

LOS ANGELES, 1954

by Carol Clark Ottesen

Los Angeles, 1954. We rent the small attic of a house near the University of Southern California owned by the widow Hernandez who does not speak English and communicates in sign language when I pay the rent or tell her the sink is stopped up or that we must do something about the cockroaches. Our rooms often smell like chilies and refried beans, and the music of the Spanish language echoes through the heating vents. For the first time in our lives we try Mexican food and love it because it is exotic, but mostly because it is cheap.

We are the only whites on the block and if I did not have the baby, I would feel isolated. People smile at the baby when I go out with the stroller but they do not smile when I am alone. An old black man folded in an ancient upholstered chair with the stuffing coming out waves to me every day from his porch. Once I bring the baby to him and he takes him on his lap. "Mighty fine, mighty fine." This is my first friend here, and I begin to feel this neighborhood is home. I am young and naive, not afraid when my husband works nights, but he is afraid for me and keeps a loaded gun under the mattress.

1993

Pair work

1. Describe the neighborhood, its people and its atmosphere.
2. Try to imagine an ordinary day for the narrator.
3. Why do you think the narrator lives in this neighborhood?
4. The narrator says the following about herself: "I am young and naive..." Can you see any further evidence of this elsewhere in the text?
5. The narrator's husband obviously believes that the neighborhood is dangerous. Do you think this is the case? Does the text give the reader any hints that he might be right?
6. Can such a short text really give you an impression of a neighborhood and its people?
7. What is the mood of the text? Is the narrator, for example, a happy person?
8. Is there a message in this text? Is the author trying to teach the reader something?
9. This piece of writing was published in 1993. Why do you think it is written in the present tense? Would the text be different if it were in the past tense?
10. What do you think the future holds for this little family?
11. Do you like this text? Why/why not?



Written work



1. Imagine you are the narrator of this story. Write a letter to your parents about:
 - a. the neighborhood
 - b. its people
 - c. the baby
 - d. your husband
 - e. Mexican food
2. Rewrite the text in the past tense. Write a short comment explaining which of the two versions you like best.
3. Imagine you are the widow Hernandez. Write a letter to your sister in which you describe the family that is renting your small attic.