

Words ran into each other

— ESMERALDA SANTIAGO —

Excerpted from *Almost a Woman*

ONE DAY YOLANDA asked me to accompany her to the library. I couldn't, because Mami forbade unplanned stops on the way home from school. "Ask her and we'll go tomorrow. If you bring proof of where you live, you can get a library card," Yolanda suggested, "and you can borrow books. For free," she added when I hesitated.

I'd passed the Bushwick Public Library many times, had wondered about its heavy entrance doors framed by columns, the wide windows that looked down on the neighborhood. Set back from the street behind a patch of dry grass, the red brick structure seemed out of place in a street of rundown apartment buildings and the tall, forbidding projects.

Inside, the ceilings were high, with dangling fixtures over long, brown tables in the center of the room and near the windows. The stacks around the perimeter were crammed with books covered in plastic. I picked up a book from a high shelf, riffled the pages, put it back. I wandered up one aisle, down another. All the books were in English. Frustrated, I found Yolanda, whispered goodbye, and found my way to the front door.

On the way out, I passed the Children's Room, where a librarian read to a group of kids. She read slowly and with expression, and after each page, she turned the book toward us so that we could see the pictures. Each page had only a few words on it, and the illustrations made their meaning clear. If American children could learn English from these books, so could I.

After the reading, I searched the shelves for the illustrated books that contained the words for my new life in Brooklyn. I chose alphabet books, their colorful pages full of cars, dogs, houses,

mailmen. I wouldn't admit to the librarian that these elementary books were for me. "For leetle seesters," I said, and she nodded, grinned, and stamped the date due in the back.

I stopped at the library every day after school and at home memorized the words that went with the pictures in the oversized pages. Some concepts were difficult. Snow was shown as huge, multifaceted flakes. Until I saw the real thing, I imagined snow as a curtain of fancy shapes, stiff and flat and possible to capture in my hand.

My sisters and brothers studied the books, too, and we read the words aloud to one another, guessing at the pronunciation.

"Ehr-RAHS-ser," we said for *eraser*. "Keh-NEEF-eh," for *knife*. "Dees" for *this* and "dem" for *them* and "dunt" for *don't*.

In school, I listened for words that sounded like those I'd read the night before. But spoken English, unlike Spanish, wasn't pronounced as written. *Water* became "waddah," *work* was "woik," and words ran into each other in a torrent of confusing sounds that bore no resemblance to the neatly organized letters on the pages of books. In class, I seldom raised my hand, because my accent sent snickers through the classroom the minute I opened my mouth.

Delsa, who had the same problem, suggested that we speak English at home. At first, we broke into giggles whenever we spoke English to each other. Our faces contorted into grimaces, our voices changed as our tongues flapped in our mouths trying to form the awkward sounds. But as the rest of the kids joined us and we practiced between ourselves, it became easier and we didn't laugh as hard. We invented words if we didn't know the translation for what we were trying to say, until we had our own language, neither English nor Spanish, but both in the same sentence, sometimes in the same word.

"Passing me *esa sabanation*," Hector called to Edna, asking her to pass a blanket.

"Stop molestationing me," Edna snapped at Norma when she bothered her.

We watched television with the sound on, despite Tata's complaints that hearing so much English gave her a headache. Slowly, as our vocabularies grew, it became a bond between us, one that separated us from Tata and from Mami, who watched us perplexed, her expression changing from pride to envy to worry.

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