

1992

Other People's Homes

Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/seeds>
University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Work is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in SEEDS: The Literary Journal of the Sisters of Color by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Milanés, Cecilia Rodríguez (1992) "Other People's Homes," *SEEDS: The Literary Journal of the Sisters of Color*. Vol. 2, Article 15.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/seeds/vol2/iss1/15>

Other People's Homes

My mother didn't like for me to go into other people's homes. I never understood it until she broke her own rule. It all started with my father. He used to work in a bus depot. I'm not sure what his job was but I remember he used to bring home all sorts of things that people had left on buses—umbrellas (we had tons of them), magazines, books, sometimes jackets or sweaters. To this day I guess what he did involved cleaning buses.

Where my father worked was in Jersey City; he had the night shift. My mother worked days sewing. They traded off taking care of me and my brother, Carlos, who is younger than me. Sometimes my mother would drop my brother off at my father's job so that he could hang out with him and "See where papi worked." It was a greasy dark place. Diesel stink everywhere. Buses parked close together all around. My father and brother would eat take out food together—usually Chinese pepper steak. Mom and me would go do errands and end up eating at a counter somewhere in McKinley Square. These were the times when we ate something my mother would never cook like fried chicken or salisbury steak or something weird like that. When we were done going to the bank or the bodega latina, mami and me would pick Carlos up. He was always sheepish after his dinners with papi (I didn't know what sheepish was then but when I learned the word, I knew that it was exactly how my brother looked those times). I didn't feel cheated though. I didn't like being around all that grease and oil. I liked going into the empty buses and running up and down the aisles or sitting up front behind the invisible bus driver. I got to do these things anyway when we'd drop Carlos off so I didn't mind going off with mami while he and papi ate with the "guys."

One of the guys my father worked with was named Al. I think he was a mechanic and he worked the same shift as papi. Apparently they became friends—as much as this was possible because my father's English was very broken and Al couldn't even try talking with him in Italian like some of the other guys because he was Polish (I remember this because his last name ended in "ski"). Al lived down the shore and commuted into the city everyday. Al was always telling my father about his house and boat and how we should all go down there one weekend and stay over and go swimming. He invited us so many times that my father got around to telling mami. One night while we were eating dinner papi said, "Vamos, Julia, what harm could be done?" My eyes stuck low to the kitchen table. I saw my brother sticking green beans under his plate. Mami sighed as she lifted Carlos' plate and said, "Esta bien, Manolo, if you have your heart set on it, we'll go."

We left our small third floor apartment early on a Saturday morning one summer day. The drive from the city to the shore was long and hot as we left the smokestacks, oil refineries and pumping stations behind us along the turnpike. Heat trapped pollution over the sky obscuring the tall buildings of downtown. Approaching the shore there was more and more land around. Where we lived there weren't too many empty lots around. Down there, wide open spaces of land with grasses, trees, swamps and rivers spread out on each side of the car.

We arrived at Al's house around noon. The first thing I noticed was that they had a mailbox. I knew what it was, of course, but I was surprised anyway. Our mail was deposited in a little metal door with a slit next to

seven other metal doors in the front hall. As soon as we went inside, Al's wife had us sit down in the dining area and eat the tunafish sandwiches she had prepared for us. My brother made a face but Mami lifted her eyebrows and he bit into the sandwich with his eyes closed. While we ate, they told us how they had planned the day—a ride out on the boat, maybe some fishing or swimming and a barbecue later. I stared up at the high ceiling. Wood beams met in an upside down V. The walls were covered with wood paneling and there was a soft cushiony rug beneath us. They had two sofas, one facing the other and a large strange driftwood lamp in the corner. On the wall directly opposite me there was a large map of the United States. I looked and looked for Jersey City but New Jersey was so small compared to the other states that I satisfied myself in finding New York City. There was only one other picture on the remaining walls: this one small but in a fancy gold frame, a seaside scene. I glanced toward the kitchen and saw a long counter with four swirling barstools pulled up to it. Their refrigerator even had a water and ice dispenser in the door. My mother noticed me looking around and told me, quietly, to finish my lunch.

They had two boys around my brother's and my age. They were pretty typical, I think, of North American boys—dirty blonde hair, light eyes and assertive. Before the introductions were all done the younger one asked Carlos if he wanted to play with his hot wheels track set. They were off before my mother could tell him in Spanish not to touch anything. The older boy, about ten, told me he had just gotten a chemistry set. My mother quickly shot me a threatening look lest I go with him but after she caught sight of papi nodding she changed her face to mean "watch yourself." Each boy had his own room. The one I went with, I think his name was Ethan or Josh, a name my parents could not pronounce, his room had bunk beds. At first I was confused because I hadn't seen any other children around. When I asked, Ethan or Josh said that he had friends sleep over all the time. None of my friends slept over nor was I ever allowed to sleep over, anywhere.

Ethan or Josh was eager to show me the vials and powders and liquids. I was more interested in the model airplanes hanging from the ceiling and the human anatomical doll. The body had exposed muscles on parts and you could pull pieces off to see the bones and organs and veins. Ethan or Josh got bored with me pretty soon and grabbed a football and asked if I knew how to play. I lied and said no because I wanted to stay and look at all the books lined up above his desk; he even had his own lamp. He left and I ventured up into the top bunk. My mother came in to check on me and made me get down and go outside "to see the canal behind the house."

Carlos and Scott (the younger one's name was easier to remember because one of the black kids in my class was named Scott Williams) were vrooming and crashing cars in the next room. They were pretty angry at being told to put the toys up and come outside. Al had a boat tied to a post out back. Their yard had no grass but white gravel instead; placed all around were anchors, nets and buoys. Carlos and me almost immediately began throwing rocks in the water and Al's sons laughed at us. My dad and Al went into the boat and there was still room for all of us. Besides the Staten Island ferry this was the biggest boat we had been in. It had a canvas top and my mother and Al's wife sat underneath it to avoid the sun. Mami and Mary, that's Al's wife, had handkerchiefs tied on their heads so their hairdos wouldn't get messed up. We children were told to sit down and stay down as the men untied the boat and revved the engine. We took a leisurely ride,

looking at all the houses lining the wide canal. We entered a small bay where we got gas, bait and sodas. My father was the only one who caught a fish and Al pat him hard on the back and said that he brought him bad luck and wouldn't invite him fishing anymore. They all laughed and my father had a wide grin for the rest of the night.

I got to sleep on the top bunk while my brother slept on the bottom bunk in Ethan/Josh's room. Ethan/Josh slept in a sleeping bag in Scott's room. I had never seen one before. One of the sofas opened up into a bed and my parents slept there though Al and Mary offered them their bed but my mother wouldn't have it.

The next day we drove to a beach nearby and stayed there long enough for our noses to get red. My mother wanted to go home before lunch but Al talked my parents into staying for a barbecue. They made hot dogs, hamburgers and corn on the cob. We were in the yard sitting on benches at a wooden table when my brother asked for rice. Scott passed him a bowl full of cole slaw and said, "We don't eat rice at barbecues, you dummy." I thought my mother would slap him because her face got all red. The brothers laughed and then their parents and finally my parents joined in but I could tell they didn't think it was too funny. Later Mary gave us all Good Humor ice cream bars. We didn't leave until dark so on the way back I didn't get to see the big open spaces, just little lights in the river as the boats steered along. Darkness hid the grasses.

When we got home the apartment felt all wrong. The picture of Santa Barbara with her shelf of candles and apples seemed to take up the whole wall. The plastic covered lampshade looked tacky (another word I learned later). The refrigerator's single door seemed ancient. That night I fell asleep preoccupied with thoughts of rearranging the furniture in the living room. Maybe putting the sofa in the middle of the room and the t.v. against a different wall would make everything right. I woke up the next day and stared out the window over my bed which faced the next apartment building's side wall a few feet away. I realized then that the screen was thick with grime because it hadn't been cleaned since all the windows were painted shut. I leaned over to one side, cocking my head to see our backyard. It seemed too closed to share with seven other families. My eyes fixed on an overgrown thorn bush, the only adornment in that narrow rectangle of dirt. I had not noticed before.

Cecilia Rodríguez Milanes