The House on Mango Street

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 flat¹ 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 TV. 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.

¹. flat: an apartment on one floor of a building.
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.

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.

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2. Chinese year of the horse: The traditional Chinese calendar names each year after one of a series of twelve animals: rat, ox, tiger, hare, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, fowl, dog, and pig. People born in years named after the same animal are believed to share certain traits. Horse people are active and energetic, quick-witted and cunning. The horse is an individual who depends only on his wits and his labor to get what he wants.
I have never seen my Papa Who Wakes Up Tired in the Dark

Your abuelito is dead, Papa says early one morning in my room. Está muerto, and then as if he just heard the news himself, crumples like a coat and cries, my brave Papa cries. I have never seen my Papa cry and don’t know what to do.

I know he will have to go away, that he will take a plane to Mexico, all the uncles and aunts will be there, and they will have a black-and-white photo taken in front of the tomb with flowers shaped like spears in a white vase because this is how they send the dead away in that country.

Because I am the oldest, my father has told me first, and now it is my turn to tell the others. I will have to explain why we can’t play. I will have to tell them to be quiet today.

My Papa, his thick hands and thick shoes, who wakes up tired in the dark, who combs his hair with water, drinks his coffee, and is gone before we wake, today is sitting on my bed.

And I think if my own Papa died what would I do. I hold my Papa in my arms. I hold and hold and hold him.

3. abuelito (a·bwe-le’to) Spanish: grandfather.
4. Esta muerto (es·a’ muér’to) Spanish: He is dead.
A Smart Cookie

I could've been somebody, you know? my mother says and sighs. She has lived in this city her whole life. She can speak two languages. She can sing an opera. She knows how to fix a T.V. But she doesn't know which subway train to take to get downtown. I hold her hand very tight while we wait for the right train to arrive.

She used to draw when she had time. Now she draws with a needle and thread, little knotted rosebuds, tulips made of silk thread. Someday she would like to see a play. She borrows opera records from the public library and sings with velvety lungs powerful as morning glories.

Today while cooking oatmeal she is Madame Butterfly until she sighs and points the wooden spoon at me. I could've been somebody, you know? Esperanza, you go to school. Study hard. That Madame Butterfly was a fool. She stirs the oatmeal. Look at my comadres. She means Izaura whose husband left and Yolanda whose husband is dead. Got to take care all your own, she says shaking her head.

Then out of nowhere:

Shame is a bad thing, you know. It keeps you down. You want to know why I quit school? Because I didn't have nice clothes. No clothes, but I had brains.

Yup, she says disgusted, stirring again. I was a smart cookie then.

Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes

I like to tell stories. I tell them inside my head. I tell them after the mailman says, Here's your mail. Here's your mail he said.

I make a story for my life, for each step my brown shoe takes. I say, “And so she trudged up the wooden stairs, her sad brown shoes taking her to the house she never liked.”

I like to tell stories. I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn't want to belong.

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, but what I remember most is Mango Street, sad red house, the house I belong but do not belong to.

I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free.

One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever. One day I will go away.

Friends and neighbors will say, What happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper? Why did she march so far away?

They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out.

5. Madame Butterfly: the main character in an opera by Giacomo Puccini. She is a Japanese woman who kills herself when she discovers that her fiancé has abandoned her and married a woman from the United States.

6. comadres (kōmā'drēs) Spanish: women friends.