hair. It really looked blue in the sunlight). And I mulled over my sorry situation at school, which was three boys in my fifth grade class who had decided that Outlaw was the funniest last name in the universe. They did not give me an ounce of peace.

"Have you robbed any banks lately?" was one of their favorite sayings, along with jumping out at
15 me, throwing their arms in the air, and yelling, "Is this a stickup?"

My teacher, Ms. Morimoto, said to ignore them, but I had tried and it did no good. I was fed up, so I was making a list of what I could say back to them that might be embarrassing. I wrote across the top of my notebook page, "How to Get Boys to Stop Making Fun of My Name."

I scooted back in front of Gram to see if she had any ideas.

20 "Naomi, I have lived with that name since I married your great-grandpa, rest his soul, almost fifty years ago, and I am due proud. Besides, there are worse things in life."

"But you don't go to Buena Vista Elementary," I said.

She laughed. That's true, but I can tell you that boys have not changed an iota and they are
25 hard to humble. You know my true feelings on the subject. How about writing, 'Those boys *will not* bother me'?"

Gram said that when you thought positive, you could make things happen, and when it *did*
30 happen, it was called a self-prophecy. If you wanted to be the best speller in the class, you said to yourself over and over, "I *am* the best speller in the class," and then before you knew it, you were practicing and becoming it. It was sort of like magic, and Gram believed it to her bones. But it didn't always work the way I hoped. At one time Owen and I were the only children in the trailer park. I thought positive every day for a month for more kids at Avocado Acres but all that moved in was a family with a teenager with a brand-new baby. Gram insisted my positive thinking had succeeded, but I had been greatly disappointed.

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35 Before I could write down Gram's suggestion, Owen sneezed, and it was a big one, the kind that sprinkled spittle and left his eyes all teary.

"Owen you got it on my page!" I said, smoothing my paper, which only smeared the wet spots.

"Sorry," he said, and then he sneezed again.

40 "Company's comin' twice," said Gram, matter-of-fact. It was another of her Oklahoma notions, and she had a million of them that she believed whole heart. This one being if a body sneezed, someone would pay a visit.