

Rosa vs Evelyn

“Want some more café?”
Oh, for heaven’s sake. Why did Mami always have to be so beggy?¹

I hated that beggy voice of hers. She sounded like a slave. [...] “You have to eat something before you go to your first day at work.” I couldn’t believe it. Going to work at the five-and-dime² was exactly what she was mad at me about. She had wanted me to work in the *bodega* for the whole summer – but it wasn’t my grocery store.

It was hers and my stepfather’s. Working all of July in that store that smelled like *bacalao*³, the world’s smelliest fish even when it was fresh, and listening to old people talk about Puerto Rico as they watched Telemundo on television, was enough, thank you! [...] Pops busted into my room.

“What are you doing?” he shouted. “You should be helping your mother.”

My stepfather had been acting super parental lately. I just looked at him.

“I want you to take out the garbage. If you can’t help in the *bodega*, you can help more in the house! In Puerto Rico, a young girl knows her place. Knows that she should help her mother. What are you, a hippie?”

Pops had an issue with hippies.

“¡Malcriados sinvergüenzas! Shameless spoiled kids,” he called them. Before I could answer, my mother stepped in behind Pops, saying, “That’s okay. I’ll take out the garbage.”

My mother the slave was all I could think. [...]

“Rosa, do you –”

“Evelyn, Mami, remember?” I yelled, correcting her. Ever since my fourteenth birthday last month, I told everybody I wanted to be called Evelyn. My full name is Rosa María Evelyn del Carmen Serrano. But I shortened it. *El Barrio*, Spanish Harlem, USA, did not need another Rosa, María, or Carmen.

The boys in our neighborhood always joked by calling out “Hey, María” every time they saw a group of girls together. They were sure *one* of us would look their way. They were right. That’s why I cut off half my name and chose Evelyn – it was the least Puerto Rican-sounding name I could have.

Sonia MANZANO, *The Revolution of Evelyn Serrano*, 2014

1. beg: supplier 2. a store with cheap items 3. morue

Text 2 A new identity

We never went back to Panamá, not even for a visit. It would have taken us forever to save enough money for plane tickets. Besides, my dad never wanted to take time off from his job. He probably could’ve asked for a few days of vacation time, but even after years of being there, making omelets and flipping pancakes, he knew – we all knew – that he was on the low end of the food chain. He could be replaced in a heartbeat. He didn’t want to risk it.

Because of that, we’d missed my *tía* Gloria’s wedding, which she’d had on a hillside in Boquete. [...]

We almost went back for my dad’s high school reunion, which my dad somehow got into his head that he didn’t want to miss. [...]

My mom was excited about the trip as I don’t know what.

[...] A few weeks before the reunion, my dad called the number on the invitation to RSVP¹. The guy who answered had been the class president. He and my dad joked around for a minute and then my dad told the guy we were coming. According to what my dad told us later, the guy said, “We’ll roll out the red carpet, then.” When my dad asked him what he

meant by that, the guy said that my dad would have to forgive him if the party wasn’t up to my dad’s standards. “We didn’t know the gringo² royalty was coming. We’ll have to get the place repainted before you arrive.” When my dad asked again what the guy was talking about, the guy said he hoped my dad didn’t expect them all to kiss his feet now and reminded my dad how humble Panamá was. It didn’t take long for my dad to slam the phone down. He stormed over to my mom, who was washing dishes, and said, “We’re not going. If that’s what they think, then we’re not going.”

My mom said, “What?”

“They think we’re Americans now. And maybe we are! Maybe we don’t belong there anymore after all.”

Cristina HENRIQUEZ, *The Book of Unknown Americans*, 2014

1. Répondez, s’il vous plaît 2. American (péjoratif)

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EVELYN SERRANO