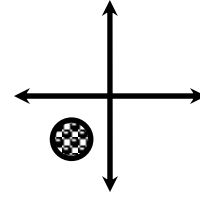


## ROSA'S WORLD

Lower left quadrant combination:

Horizontal—*Negative External Influences*

Vertical—*Worsening Social Conditions*



*“Rosa’s World” is a San Joaquin Valley of unfulfilled potential, civil unrest and all-but-forgotten dreams. The reason? Wholesale social disinvestment has brought the Valley to its knees.*

On July 13, 2025, it was hotter than hell as the scorching summer sun beat down on the solitary figure near the gravesite in the dusty cemetery outside Visalia. Rosa Perez—Dr. Rosa Perez—was weeping, partly for her mother who lay beneath the brown grass and partly for the realization that the dream that had brought her parents to California more than twenty years ago would never be realized.

In 2002, Manuel and Carmen Perez said goodbye to their neighbors in their village in El Salvador, and set out with their three children for the United States. For years they had heard that California’s San Joaquin Valley was a land of opportunity. It was a difficult journey: first through Mexico, across the border near Mexicali, through the Imperial Valley and over the Tehachapis to the Great Central Valley.

Three weeks after leaving their home, they arrived in Ivanhoe, a small farming community in Tulare County where one of Manuel’s cousins had moved four years earlier. Life there wasn’t easy, but it was better than the life they had left. Their new home, an old garage, was hot in the smog of summer and cold in the fog of winter—but still better than the shack they left in El Salvador. Both Manuel and Carmen found jobs in the fields, while the kids, Ramon,

Maria, and Rosa, enrolled in school for the first time in their lives.

### THE VALLEY’S SYSTEMS CRUMBLE

Within a few years, though, things began to change. The promise of an education for the Perez children turned into an uphill struggle against a public education system that was crumbling from neglect, political bickering, and economic recession.

With tax receipts down and energy costs up, there weren’t enough dollars in California to fund improvements in many of the state’s schools, roads, and infrastructure. What money that did exist disproportionately went to school systems and roads on the coast, and especially to the suburbs.

In the neglected districts of the San Joaquin Valley, gangs gained such strength that parents started pulling their children out of the public schools. Charter schools, parochial schools, even home schooling looked like better alternatives than subjecting their children to violence and intimidation.

Between 2008 and 2010, the Valley public school system passed a turning point, a point of no return such that salvaging the existing system was no longer an option. The state stepped in to take over control of the school

system from the lowest performing local districts, and set up trade schools pushing vocational education . . . but even that wasn't enough. The economy was so weak that there were no "vocations," no jobs, for those who graduated from the new schools. The Valley was trapped in a vicious cycle in which employers, alarmed by the failure of the school system, were pulling out faster than new employees were graduating into the workforce.

### **A FAMILY STRAINED**

At their wits end, Manuel and Carmen found it difficult to keep their family together. Two months after her 14th birthday, Rosa moved in with a family of second generation Mexican merchants, Mr. and Mrs. Rodriguez.

Rosa's sister, Maria, wasn't so lucky. Maria got pregnant at 13. Lacking consistent prenatal care (in part because the nearest clinic was not served by public transit and her parents 15 year old Chevy truck was temperamental at best) and struggling with asthma due to severe air pollution, Maria lost her child after draining the meager savings that Manuel and Carmen had scraped together.

Maria died a few years later in a domestic dispute.

Then in 2014 Manuel lost his job when his employer, San Joaquin Farms, filed for bankruptcy. Manuel and Carmen had wanted to help Rosa with her education, but now that was impossible. Inspired by one of her teachers in the parochial school Rosa attended with the Rodriguez children, Rosa set her sights on a career in medicine. She won a full scholarship to Fresno State, and would eventually go on to UCLA for her medical degree.

But her hard-won path toward success was the rare exception. Everyone in the San Joaquin Valley was suffering the ravages of recession, drought, and inadequate efforts by state and federal governments to relieve their suffering.

### **UNREST**

As for Rosa's brother, Ramon never caught the educational updraft his sister rode. Instead he found himself swept up into gang culture and lured toward the narcotics underground.

But his friends weren't petty criminals. They were more interested in fighting for justice for Latinos who had been left behind by the California Dream. Recruited in a bar in Bakersfield, Ramon and his friends became active in a political underground that would surface in a wave of deadly class riots in 2021.

Once class tensions flared into violence, most of the remaining Anglos, Sikhs, Hmong—everyone and anyone who could—fled to the coast or to the Sierras. Pummeled by years of social and economic disaster, the San Joaquin Valley now looked like some of the poorest parts of Mexico. Before pulling up stakes and moving on, the last of the Valley's power brokers had enriched themselves by buying water at \$75 per acre foot and selling it at \$2,000 per acre foot to private interests in the Los Angeles Basin—just like the movie Chinatown's water wars all over again, but without Jack Nicholson and Faye Dunaway. Now it was just more of the same corruption that had been undermining the interests of people like Manuel and Carmen Perez for decades.

## **RIOTS**

Emboldened by the nakedness of the injustice, Ramon and his cohorts built a network of guerillas that extended north into the United States, continuing the influence of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and the Zapatistas in Chiapas. In 2022, increasingly alarmed at what seemed like a full-blown revolution, the federal government sent troops on a scale unseen since the urban disturbances of the 1960s to restore peace in the San Joaquin Valley.

But there wasn't much left to fight over.

Most of the farms had shut down for lack of management, water, and workers. Lacking the cover of big city streets or dense rain forests, Ramon and his compañeros had no place to hide from the low-flying helicopters and high-tech search and surveillance equipment. Their uprising was quashed in weeks and Ramon, lucky not to have been

killed, found himself looking at twenty-five years in prison at Corcoran.

## **BITTER END**

Back in Tulare County, Rosa's mother found that she had contracted breast cancer. They said it was from pesticides that had penetrated into the water system.

Rosa knew enough to know that there was nothing that she or any of her colleagues could do to combat a cancer that was in its advanced stages. As Rosa comforted her mother during her final weeks, she reassured her mother that she and Manuel had not made a mistake moving the family from El Salvador to the United States.

But as she stood by her mother's grave in the hot Valley sun, Rosa, despite her accomplishments, was not so sure.

## **WHAT DOES ROSA'S WORLD MEAN?**

- Difficulty attracting and retaining teachers and health-care professionals has a long-term impact
- Difficulties attracting clean industry has an impact on the region's attractiveness
- Difficulties attracting talent of all kinds pushes the best away
- Efficient land use is tied to quality of life
- Need for enforcing air quality—implementation and enforcement
- Little affordable health care affects livability—affordable housing is critical
- There is a need for regional coalitions
- Apathy
- “Me-first” thinking narrows horizons
- Recession—How can the Valley ride out economic fluctuations?

## **SOME POSSIBLE EARLY INDICATORS OF ROSA'S WORLD TO LOOK OUT FOR:**

- Widening gaps in education and income
- Increasing numbers of Latinos and others in illegal drug trade
- Increasing, inter-ethnic friction, unemployment and more poverty
- Increasing demands for social services
- Increasing drop-out rate
- More gated communities and social separation
- Worsening economy
- Shortage of water
- Poor air, higher asthma rates and other health problems
- An increase in drug abuse and crime
- More prisons and prisoners call the Valley home
- Bankruptcies, relocations, shut-downs
- Farmers are not investing in new equipment
- More single-parent families and decrease in retirees
- Higher infant mortality
- Increase in gun ownership or signs of ‘fortress-like’ housing

*If a significant number of these early indicators show up in the news, then the citizens of the San Joaquin Valley would be wise to implement at least some of the following strategic options.*

## **STRATEGIC OPTIONS FOR ROSA'S WORLD**

- Education reform with more options for different needs
- High speed rail plus comprehensive land use planning to cover: 1) Shutting down toxic towns bypassed by rail; 2) Economic development for hubs so that they are more than

bedroom suburbs to Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area; 3) more roads and fuel cell technology to avoid air pollution

- Local initiatives to rebuild schools and provide long term support to the local education system—including parents, teachers, community, and business
- Strategic economic development plan that progressively builds on the Valley's strengths: 1) first warehouses; 2) then light manufacturing; 3) then high-tech
- Find common ground on which to build shared vision of the big picture
- Voter registration drive directed towards Latinos and other emerging groups
- Build community nonprofits to meet community service needs not served by other sectors
- Seek outside grants and philanthropy
- Provide optimism and opportunity for young people
- Value the Valley