



## Daughter of Invention (1991)

Julia Alvarez

From *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*

For a period after they arrived in this country, Laura Garcia tried to invent something. Her ideas always came after the sightseeing visits she took with her daughters to department stores to see the wonders of this new country. On his free Sundays, Carlos carted the girls off to the Statue of Liberty or the Brooklyn Bridge or Rockefeller Center, but as far as Laura was concerned, these were men's wonders. Down in housewares were the true treasures women were after.

Laura and her daughters would take the escalator, marveling at the moving staircase, she teasing them that this might be the ladder Jacob saw with angels moving up and down to heaven. The moment they lingered by a display, a perky saleslady approached, no doubt thinking a young mother with four girls in tow fit the perfect profile for the new refrigerator with automatic defrost or the heavy duty washing machine with the prewash soak cycle. Laura paid close attention during the demonstrations, asking intelligent questions, but at the last minute saying she would talk it over with her husband. On the drive home, try as they might, her daughters could not engage their mother in conversation, for inspired by what she had just seen, Laura had begun inventing.

She never put anything actual on paper until she had settled her house down at night. On his side of the bed her husband would be conked out for an hour already, his Spanish newspapers draped over his chest, his glasses propped up on his bedside table, looking out eerily at the darkened room like a disembodied bodyguard. In her lighted corner, pillows propped behind her, Laura sat up inventing. On her lap lay one of those innumerable pads of paper her husband brought home from his office, compliments of some pharmaceutical company, advertising tranquilizers or antibiotics or skin cream. She would be working on a sketch of something familiar but drawn at such close range so she could attach a special nozzle or handle, the thing looked peculiar. Her daughters would giggle over the odd doodles they found in kitchen drawers or on the back shelf of the downstairs toilet. Once Yoyo was sure her mother had drawn a picture of a man's you-know-what; she showed her sisters her find, and with coy, posed faces they inquired of their mother what she was up to. Ay, that was one of her failures, she explained to them, a child's double compartment drinking glass with an outsized, built-in straw.

Her daughters would seek her out at night when she

seemed to have a moment to talk to them: they were having trouble at school or they wanted her to persuade their father to give them permission to go into the city or to a shopping mall or a movie—in broad daylight, Mami! Laura would wave them out of her room. "The problem with you girls . . ." The problem boiled down to the fact that they wanted to become Americans and their father—and their mother, too, at first—would have none of it.

"You girls are going to drive me crazy!" she threatened, if they kept nagging. "When I end up in Bellevue, you'll be safely sorry!"

She spoke in English when she argued with them. And her English was a mishmash of mixed-up idioms and sayings that showed she was "green behind the ears," as she called it.

If her husband insisted she speak in Spanish to the girls so they wouldn't forget their native tongue, she'd snap, "When in Rome, do unto the Romans."

Yoyo, the Big Mouth, had become the spokesman for her sisters, and she stood her ground in that bedroom. "We're not going to that school anymore, Mami!"

"You have to." Her eyes would widen with worry. "In this country, it is against the law not to go to school. You want us to get thrown out?"

"You want us to get killed? Those kids were throwing stones today!"

"Sticks and stones don't break bones," she chanted. Yoyo could tell, though, by the look on her face, it was as if one of those stones the kids had aimed at her daughters had hit her. But she always pretended they were at fault. "What did you do to provoke them? It takes two to tangle, You know."

"Thanks, thanks a lot, Momi!" Yoyo stormed out of that room and into her own. Her daughters never called her Mom except when they wanted her to feel how much she had failed them in this country. She was a good enough Mami, fussing and scolding and giving advice, but a terrible girlfriend parent, a real failure of a Mom.

Back she went to her pencil and pad, scribbling and tsking and tearing off sheets, finally giving up, and taking up her New York Times. Some nights, though, if she got a good idea, she rushed into Yoyo's room, a flushed look on her face, her tablet of paper in her hand, a cursory knock on the door she'd just thrown open. "Do I have something to show you, Cuquital!" This was Yoyo's time to herself, after she finished her homework while her sisters were still downstairs watching TV in the basement. Hunched over her small desk, the overhead light turned off, her desk lamp

poignantly lighting only her paper, the rest of the room in warm, soft, un-created darkness, she wrote her secret poems in her new language.

"You're going to ruin your eyes!" Laura began, snapping on the overly bright overhead light, scaring off whatever shy passion Yoyo, with the blue thread of her writing, had just begun coaxing out of a labyrinth of feelings.

"Oh, Mami!" Yoyo cried out, her eyes blinking up at her mother, "I'm writing."

"Ay Cuquita." This was her communal pet name for whoever was in her favor, "Cuquita, when I make a million, I'll buy you your very own typewriter." (Yoyo had been nagging her mother for one just like the one her father had bought to do his order forms at home.) "Gravy on the turkey" was what she called it when someone was buttering her up. She buttered and poured. "I'll hire you your very own typist."

Down she plopped on the bed and held out her pad. "Take a guess, Cuquita!" Yoyo studied the rough sketch a moment. Soap sprayed from the nozzle head of a shower when you turned the knob a certain way? Instant coffee with creamer already mixed in? Time-released water capsules for your potted plants when you were away? A key chain with a timer that would go off when your parking meter was about to expire? (The ticking would help you find your keys easily if you mislaid them.) The famous one, famous only in hindsight, was the stick person dragging a square by a rope—a suitcase with wheels? "Oh, of course," Yoyo said, humoring her. "What every household needs: a shower like a car wash, keys ticking like a bomb, luggage on a leash!" By now, it had become something of a family joke, their Thomas Edison. Mami, their Benjamin Franklin Mom.

Her face fell. "Come on now! Use your head." One more wrong guess, and she'd show Yoyo, pointing with her pencil to the different highlights of this incredible new wonder. "Remember that time we took the car to Bear Mountain, and we re-ah-lized that we had forgotten to pack an opener with our pick-a-nick!" (Her daughters kept correcting her, but she insisted this was how it should be said.) "When we were ready to eat we didn't have any way to open the refreshments cans?" (This before flip-top lids, which she claimed had crossed her mind.) "You know what this is now?" Yoyo shook her head. "Is a car bumper, but see this part is a removable can opener. So simple and yet so necessary, eh?"

"Yeah, Mami. You should patent it." Yoyo shrugged as her mother tore off the scratch paper and folded it, carefully, corner to corner, as if she were going to save it. But then, she tossed it in the wastebasket on her way out of the room and gave a little laugh like a disclaimer. "It's half of one or two dozen of another."

None of her daughters was very encouraging. They resented her spending time on those dumb inventions. Here they were trying to fit in America among Americans; they needed help figuring out who they were, why the Irish kids whose grandparents had been micks were calling them spics. Why had they come to this country in the first place? Important, crucial, final things, and here was their own mother, who didn't have a second to help them puzzle any of this out, inventing gadgets to make life easier for the American Moms.

Sometimes Yoyo challenged her. "Why, Mami? Why do it? You're never going to make money. The Americans have already thought of everything, you know that."

"Maybe not. Maybe, just maybe, there's something they've missed that's important. With patience and calm, even a burro can climb a palm." This last was one of her many Dominican sayings she had imported into her scrambled English.

"But what's the point?" Yoyo persisted.

"Point, point, does everything need a point? Why do you write poems?"

Yoyo had to admit it was her mother who had the point there. Still, in the hierarchy of things, a poem seemed much more important than a potty that played music when a toilet-training toddler went in its bowl.

They talked about it among themselves, the four girls, as they often did now about the many puzzling things in this new country.

"Better she reinvents the wheel than be on our cases all the time," the oldest, Carla, observed. In the close quarters of an American nuclear family, their mother's prodigious energy was becoming a real drain on their self-determination. Let her have a project. What harm could she do, and besides, she needed that acknowledgment. It had come to her automatically in the old country from being a *de la Torre*. "García de la Torre," Laura would enunciate carefully, giving her maiden as well as married name when they first arrived. But the blank smiles had never heard of her name. She would show them. She would prove to these Americans what a smart woman could do with a pencil and pad.

She had a near miss once. Every night, she liked to read *The New York Times* in bed before turning off her light, to see what the Americans were up to. One night, she let out a yelp to wake up her husband beside her. He sat bolt upright, reaching for his glasses which in his haste, he knocked across the room. "¿Que pasa? ¿Que pasa?" What is wrong? There was terror in his voice, the same fear she'd heard in the Dominican Republic before they left. They had been watched there; he was followed. They could not talk, of course, though they had whispered to each other in fear at night in



the dark bed. Now in America, he was safe, a success even; his Centro de Medicina in the Bronx was thronged with the sick and the homesick yearning to go home again. But in dreams, he went back to those awful days and long nights, and his wife's screams confirmed his secret fear: they had not gotten away after all; the SIM had come for them at last.

"Ay, Cucol Remember how I showed you that suitcase with little wheels so we should not have to carry those heavy bags when we traveled? Someone stole my idea and made a million!" She shook the paper in his face. "See, see! This man was no bobol!" He didn't put all his pokers on a back burner. I kept telling you, one of these days my ship would pass me by in the night!" She wagged her finger at her husband and daughters, laughing all the while, one of those eerie laughs crazy people in movies laugh. The four girls had congregated in her room. They eyed their mother and each other. Perhaps they were all thinking the same thing, wouldn't it be weird and sad if Mami did end up in Bellevue?

"¡Ya, ya!" She waved them out of her room at last. "There is no use trying to drink spilt milk, that's for sure."

It was the suitcase rollers that stopped Laura's hand; she had weather-vaned a minor brainstorm. And yet, this plagiarist had gotten all the credit, and the money. What use was it trying to compete with the Americans: they would always have the head start. It was their country, after all. Best stick close to home. She cast her slights about—her daughters ducked—and found her husband's office in need. Several days a week, dressed professionally in a white smock with a little name tag pinned on the lapel, a shopping bag full of cleaning materials and rags, she rode with her husband in his car to the Bronx. On the way, she organized the glove compartment or took off the address stickers from the magazines for the waiting room because she had read somewhere how by means of these stickers drug addict patients found out where doctors lived and burglarized their homes looking for syringes. At night, she did the books, filling in columns with how much money they had made that day. Who had time to be inventing silly things!

She did take up her pencil and pad one last time. But it was to help one of her daughters out. In ninth grade, Yoyo was chosen by her English teacher, Sister Mary Joseph, to deliver the Teacher's Day address at the school assembly. Back in the Dominican, Republic growing up, Yoyo had been a terrible student. No one could ever get her to sit down to a book.

But in New York, she needed to settle somewhere, and since the natives were unfriendly, and the country inhospitable, she took root in the language. By high school, the nuns were reading her stories and compositions out loud in English class.



But the spectre of delivering a speech brown-nosing the teachers jammed her imagination. At first she didn't want to and then she couldn't seem to write that speech. She should have thought of it as "a great honor," as her father called it. But she was mortified. She still had a slight accent, and she did not like to speak in public, subjecting herself to her classmates' ridicule. It also took no great figuring to see that to deliver a eulogy for a convent full of crazy, old, overweight nuns was no way to endear herself to her peers.

But, she didn't know how to get out of it. Night after night, she sat at her desk, hoping to polish off some quick, noncommittal little speech. But she couldn't get anything down.

The weekend before the assembly Monday morning Yoyo went into a panic. Her mother would just have to call in tomorrow and say Yoyo was in the hospital, in a coma.

Laura tried to calm her down. "Just remember how Mister Lincoln couldn't think of anything to say at the Gettysburg, but then, bang! Four score and once upon a time ago," she began reciting. "Something is going to come if you just relax. You'll see, like the Americans say, Necessity is the daughter of invention. I'll help you."

That weekend, her mother turned all her energy towards helping Yoyo write her speech. "Please, Mami, just leave me alone, please," Yoyo pleaded with her. But Yoyo would get rid of the goose only to have to contend with the gander. Her father kept poking his head in the door just to see if Yoyo had "fulfilled your obligations," a phrase he had used when the girls were younger and he'd check to see whether they had gone to the bathroom before a car trip. Several times that weekend around the supper table, he recited his own high school valedictorian speech. He gave Yoyo pointers on delivery, notes on the great orators and their tricks. (Humbleness and praise and falling silent with great emotion were his favorites.)

Laura sat across the table, the only one who seemed to be listening to him. Yoyo and her sisters were forgetting a lot of their Spanish, and their father's formal, florid diction was hard to understand. But Laura smiled softly to herself, and turned the lazy Susan at the center of the table around and around as if it were the prime mover, the

first gear of her attention.

That Sunday evening, Yoyo was reading some poetry to get herself inspired: Whitman's poems in an old book with an engraved cover her father had picked up in a thrift shop next to his office. I celebrate myself and sing myself. . . . He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher. The poet's words shocked and thrilled her. She had gotten used to the nuns, a literature of appropriate sentiments, poems with a message, expurgated texts. But here was a



flesh and blood man, belching and laughing and sweating in poems. Who touches this book touches a man.

That night, at last, she started to write, recklessly, three, five pages, looking up once only to see her father passing by the hall on tiptoe. When Yoyo was done, she red over her words, and her eyes filled. She finally sounded like herself in English!

As soon as she had finished that first draft, she called her mother to her room. Laura listened attentively while Yoyo read the speech out loud, and in the end, her eyes were glistening too. Her face was soft and warm and proud. "Ay, Yoyo, you are going to be the one to bring our name to the headlights in this country! That is a beautiful, beautiful speech I want for your father to hear it before he goes to sleep. Then I will type it for you, all right?"

Down the hall they went, mother and daughter, faces flushed with accomplishment, into the master bedroom where Carlos was propped tip on his pillows, still awake, reading the Dominican papers, already days old. Now that the dictatorship had been toppled, he had become interested in his country's fate again. The interim government was going to hold the first free elections in thirty years. History was in the making, freedom and hope were in the air again! There was still some question in his mind whether or not he might move his family back. But Laura had gotten used to the life here. She did not want to go back to the old country where, de la Torre or not, she was only a wife and a mother (and a failed one at that, since she had never provided the required son). Better an independent nobody than a high-class house slave. She did not come straight out and disagree with her husband's plans. Instead, she fussed with him about reading the papers in bed, soiling their sheets with those poorly printed, foreign tabloids. "The Times is not that bad!" she'd claim if her husband tried to humor her by saying they shared the same dirty habit.

The minute Carlos saw his wife and daughter filling in, he put his paper down, and his face brightened as if at long last his wife had delivered the son, and that was the news she was bringing him. His teeth were already grinning from the glass of water next to his bedside lamp, so he lisped when he said, "Eh-speech, eh-speech!"

"It is so beautiful, Cuco," Laura coached him, turning the sound on his TV off. She sat down at the foot of the bed. Yoyo, stood before both of them, blocking their view of the soldiers in helicopters landing amid silenced gun reports and explosions. A few weeks ago it had been the shores of the Dominican Republic. Now it was the jungles of Southeast Asia they were saving. Her mother gave her the nod to begin reading.

Yoyo didn't need much encouragement. She put her nose to the fire, as her mother would have said, and read from

start to finish without looking up. When she concluded, she was a little embarrassed at the pride she took in her own words. She pretended to quibble with a phrase or two, then looked questioningly to her mother. Laura's face was radiant. Yoyo turned to share her pride with her father.

The expression on his face shocked both mother and daughter. Carlos's toothless mouth had collapsed into a dark zero. His eyes bored into Yoyo, then shifted to Laura. In barely audible Spanish, as if secret microphones or informers were all about, he whispered to his wife, "You will permit her to read that?"

Laura's eyebrows shot up, her mouth fell open. In the old country, any whisper of a challenge to authority could bring the secret police in their black V.W.'s. But this was America. People could say what they thought.

"What is wrong with her speech?" Laura questioned him.

"What ees wrrrong with her eh-speech?" Carlos wagged his head at her. His anger was always more frightening in his broken English. As if he had mutilated the language in his fury—and now there was nothing to stand between them and his raw, dumb anger. "What is wrong? I will tell you what is wrong. It show no gratitude. It is boastful. I celebrate myself? The best student learns to destroy the teacher?" He mocked Yoyo's plagiarized words. "That is insubordinate. It is improper. It is disrespecting of her teachers—"In his anger he had forgotten his fear of lurking spies: each wrong he voiced was a decibel higher than the last outrage. Finally, he shouted at Yoyo, "As your father, I forbid you to make that eh-speech!"

Laura leapt to her feet, a sign that she was about to deliver her own speech. She was a small woman, and she spoke all her pronouncements standing up, either for more projection or as a carry-over from her girlhood in convent schools where one asked for, and literally, took the floor order to speak. She stood by Yoyo's side, shoulder to shoulder. They looked down at Carlos. "That is no tone of voice—" she began.

But now, Carlos was truly furious. It was bad enough that his daughter was rebelling, but here was his own wife joining forces with her. Soon he would be surrounded by a housefull of independent American women. He too leapt from the bed, throwing off his covers. The Spanish newspapers flew across the room. He snatched the speech out of Yoyo's hands, held it before the girl's wide eyes, a vengeful, mad look in his own, and then once, twice, three, four, countless times, he tore the speech into shreds.

"Are you crazy?" Laura lunged at him. "Have you gone mad? That is her speech for tomorrow you have torn up!"

"Have you gone mad?" He shook her away. "You were going to let her read that . . . that insult to her teachers?"



"Insult to her teachers!" Laura's face had crumpled up like a piece of paper. On it was written a love note to her husband, an unhappy, haunted man. "This is America, Papl, Americal You are not in a savage country anymore!"

Meanwhile, Yoyo was on her knees, weeping wildly, collecting all the little pieces of her speech, hoping that she could put it back together before the assembly tomorrow morning. But not even a sibyll could have made sense of those tiny scraps of paper. All hope was lost. "He broke it, he broke it," Yoyo moaned as she picked up a handful of pieces.

Probably, if she had thought a moment about it, she would not have done what she did next. She would have realized her father had lost brothers and friends to the dictator Trujillo. For the rest of his life, he would be haunted by blood in the streets and late night disappearances. Even after all these years, he cringed if a black Volkswagen passed him on the street. He feared anyone in uniform: the meter maid giving out parking tickets, a museum guard approaching to tell him not to get too close to his favorite Goya.

On her knees, Yoyo thought of the worst thing she could say to her father. She gathered a handful of scraps, stood up, and hurled them in his face. In a low, ugly whisper, she pronounced Trujillo's hated nickname: "Chapital You're just another Chapital"

It took Yoyo's father only a moment to register the loathsome nickname before he came after her. Down the halls they raced, but Yoyo was quicker than he and made it into her room just in time to lock the door as her father threw his weight against it. He called down curses on her head, ordered her on his authority as her father to open that

door! He throttled that doorknob, but all to no avail. Her mother's love of gadgets saved Yoyo's hide that night. Laura had hired a locksmith to install good locks on all the bedroom doors after the house had been broken into once while they were away. Now if burglars broke in

again, and the family were home, there would be a second round of locks for the thieves to contend with.

"Lolo," she said, trying to calm him down. "Don't you ruin my new locks."

Finally he did calm down, his anger spent. Yoyo heard their footsteps retreating down the hall. Their door clicked shut. Then, muffled voices, her mother's rising in anger, in persuasion, her father's deeper murmurs of explanation and self-defense. The house fell silent a moment, before Yoyo heard, far off, the gun blasts and explosions, the serious, self-important voices of newscasters reporting their TV war.

A little while later, there was a quiet knock at Yoyo's door, followed by a tentative attempt at the door knob. "Cuquita?" her mother whispered. "Open up, Cuquita."

"Go away," Yoyo wailed, but they both knew she was glad her mother was there, and needed only a moment's protest to save face.

Together they concocted a speech: two brief pages of stale compliments and the polite commonplaces on teachers, a speech wrought by necessity and without much invention by mother and daughter late into the night on one of the pads of paper Laura had once used for her own inventions. After it was drafted, Laura typed it up while Yoyo stood by, correcting her mother's misnomers and mis-sayings.

Yoyo came home the next day with the success story of the assembly. The nuns had been flattered, the audience had stood up and given "our devoted teachers a standing ovation," what Laura had suggested they do at the end of the speech.

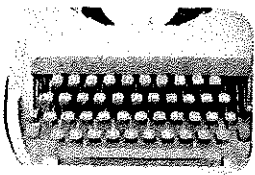
She clapped her hands together as Yoyo recreated the moment. "I stole that from your father's speech, remember? Remember how he put that in at the end?" She quoted him in Spanish, then translated for Yoyo into English.

That night, Yoyo watched him from the upstairs hall window, where she'd retreated the minute she heard his car pull up in front of the house. Slowly, her father came up the driveway, a grim expression on his face as he grappled with a large, heavy cardboard box. At the front door, he set the package down carefully and patted all his pockets for his house keys. If only he'd had Laura's ticking key chain! Yoyo heard the snapping open of locks downstairs. She listened as he struggled to maneuver the box through the narrow doorway. He called her name several times, but she did not answer him.

"My daughter, your father, he love you very much," he explained from the bottom of the stairs. "He just want to protect you." Finally, her mother came up and pleaded with Yoyo to go down and reconcile with him. "Your father did not mean to harm. You must pardon him. Always it is better to let bygones be forgotten, no?"

Downstairs, Yoyo found her father setting up a brand new electric typewriter on the kitchen table. It was even better than her mother's. He had outdone himself with all the extra features: a plastic carrying case with Yoyo's initials decaled below the handle, a brace to lift the paper upright while she typed, an erase cartridge, an automatic margin tab, a plastic hood like a toaster cover to keep the dust away. Not even her mother could have invented such a machine!

But Laura's inventing days were over just as Yoyo's were starting up with her school-wide success. Rather than the rolling suitcase everyone else in the family remembers, Yoyo thinks of the speech her mother wrote as her last invention. It was as if, after that, her mother had passed on to Yoyo her pencil and pad and said, "Okay, Cuquita, here's the buck. You give it a shot."



## MENTOR STORY



A shimmery note travels from the bells to the corner where I sit. The sound is soothing, beautiful, but once it was a noise I despised. I close my eyes and find myself transported back into Mrs. Frazier's fifth grade music class. It was the middle of November, and we had just finished our note and ear training. We were sitting, waiting expectantly, anticipating her decision. Would we be allowed to choose our own instruments, or would she choose for us?

I was sitting on the tenth chair of the first row next to Sylvia. It was a favorite chair because music class was always dismissed by row. The first row would be dismissed first. The way we sat in music class depended on how we lined up after P.E., since from P.E. we would go directly to music class. Sylvia and I always tried to be the tenth and eleventh ones in line so we not only sat next to each other, but would also be dismissed first.

On this particular day, our class was to begin the fifth grade band on an experimental basis. If we did well, the band would become a part of the school curriculum. Not that we cared whether the band succeeded or not, to us it meant a chance to get our hands on some noisemakers. Oh, what a racket we would make!

Mrs. Frazier had brought with her a wonderful array of musical instruments. The cymbals were next to the door. A saxophone lay behind a set of bells. My eyes ran over the elegant pieces, searching for the one I wanted. And there it was! Amid the usual instruments lay a harp! Not a big harp, but a lap harp, just like the one Daddy had.

I discovered the harp one night when I was looking for my sister's diary. Nora was fifteen and had a boyfriend. She would write about her dates with him in her diary, which she kept hidden. She would change the location of the diary every few weeks. One day I found it in the freezer! Anyway, that night I did not find her diary, instead, I found the old harp that a friend had given my father.

He kept it in its original box with a string tied around it. There was a name printed on the box which told of the maker, but it was so faded I couldn't make it out. I pulled the string and opened the box. Amid wrapping paper lay the most elegant instrument I had ever laid my eyes on. It

# The Sound of Bells

Sonia G. Cantu

was a strange shape, not a box, not a triangle, but sort of in the middle. Silver knobs held the strings in place. The wood was also a strange color. I didn't know what it was, and I didn't care. With great caution I lifted it out of its box and placed it in my lap. I sat there looking at it for a long time before I actually played it. I ran one finger over the strings and produced the sweetest melody. Whenever I felt down, I would take the harp into the closet and play it.

Thinking about that night and the fact that I was not allowed to touch my father's harp since I was promised I sat on the edge of my seat, waiting, praying that we'd be allowed to choose our own instruments. Oh, now I wanted that harp! It became a need so strong I wanted to scream, "LET US CHOOSE! I WANT TO PLAY THE HARP!"

After what seemed like an eternity, Mrs. Frazier looked at us and said the greatest words: "You may choose."

A buzzing was heard as the thrifty of us began talking at once. Everyone had a favorite instrument. Everyone wanted her choice. No one wanted to settle for something else. I, of course, wanted the harp.

Since my name was usually the first one called during roll call because I was the only Cantu, I expected to be first. My hopes came crashing down when I realized that Mrs. Frazier had begun backwards! Sissie Villarreal was called first!

Or no? I kept thinking as girl after girl was called up to the front to choose. My heart felt as if it would jump out of my chest as I watched the other girls go up to the harp and pick it up. But, always, they would put it back down.

"Phew!" The breath I was holding came out in a rush when my name was called, and the harp was still atop the



table. Giddy, I stood up and walked to the harp. It would be mine! I would get to play the harp! Trembling, I reached for the prize, touching the silver knobs reverently. I turned to walk to my seat.

Then it happened. I didn't see the pencil on the floor until it was too late. My foot slid on top of it, and I felt myself float into the air. The harp flew out of my hands

and fell to the floor with a horrible twang of bursting strings. In slow motion, I felt myself falling, falling, until I landed protectively across the top of the harp, but it was too late: the beautiful instrument was broken beyond repair. For a whole year, I sadly shook a set of stupid bells and vowed never to want something so badly ever again.



## MENTOR STORY

## The Red Spirit Bow

Erika Garcia had the most amazing red spirit bows in Kika de la Garza Elementary. These bows were not ordinary bows; they were bows with spirit accessories that girls could wear at the La Joya football games. The best part was that Erika was selling them for \$5; that was all I needed \$5 to get one. Who cared about the game? All I wanted was to wear one of those spirit bows on Fridays. My eyes shined as I pictured myself wearing the red bow with a matching red school shirt. I would look just like all the other girls.

I was a fourth grader at Kika de la Garza, and it was my first year there. I was lucky enough to have Karla as a friend because she knew all the popular kids, and she had been in that school ever since she was in first grade. Since I was Karla's friend, every one talked to me, so I eventually became part of the in-group. To be part of the in-group, you had to dress like them, talk like them, and you even had to be familiar with their favorite shows. During lunch we would talk about important things such as "Saved by the Bell" episodes, how much fun the girl scouts were, and even about who was planning to be part of the talent show. After lunch, we were allowed to buy snacks so we could eat them on the playground. Some of my friends took about \$3 to school every day. The most I ever took was a dollar to

buy ice cream and a soda. Sometimes my mother didn't have any money to give me, so I wouldn't buy a snack. When I didn't have money, Karla would share her snacks with me, and she never told the others that I didn't have any money so they wouldn't make fun of me.

The day Erika was selling the spirit bows was one of the days when my mother hadn't given me any money. Even if she had, it would have not been enough to buy the bow because it was five dollars and the most my mother would give me was a dollar. Two of my friends bought bows that same day. The others gave Erika what they had so she could save one for them. Erika said she would take payments if we didn't have all the money that day, but she was running out of red ribbon and accessories. Once she ran out, she would no longer be able to make any more bows. I didn't have any money to put my bow on hold, and Karla had already given Erika the three dollars she had because she also didn't want Erika to run out of ribbon. Karla saw my lips curling out of sadness while every one talked about the red bows. I knew Erika was probably going to run out of bows by the next day, and I was going to be the only girl without a spirit bow on Friday.

continued on pg. 90

## Cont'd.

Throughout the day all I could think about was how I was going to get that bow. Then I thought about just asking my mom for the five dollars, which is what any girl would have thought about. Not me, because my mother had never given me more than one dollar. The class finally ended and we were ready to ride the bus. As I was heading to the bus, Jennifer told me not to forget my five dollars tomorrow. I don't know why, but the words "don't forget your five dollars" floated through my mind for a long time. I blanked out on the way to my house, and the bus driver had to remind me that we were in front of my house already. As I was heading towards the bus door, I realized that some of the kids were making fun of my dazed face. When I reached the door the bus driver asked me, "Are you okay?"

I ran out with out answering.

I hit myself on the cheeks a couple of times, then I said to my self, "Wake up, Nadia. It's time to ask mom to give you five dollars." My mother was still at work, and I decided to clean the house a little to make some points. The hour I waited for her seemed like the longest hour I had ever lived through. My mother would usually get home around five, so all I could do was stare at the kitchen clock and wait for the stick to hit the magic number. At five o'clock my mother came home. When she walked in the house, my brother rushed to the door and hugged her. She told us how hungry she was and that she was going to make something to eat. I saw how tired she was and how she hadn't even noticed how I had cleaned up the house, so I decided not to bother her with my tiny worries. Although I knew my spirit bow wasn't important, I was sad because there was no way I was going to get it. Not having the spirit bow meant not being like my friends. I didn't want to feel left out on Friday. If I didn't wear that bow on Friday, I was not going to be cool like the other girls. I had worked too hard to be part of the in-group, and I did not want to run the danger of being kicked out forever.

It was time to go to bed, and my mother was already

asleep. I was determined to get that spirit bow. I opened my mother's purse in the dark, and the first thing I saw was a five dollar bill. I knew it was a sign and I had to take advantage of it. I got the five dollar bill and rushed to bed. The next morning I woke up super early with a happy face, and I was eager to get to school. When I got to school, I heard all the girls talking about how most of the popular girls were going to wear their spirit bows on Friday. I was happy to hear that because I was part of the popular crowd, and now I had the money to get that bow. At lunch time, I was looked all over for Erika. All of sudden some one patted me on the back, and I felt I wanted to die because for some strange reason I thought it was my mother. When I turned around, I realized it was Erika. She wanted to know if I wanted a bow because she had saved the very last one for me. I was very happy to hear that she still had a bow for me, but when I was about to hand her my mother's five dollar bill, my hands and my face started shaking as I was trying to hold back the storm of tears in my eyes. The storm was too strong, and my eyes and my heart couldn't hold back. I cried for the rest of the day. All I wanted was to tell my mother how ashamed I was for taking her money.

When I got home I didn't have a red spirit bow, but I did have a red, swollen face. When my mother got home I told her what I had done. The first thing she asked for was the five dollars, and I didn't know what had happened to them. I must have dropped them when I was crying. I told my mother how sorry I was, but she didn't care. She was furious and called me a thief. She grounded me for a couple of weeks. I could not talk on the phone or go to girl scout meetings. None of that mattered. What mattered was that I tried to be honest to my mother, and she didn't care. That day was the worst day of the year. I had lost everything that was important to me. I had lost the opportunity to be cool on Friday, I had lost my mother's five dollar bill, and most important, I had lost my mother's trust.

Nadia E. Valos

## SAMPLE EXPOSITORY ESSAY

### You Must Attend

An aspect of our education system that I support is the concept of mandatory attendance. Why mandatory attendance? Mandatory attendance is a primary foundation for any system in our society. Our presence whether it be physical or mental is what allows us to be involved in any activity, for example, a job training, a club meeting, or for this cause, school. We have to attend to an event in order to learn and become a part of it.

Focus

Students in schools are exposed to information on a daily level so that they can then absorb that information over time on the basis of repetition. Picture this: think of a first grade class being introduced to specifics in math. On Monday the class starts learning the concept of addition. Tuesday, they are given a hands on activity with candies to help visualize addition. On Wednesday, they are then taught to read and interpret a regular math problem by seeing them as the candies they had the day before. Thursday, they review the concept of addition and on Friday they are tested on the material. With the results, the teacher is able to see how the students understand the material. Seems pretty simple. But now imagine if attendance in our educational system was optional! What would happen if one of those students had missed class on Wednesday? That student would be missing a main learning point in addition and would most likely fall behind the curve in comparison to a student who attended all week. Although it might seem like a manageable math objective, how simple is it for a person to learn a concept the first time they are told about it? A person that can remember or learn a concept after being told once is almost unheard of.

Explain  
connect  
to life

With mandatory attendance, students learn more than just about school subjects. Students learn about themselves. When students attend school they develop their personality and their interests. Students begin to associate with other kids that have similar interests and with time can become their close friends. As they progress through grades, students also become involved in extra curricular activities. Activities that they have to work at to become a part of. The typical example would be a student participating on a school sport team. Requirements for groups of the sort involve attending training sessions, going to practices, but most importantly is attending classes and maintaining certain grade point averages. As in the movie, *Coach Carter*, Coach Carter presents the students with the idea that being a part of the basketball team is a reward. Their spot on the team is something they must earn by following expectations set in the players contract presented by the coach. The contract consisted of attending all their classes in the front row, making good grades, and always being prepared for practice. Coach Carter presents the thought that winning on the court is the key to winning off the court. So, for a student that enjoys playing a sport or an instrument, it is understood that they will do what is necessary to be among friends doing what they enjoy. Making attendance a primary focus allows for a smooth transition into success.

Example  
given

Style

That daily involvement in school gives one experience. That experience helps set the outline of a routine which most people in our society tend to have for their work, home, or any aspect in the rest of their life. Attendance is what maintains a student's focus pointed towards learning, involvement, and success. Mandatory attendance in schools is how today's American education system is leading our students towards academic and social success.

Take away  
Thesis + 2 examples



**SAMPLE EXPOSITORY ESSAY**

**The Brick Wall of Education**

"We don't need no education, We don't need no thought control, No dark sarcasm in the classroom, Teachers leave them kids alone" -famous lines from Another Brick In the Wall. The writer of this song obviously had a very negative view on education but what I do not understand is how he can think that we need absolutely no education and how he can view our education system so horribly. Our education system may have some flaws and it may need some rethinking but it also teaches us how to deal with responsibility and commitments, along with many other important life lessons.

In my years of schooling I was always the kid who missed weeks of school and was constantly just a little bit behind everyone else because I went through quite a bit of health problems. I was bombarded with school work and teacher disapproval when I would return to school so the analogy of the brick wall closing in on me perfectly describes how I felt. It was like school was closing in on me and there was no way out. I had to spend hours doing the same homework as other students because I got it all at once but the good thing was that because I got it all at once I actually had to do the work and read the material, instead of having other students help me. When it came to testing I would do so well that my teachers would ask me how I cheated because there was no way I could have done so well with all my absences. If I had not worked so hard all those years, I would not have learned how to overcome obstacles in real life. School is supposed to be about learning and growing as a person, the lessons learned there are more than just Math, Science, English, and History. What people do not seem to understand is that maybe learning things like getting along with difficult people and following rules are important life lessons.

I can understand that maybe back when this song was originally written that education was flawed in more ways than it is today but I do not think that it was as bad as the writer makes it out to be. Throughout my years in school I have experienced my fair share of bad teachers and difficulties but every student has to go through that to see that life isn't perfect. I can think of several examples of this, but the one that sticks out the most was in my senior year College Algebra class. I had a teacher who spoke broken english, so it was hard to even understand the lectures everyday. Whenever I would ask for help she would yell at me that I was not paying attention or I would have understood what was going on. I remember staying everyday for tutoring for an hour and a half just to get my homework done. For tests, I would spend three hours at tutoring going over the review with a tutor and then I would go study with my classmates because I discovered that I learn better when I teach it to other students. That still stands out as one of the hardest classes I ever took but it taught me was that not everything can be easy, sometimes we have to work past difficult teachers and that if you work really hard, you can accomplish anything.

We are all going to have problems we have to deal with, not just in school but outside of it also. I can see how he might have that view but what our system needs these days more than anything is innovation, instead of criticism. The education system seems to have hit its own brick wall, with all the other countries coming up with new ways to keep their students on the right track we seem to be stuck in our old ways. The world is becoming more competitive as time passes but the United States does not seem to be worried with the competition. We all want our three month summer and our 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. school day but there are some countries that go to school up to eleven months out of the year from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. I am not saying this is the only way or the right way to do it but they seem to be making innovations along with the innovations in technology and science.

If we spend our time constantly criticizing instead of coming up with ways to make it better, we are taking steps backwards instead of forwards. If we were to try to focus on making the future better, we could probably catch right up with the competition but until we do so, we should not be dwelling on the mistakes in education of the past. I would hope that in the future we can have some changes and innovations so that the United States can stay in the running and can emerge as the leader in global competition. Regardless of what Pink Floyd claims in his classic anti-education lyrics, yes, we do need education.

Analogy  
Pink  
Floyd

## SAMPLE EXPOSITORY ESSAY

Dustie Cortez

## Wreck

Why do women do it? Why do men fall for it? No one here is a victim of anyone else. True we are only human, but as humans don't we have the ability to control our own destinies and not allow ourselves to become slaves to this relationship car wreck? A wreck is truly what this is: two confused, spiraling and unfocused objects collide and the rest is insecurities, self-doubts and regrets. A woman, craving attention towards her adopted image, wrecks head on into a man wanting a "do me doll", both thinking they know exactly what they want. Yet once they find out that this is nothing but emptiness, they flee the scene of the crime as if to avoid a hit and run. Where did it go wrong?

First of all, let's be candid and agree to agree that women feel the need to be frequently validated by their physical appearance rather than by any talents, skills, or abilities they might possess. A woman would rather be told she could be mistaken for a supermodel than be told she's as brilliant as a scientist. This is where it all begins and it is a natural instinct that is encouraged in our society—it is nature and nurture times one hundred. From Barbie to Ally McBeal, all our society stresses are superficial appearances which are inflated at the cost of true character. Women then become clones of clones of clones. At the strong suggestion of the media, women completely murder their individuality (if they ever had any) and enter into the nameless, faceless Bimbo collective. So what we have here is a woman that has put all her time and effort into manufacturing this artificial image, which is nothing more than a shell. What is completely overlooked is substance, which can never be manufactured artificially and is essential in any long-lasting and fulfilling relationship.

Men, however, are drawn to this image like

mosquitoes to a bug light: this is why women assume this fake persona. Now we've all heard the saying that "men are pigs," and although for the most part this is certainly true, women do play an enormous part in contributing to this commonly held truth by not only allowing this mentality, but feeding it as well. So why do we do it?

The attention and false sense of self-esteem which are rewards for such behavior seem to be the only logical explanation. The blunt truth is that from the outside looking in, it is a disgusting display and the lengths

women will go to keep up appearances boggles the mind. And yes, I'm talking to you, Ms. Thing, who like a monkey imitates that cute,

sassy chick of the day; you, Ms. Thing, who laughs overbearingly loud to ensure that you are heard by all who surround you; you, Ms. Thing, who rehearses to utter exhaustion the way you walk, the way you talk, the way you stand, the way you sit, and that oh so casual way you run your fingers through your hair; and yes, it is you, Ms. Thing, who at the end of the day—after he's figured out that underneath that enchanting visage is nothing more than vacuous space and has grown tired of your scene—is left with only your image for company. And off in the distance you can swear that you hear the sharp shrieking of brakes and the crash of metal and glass.

Finally, after he has upped and gone, was it worth it? Was it worth it to know that all the effort and time you've invested has been a bust and all your left with are doubts; Didn't I wear the right clothes? Wasn't I cute enough? Didn't I giggle at all the right places? The result is a miserable, wasted, and bitter existence for both parties and one that is perpetually repeated in a sadistically vicious cycle. February 2004

• *essay* •

- men looking a physical attribute



Read the information in the box below.

In 1955 medical researcher Jonas Salk introduced an effective polio vaccine. At the time polio was considered the biggest threat to public health, yet Salk refused to profit by patenting the vaccine because he was more concerned with preventing disease than with personal gain.

Although many people work to benefit themselves, some people choose to put others first. Think carefully about this statement.

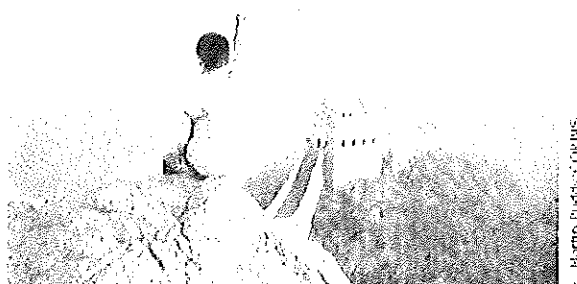
Write an essay explaining whether people should be more concerned about others than about themselves.

Be sure to —

- clearly state your thesis
- organize and develop your ideas effectively
- choose your words carefully
- edit your writing for grammar, mechanics, and spelling



Look at the photograph.



Write a story about the power of imagination. Be sure that your story is focused and complete and that it has an interesting plot and engaging characters.