

WHEN I WAS PUERTO RICAN

by
ESMERALDA
SANTIAGO

A girl gets an audition that could change her life

The Story So Far Esmeralda Santiago moved to Brooklyn from Puerto Rico with her mother and several of her brothers and sisters when she was 13, leaving behind her father and life in the country. After being assigned to a class for kids with learning disabilities because she cannot speak English well, she decides that Brooklyn is not the place for her. When her family moves and she changes schools, she is given the chance to write her own ticket.

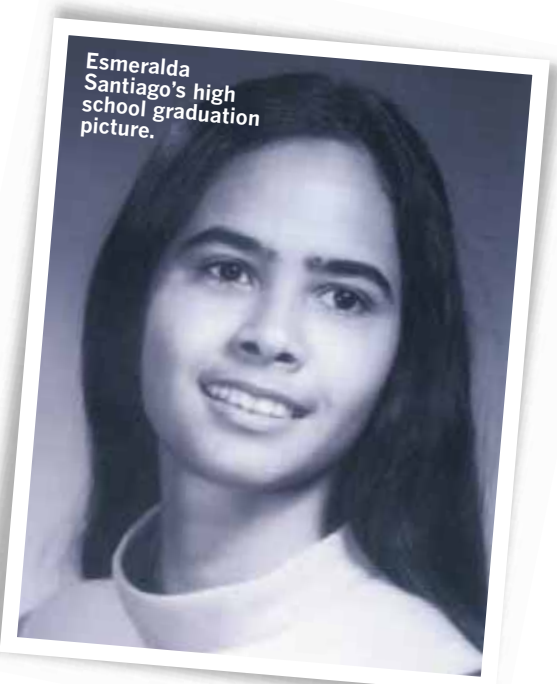
WHILE FRANCISCO WAS STILL ALIVE, WE HAD MOVED TO ELLERY STREET. That meant I had to change schools, so Mami walked me to P.S. 33, where I would attend ninth grade. The first week I was there I was given a series of tests that showed that even though I couldn't speak English very well, I read and wrote it at the tenth-grade level. So they put me in 9-3, with the smart kids.

One morning, Mr. Barone, a guidance counselor, called me to his office. He was short, with a big head and large hazel eyes under shapely eyebrows. His nose was long and round at the tip. He dressed in browns and yellows and often perched his tortoiseshell glasses on his forehead, as if he had another set of eyes up there.

"So," he pushed his glasses up, "what do you want to be when you grow up?"

"I don't know."

He shuffled through some papers. "Let's see here . . . you're fourteen, is that right?"



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“Yes, sir.”

“And you’ve never thought about what you want to be?”

When I was very young, I wanted to be a jíbara. When I was older, I wanted to be a cartographer, then a topographer. But since we’d come to Brooklyn, I’d not thought about the future much.

“No, sir.”

He pulled his glasses down to where they belonged and shuffled through the papers again.

“Do you have any hobbies?” I didn’t know what he meant. “Hobbies, hobbies,” he flailed his hands, as if he were juggling, “things you like to do after school.”

“Ah, yes.” I tried to imagine what I did at home that might qualify as a hobby. “I like to read.”

He seemed disappointed. “Yes, we know that about you.” He pulled out a paper and stared at it. “One of the tests we gave you was an aptitude test. It tells us what kinds of things you might be good at. The tests show that you would be good at helping people. Do you like to help people?”

I was afraid to contradict the tests. “Yes, sir.”

“There’s a high school we can send you where you can study biology and chemistry which will prepare you for a career in nursing.”

I screwed up my face. He consulted the papers again.

“You would also do well in communications. Teaching maybe.”

I remembered Miss Brown standing in front of a classroom full of rowdy teenagers, some of them taller than she was.

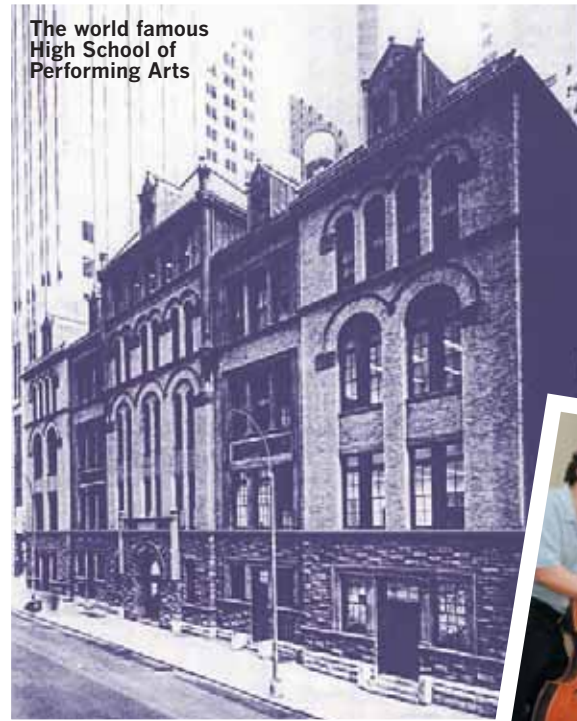
“I don’t like to teach.”

Mr. Barone pushed his glasses up again and leaned over the stack of papers on his desk. “Why don’t you think about it and get back to me,” he said, closing the folder with my name across the top. He put his hand flat on it, as if squeezing something out. “You’re a smart girl, Esmeralda. Let’s try to get you into an academic school so that you have a shot at college.”

On the way home, I walked with another new ninth grader, Yolanda. She had been in New York for three years

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The world famous
High School of
Performing Arts



Student dancers



but knew as little English as I did. We spoke in Spanglish, a combination of English and Spanish in which we hopped from one language to the other depending on which word came first.

“Te preguntó el Mr. Barone, you know, lo que querías hacer when you grow up?” I asked.

“Sí, pero, I didn’t know. ¿Y tú?”

“Yo tampoco. He said, que I like to help people. Pero, you know, a mí no me gusta mucho la gente.” When she heard me say I didn’t like people much, Yolanda looked at me from the corner of her eye, waiting to become the exception.

By the time I said it, she had dashed up the stairs of her building. She didn’t wave as she ducked in, and the next day

SCHOOL: ALUMNI & FRIENDS OF LAGUARDIA HIGH SCHOOL; BOTH INTERIOR PHOTOS: ©MICHAEL S. YAMASHITA/CORBIS

she wasn't friendly. I walked around the rest of the day in embarrassed isolation, knowing that somehow I had given myself away to the only friend I'd made at Junior High School 33. I had to either take back my words or live with the consequences of stating what was becoming the truth. I'd never said that to anyone, not even to myself. It was an added weight, but I wasn't about to trade it for companionship.

A FEW DAYS LATER, MR. BARONE CALLED ME BACK TO HIS OFFICE.

"Well?" Tiny green flecks burned around the black pupils of his hazel eyes.

The night before, Mami had called us into the living room. On the television "fifty of America's most beautiful girls" paraded in ruffled tulle dresses before a tinsel waterfall.

"Aren't they lovely?"

Mami murmured, as the girls, escorted by boys in uniform, floated by the camera, twirled, and disappeared behind a screen to the strains of a waltz and an announcer's dramatic voice calling their names, ages, and states. Mami sat mesmerized through the whole pageant.

"I'd like to be a model," I said to Mr. Barone.

He stared at me, pulled his glasses down from his forehead, looked at the papers inside the folder with my name on it, and glared. "A model?"

His voice was gruff, as if he were more comfortable yelling at people than talking to them.

"I want to be on television."

"Oh, then you want to be an actress," in a tone that said this was only a slight improvement over my first career choice. We stared at one another for a few seconds. He pushed his glasses up to his forehead again and reached for a book on the shelf in back of him. "I only know of one school that trains actresses, but we've never sent them a student from here."

"I'm not afraid . . . I'm not afraid . . . I'm not afraid." Every day I walked home from school repeating those words.

Performing Arts, the write-up said, was an academic, as opposed to a vocational, public school that trained students wishing to pursue a career in theater, music, and dance.

"It says here that you have to audition." He stood up and held the book closer to the faint gray light coming through the narrow window high on his wall. "Have you ever performed in front of an audience?"

"I was an announcer in my school show in Puerto Rico," I said. "And I recite poetry. There, not here."

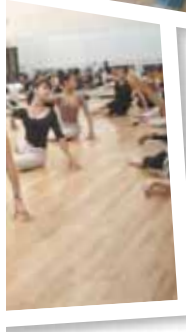
He closed the book and held it against his chest. His right index finger thumped a rhythm on his lower lip. "Let me call them and find out exactly what you need to do. Then we can talk some more."

I left his office strangely happy, confident that something good had just happened, not knowing exactly what.

"I'M NOT AFRAID . . . I'M NOT AFRAID . . . I'M NOT AFRAID."

Every day I walked home from school repeating those words. The broad streets and sidewalks that had impressed me so on the first day we had arrived had become as familiar as the dirt road from Macún to the highway. Only my curiosity about the people who lived behind these walls ended where the façades of the buildings opened into dark hallways or locked doors. Nothing good, I imagined, could be happening inside if so many locks had to be breached to go in or step out.

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It was on these tense walks home from school that I decided I had to get out of Brooklyn. Mami had chosen this as our home, and just like every other time we'd moved, I'd had to go along with her because I was a child who had no choice. But I wasn't willing to go along with her on this one.

"How can people live like this?" I shrieked once, desperate to run across a field, to feel grass under my feet instead of pavement.

"Like what?" Mami asked, looking around our apartment, the kitchen and living room crisscrossed with sagging lines of drying diapers and bedclothes.

"Everyone on top of each other. No room to do anything. No air."

"Do you want to go back to Macún, to live like savages, with no electricity, no toilets . . ."

"At least you could step outside every day without somebody trying to kill you."

"Ay, Negi, stop exaggerating!"

"I hate my life!" I yelled.

"Then do something about it," she yelled back.

Until Mr. Barone showed me the listing for Performing Arts High School, I hadn't known what to do.

The auditions are in less than a month. You have to learn a monologue, which you will perform in front of a panel. If you do well, and your grades here are good, you might get into the school."

Mr. Barone took charge of preparing me for my audition to Performing Arts. He selected a speech from *The Silver Cord*, a play by Sidney Howard, first performed in 1926, but whose action took place in a New York drawing room circa 1905.

"Mr. Gatti, the English teacher," he said, "will coach you. . . . And Mrs. Johnson will talk to you about what to wear and things like that."

I was to play Christina, a young married woman confronting her mother-in-law. I learned the monologue phonetically from Mr. Gatti. It opened with "You belong to a type that's very common in this country, Mrs. Phelps—a type of self-centered, self-pitying, son-devouring tigress, with unmentionable proclivities suppressed on the side."

"We don't have time to study the meaning of every word," Mr. Gatti said. "Just make sure you pronounce every word correctly."

Mrs. Johnson, who taught Home Economics, called me to her office.

"Is that how you enter a room?" she asked the minute I came in. "Try again, only this time, don't barge in. Step in slowly, head up, back straight, a nice smile on your face. That's it." I took a deep breath and waited. "Now sit. No, not like that. Don't just plop down. Float down to the chair with your knees together." She demonstrated, and I copied her. "That's better. What do you do with your hands? No, don't hold your chin like that; it's not ladylike. Put your hands on your lap, and leave them there. Don't use them so much when you talk."

I sat stiff as a cutout while Mrs. Johnson and Mr. Barone asked me questions they thought the panel at Performing Arts would ask.

"Where are you from?"

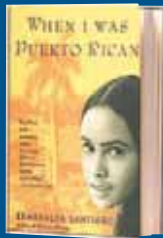
"Puerto Rico."

"No," Mrs. Johnson said, "Porto Rico. Keep your r's soft. Try again."

"Do you have any hobbies?" Mr. Barone asked. Now I knew what to answer.

"I enjoy dancing and the movies."

LC Book Club Questions



START YOUR OWN BOOK CLUB. HERE ARE SOME QUESTIONS TO GET YOU STARTED...

- 1 When Santiago meets with Mr. Barone, she tells him that she wants to be a model. Does she mean it literally? What does that tell us about her aspirations?
- 2 Why is Santiago so driven to leave Brooklyn? Do you think she herself knows why?
- 3 Is Santiago conflicted about becoming more "American?" What do you think becoming more American means to her?

“Why do you want to come to this school?” Mrs. Johnson and Mr. Barone had worked on my answer if this question should come up.

“I would like to study at Performing Arts because of its academic program and so that I may be trained as an actress.”

“Very good, very good!” Mr. Barone rubbed his hands together, twinkled his eyes at Mrs. Johnson. “I think we have a shot at this.”

“Remember,” Mrs. Johnson said, “when you shop for your audition dress, look for something very simple in dark colors.”

Mami bought me a red plaid wool jumper with a crisp white shirt, my first pair of stockings, and penny loafers. The night before, she rolled up my hair in pink curlers that cut into my scalp and made it hard to sleep. For the occasion, I was allowed to wear eye makeup and a little lipstick.

“You look so grown up!” Mami said, her voice sad but happy, as I twirled in front of her and Tata.

“Toda una señorita,” Tata said, her eyes misty.

We set out for the audition on an overcast January morning heavy with the threat of snow.

“Why couldn’t you choose a school close to home?” Mami grumbled as we got on the train to Manhattan. I worried that even if I were accepted, she wouldn’t let me go because it was so far from home, one hour each way by subway. But in spite of her complaints, she was proud that I was good enough to be considered for such a famous school. And she actually seemed excited that I would be leaving the neighborhood.

“You’ll be exposed to a different class of people,” she assured me, and I felt the force of her ambition without knowing exactly what she meant.

THREE WOMEN SAT BEHIND A LONG TABLE IN A CLASSROOM where the desks and chairs had been pushed against a wall. As I entered I held my head up and smiled, and then I floated down to the chair in front of them, clasped my hands on my lap, and smiled some more.

“Good morning,” said the tall one with hair the color of sand. She was big boned and solid, with intense blue eyes, a generous mouth, and soothing hands with short fingernails. She was dressed in shades of beige from head to toe and wore

no makeup and no jewelry except for the gold chain that held her glasses just above her full bosom. Her voice was rich, modulated, each word pronounced as if she were inventing it.

Next to her sat a very small woman with very high heels. Her cropped hair was pouffed around her face, with bangs brushing the tips of her long false lashes, her huge dark brown eyes were thickly lined in black all around, and her small mouth was carefully drawn in and painted cerise. Her suntanned face turned toward me with the innocent curiosity of a lively baby. She was dressed in black, with many gold chains around her neck, big earrings, several bracelets, and large stone rings on the fingers of both hands.

The third woman was tall, small boned, thin, but shapely. Her dark hair was pulled flat against her skull into a knot in back of her head. Her face was all angles and light, with fawnlike dark brown eyes, a straight nose, full lips painted just a shade pinker than their natural color. Silky forest green cuffs peeked out from the sleeves of her burgundy suit. Diamond studs winked from perfect earlobes.

I had dreamed of this moment for several weeks. More than anything, I wanted to impress the panel with my talent, so that I would be accepted into Performing Arts and leave Brooklyn

But the moment I faced these three impeccably groomed women, I forgot my English and Mrs. Johnson’s lessons on how to behave like a lady.

MEET THE AUTHOR: Esmeralda Santiago

BORN

Puerto Rico

LIVES

Westchester County, N.Y.

EDUCATION

Harvard University, Sarah Lawrence College

STATUS

Married, 2 children

DAY JOB

Owns Cantomedia, a film production company

OTHER WORK

America’s Dream (1996), *Almost A Woman* (1998)

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20 Minute Essay

>>TAKE 20 MINUTES TO PLAN AND WRITE AN ESSAY BASED ON THE FOLLOWING: "I had failed the audition and would never, ever get out of Brooklyn." Why does Santiago feel this way? Can you relate to this sentiment? Have you ever been in a position like this?

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every day. And, I hoped, one day I would never go back.

But the moment I faced these three impeccably groomed women, I forgot my English and Mrs. Johnson's lessons on how to behave like a lady. In the agony of trying to answer their barely comprehensible questions, I jabbed my hands here and there, forming words with my fingers because the words refused to leave my mouth.

"Why don't you let us hear your monologue now?" the woman with the dangling glasses asked softly.

I stood up abruptly, and my chair clattered onto its side two feet from where I stood. I picked it up, wishing with all my strength that a thunderbolt would strike me dead to ashes on the spot.

"It's all right," she said. "Take a deep breath. We know you're nervous."

I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, walked to the middle of the room and began my monologue.

"Ju bee lonh 2 a type dats berry cómo in dis kuntree, Meessee Felps. A type off selfcent red self pee tee in sun de boring tie gress wid on men shon ah ball pro klee bee tees on de side."

In spite of Mr. Gatti's reminders that I should speak slowly and enunciate every word, even if I didn't understand it, I recited my three-minute monologue in one minute flat.

The small woman's long lashes seemed to have grown with

Before long I had forgotten where I was, and that the tree didn't exist and Bonnie was not my sister.

amazement. The elegant woman's serene face twitched with controlled laughter. The tall one dressed in beige smiled sweetly.

"Thank you, dear," she said. "Could you wait outside for a few moments?"

I resisted the urge to curtsy. The long hallway had narrow wainscoting halfway up to the high ceiling. Single bulb lamps hung from long cords, creating yellow puddles of light on the polished brown linoleum tile. A couple of girls my age sat on straight chairs next to their mothers, waiting their turn. They looked up as I came out and the door shut behind me. Mami stood up from her chair at the end of the hall. She looked as scared as I felt.

"What happened?"

"Nothing," I mumbled, afraid that if I began telling her about it, I would break into tears in front of the other people, whose eyes followed me and Mami as we walked to the EXIT sign. "I have to wait here a minute."

"Did they say anything?"

"No. I'm just supposed to wait."

We leaned against the wall. Across from us there was a bulletin board with newspaper clippings about former students. On the ragged edge, a neat person had printed in blue ink, "P.A." and the year the actor, dancer, or musician had graduated. I closed my eyes and tried to picture myself on that bulletin board, with "P.A. '66" across the top.

The door at the end of the hall opened, and the woman in beige poked her head out.

"Esmeralda?"

"Sí, I mean, here." I raised my hand.

She led me into the room. There was another girl in there, whom she introduced as Bonnie, a junior at the school.

"Do you know what a pantomime is?" the woman asked. I nodded. "You and Bonnie are sisters decorating a Christmas tree."

Bonnie looked a lot like Juanita Marín, whom I had last seen in Macún four years earlier. We decided where the invisible Christmas tree would be, and we sat on the floor and pretended we were taking decorations out of boxes and hanging them on the branches.

My family had never had a Christmas tree, but I remembered how once I had helped Papi wind colored lights around the eggplant bush that divided our land from Doña Ana's. We started at the bottom and wound the wire with tiny red bulbs around and around until we ran out; then Papi plugged another cord to it and we kept going until the branches hung heavy with light and the bush looked like it was on fire.

Before long I had forgotten where I was, and that the tree didn't exist and Bonnie was not my sister. She pretended to hand me a very delicate ball, and just before I took it, she made like it fell to the ground and shattered. I was petrified that Mami would come in and yell at us for breaking her favorite decoration. Just as I began to pick up the tiny fragments of nonexistent crystal, a voice broke in. "Thank you."

Bonnie got up, smiled, and went out.

The elegant woman stretched her hand out for me to shake.

"We will notify your school in a few weeks. It was very nice to meet you."

I shook hands all around then backed out of the room in a fog, silent, as if the pantomime had taken my voice and the urge to speak.

On the way home Mami kept asking what had happened, and I kept mumbling, "Nothing. Nothing happened," ashamed that, after all the hours of practice with Mrs. Johnson, Mr. Barone, and Mr. Gatti, after the expense

of new clothes and shoes, after Mami had to take a day off work to take me into Manhattan, after all that, I had failed the audition and would never, ever, get out of Brooklyn.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

Esmeralda Santiago was accepted to The High School of Performing Arts, despite her worst fears. In the epilogue of *When I Was Puerto Rican*, it is 13 years later, and Santiago returns to visit Performing Arts while on a break from Harvard University. One of her favorite teachers, who attended her audition, told her how funny it had been "to see a 14-year-old Puerto Rican girl jabbering out a monologue about a possessive mother-in-law at the turn of the century, the words incomprehensible because they went by so fast." She also tells Esmeralda, "We admired . . . the courage it took to stand in front of us and do what you did." ■

THE HIGH SCHOOL OF PERFORMING ARTS



Does this look like your high school? Students rock out in *Fame* (1980).

IN 1980, NEW YORK CITY'S High School of the Performing Arts became the subject of the Academy Award-winning movie *Fame*. The movie, starring Irene Cara as Coco, Lee Curreri as Bruno, Barry Miller as Raul, and Paul McCrane as Montgomery (Dr. Romano on *ER*), chronicled the lives of students at the school from audition to graduation. The movie spawned a hit TV series that ran from 1982-1987. The school is now known as the Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music and Art and the Performing Arts, and it is located in New York City. For more information about the school, which provides high school students with professional training in the areas of art, drama, dance, and music, visit www.laguardiahhs.com.

Famous Alumni

LOOK WHO WENT TO THE FAME SCHOOL! THESE ARE JUST A FEW OF THE SCHOOL'S MOST FAMOUS FORMER STUDENTS



Jennifer Aniston
Friends (1994-present),
The Good Girl (2002)



Marlon Wayans
Scary Movie 1 & 2, (2000, 2001),
Requiem for a Dream (2000)



Ron Eldard
Ghost Ship (2002),
Black Hawk Down (2001),
ER (1995-1997)



Suzanne Vega
Singer/songwriter,
recording artist,
composer



Adrien Brody
Winner of an
Academy Award
for *The Pianist*
(2002)