

The House on Mango Street

FICTION
Sandra Cisneros
1984



Introduction

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Sandra Cisneros (b. 1954) is regarded as a prominent writer in the Chicana literary movement. She has won numerous awards, including the National Medal of Arts and the National Book Award. Her first novel, *The House on Mango Street*, is a series of compressed, lyrical vignettes which center around a Latina girl growing up in a Chicago barrio. From her little red house, the protagonist Esperanza describes her life and the neighborhood around her. In this excerpt, Esperanza gives readers a glimpse into her dissatisfaction with the present and her hopes for the future.

“I have inherited her name, but I don’t want to inherit her place by the window.”

The House on Mango Street

1 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.

2 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.

3 Once when we were living on Loomis, a nun¹ 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.

4 Where do you live? she asked.

5 There, I said pointing up to the third floor.

6 You live there?

1. **nun** a female member of a religious order, often the staff and faculty at Catholic schools

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NOTES

Skill:
Figurative
Language

The description of windows “so small you’d think they were holding their breath” is an example of personification. I can picture windows sucking in their breath, so small they can’t let any air out even when they’re open.

- 7 *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.
- 8 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.

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My Name

- 9 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.
- 10 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.
- 11 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.
- 12 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.
- 13 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.
- 14 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.

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The metaphor “a wild horse of a woman” doesn't use *like* or *as*. This communicates that the author's great-grandmother was independent. The simile “as if she were a fancy chandelier” implies how valuable she was to her great-grandfather.



Esperanza wants to be her own person instead of having a name related to her heritage. She wants to separate herself from her parents and sister. Changing her name seems to her an important step in that direction.

Four Skinny Trees

- 15 They are the only ones who understand me. I am the only one who understands them. Four skinny trees with skinny necks and pointy elbows like mine. Four who do not belong here but are here. Four raggedy excuses planted by the city. From our room we can hear them, but Nenny just sleeps and doesn't appreciate these things.
- 16 Their strength is secret. They send **ferocious** roots beneath the ground. They grow up and they grow down and grab the earth between their hairy toes and bite the sky with violent teeth and never quit their anger. This is how they keep.
- 17 Let one forget his reason for being, they'd all droop like tulips in a glass, each with their arms around the other. Keep, keep, keep, trees say when I sleep. They teach.

Excerpted from *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, published by Vintage Books.