

INTRODUCTION

It's been ten years since *The House on Mango Street* was first published. I began writing it in graduate school, the spring of 1977, in Iowa City. I was twenty-two years old.

I'm thirty-eight now, far from that time and place, but the questions from readers remain. Are these stories true? Are you Esperanza?

When I began *The House on Mango Street*, I thought I was writing a memoir. By the time I finished it, my memoir was no longer memoir, no longer autobiographical. It had evolved into a collective story peopled with several lives from my past and present, placed in one fictional time and neighborhood—Mango Street.

The story is like a Giacometti sculpture. The farther away it is from you, the clearer you can see it. In Iowa City, I was undergoing several changes of identity. For the first time I was living alone, in a community very different in class and culture from the one where I was raised. This caused so much unrest I could barely speak, let alone write about it. The story I was living at twenty-two would have to wait, but I could take the story of an earlier place, an earlier voice, and record that on paper.

The voice of *Mango Street* and all my work was born at one moment, when I realized I was different. This sounds absurd and simple, but until Iowa City, I assumed the world was like Chicago, made up of people of many cultures all living together—albeit not happily at times but still coexisting. In Iowa, I was suddenly aware of feeling odd when I spoke, as if I were a foreigner. But this was my land too. This is not to say I hadn't felt this "otherness" before in Chicago, but I hadn't felt it quite as keenly as I did in graduate school. I couldn't articulate what it was that was happening, except I knew I felt ashamed when I spoke in class, so I chose not to speak.

I can say my political consciousness began the moment I recognized my otherness. I was in a graduate seminar on memory and the imagination. The books required were Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak Memory*, Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa*, and Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*. I had enjoyed the first two, but as usual I said nothing, just listened to the dialogue around me, too afraid to speak. The third book, though, left me baffled. I assumed I just didn't get it because I wasn't as smart as everyone else, and if I didn't say anything, maybe no one else would notice.

The conversation, I remember, was about the house of memory—the attic, the stairwells, the cellar. Attic? My family lived in third-floor flats for the most part, because noise traveled down. Stairwells reeked of Pine Sol from the Saturday scrubbing. We shared them with the people downstairs; they were public zones no one except us thought to clean. We mopped them all right, but not without resentment for cleaning up some other people's trash. And as for cellars, we had a basement, but who'd want to hide in there? Basements were filled with urban fauna. Everyone was scared to go in there including the meter reader and the landlord. What was this guy Bachelard talking about when he mentioned the familiar and comforting house of memory? It was obvious he never had to clean one or pay the landlord rent for one like ours.

Then it occurred to me that none of the books in this class or in any of my classes, in all the years of my education, had ever discussed a house like mine. Not in books or magazines or films. My classmates had come from real houses, real neighborhoods, ones they could point to, but what did I know?

When I went home that evening and realized my education had been a lie—had made presumptions about what was "normal," what was American, what was valuable—I wanted to quit school right then and there, but I didn't. Instead, I got angry, and anger when it is used to act, when it is used nonviolently, has power. I asked myself what I could write about that my classmates could not. I didn't know what I wanted exactly, but I did have enough sense to know what I didn't want. I didn't want to sound like my classmates; I didn't want to keep imitating the writers I had been reading. Their voice were right for them but not for me.

Instead, I searched for the "ugliest" subjects I could find, the most un-"poetic"—slang, monologues in which waitresses or kids talked their own lives. I was trying as best I could to write the kind of book I had never seen in a library or in a school, the kind of book not even my professors could write. Each week I ingested the class readings and then went off and did the opposite. It was a quiet revolution, perhaps a reaction taken to extremes, but it was out of this negative experience that I found something positive: my own voice.

The language in *Mango Street* is based on speech. It's very much an antiacademic voice—a child's voice, a girl's voice, a poor girl's voice, a spoken voice, the voice of an American-Mexican. It's in this rebellious realm of antipoetics that I tried to create a poetic text with the most unofficial language I could find. I did it neither ingenuously nor naturally. It was as clear to me as if I were tossing a Molotov.

At one time or another, we all have felt other. When I teach writing, I tell the story of the moment

of discovering and naming my otherness. It is not enough simply to sense it; it has to be named, and then written about from there. Once I could name it, I ceased being ashamed and silent. I could speak up and celebrate my otherness as a woman, as a working-class person, as an American of Mexican descent. When I recognized the places where I departed from my neighbors, my classmates, my family, my town, my brothers, when I discovered what I knew that no one else in the room knew, and then spoke it in a voice that was my voice, the voice I used when I was sitting in the kitchen, dressed in my pajamas, talking over a table littered with cups and dishes, when I could give myself permission to speak from that intimate space, then I could talk and sound like myself, not like me trying to sound like someone I wasn't. Then I could speak, shout, laugh from a place that was uniquely mine, that was no one else's in the history of the universe, that would never be anyone else's, ever.

I wrote these stories that way, guided by my heart and by my ear. I was writing a novel and didn't know I was writing a novel; if I had, I probably couldn't have done it. I knew I wanted to tell a story made up of a series of stories that would make sense if read alone, or that could be read all together to tell one big story, each story contributing to the whole—like beads in a necklace. I hadn't seen a book like this before. After finishing my book, I would discover these novels later: Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha*, Nellie Campobello's *Cartucho*, Ermilo Abreu Gómez's *Canek*, and Tomás Rivera's *Y no se lo tragó la tierra*.

While I was writing *Mango Street*, I remember reading Nicanor Parra's *Antipoems* and delighting in their irreverence to "Poetry," just as I had been delighted by Carl Sandburg's wise-guy, working-class voice and Gwendolyn Brooks' *Bronzeville* poems. I remember I was trying to write something that was a cross between fiction and poetry—like Jorge Luis Borges' *Dream Tigers*, a book whose stories read like fables; but with the lyricism and succinctness of poetry.

I finished writing my book in November 1982, miles from the Iowa cornfields. I had traveled a great distance both physically and mentally from the book's inception. And in the meantime, lots of things happened to me. I taught Latino high-school dropouts and counseled Latina students. Because I often felt helpless as a teacher and counselor to alter their lives, their stories began to surface in my "memoir"; then *Mango Street* ceased to be my story. I arranged and diminished events on Mango Street to speak a message, to take from different parts of other people's lives and create a story like a collage. I merged characters from my twenties with characters from my teens and childhood. I edited, changed, shifted the past to fit the present. I asked questions I didn't know to ask when I was an adolescent. But best of all, writing in a younger voice allowed me to name that thing without a name, that shame of being poor, of being female, of being not quite good enough, and examine where it had come from and why, so I could exchange shame for celebration.

I had never been trained to think of poems or stories as something that could change someone's life. I had been trained to think about where a line ended or how best to work a metaphor. It was always the "how" and not the "what" we talked about in class. Even while I was teaching in the Chicago community, the two halves of my life were at odds with each other—the half that wanted to roll up my sleeves and do something for the community, and the half that wanted to retreat to my kitchen and write. I still believed my writing couldn't save anyone's life but my own.

In the ten years since *Mango Street* has been published those two halves of my life have met and merged. I believe this because I've witnessed families buying my book for themselves and for family members, families for whom spending money on a book can be a sacrifice. Often they bring a mother, father, sibling, or cousin along to my readings, or I am introduced to someone who says their son or daughter read my book in a class and brought it home for them. And there are the letters from readers of all ages and colors who write to say I have written their story. The raggedy state of my books that some readers and educators hand me to sign is the best compliment of all. These are my affirmations and blessings.

Am I Esperanza? Yes. And no. And then again, perhaps maybe. One thing I know for certain, you, the reader, are Esperanza. So I should ask, What happened to you? Did you stay in school? Did you go to college? Did you have that baby? Were you a victim? Did you tell anyone about it or did you keep it inside? Did you let it overpower and eat you? Did you wind up in jail? Did someone harm you? Did you hurt someone? What happened to Margarita, Fat Boy, Gizmo, Angélica, Leticia, María, Rubén, Silvia, José, Dagoberto, Refugia, Bobby? Will you go back to school, find somebody to take care of the baby while you're finishing your diploma, go to college, work two jobs so you can do it, get help from the substance-abuse people, walk out of a bad marriage, send paychecks to the woman who bore your child, learn to be the human being you are not ashamed of? Did you run away from home? Did you join a gang? Did you get fired? Did you give up? Did you get angry?

You are Esperanza. You cannot forget who you are.

November 16, 1993
San Antonio de Bexar, Texas

House on Mango Street

Sandra Cisneros

Vintage, 1991 (1984 original)

NYC

No Speak English

Mamacita is the big mama of the man across the street, third-floor front. Rachel says her name ought to be *Mamasota*, but I think that's mean.

The man saved his money to bring her here. He saved and saved because she was alone with the baby boy in that country. He worked two jobs. He came home late and he left early. Every day.

Then one day Mamacita and the baby boy arrived in a yellow taxi. The taxi door opened like a waiter's arm. Out stepped a tiny pink shoe, a foot soft as a rabbit's ear, then the thick ankle, a flutter of hips, fuchsia roses and green perfume. The man had to pull her,

the taxicab driver had to push. Push, pull. Push, pull. Poof!

All at once she bloomed. Huge, enormous, beautiful to look at, from the salmon-pink feather on the tip of her hat down to the little rosebuds of her toes. I couldn't take my eyes off her tiny shoes.

Up, up, up the stairs she went with the baby boy in a blue blanket, the man carrying her suitcases, her lavender hatboxes, a dozen boxes of satin high heels. Then we didn't see her.

Somebody said because she's too fat, somebody because of the three flights of stairs, but I believe she doesn't come out because she is afraid to speak English, and maybe this is so since she only knows eight words. She knows to say: *He not here* for when the landlord comes, *No speak English* if anybody else comes, and *Holy smokes*. I don't know where she learned this, but I heard her say it one time and it surprised me.

My father says when he came to this country he ate hamandeggs for three months. Breakfast, lunch and dinner. Hamandeggs. That was the only word he knew. He doesn't eat hamandeggs anymore.

Whatever her reasons, whether she is fat, or can't climb the stairs, or is afraid of English, she won't come down. She sits all day by the window and plays the Spanish radio show and sings all the homesick songs about her country in a voice that sounds like a seagull.

Home. Home. Home is a house in a photograph, a pink house, pink as hollyhocks with lots of startled light. The man paints the walls of the apartment pink, but it's not the same you know. She still sighs for her pink house, and then I think she cries. I would.

Sometimes the man gets disgusted. He starts screaming and you can hear it all the way down the street.

Ay, she says, she is sad.
Oh, he says. Not again.

¿Cuándo, cuándo, cuándo? she asks.

¡Ay, caray! We are home. This is home. Here I am and here I stay. Speak English. Speak English. Christ!
¡Ay! Mamacita, who does not belong, every once in a while lets out a cry, hysterical, high, as if he had torn the only skinny thread that kept her alive, the only road out to that country.

And then to break her heart forever, the baby boy, who has begun to talk, starts to sing the Pepsi commercial he heard on T.V.

No speak English, she says to the child who is singing in the language that sounds like tin. No speak English, no speak English, and bubbles into tears. No, no, no, as if she can't believe her ears.

Fiction/Literature

"Cisneros draws on her rich [Latino] heritage... and seduces with precise, spare prose, creat[ing] unforgettable characters we want to lift off the page. She is not only a gifted writer, but an absolutely essential one."

—Bebe Moore Campbell, *The New York Times Book Review*

Told in a series of vignettes stunning for their eloquence, *The House on Mango Street* is Sandra Cisneros's greatly admired novel of a young girl growing up in the Latino section of Chicago. Acclaimed by critics, beloved by children, their parents and grandparents, taught everywhere from inner-city grade schools to universities across the country, and translated all over the world, it has entered the canon of coming-of-age classics.

Sometimes heartbreaking, sometimes deeply joyous, *The House on Mango Street* tells the story of Esperanza Cordero, whose neighborhood is one of harsh realities and harsh beauty. Esperanza doesn't want to belong—not to her rundown neighborhood, and not to the low expectations the world has for her. Esperanza's story is that of a young girl coming into her power, and inventing for herself what she will become.

"Marvelous...spare yet luminous. The subtle power of Cisneros's storytelling is evident. She communicates all the rapture and rage of growing up in a modern world."

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

"A deeply moving novel...delightful and poignant.... Like the best of poetry, it opens the windows of the heart without a wasted word."

—*Miami Herald*

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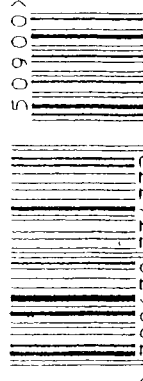
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