

When I Was Puerto Rican

By Esmeralda Santiago

Esmeralda Santiago (b. 1948) was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and she came to the United States when she was thirteen. Santiago attended New York City's Performing Arts High School, where she majored in drama and dance. After eight years of part-time study at community colleges, she transferred to Harvard University with a full scholarship. She graduated magna cum laude in 1976. Since then, Santiago has written for many national publications including *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe* and *Sports Illustrated*. She has published novels, screenplays, and three acclaimed memoirs: *When I was Puerto Rican* (1994), *Almost a Woman* (1999), and *The Turkish Lover* (2004).

The first day of school Mami walked me to a stone building that loomed over Graham Avenue, its concrete yard enclosed by an iron fence with spikes at the top. The front steps were wide but shallow and led up to a set of heavy double doors that slammed shut behind us as we walked down the shiny corridor. I clutched my eighth-grade report card filled with A's and B's, and Mami had my birth certificate. At the front office we were met by Mr. Grant, a droopy gentleman with thick glasses and a kind smile who spoke no Spanish. He gave Mami a form to fill out. I knew most of the words in the squares we were to fill in: NAME, ADDRESS (city, state), and OCCUPATION. We gave it to Mr. Grant, who reviewed it, looked at my birth certificate, studied my report card, then wrote on the top of the form "7-18."

Don Julio had told me that if students didn't speak English, the schools in Brooklyn would keep them back one grade until they learned it.

"Seven gray?" I asked Mr. Grant, pointing at his big numbers, and he nodded.

"Ino guan seven gray. I eight gray. I teeneyer."

"You don't speak English," he said. "You have to go to the seventh grade while you're learning."

"I have A's in school Puerto Rico. I learn good. I no seven gray girl."

Mami stared at me, not understanding but knowing I was being rude to an adult.

"What's going on?" she asked me in Spanish. I told her they wanted to send me back one grade, and I would not have it. This was probably the first rebellious act she had seen from me outside my usual mouthiness within the family.

"Negi, leave it alone. Those are the rules," she said, a warning in her voice.

"I don't care what their rules say," I answered. "I'm not going back to seventh grade. I can do the work. I'm not stupid."

Mami looked at Mr. Grant, who stared at her as if expecting her to do something about me. She smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

“Meester Grant,” I said, seizing the moment, “I go eight gray six mons. Eef I no learn inglish, I go seven gray. Okay?”

“That’s not the way we do things here,” he said hesitating.

“I good studen. I learn queek. You see notes.” I pointed to the A’s on my report card. “I pass seven gray.”

So we made a deal.

“You have until Christmas,” he said. “I’ll be checking on your progress.” He scratched out “7–18” and wrote in “8–23.” He wrote something on a piece of paper, sealed it inside an envelope, and gave it to me. “Your teacher is Miss Brown. Take this note upstairs to her. Your mother can go,” he said and disappeared into his office.

“Wow!” Mami said, “You can speak English!”

I was so proud of myself, I almost burst. In Puerto Rico, if I’d been that pushy, I would have been called *mal educada* by the Mr. Grant equivalent and sent home with a note to my mother. But here it was my teacher who was getting the note, I got what I wanted and my mother was sent home.

“I can find my way after school,” I said to Mami. “You don’t have to come get me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I’ll be all right.”

I walked down the black-tiled hallway, past many doors that were half glass, each one labeled with a room number in neat black lettering. Other students stared at me, tried to get my attention, or pointedly ignored me. I kept walking as if I knew where I was going, heading for the sign that said stairs with an arrow pointing up. When I reached the end of the hall and looked back, Mami was still standing at the front door watching me, a worried expression on her face. I waved and she waved back. I started up the stairs, my stomach churning into tight knots. All of a sudden, I was afraid that I was about to make a fool of myself and end up in seventh grade in the middle of the school year. Having to fall back would be worse than just accepting my fate now and hopping forward if I proved to be as good a student as I had convinced Mr. Grant I was. “What have I done?” I kicked myself with the back of my right shoe, much to the surprise of the fellow walking behind me, who laughed uproariously, as if I had meant it as a joke.

Miss Brown’s was the learning disabled class, where the administration sent kids with all sort of problems, none of which, from what I could see, had anything to do with their ability to learn but more with their willingness to do so. They were an unruly group. Those who came to class, any-way. Half of them never showed up, or, when they did, they slept through the lesson or nodded off in the middle of Miss Brown’s carefully parsed sentences.

We were outcasts in a school where the smartest eighth graders were in the 8–1 homeroom, each subsequent drop in number indicating one notch less smart. If your class was in the low double digits (8–10 for instance), you were smart, but not a pinhead. Once you got into the teens, your intelligence was in question, especially as the numbers rose to the high teens. And then there were the twenties. I was in 8–23, where the dumbest most undesirable people were placed. My class was, in some ways, the equivalent of seventh grade, perhaps even sixth or fifth.

Miss Brown, the homeroom teacher, who also taught English composition, was a young black woman who wore sweat pads under her arms. The strings holding them in place sometimes slipped outside the short sleeves of her well-pressed white shirts, and she had to turn her back to us in order to adjust them. She was very pretty, with almond eyes and a hairdo that was flat and straight at the top of her head then dipped into tight curls at the ends. Her fingers were well manicured, the nails painted pale pink with white tips. She taught English composition as if everyone cared about it, which I found appealing.

After the first week she moved me from the back of the room to the front seat by her desk, and after that, it felt as if she were teaching me alone. We never spoke except when I went up to the blackboard.

“Esmeralda,” she called in a musical voice, “would you please come up and mark the prepositional phrase?”

In her class, I learned to recognize the structure of the English language, and to draft the parts of a sentence by the position of words relative to pronouns and prepositions without knowing exactly what the whole thing meant.

Every day after school I went to the library and took out as many children’s books as I was allowed. I figured that if American children learned English through books, so could I, even if I was starting later. I studied the bright illustrations and learned the words for the unfamiliar objects of our new life in the United States: A for Apple, B for Bear, C for Cabbage. As my vocabulary grew, I moved to large-print chapter books. Mami bought me an English-English dictionary because that way, when I looked up a word I would be learning others.

By my fourth month in Brooklyn, I could read and write English much better than I could speak it, and at midterms I stunned the teachers by scoring high in English, History, and Social Studies. During the January assembly, Mr. Grant announced the names of the kids who had received high marks in each class. My name was called out three times. I became a different person to the other eighth graders. I was still in 8–23, but they knew, and I knew, that I didn’t belong there.

[Source Text: *The Place Where We Dwell: Reading and Writing about New York City*, Chapter 3: Urban Education, Kendall-Hunt, 2014]