

The House on Mango Street

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A House of My Own

The young woman in this photograph is me when I was writing *The House on Mango Street*. She's in her office, a room that had probably been a child's bedroom when families lived in this apartment. It has no door and is only slightly wider than the walk-in pantry. But it has great light and sits above the hallway door downstairs, so she can hear her neighbors come and go. She's posed as if she's just looked up from her work for a moment, but in real life she never writes in this office. She writes in the kitchen, the only room with a heater.

It's Chicago, 1980, in the down-at-the-heels Bucktown neighborhood before it's discovered by folks with money. The young woman lives at 1814 N. Paulina Street second

floor front. Nelson Algren once wandered these streets. Saul Bellow's turf was over on Division Street, walking distance away. It's a neighborhood that reeks of beer and urine, of sausage and beans.

The young woman fills her "office" with things she drags home from the flea market at Maxwell Street. Antique typewriters, alphabet blocks, asparagus ferns, bookshelves, ceramic figurines from Occupied Japan, wicker baskets, birdcages, hand-painted photos. Things she likes to look at. It's important to have this space to look and think. When she lived at home, the things she looked at scolded her and made her feel sad and depressed. They said, "Wash me." They said, "Lazy." They said, "You ought." But the things in her office are magical and invite her to play. They fill her with light. It's the room where she can be quiet and still and listen to the voices inside herself. She likes being alone in the daytime.

As a girl, she dreamed about having a silent home, just to herself, the way other women dreamed of their weddings. Instead of collecting lace and linen for her trousseau, the young woman buys old things from the thrift stores on grimy Milwaukee Avenue for her future house-of-her-own—faded quilts, cracked vases, chipped saucers, lamps in need of love.

The young woman returned to Chicago after graduate school and moved back into her father's house, 1754 N. Keeler, back into her girl's room with its twin bed and floral wallpaper. She was twenty-three and a half. Now she summoned her courage and told her father she wanted to live alone again, like she did when she was away at school. He looked at her with that eye of the rooster before it attacks, but she wasn't alarmed. She'd seen that look before and knew he was harmless. She was his favorite, and it was only a matter of waiting.

The daughter claimed she'd been taught that a writer needs quiet, privacy, and long stretches of solitude to think. The father decided too much college and too many gringo friends had ruined her. In a way he was right. In a way she was right. When she thinks to herself in her father's language, she knows sons and daughters don't leave their parents' house until they marry. When she thinks in English, she knows she should've been on her own since eighteen.

For a time father and daughter reached a truce. She agreed to move into the basement of a building where the oldest of her six brothers and his wife lived, 4832 W. Homer. But after a few months, when the big brother upstairs turned out to be Big Brother, she got on her bicycle and rode through the neighborhood of her high school days until she spotted an apartment with fresh-painted walls and masking tape on the windows. Then she knocked on the storefront downstairs. That's how she convinced the landlord she was his new tenant.

Her father can't understand why she wants to live in a hundred-year-old building with big windows that let in the cold. She knows her apartment is clean, but the hallway is scuffed and scary, though she and the woman upstairs take turns mopping it regularly. The hall needs paint, and there's nothing they can do about that. When the father visits, he climbs up the stairs muttering with disgust. Inside, he looks at her books arranged in milk crates, at the futon on the floor in a bedroom with no door, and whispers, "Hippie," in the same way he looks at boys hanging out in his neighborhood and says, "*Drogas*." When he sees the space heater in the kitchen, the father shakes his head and sighs, "Why did I work so hard to buy a house with a furnace so she could go backwards and live like this?"

When she's alone, she savors her apartment of high ceilings and windows that let in the sky, the new carpeting and walls white as typing paper, the walk-in pantry with empty shelves, her bedroom without a door, her office with its typewriter, and the big front-room windows with their view of a street, rooftops, trees, and the dizzy traffic of the Kennedy Expressway.

Between her building and the brick wall of the next is a tidy, sunken garden. The only people who ever enter the garden are a family who speak like guitars, a family with a Southern accent. At dusk they appear with a pet monkey in a cage and sit on a green bench and talk and laugh. She spies on them from behind her bedroom curtains and wonders where they got the monkey.

Her father calls every week to say, "*Mija*, when are you coming home?" What does her mother say about all this? She puts her hands on her hips and boasts, "She gets it from me." When the father is in the room, the mother just shrugs and says, "What can I do?" The mother doesn't object. She knows what it is to live a life filled with regrets, and she doesn't want her daughter to live that life too. She always supported the daughter's projects, so long as she went to school. The mother who painted the walls of their Chicago homes the color of flowers; who planted tomatoes and roses in her garden; sang arias; practiced solos on her son's drum set; boogied along with the *Soul Train* dancers; glued travel posters on her kitchen wall with Karo syrup; herded her kids weekly to the library, to public concerts, to museums; wore a button on her lapel that said "Feed the People Not the Pentagon"; who never went beyond the ninth grade. *That* mother. She nudges her daughter and says, "Good lucky you studied."

The father wants his daughter to be a weather girl on television, or to marry and have babies. She doesn't want to be a TV weather girl. Nor does she want to marry and have babies. Not yet. Maybe later, but there are so many other things she must do in her lifetime first. Travel. Learn how to dance the tango. Publish a book. Live in other cities. Win a National Endowment for the Arts award. See the Northern Lights. Jump out of a cake.

She stares at the ceilings and walls of her apartment the way she once stared at the ceilings and walls of the apartments she grew up in, inventing pictures in the cracks in the plaster, inventing stories to go with these pictures. At night, under the circle of light from a cheap metal lamp clamped to the kitchen table, she sits with paper and a pen and pretends she's not afraid. She's trying to live like a writer.

Where she gets these ideas about living like a writer, she has no clue. She hasn't read Virginia Woolf yet. She doesn't know about Rosario Castellanos or Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga are cutting their own paths through the world somewhere, but she doesn't know about them. She doesn't know anything. She's making things up as she goes.

When the photo of the young woman who was me was snapped, I still called myself a poet, though I'd been writing stories since grammar school. I'd gravitated back to fiction while in the Iowa poetry workshop. Poetry, as it was taught at Iowa, was a house of cards, a tower of ideas, but I can't communicate an idea except through a story.

The woman I am in the photo was working on a series of vignettes, little by little, along with her poetry. I already had a title—*The House on Mango Street*. Fifty pages had been written, but I still didn't think of it as a novel. It was just a jar of buttons, like the mismatched embroidered pil-

lowcases and monogrammed napkins I tugged from the bins at the Goodwill. I wrote these things and thought of them as "little stories," though I sensed they were connected to each other. I hadn't heard of story cycles yet. I hadn't read Ermilo Abreu Gómez's *Caneek*, Elena Poniatowska's *Lilus Kikus*, Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha*, Nellie Campobello's *My Mother's Hands*. That would come later, when I had more time and solitude to read.

The woman I once was wrote the first three stories of *House* in one weekend at Iowa. But because I wasn't in the fiction workshop, they wouldn't count toward my MFA thesis. I didn't argue; my thesis advisor reminded me too much of my father. I worked on these little stories on the side for comfort when I wasn't writing poetry for credit. I shared them with colleagues like poet Joy Harjo, who was also having a hard time in the poetry workshops; and fiction writer Dennis Mathis, a small-town Illinois native, but whose paperback library was from the world.

Little-little stories were in literary vogue at the time, in the '70s. Dennis told me about the Japanese Nobel Prize winner Kawabata's minimal "palm of the hand" stories. We fried omelets for dinner and read García Márquez and Heinrich Böll stories aloud. We both preferred experimental writers—all men back then, except for Grace Paley—rebels like ourselves. Dennis would become a lifelong editor, ally, and voice on the phone when either one of us lost heart.

The young woman in the photo is modeling her book-in-progress after *Dream Tigers* by Jorge Luis Borges—a writer she'd read since high school, story fragments that ring like Hans Christian Andersen, or Ovid, or entries from the encyclopedia. She wants to write stories that ignore borders between genres, between written and spoken, between highbrow literature and children's nursery

rhymes, between New York and the imaginary village of Macondo, between the U.S. and Mexico. It's true, she wants the writers she admires to respect her work, but she also wants people who don't usually read books to enjoy these stories too. She *doesn't* want to write a book that a reader won't understand and would feel ashamed for not understanding.

She thinks stories are about beauty. Beauty that is there to be admired by anyone, like a herd of clouds grazing overhead. She thinks people who are busy working for a living deserve beautiful little stories, because they don't have much time and are often tired. She has in mind a book that can be opened at any page and will still make sense to the reader who doesn't know what came before or comes after.

She experiments, creating a text that is as succinct and flexible as poetry, snapping sentences into fragments so that the reader pauses, making each sentence serve *her* and not the other way round, abandoning quotation marks to streamline the typography and make the page as simple and readable as possible. So that the sentences are pliant as branches and can be read in more ways than one.

Sometimes the woman I once was goes out on weekends to meet with other writers. Sometimes I invite these friends to come to my apartment to workshop each other's work. We come from Black, white, Latino communities. We are men and we are women. What we have in common is our sense that art should serve our communities. Together we publish an anthology—*Emergency Tacos*—because we finish our collaborations in the early hours before dawn and gather at the same twenty-four-hour *taquería* on Belmont Avenue, like a multicultural version of Hopper's *Nighthawks* painting. The *Emergency Tacos* writers organize monthly arts events at my brother Keek's apartment—

Galeria Quique. We do this with no capital except our valuable time. We do this because the world we live in is a house on fire and the people we love are burning.

The young woman in the photograph gets up in the morning to go to the job that pays the rent on her Paulina Street apartment. She teaches at a school in Pilsen, her mother's old neighborhood on Chicago's south side, a Mexican neighborhood where the rent is cheap and too many families live crowded together. Landlords and the city take no responsibility for the rats, trash that isn't collected often enough, porches that collapse, apartments without fire escapes, until a tragedy happens and several people die. Then they hold investigations for a little while, but the problems go on until the next death, the next investigation, the next bout of forgetting.

The young woman works with students who have dropped out of high school but have decided to try again for their diplomas. She learns from her students that they have more difficult lives than her storyteller's imagination can invent. Her life has been comfortable and privileged compared to theirs. She never had to worry about feeding her babies before she went to class. She never had a father or boyfriend who beat her at night and left her bruised in the morning. She didn't have to plan an alternative route to avoid gangs in the school hallway. Her parents didn't plead with her to drop out of school so she could help them earn money.

How can art make a difference in the world? This was never asked at Iowa. Should she be teaching these students to write poetry when they need to know how to defend themselves from someone beating them up? Can a memoir by Malcolm X or a novel by García Márquez save them from the daily blows? And what about those who

have such learning problems they can't even manage a book by Dr. Seuss, but can weave a spoken story so wondrous, she wants to take notes. Should she give up writing and study something useful like medicine? How can she teach her students to take control of their own destiny? She loves these students. What should she be doing to save their lives?

The young woman's teaching job leads to the next, and now she finds herself a counselor/recruiter at her alma mater, Loyola University on the north side, in Rogers Park. I have health benefits. I don't bring work home anymore. My work day ends at five p.m. Now I have evenings free to do my own work. I feel like a real writer.

At the university I work for a program that no longer exists, the Educational Opportunity Program, that assists "disadvantaged" students. It's in keeping with my philosophy, and I can still help the students from my previous job. But when my most brilliant student is accepted, enrolls, and drops out in her first semester, I collapse on my desk from grief, from exhaustion, and feel like dropping out myself.

I write about my students because I don't know what else to do with their stories. Writing them down allows me to sleep.

On the weekends, if I can sidestep guilt and avoid my father's demands to come home for Sunday dinner, I'm free to stay home and write. I feel like a bad daughter ignoring my father, but I feel worse when I don't write. Either way, I never feel completely happy.

One Saturday the woman at the typewriter accepts an invitation to a literary soiree. But when she arrives, she feels she's made a terrible mistake. All the writers are old men. She has been invited by Leon Forrest, a Black novel-

ist who was trying to be kind and invite more women, more people-of-color, but so far, she's the only woman, and he and she the only coloreds.

She's there because she's the author of a new book of poetry—*Bad Boys* from Mango Press, the literary efforts of Gary Soto and Lorna Dee Cervantes. Her book is four pages long and was bound together on a kitchen table with a stapler and a spoon. Many of the other guests, she soon realizes, have written *real* books, hardbacks from big New York houses, printed in editions of hundreds of thousands on actual presses. Is she really a writer or is she only pretending to be a writer?

The guest of honor is a famous writer who went to the Iowa Workshop several years before she got there. His latest book has just been sold to Hollywood. He speaks and carries himself as if he's the Emperor of Everything.

At the end of the evening, she finds herself searching for a ride home. She came on the bus, and the Emperor offers to give her a lift home. But she's not going home, she's got her heart set on a movie that's showing only tonight. She's afraid of going to the movies alone, and that's why she's decided to go. Because she's afraid.

The famous writer drives a sports car. The seats smell of leather, and the dashboard is lit like an airplane cockpit. Her own car doesn't always start and has a hole in the floor near the accelerator that lets in rain and snow, so she has to wear boots when she drives. The famous writer talks and talks, but she can't hear what he is saying, because her own thoughts are drowning him out like a wind. She doesn't say anything, doesn't have to. She is just young and pretty enough to feed the famous writer's ego by nodding enthusiastically at everything he says until he drops her off in front of the cinema. She hopes the famous writer notices she is going to see *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* alone. To

tell the truth, she feels miserable walking up to the box office by herself, but she forces herself to buy the ticket and go in because she loves this movie.

The theater is packed. It feels to the young woman as if everybody is there with somebody, except her. Finally, the scene where Marilyn sings "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend." The colors are cartoon-wonderful, the set deliciously campy, the lyrics clever, the whole number is pure old-style glamour. Marilyn is sensational. After her song is over, the audience breaks into applause as if this were a live performance, though sad Marilyn has been dead years and years.

The woman who is me goes home proud of having gone to the movies alone. *See? It wasn't that difficult.* But as she bolts the door of her apartment, she bursts into tears. "I don't have diamonds," she sobs, not knowing what she means, except she knows even then it's not about diamonds. Every few weeks, she has a messy crying jag like this that leaves her feeling shipwrecked and awful. It's such a regular occurrence she thinks these storms of depression are as normal as rain.

What is the woman in the photograph afraid of? She's afraid of walking from her parked car to her apartment in the dark. She's afraid of the scuffling sounds in the walls. She's afraid she'll fall in love and get stuck living in Chicago. She's afraid of ghosts, deep water, rodents, night, things that move too fast—cars, airplanes, her life. She's afraid she'll have to move back home again if she isn't brave enough to live alone.

Throughout all this, I am writing stories to go with that title, *The House on Mango Street*. Sometimes I write about people I remember, sometimes I write about people

I've just met, often I mix the two together. My students from Pilsen who sat before me when I was teaching, with girls who sat beside me in another classroom a decade before. I pick up parts of Bucktown, like the monkey garden next door, and plop it down in the Humboldt Park block where I lived during my middle and high school years—1525 N. Campbell Street.

Often all I have is a title with no story—"The Family of Little Feet,"—and I have to make the title kick me in the behind to get me going. Or, sometimes all I've got is a first sentence—"You can never have too much sky." One of my Pilsen students said I had said this, and she never forgot it. Good thing she remembered and quoted it back to me. "They came with the wind that blows in August . . ." This line came to me in a dream. Sometimes the best ideas come in dreams. Sometimes the worst ideas come from there, too!

Whether the idea came from a sentence I heard buzzing around somewhere and saved in a jar, or from a title I picked up and pocketed, the stories always insist on telling me where they want to end. They often surprise me by stopping when I had every intention of galloping along a little further. They're stubborn. They know best when there's no more to be said. The last sentence must ring like the final notes at the end of a mariachi song—*tan-tán*—to tell you when the song is done.

The people I wrote about were real, for the most part, from here and there, now and then, but sometimes three real people would be braided together into one made-up person. Usually when I thought I was creating someone from my imagination, it turned out I was remembering someone I'd forgotten or someone standing so close I couldn't see her at all.

I cut apart and stitched together events to tailor the

story, gave it shape so it had a beginning, middle, and end, because real life stories rarely come to us complete. Emotions, though, can't be invented, can't be borrowed. All the emotions my characters feel, good or bad, are mine.

I meet Norma Alarcón. She is to become one of my earliest publishers and my lifetime friend. The first time she walks through the rooms of the apartment on North Paulina, she notices the quiet rooms, the collection of typewriters, the books and Japanese figurines, the windows with the view of freeway and sky. She walks as if on tiptoe, peering into every room, even the pantry and closet as if looking for something. "You live here . . ." she asks, "alone?"

"Yes."

"So . . ." She pauses. "How did you do it?"

Norma, I did it by doing the things I was afraid of doing so that I would no longer be afraid. Moving away to go to graduate school. Traveling abroad alone. Earning my own money and living by myself. Posing as an author when I was afraid, just as I posed in that photo you used on the first cover of *Third Woman*.

And, finally, when I was ready, after I had apprenticed with professional writers over several years, partnering with the right agent. My father, who sighed and wished for me to marry, was, at the end of his life, much more gratified I had my agent Susan Bergholz providing for me rather than a husband. *¿Ha llamado Susan?* he asked me daily, because if Susan called it meant good news. Diamonds may do for a girl, but an agent is a woman writer's best friend.

I couldn't trust my own voice, Norma. People saw a little girl when they looked at me and heard a little girl's voice when I spoke. Because I was unsure of my own adult voice and often censored myself, I made up another voice, Esperanza's, to be my voice and ask the things I needed answers to myself—"Which way?" I didn't know exactly, but I knew which routes I didn't want to take—Sally, Rafaela, Ruthie—women whose lives were white crosses on the roadside.

At Iowa we never talked about serving others with our writing. It was all about serving ourselves. But there were no other examples to follow until you introduced me to Mexican writers Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Elena Poniatowska, Elena Garro, Rosario Castellanos. The young woman in the photograph was looking for another way to be—"otro modo de ser," as Castellanos put it.

Until you brought us all together as U.S. Latina writers—Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Marjorie Agosín, Carla Trujillo, Diana Solís, Sandra María Esteves, Diane Gómez, Salima Riverá, Margarita López, Beatriz Badikian, Carmen Abregó, Denise Chávez, Helena Viramontes—until then, Normita, we had no idea what we were doing was extraordinary.

I no longer make Chicago my home, but Chicago still makes its home in me. I have Chicago stories I have yet to write. So long as those stories kick inside me, Chicago will still be home.

Eventually I took a job in San Antonio. Left. Came back. And left again. I kept coming back lured by cheap rent. Affordable housing is essential to an artist. I could, in time, even buy my own first house, a hundred-year-old home once periwinkle, but now painted a Mexican pink.

Two years ago my office went up in my backyard, a building created from my Mexican memories. I am writing this today from this very office, Mexican marigold on the outside, morning-glory violet on the inside. Wind chimes ring from the terrace. Trains moan in the distance all the time, ours is a neighborhood of trains. The same San Antonio River tourists know from the Riverwalk winds its way behind my house to the Missions and beyond until it empties into the Gulf of Mexico. From my terrace you can see the river where it bends into an S.

White cranes float across the sky like a scene painted on a lacquered screen. The river shares the land with ducks, raccoons, possums, skunks, buzzards, butterflies, hawks, turtles, snakes, owls, even though we're walking distance to downtown. And within the confines of my own garden there are plenty of other creatures too—yappy dogs, kamikaze cats, one lovesick parrot with a crush on me.

This is my house.

Bliss.

October 24th, 2007. You come down from Chicago for a visit, Mama. You don't want to come. I make you come. You don't like to leave your house anymore, your back hurts you say, but I insist. I built this office beside the river for you as much as for me, and I want you to see it.

Once, years ago, you telephoned and said in an urgent voice, "When are you going to build your office? I just saw Isabel Allende on PBS and she has a HUGE desk and a BIG office." You were upset because I was writing on the kitchen table again like in the old days.

And now here we are, on the rooftop of a saffron building with a river view, a space all my own just to write.

We climb up to the room I work in, above the library, and out to the balcony facing the river.

You have to rest. There are industrial buildings on the opposite bank—abandoned granaries and silos—but they're so rain-rusted and sun-bleached, they have their own charm, like public sculptures. When you've recovered your breath, we continue.

I'm especially proud of the spiral staircase to the rooftop. I'd always dreamed of having one, just like the houses in Mexico. Even the word for them in Spanish is wonderful—*un caracol*—a snail. Our footsteps clang on each metal step, the dogs following so close we have to scold them.

"Your office is bigger than in the pictures you sent," you say delighted. I imagine you're comparing it to Isabel Allende's.

"Where did you get the drapes in the library? I bet they cost a pretty penny. Too bad your brothers couldn't upholster your chairs for you and save you some money. Boy, this place is niiiice!" you say, your voice sliding up the scales like a river grackle.

I plop yoga mats on the rooftop, and we sit cross-legged to watch the sun descend. We drink your favorite, Italian sparkling wine, to celebrate your arrival, to celebrate my office.

The sky absorbs the night quickly-quickly, dissolving into the color of a plum. I lie on my back and watch clouds scurry past in a hurry to get home. Stars come out shyly, one by one. You lie down next to me and drape one leg over mine like when we sleep together at your home. We always sleep together when I'm there. At first because there isn't any other bed. But later, after Papa dies, just because you want me near. It's the only time you let yourself be affectionate.

"What if we invite everybody down here for Christmas next year?" I ask, "What do you think?"

"We'll see," you say lost in your own thoughts.

The moon climbs the front yard mesquite tree, leaps over the terrace ledge and astonishes us. It's a full moon, a huge nimbus like the prints of Yoshitoshi. From here on, I won't be able to see a full moon again without thinking of you, this moment. But right now, I don't know this.

You close your eyes. You look like you're sleeping. The plane ride must've tired you. "Good lucky you studied," you say without opening your eyes. You mean my office, my life.

I say to you, "Good lucky."

*For my mother, Elvira Cordero Cisneros
July 11th, 1929–November 1st, 2007*

May 26th, 2008
Casa Xóchitl, San Antonio de Béxar, Texas

The House on Mango Street

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We didn't always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Paulina, and before that I can't remember. But what I remember most is moving a lot. Each time it seemed there'd be one more of us. By the time we got to Mango Street we were six—Mama, Papa, Carlos, Kiki, my sister Nenny and me.

The house on Mango Street is ours, and we don't have to pay rent to anybody, or share the yard with the people downstairs, or be careful not to make too much noise, and there isn't a landlord banging on the ceiling with a broom. But even so, it's not the house we'd thought we'd get.

We had to leave the flat on Loomis quick. The water pipes broke and the landlord wouldn't fix them because the house was too old. We had to leave fast. We were using the washroom next door and carrying water over in empty milk gallons. That's why Mama and Papa looked for a house, and that's why we moved into the house on Mango Street, far away, on the other side of town.

They always told us that one day we would move into a house, a real house that would be ours for always so we wouldn't have to move each year. And our house would have running water and pipes that worked. And inside it would have real stairs, not hallway stairs, but stairs inside like the houses on T.V. And we'd have a basement and at least three washrooms so when we took a bath we wouldn't have to tell everybody. Our house would be white with trees around it, a great big yard and grass growing without a fence. This was the house Papa talked about when he held a lottery ticket and this was the house Mama dreamed up in the stories she told us before we went to bed.

But the house on Mango Street is not the way they told it at all. It's small and red with tight steps in front and windows so small you'd think they were holding their breath. Bricks are crumbling in places, and the front door is so swollen you have to push hard to get in. There is no front yard, only four little elms the city planted by the curb. Out back is a small garage for the car we don't own yet and a small yard that looks smaller between the two buildings on either side. There are stairs in our house, but they're ordinary hallway stairs, and the house has only one washroom. Everybody has to share a bedroom—Mama and Papa, Carlos and Kiki, me and Nenny.

Once when we were living on Loomis, a nun from my school passed by and saw me playing out front. The laundromat downstairs had been boarded up because it had

been robbed two days before and the owner had painted on the wood YES WE'RE OPEN so as not to lose business.

Where do you live? she asked.

There, I said pointing up to the third floor.

You live *there*?

There. I had to look to where she pointed—the third floor, the paint peeling, wooden bars Papa had nailed on the windows so we wouldn't fall out. You live *there*? The way she said it made me feel like nothing. *There.* I lived *there.* I nodded.

I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn't it. The house on Mango Street isn't it. For the time being, Mama says. Temporary, says Papa. But I know how those things go.

Hairs

Everybody in our family has different hair. My Papa's hair is like a broom, all up in the air. And me, my hair is lazy. It never obeys barrettes or bands. Carlos' hair is thick and straight. He doesn't need to comb it. Nenny's hair is slippery—slides out of your hand. And Kiki, who is the youngest, has hair like fur.

But my mother's hair, my mother's hair, like little rosettes, like little candy circles all curly and pretty because she pinned it in pincurls all day, sweet to put your nose into when she is holding you, holding you and you feel safe, is the warm smell of bread before you bake it, is the

smell when she makes room for you on her side of the bed still warm with her skin, and you sleep near her, the rain outside falling and Papa snoring. The snoring, the rain, and Mama's hair that smells like bread.

Someday I will have a best friend all my own. One I can tell my secrets to. One who will understand my jokes without my having to explain them. Until then I am a red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor.

Boys & Girls

The boys and the girls live in separate worlds. The boys in their universe and we in ours. My brothers for example. They've got plenty to say to me and Nenny inside the house. But outside they can't be seen talking to girls. Carlos and Kiki are each other's best friend . . . not ours.

Nenny is too young to be my friend. She's just my sister and that was not my fault. You don't pick your sisters, you just get them and sometimes they come like Nenny.

She can't play with those Vargas kids or she'll turn out just like them. And since she comes right after me, she is my responsibility.

My Name

In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine. A muddy color. It is the Mexican records my father plays on Sunday mornings when he is shaving, songs like sobbing.

It was my great-grandmother's name and now it is mine. She was a horse woman too, born like me in the Chinese year of the horse—which is supposed to be bad luck if you're born female—but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong.

My great-grandmother. I would've liked to have

known her, a wild horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn't marry. Until my great-grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off. Just like that, as if she were a fancy chandelier. That's the way he did it.

And the story goes she never forgave him. She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow. I wonder if she made the best with what she got or was she sorry because she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window.

At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something, like silver, not quite as thick as sister's name—Magdalena—which is uglier than mine. Magdalena who at least can come home and become Nenny. But I am always Esperanza.

I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do.

Cathy Queen of Cats

She says, I am the great great grand cousin of the queen of France. She lives upstairs, over there, next door to Joe the baby-grabber. Keep away from him, she says. He is full of danger. Benny and Blanca own the corner store. They're okay except don't lean on the candy counter. Two girls raggedy as rats live across the street. You don't want to know them. Edna is the lady who owns the building next to you. She used to own a building big as a whale, but her brother sold it. Their mother said no, no, don't ever sell it. I won't. And then she closed her eyes and he sold it. Alicia is stuck-up ever since she went to college. She used to like me but now she doesn't.

Cathy who is queen of cats has cats and cats and cats. Baby cats, big cats, skinny cats, sick cats. Cats asleep like little donuts. Cats on top of the refrigerator. Cats taking a walk on the dinner table. Her house is like cat heaven.

You want a friend, she says. Okay, I'll be your friend. But only till next Tuesday. That's when we move away. Got to. Then as if she forgot I just moved in, she says the neighborhood is getting bad.

Cathy's father will have to fly to France one day and find her great great distant grand cousin on her father's side and inherit the family house. How do I know this is so? She told me so. In the meantime they'll just have to move a little farther north from Mango Street, a little farther away every time people like us keep moving in.

Our Good Day

If you give me five dollars I will be your friend forever. That's what the little one tells me.

Five dollars is cheap since I don't have any friends except Cathy who is only my friend till Tuesday.

Five dollars, five dollars.

She is trying to get somebody to chip in so they can buy a bicycle from this kid named Tito. They already have ten dollars and all they need is five more.

Only five dollars, she says.

Don't talk to them, says Cathy. Can't you see they smell like a broom.

But I like them. Their clothes are crooked and old.

They are wearing shiny Sunday shoes without socks. It makes their bald ankles all red, but I like them. Especially the big one who laughs with all her teeth. I like her even though she lets the little one do all the talking.

Five dollars, the little one says, only five.

Cathy is tugging my arm and I know whatever I do next will make her mad forever.

Wait a minute, I say, and run inside to get the five dollars. I have three dollars saved and I take two of Nenny's. She's not home, but I'm sure she'll be glad when she finds out we own a bike. When I get back, Cathy is gone like I knew she would be, but I don't care. I have two new friends and a bike too.

My name is Lucy, the big one says. This here is Rachel my sister.

I'm her sister, says Rachel. Who are you?

And I wish my name was Cassandra or Alexis or Maritza—anything but Esperanza—but when I tell them my name they don't laugh.

We come from Texas, Lucy says and grins. Her was born here, but me I'm Texas.

You mean *she*, I say.

No, I'm from Texas, and doesn't get it.

This bike is three ways ours, says Rachel who is thinking ahead already. Mine today, Lucy's tomorrow and yours day after.

But everybody wants to ride it today because the bike is new, so we decide to take turns *after* tomorrow. Today it belongs to all of us.

I don't tell them about Nenny just yet. It's too complicated. Especially since Rachel almost put out Lucy's eye about who was going to get to ride it first. But finally we agree to ride it together. Why not?

Because Lucy has long legs she pedals. I sit on the

back seat and Rachel is skinny enough to get up on the handlebars which makes the bike all wobbly as if the wheels are spaghetti, but after a bit you get used to it.

We ride fast and faster. Past my house, sad and red and crumbly in places, past Mr. Benny's grocery on the corner, and down the avenue which is dangerous. Laundromat, junk store, drugstore, windows and cars and more cars, and around the block back to Mango.

People on the bus wave. A very fat lady crossing the street says, You sure got quite a load there.

Rachel shouts, You got quite a load there too. She is very sassy.

Down, down Mango Street we go. Rachel, Lucy, me. Our new bicycle. Laughing the crooked ride back.

Laughter

Nenny and I don't look like sisters . . . not right away. Not the way you can tell with Rachel and Lucy who have the same fat popsicle lips like everybody else in their family. But me and Nenny, we are more alike than you would know. Our laughter for example. Not the shy ice cream bells' giggle of Rachel and Lucy's family, but all of a sudden and surprised like a pile of dishes breaking. And other things I can't explain.

One day we were passing a house that looked, in my mind, like houses I had seen in Mexico. I don't know why. There was nothing about the house that looked exactly like

the houses I remembered. I'm not even sure why I thought it, but it seemed to feel right.

Look at that house, I said, it looks like Mexico.

Rachel and Lucy look at me like I'm crazy, but before they can let out a laugh, Nenny says: Yes, that's Mexico all right. That's what I was thinking exactly.

Gil's Furniture Bought & Sold

There is a junk store. An old man owns it. We bought a used refrigerator from him once, and Carlos sold a box of magazines for a dollar. The store is small with just a dirty window for light. He doesn't turn the lights on unless you got money to buy things with, so in the dark we look and see all kinds of things, me and Nenny. Tables with their feet upside-down and rows and rows of refrigerators with round corners and couches that spin dust in the air when you punch them and a hundred T.V.'s that don't work probably. Everything is on top of everything so the whole store has skinny aisles to walk through. You can get lost easy.

The owner, he is a black man who doesn't talk much and sometimes if you didn't know better you could be in there a long time before your eyes notice a pair of gold glasses floating in the dark. Nenny who thinks she is smart and talks to any old man, asks lots of questions. Me, I never said nothing to him except once when I bought the Statue of Liberty for a dime.

But Nenny, I hear her asking one time how's this here and the man says, This, this is a music box, and I turn around quick thinking he means a *pretty* box with flowers painted on it, with a ballerina inside. Only there's nothing like that where this old man is pointing, just a wood box that's old and got a big brass record in it with holes. Then he starts it up and all sorts of things start happening. It's like all of a sudden he let go a million moths all over the dusty furniture and swan-neck shadows and in our bones. It's like drops of water. Or like marimbas only with a funny little plucked sound to it like if you were running your fingers across the teeth of a metal comb.

And then I don't know why, but I have to turn around and pretend I don't care about the box so Nenny won't see how stupid I am. But Nenny, who is stupider, already is asking how much and I can see her fingers going for the quarters in her pants pocket.

This, the old man says shutting the lid, this ain't for sale.

Meme Ortiz

Meme Ortiz moved into Cathy's house after her family moved away. His name isn't really Meme. His name is Juan. But when we asked him what his name was he said Meme, and that's what everybody calls him except his mother.

Meme has a dog with gray eyes, a sheepdog with two names, one in English and one in Spanish. The dog is big, like a man dressed in a dog suit, and runs the same way its owner does, clumsy and wild and with the limbs flopping all over the place like untied shoes.

Cathy's father built the house Meme moved into. It is wooden. Inside the floors slant. Some rooms uphill. Some down. And there are no closets. Out front there are twenty-

one steps, all lopsided and jutting like crooked teeth (made that way on purpose, Cathy said, so the rain will slide off), and when Meme's mama calls from the doorway, Meme goes scrambling up the twenty-one wooden stairs with the dog with two names scrambling after him.

Around the back is a yard, mostly dirt, and a greasy bunch of boards that used to be a garage. But what you remember most is this tree, huge, with fat arms and mighty families of squirrels in the higher branches. All around, the neighborhood of roofs, black-tarred and A-framed, and in their gutters, the balls that never came back down to earth. Down at the base of the tree, the dog with two names barks into the empty air, and there at the end of the block, looking smaller still, our house with its feet tucked under like a cat.

This is the tree we chose for the First Annual Tarzan Jumping Contest. Meme won. And broke both arms.

Louie, His Cousin & His Other Cousin

Downstairs from Meme's is a basement apartment that Meme's mother fixed up and rented to a Puerto Rican family. Louie's family. Louie is the oldest in a family of little sisters. He is my brother's friend really, but I know he has two cousins and that his T-shirts never stay tucked in his pants.

Louie's girl cousin is older than us. She lives with Louie's family because her own family is in Puerto Rico. Her name is Marin or Maris or something like that, and she wears dark nylons all the time and lots of makeup she gets free from selling Avon. She can't come out—gotta baby-sit with Louie's sisters—but she stands in the doorway

a lot, all the time singing, clicking her fingers, the same song:

*Apples, peaches, pumpkin pah-ay.
You're in love and so am ah-ay.*

Louie has another cousin. We only saw him once, but it was important. We were playing volleyball in the alley when he drove up in this great big yellow Cadillac with whitewalls and a yellow scarf tied around the mirror. Louie's cousin had his arm out the window. He honked a couple of times and a lot of faces looked out from Louie's back window and then a lot of people came out—Louie, Marin and all the little sisters.

Everybody looked inside the car and asked where he got it. There were white rugs and white leather seats. We all asked for a ride and asked where he got it. Louie's cousin said get in.

We each had to sit with one of Louie's little sisters on our lap, but that was okay. The seats were big and soft like a sofa, and there was a little white cat in the back window whose eyes lit up when the car stopped or turned. The windows didn't roll up like in ordinary cars. Instead there was a button that did it for you automatically. We rode up the alley and around the block six times, but Louie's cousin said he was going to make us walk home if we didn't stop playing with the windows or touching the FM radio.

The seventh time we drove into the alley we heard sirens . . . real quiet at first, but then louder. Louie's cousin stopped the car right where we were and said, Everybody out of the car. Then he took off flooring that car into a yellow blur. We hardly had time to think when the cop car pulled in the alley going just as fast. We saw the yellow Cadillac at the end of the block trying to make a left-hand

turn, but our alley is too skinny and the car crashed into a lamppost.

Marin screamed and we ran down the block to where the cop car's siren spun a dizzy blue. The nose of that yellow Cadillac was all pleated like an alligator's, and except for a bloody lip and a bruised forehead, Louie's cousin was okay. They put handcuffs on him and put him in the back-seat of the cop car, and we all waved as they drove away.

Marin

Marin's boyfriend is in Puerto Rico. She shows us his letters and makes us promise not to tell anybody they're getting married when she goes back to P.R. She says he didn't get a job yet, but she's saving the money she gets from selling Avon and taking care of her cousins.

Marin says that if she stays here next year, she's going to get a real job downtown because that's where the best jobs are, since you always get to look beautiful and get to wear nice clothes and can meet someone in the subway who might marry you and take you to live in a big house far away.

But next year Louie's parents are going to send her

back to her mother with a letter saying she's too much trouble, and that is too bad because I like Marin. She is older and knows lots of things. She is the one who told us how Davey the Baby's sister got pregnant and what cream is best for taking off moustache hair and if you count the white flecks on your fingernails you can know how many boys are thinking of you and lots of other things I can't remember now.

We never see Marin until her aunt comes home from work, and even then she can only stay out in front. She is there every night with the radio. When the light in her aunt's room goes out, Marin lights a cigarette and it doesn't matter if it's cold out or if the radio doesn't work or if we've got nothing to say to each other. What matters, Marin says, is for the boys to see us and for us to see them. And since Marin's skirts are shorter and since her eyes are pretty, and since Marin is already older than us in many ways, the boys who do pass by say stupid things like I am in love with those two green apples you call eyes, give them to me why don't you. And Marin just looks at them without even blinking and is not afraid.

Marin, under the streetlight, dancing by herself, is singing the same song somewhere. I know. Is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life.

Those Who Don't

Those who don't know any better come into our neighborhood scared. They think we're dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives. They are stupid people who are lost and got here by mistake.

But we aren't afraid. We know the guy with the crooked eye is Davey the Baby's brother, and the tall one next to him in the straw brim, that's Rosa's Eddie V., and the big one that looks like a dumb grown man, he's Fat Boy, though he's not fat anymore nor a boy.

All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight. Yeah. That is how it goes and goes.

END

Rosa Vargas
not her fault you
only one against s

They are bad
it with only one mother who is tired all the time from
buttoning and bottling and babying, and who cries every
day for the man who left without even leaving a dollar for
bologna or a note explaining how come.

The kids bend trees and bounce between cars and
dangle upside down from knees and almost break like
fancy museum vases you can't replace. They think it's
funny. They are without respect for all things living, in-
cluding themselves.