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## **Querida Prima, Dear Prima : A Story for Children Seven to Ten Years Old**

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Querida Prima, Dear Prima

A story for children seven to ten years old

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of  
Master of Science in Education  
Bank Street College of Education  
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## **Abstract**

### **Querida Prima, Dear Cousin**

#### **A Story for Children seven to ten years old**

This project is an original bilingual story of two cousins who live in two different countries: The United States and Costa Rica. They bridge their separation by writing letters and emails throughout the story. Through this correspondence they learn about each other and that they have more in common in their seemingly distinct worlds than they realize. The text of the book is written in English. The correspondence between the two characters is in English with Spanish translations.

This thesis includes a rationale which explains the need for this book in a world that recognizes the importance of bilingualism and on a personal level for the author. There is also a section illustrating the author's writing process. In addition, this paper includes a review of children's literature that considers with both penpal writing and being bilingual. Also included is a section on how this book can be used in the curriculum. The two appendixes contain samples of children's responses to the story and sample letters that the author used to help write the story.

## **Rationale**

### Personal Experiences

Writing this book was more the fulfillment of a personal mission than completing a requirement for graduation from Bank Street College. For many years I had longed to attempt to write and illustrate a book for children, and it seemed that an independent study was the perfect opportunity to take on the project. It took me a while from the time I decided on writing a book to choose exactly what I was going to write about. I explored many distinct ideas in the process. At one point I wanted to write a book about a child coping with the loss of his father, at another I wanted to write a recycling field guide to New York City. When I finally decided on the idea that I wound up pursuing, it felt like a natural fit. It was a subject that I knew the most about and to which I felt the closest. The enthusiasm that I felt for the subject matter is what made this project come alive for me.

It is ironic that initially the idea did not seem the most suitable to me as it did to people who were close to me. It was my advisor in the Museum Education Department, Marian Howard, who suggested early on last year, "Why don't you write a book about friends, one in New York and the other in Costa Rica?" She had known about my experiences and had recognized that it was an important part of my life, so important that there was a story to be told. Another person who knew of my love of Spanish and connection with Costa Rica, my cooperating teacher during field work, reminded me that this would be a good direction for my project to head toward. I told her about my

idea to write a penpal book, and she agreed that it was a project worth perusing. Jane Yolen (1973) further convinced me in her book, Writing Books for Children, "All writing, like life, should be approached with passion, whether passion for a subject character, or twist of plot. You must be involved, or you do not involve your reader" (p. 4). As I delved into the project, I realized how much sense this made. The best story would come from what I felt strongly about: my attachment to my experiences in Costa Rica and my interest in children who are bilingual and bicultural.

Some of my most meaningful experiences in connection with the writing of this book came from working at a school in the mountains of Costa Rica while finishing my undergraduate degree. The school is situated in a community inhabited by Quakers from the United States and Costa Ricans. The town hosts three schools: one public school conducted in Spanish, and two bilingual private schools. The private schools provided an education in English and Spanish for both North American and Costa Rican children. The school that I worked in was an English immersion program. The classes were conducted entirely in English by native English speakers. The children who spoke Spanish at home and attended since pre-school were proficient in both Spanish and English by the time they were in first grade. The children also attended one class specifically to enrich their Spanish. During free time the children interacted in both Spanish and English.

In the two months that I spent working at this school I assisted in a classroom of 6-9 year olds. I also tutored a child who spoke Japanese and

Spanish at home and was learning his third language, English, in school. This was my first real exposure to children who were bilingual. I was impressed by their control of two languages at such a young age. Even the children in kindergarten, who were not speaking English yet, were able to understand and communicate. The children could switch easily into Spanish when they were talking to each other or translating for another child. I compared this to my own relatively slow acquisition of a second language and found it impressive.

It was at this point that I decided to not only make sure that I would become as proficient a speaker of Spanish as possible but that my calling and desire was to work with children who are multilingual. For the remainder of my time in Costa Rica I continued to pursue my own studies in Spanish, assist at the school, and privately teach English to children who didn't go to one of the bilingual schools.

When I returned to New York, I continued in my quest to be a better speaker of Spanish. I continued taking Spanish courses in college to retain and expand on what I had learned during my journey. I was amazed at how much I still had to learn after constant practice and exposure in Costa Rica. The entire time I thought about the children that I met and how quickly and aptly they learned their second language. I became fascinated with how a child grows up bilingual.

Friendships in Costa Rica allowed me to be able to continue practicing Spanish and participating in a culture that I loved so much. I had the

opportunity to return several times, each time sharing and learning more about the country and the culture that inspired me to write this book. These experiences do not make me an expert by any means, but they make me well-prepared for this project that partially takes place in Costa Rica. I have incorporated my experiences and based much of what is contained in the book on people I know.

It was at my first job as a teacher in the United States, before I started Bank Street College, that I was able to closely observe bilingual children in this country. I had a temporary job as a substitute teacher at a catholic school in Passaic, New Jersey. The class was conducted entirely in English. The students were all Latino, and most were bilingual, with the exception of one girl who had recently arrived from Mexico and spoke only Spanish. Her cousin sat next to her and as I found out later was supposed to translate for her. Instead of helping, she spent most of her time with her back toward her chatting with her adjacent friends. All of the lessons, tests, and readings were in English. No attempt was made to translate for the child or provide her with the individual attention that she desperately needed. When I spoke to her in Spanish, she beamed because she could communicate directly for the first time with a teacher. I was struck not only by her situation, but by her cousin who was a balanced bilingual and very bright. She seemed to have forgotten her own connections with coming to the country only a few years earlier and the difficulties she had learning English.



At my first student teaching placement, in the dual language program at PS 87, I observed children living with two languages. I witnessed how children learned and thrived in a classroom that had rich exposure to both Spanish and English. The students were not only learners of another language but teachers of their own. In this setting, Spanish monolinguals were empowered, they saw that their language is just as important as English and were given opportunities to share what they know with their classmates as they learned English from them. I was intrigued by the diversity within the classroom. Many of the children were from bicultural families and were already bilingual. Some children were from homes where only English was spoken and others where only Spanish was spoken. The classroom was the forum where their worlds united; the students who struggled with Spanish on the Spanish days became the helpers on the English days; those who struggled with English were able to share what they knew on Spanish days. Along the way, both the English and the Spanish speakers become proficient in both languages, therefore stronger and more confident learners.

One of the most impressive displays of language acquisition that I had the good fortune to observe was of Angela, a child who arrived towards the end of the first semester from Venezuela. She entered the class speaking only Spanish. Interestingly, she was immediately sought out by the child in the class who spoke the least amount of Spanish, Karrie. Karrie voluntarily picked Angela as a friend and buddy because she could identify with her as a fellow monolingual and knew she could help her. This relationship was

empowering for both children. Karrie could take a more active role in the classroom as she helped her new friend on the English days and on the Spanish days Angela would help Karrie learn in a more personalized way. I, unfortunately, was not able to stay to watch the relationship unfold as I had to move on to another placement. However at the end of the year, just four months later, I was pleasantly surprised to find Angela chatting away in English to Karrie and simultaneously translating for a new student who spoke very little English. I thought about Angela and the other children in this class when I wrote this book.

In the past few years, I have been a part of two penpal writing projects in two different classrooms, one third and the other fourth grade. Penpal writing is one of the most exciting projects for children of these ages to participate. The joy in their eyes when they know the letters have arrived and the wonder on their faces if they will ever meet them in person are what remind me that penpal writing is a worthwhile activity in the classroom.

The first project I was a part of helped spark the idea for this book. I initiated a relationship between the fourth grade class at a Quaker school in New York City where I student taught and a bilingual Quaker school in Monteverde, Costa Rica. This penpal unit was incorporated into a social studies unit on the rainforest. Through these letters the children learned about people who lived in a mountainous area surrounded by the cloud forest of Costa Rica. In turn, the children in Costa Rica were learning about the lives of children from another Quaker school in New York City. This

project helped the curriculum come alive for my class: they asked questions about the cloud forest and learned to squash many stereotypes. They also explored some of the Spanish they were learning. The children wrote back and forth, they emailed each other, and one child even had the opportunity to visit her penpal. When I saw her almost a year later, she ran to me and the first thing she said was, "I met my penpal in Costa Rica!" At this point I was having trouble deciding what to do for my thesis and when she approached me, I knew what I should do. Unfortunately, I did not save any of the letters that the children wrote to help me write the book. I have tried to contact the children and most of them cannot find their old letters. In my last attempt I contacted the teacher from the school in Monteverde via email and she sent current letters that her class was writing to new penpals. (See Appendix B)

In another class where I was an assistant teacher, the children participated in a different type of penpal project. They wrote to children in another third grade class in Long Island. The teacher used this as a way to teach the conventions of paragraph making and letter writing. The children spent a lot of time working on their first draft following a writing format the teacher demonstrated. Then, they went through an editing process and wrote the letters. They often include pictures or something they made for their penpal.

The idea for this book also stemmed from this experience. I found that while the teacher had worthwhile intentions, putting such a strong emphasis on the format, the children were being stifled by it. When they first sat down

to write their letters their writing didn't flow naturally. The focus on the structure of the letter and paragraphing, while very useful, was keeping them from getting their thoughts onto the paper. When I noticed this, I realized that a book about penpals, not unlike my own, would be a useful tool as an impetus for writing. They would be able to see what other children ask each other and possibly get ideas from the book. In addition, they could study one of the actual letters and look at how paragraphs were made, if this were the goal of the teacher.

### Bilingualism

In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine. A muddy color. It is the Mexican records my father plays on Sunday mornings when he is shaving, songs like sobbing...

... At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something, like silver, not quite as thick as my sister's name- Magdalena- which is uglier than mine." (Cisneros,1984, pp10-11)

Sandra Cisneros described the feelings that bilingual children may have in their quest to make sense of their two cultures. Something so seemingly simple yet inexplicably intricate as the meaning and pronunciation of her name allows Cisneros to explore her own two worlds. These are the two worlds of the child who is bilingual and bicultural. She knows two languages and feels connected to two distinct cultures. She is constantly

negotiating between the two, deciding to whom she will speak which language, often not fully accepted into one group or the other. She is “a product of both worlds.. and both [are] reflected in her way of speaking and everyday activities” (Zentella,1997,p.68).

Being a part of two cultures covers a wide range of linguistic levels. A person may be more dominant in one language or the other, or have almost equal fluency in both languages. The exposure to and importance placed on the native language and culture will determine the degree of identification that a child has to their culture and to what extent they are bilingual. Also, “Migration and economic history, gender, race, education, and age related norms and activities shape each network, and consequently, children’s linguistic and cultural development” ( Zentella, 1997,p. 39). The experience differs from culture to culture and family to family. “Raising a child bilingually in the United States does not just happen- it requires vigilance and persistence on the part of the parents and cooperation and continued practice on the part of the child” (Tabors, 1997,p143). The bicultural character in this story, Paola, is a child from a Costa Rican mother and Jewish American father. She was born in the United States. She has been raised speaking and studying both languages and exposed to both cultures. She is a balanced bilingual at a young age.

“The great majority of bilingual Latinos in the US regard their ability to speak Spanish and as one of the greatest gifts their parents gave them, and want very much to pass that gift to their children” (Zentella,1998,p.1).

Zentella and her students list the benefits of this gift that so many immigrants in the past and present have not been able to give their children. Some of the "personal, academic, cultural, and professional benefits"(1998,p.1) are: the ability to communicate with all members of the family, an appreciation of traditions of their old and new homelands, an adeptness of language, more job opportunities (Zentella, 1998, p.1). These benefits of bilingualism can also be true for everyone in the United States. Unfortunately, we have not learned what most of the rest of the world has that "Polyglottism is a very early characteristic of human societies, and monolingualism is a social limitation" (Miller, 1983, 113).

A child growing up bilingual and bicultural, depending on her environment, is often seen as different and therefore isolated by society. A teacher needs to consider the isolation that a child who speaks Spanish, or a language other than the dominant one in the classroom, might struggle in trying to define herself culturally. She must prevent the segregation that might happen in regards to language and cultural differences. She also must provide enough multicultural literature that presents characters and settings to which the children are able to relate. Often a Latin American child loses her Spanish because of the strong social demands to acclimate into an "English only" world. "The grammatical skills she [has] in two languages and her knowledge of two cultures [are] not sufficiently understood, rewarded or developed" (Zentella, 1997, p.1).

An important lesson to learn is how to empower the bilingual child who has not been fully understood by society for the gift that she has. Instead of a hindrance, learning two languages can help her with her self-esteem. Her first language will help her learn her second and provide her with more opportunities to learn. "It is difficult to counteract negative stereotypes and to raise Latino children to be proud of whom they are, but it is crucial for their social, educational, and psychological well being" (Zentella, 1998,p.9).

#### Developmental appropriateness

This book is geared towards children who are seven to ten years old. As they emerge from egocentrism, children of this age group are in a period of "self discovery in which the child finds out about himself in the course of engaging in activities and relating to other persons,"(Elkind, 1971,p.74) and also "discover[s] the larger social world around them" (Elkind, p.74). A child of this age group is seeking out information about herself while making sense of what is around her.. Her "interests go beyond the here and now; [s]he finds the stories of foreign places and children enchanting and is beginning to be excited about historical events and peoples" (Elkind, p.126). The children reading the book, Querida Prima, Dear Cousin, will be able to both identify with the characters because they have similar experiences (being bilingual/ bicultural) and explore their curiosities about a child from a culture different from their own.

Children in middle childhood are finding a special place for themselves with their peers. During this time friendship is key to the

development of the child's "basic social needs.. [It] provides [her] with information about [herself], others and the world..[and] provides models of intimate relationships that will become important in later life" (Cole and Cole, 1989, p.583). "Friends can supply companionship, approval and a sense of belonging" (Minuchin, 1977,p.69). One of the ways children of this age explore friendship is through penpal letters, whether as correspondence as part of school projects, updates between camp friends, or letters to a faraway cousin. Seven, eight, and nine year olds (along with the rest of us, regardless of our age) feel independent, important, and more grown-up when we write and receive penpal letters.

Families, as friendships, during the middle years are important to children. They enjoy reading fiction about families. Through these books, they can learn about families other than their own or discover similarities among themselves and other families. "Such books can help children understand themselves and others"(Oppenheim, Brenner, & Boegehold, 1986, p188-189). An emphasis on family is even more important to the bilingual child because her family's atmosphere will determine how she develops as a bilingual. Zentella (1997) eloquently describes this in her study about New York Puerto Ricans, Growing up Bilingual, "If you grew up in a family-like atmosphere with people who loved New York and Puerto Rico, you came to feel like a New York Puerto Rican and you learned to speak Spanish and English in ways that proclaimed the overlapping racial and cultural aspects of that identity"(p.40).



The range of reading abilities and interests vary greatly in these years. "Some [children] are still breaking the reading code. Others are able to read almost anything" (Oppenheim, et al,1986, p179). This book is suitable for both adults to read aloud to those children who might find this book too advanced and independently for a child who has already learned to read. "These are children who are making their own reading choices" (Yolen, 1973,p.110). Plot, characters and illustrations must be carefully thought out in a book for this age. The age of the characters must be considered to keep the reader engaged. "It is often noted that children like to read about someone a bit older-never younger- than themselves" (Yolen, p111). Of course there are exceptions to this rule. In the case of Querida Prima, it made more sense if the characters were slightly older than the reader because of the mature writing styles of the characters.

## The Writing Process

I saved the most grueling and in every way the most important part of this project, my reflections on my writing process, for the last part that I worked on. I agree wholeheartedly with Katherine Paterson's (1981) sentiment that, "You can't talk about them [your books] when you're writing them... They're too fragile and would collapse under the weight of your verbiage" (p33). The only time I could safely reflect on my story was after I had finished writing the first draft. I found the support I needed while writing the story with the works of two famous children's book authors. Sense of Wonder, by Catherine Paterson, and Writing Books for Children, by Jane Yolen, inspired me during this complicated procedure.

Along the way, the best advice that I often struggled with and had to constantly remind myself, was from Jane Yolen (1973). On page 22, she writes that there are three general rules when writing a picture book: be simple, understand structure, and know the audience. While I tried, I can't say that I strictly followed these rules. Through the mistakes I made I understand the intricacies and importance of following these guidelines. My original version of the story was a jumbled mix of every children's book that I ever wanted to write. This simply doesn't work when writing a short book for children and especially a bilingual one with a complicated format (as the one I had envisioned.) The only way that the story would make sense was if it was simple. Yolen (1973) enlightened me and encouraged me to do some heavy editing with yet another inspiring message, "In a picture book a writer must

deal with one idea at a time. If you have another idea- write another book" (p. 23).

In order to begin writing the book I had to first focus on the audience for whom I was writing. Would the readers be monolingual or bilingual? Could they be both? After serious consideration, I found that it would be best to write the book for English monolinguals and bilingual children. This meant that I would write the text in English and incorporate a few Spanish words. The letters would be written in either Spanish or English and then translated. This format would attempt to recreate the world of a child who is bilingual and is constantly surrounded by the two languages, always making choices about which language she will speak when and to whom. This decision on format also provided me with the clearest and cleanest design for the book. Once this was decided I could begin to explore my characters.

I knew that in choosing the characters for the book, I had to keep the goals of writing the book close at hand. I was writing a book about contemporary bilingual children and comparing their lives in New York and Costa Rica while trying not to generalize or stereotype. My original thought was that the two children would both be from bilingual settings and they would not know each other. I would use the Quaker community I lived in as the Costa Rican model. While the comparison between "city and country" would be effective, I decided against the idea because I wanted to avoid the stereotypes or romanticism that could be made about a child living in the rain forest. It would be more powerful to depict a child who also lived in an urban

setting to make more parallels between their lives. My next thought was that each child would live in the city of their respective countries and wouldn't know each other, their only connection might be through a school penpal assignment. This option would lead me to write a book about a Spanish-speaking girl from Costa Rica and an English-speaking girl from the United States, and I didn't want to write a book with such clear cut differences between characters. I wanted to avoid this cliché of many books and representations of this type. Finally, I decided on writing the book about cousins in two different places. The child in New York would be both from North American and Latin American background, a reality of many children in New York and this country. She would be bilingual and bicultural, and her letters to her cousin in Costa Rica would provide both a connection and contrast to the two cultures and places.

I began a sketchbook where I jotted down every idea I had regarding the characters, plot, and execution of the book. I made outlines of the story and character sketches on the subway. Any idea that popped into my head was recorded in the sketchbook. I took advantage of Jane Yolen's analogy of the mind as a scrapbook of ideas waiting to become inspiration (1973, p.11). It became the center for the creation of this book and was an integral part in writing the initial story. When I actually sat down to organize and write the first draft of the story, it flowed very smoothly, thanks to the initial ideas in the sketchbook. My first draft was an enlarged version of one of the outlines, and each time I sat at the computer I edited and revised what was on the page.

In order to create realistic characters and develop the plot I tried to make the characters real to me. I began by brainstorming appropriate names. I wound up choosing two names of children who I know in Costa Rica. I wrote down many things about them: what their home life was like, what they did after school, favorite foods, middle names, fears. I also wrote lists of questions that they might have about each other's lives. In the end, I used one quarter of the material, but I understood the girls as actual personalities.

In order to prepare myself for writing I read and explored children's books about the same themes as my book. (See Children's book review section.) I had just reached a point in the development of the book when I thought that my idea was really creative and innovative. I was convinced that while some of my ideas had been explored before, none of them had been executed in the way that I imagined, two children exploring each other's cultures and languages, getting to know each other through penpal letters. My idea was to have the actual letters so that the reader could open them and unfold their wonder. The penpals would send letters, postcards, and email. They would start stamp collections from their mail. The book would be in Spanish and English. I would write the story in a narrator's voice to contrast the children's' voices (in their letters). I had searched the library and bookshelves for books of this kind and couldn't find anything to which to compare it. Then one day, in the height of my creativity and flow of ideas, I found a book that would bring me back to earth, Penpals: A Friendship in Spanish and English, by Catherine Bruzzone. I opened the book and found precisely what I had

imagined for the execution of my book: real letters, photos, stamp collections. At first I was disappointed; I didn't want to see it. I was foolish to think that my idea had never been done.

After further examination of the book, I realized that although it was similar to my idea, what I was planning expanded on the premise of this book: A friendship in two languages. I planned on having a more developed relationship between the two characters, who are related. They would be strangers in one sense, because they've only met a few times, but they would also be connected through their cultures and families. My book will provide a twist from the typical clear cut relationship between the English speaker and the Spanish one. It would explore the complex relationship of people who are bilingual and bicultural. This is a reality of many children in New York who are Latin American, sharing many languages and cultures.

After seeing this book I was also motivated to include correspondence via email. I was tentative when I first began exploring the idea because I was more concerned with investigating the beauty of receiving actual mail, the curiosity when the letter arrives, the way it feels in your hands, the knowledge that your penpal has touched the letter with their hands and the wonder of what kind of journey the letter has been on. I found that this can be combined with the same joy and wonder of receiving email. This truly is the reality of our present and future means of correspondence. There is something wonderful about checking your email and hearing "you've got mail" or being able to get a quicker response than you would from a letter. It provides the

kind of immediate gratification that sometimes the phone can supply, somehow your worlds don't seem so far away. Including email correspondence also provided my book with something different that most of the other penpal books did not have.

After further thought and the disappointment faded, I found that finding this book was actually helpful. It allowed me to see my ideas for the format executed. I learned what I needed to do in order to make the story smoother, to write the actual letters and how to present the translations.

In addition to the children's book research, I prepared myself in other ways to write the book. I used the experiences I had with the two penpal projects I was involved with to collect information from children's letters to each other. I read every letter and saved selected ones (see Appendix B) that children wrote in the third grade penpal project. I also read and included some letters from the bilingual school in Costa Rica to their penpals in New York. (see Appendix B). A good friend, who is Costa Rican, wrote me letters about her eleven year old life, which I also considered in this project. I used these letters to help me try to incorporate the kinds of things that children would tell and ask each other. One of the main challenges for me was to write as a child would, with her words and thoughts, not as an adult thinking as a child.

In the very preliminary stage of the writing of the story, I showed some of the students in my third grade class sample letters from the book. I wanted to get their feedback before school was over. This was imperative because the story is geared for this age group and I wanted to see how they would respond.

I gave them two letters and asked them to answer some questions. (See Appendix A.) I used their feedback to help me revise my story and see if it made sense to them and interested them. The children who participated provided me with some suggestions to improve the book.

Once the story was written and most of the major revisions were made I began to work on the illustrations. As I was writing the story, I had to keep the pictures in my head. "What you write must be illustratable. This means that action is the most important thing, not the thoughts in your characters' heads" (Yolen, 1973, p.27). I tried to keep this in mind as I wrote, while I included ample descriptions of the characters' thoughts, I attempted to include more action so that the story could be more illustratable. When I began to work on the illustrations, I knew what I wanted to draw, but I had difficulty conveying the information in a drawing. I had made several attempts but found myself frustrated with the result. I acknowledged that I'm not an illustrator and the main focus of my project was to write the story, the illustrations at this point were secondary. Once I got the ideas on paper I began to work with the medium. One of the major changes in the illustrations of the book was that I found my idea of the actual letters that the reader can open too difficult to pursue for this project.

One of the most important things that I was reminded of during this process is that writing is a long, complicated, and often heart-wrenching procedure. I had to revise the story on several occasions. I often added more interesting, descriptive language to describe the five senses, as Epstein (1991)



suggests, so that the “fictional person seems real” (p.14). After rereading the letters, studying real letters that children of the same age wrote (see Appendix B), and taking suggestions from the children in my third grade class, I revised the letters trying to make the language more realistic. The part that was the most challenging for me was telling the story in a clear way. Remembering what I learned from Yolen, I decided to go back to simplify the story. I didn’t have to directly tell the reader everything. The beauty of many good stories lies in the author’s ability to suggest many details. Once I acknowledged this, the story made more sense to me. I cannot say that I am fully comfortable with it as it is today, and I am not sure that I can improve it unless I rewrite it from the beginning. It may not be what I imagined, but it is what I set out to write. I see it as a first draft of a project that I will pursue for many years.

## Review of Children's Literature

Throughout this process, I have read and reviewed many books about friendships and penpals, books written in Spanish and English, books about families, books about children living in an urban setting. I have found that while there are many books about Latino children both living in this country and in Latin America, the quantity doesn't adequately represent the magnitude and diversity of the Latino population that exists in this country. There are still many gaps in the representation of Latino children in children's literature. Below, I have highlighted the books that have helped me form my ideas along the way. Aspects of each of them have given me insight into the direction that I wanted to go in. Individually they are diverse, but together they have helped inspire the book I have made.

Penpals: A Friendship in Two Languages, by Catherine Bruzzone and Lone Morton, is the most important book I discovered, and ironically it happened to be one of the last books that I found. As mentioned previously, I had most of the ideas about my book already formed and the format established when I ran across this book. Its clear format and simple plot, a letter from each child on every page with side-by-side translations, allowed for children who are both Spanish or English monolingual and bilingual to read comfortably. The book begins when Carlos from Mexico writes to Cindy in the United States to ask her if she would be interested in being his penpal. Their friendship unfolds through the letters they send back and forth. The format is

simple, which supports the goal as a book for children who are acquiring another language. While inspired and appreciative of the simplicity of the book, I wanted to give my book more character development to allow for a more driven plot. By adding more detail to the characters in the book, I was trying to break away from the somewhat stereotypical and easily defined relationship of the English-speaking child from the United States writing to a Spanish-speaking one in another country. I wanted to represent the very common, yet less represented relationship of children who are from the same culture and speak the same language but who are in two distinct settings.

The illustrations of this book are interestingly executed. While the text is lacking in description about the characters, except for what they reveal in their letters, the illustrations fill in the gaps and provide for a better understanding of the characters. In each section, the actual letter is situated on a tabletop or doormat of the person who has received it. In the background the reader gets a glimpse of the life of each child, for example, Carlos' postcard collection and Cindy's ballet slippers. As the reader unfolds and examines each letter he/she get insight into each character by inspecting their settings.

Just Like Home, by Elizabeth Miller, caught my eye because of the title. It sounded like it would deal with some of the issues that I wanted to address in my book, like moving from one country to another. The language was simple, "In August we arrived in the U.S.A. So many different people. Not like home." Below there was a direct translation in Spanish. While I am a firm supporter of simplicity in writing, I wasn't intrigued by the opening line. However,

throughout the book, the child continues to have experiences that are both positive and negative, similar and different to her memories of Mexico. Each illustration is compared to an illustration from the character's life in Mexico and is followed by, "Just like home," or "Not like home." For example, "Our cousin's room is not very big. I had to share a room with my sister. Just like home." Or, "In December, It became cold outside. Look! Out the Window! Snow! Not like home."

What appealed to me about the book was the way that the author and illustrator simply presented many important issues for a child moving to this country. She has to confront some new experiences but is also able to find things that are familiar to her. This is what I wanted to achieve with my characters. I wanted them to be able to see the similarities and differences in each other's worlds. In addition, the themes addressed guided me to thinking about how Paola, the main character in my story, would feel about her move to Costa Rica.

Reading this book reminded me that it is important to be simple and clear in my writing. After reading this book I went back into my text and revised my ideas to create a simpler story. I did not however want my story to be as simple as this book. I wanted the characters to have depth and develop more. In addition, I wanted the text to be a bit more poetic and interesting. The simple language led me to believe that this book is geared towards young readers or people who are acquiring a second language.

Margaret and Margarita, by Lynn Reiser, was a starting point for me in this process. It is a bilingual book about two children who are monolingual, each one does not speak each other's language. What seems like an obstacle to adults, the children overcome the communication "problem" by teaching each other. By the end of the book both children learn how to learn to communicate with each other and become friends. The book's format, text in English juxtaposed with the same text in Spanish, is what makes this book readable for all people, English or Spanish-speaking and bilingual. The red text is written in English from Margaret's point of view and is juxtaposed with blue text in Spanish for her playmate Margarita. The text is exactly the same in both languages. The children play with words as they play with each other and at the end of the book, their mothers are experimenting with each other's language. The language and vocabulary is simple, but the story is very beautiful. This book can be read to and by a wide age range (5-8).

Another book that I found useful was Fernando's Gift, El Regalo de Fernando, by Douglas Keister. This book is truly bilingual in the sense that it contains text in both languages. It is the story of Fernando, a child who grows up in the rainforest in Costa Rica. It gives a very realistic portrayal of life in the rainforest through photos of the people in the story. What is wonderful about the book is that the author creates a story around a real family. The book also addresses issues of ecology. It is a good resource for images of the rainforest and people from Costa Rica. Although Fernando and Monserrat are

from two different environments in Costa Rica, it is the only book that I found about a child growing up in Costa Rica .

Pepita Talks Twice, Pepita Habla Dos Veces, by Ofelia Dumas Lachtman, is written in English with side-by-side translations in Spanish. It addresses the important issue of being bilingual as a child. Pepita is a child who grows tired of always having to translate into one language or the other for her friends and family and decides that she will stop speaking Spanish. At the end of the book, she learns that she is special and better off being able to speak both languages. This book inspired me to think about this as an issue for Paola. She very likely would have to translate for classmates or relatives and might find this tiring at times. I learned an important lesson after reading this book. When I first saw it I underestimated it because of the illustrations which are somewhat cartoon-like and didn't appeal to me. However, it proved to be very insightful and presented a very common experience and important issues for bilingual children.

The first book I thought about when I began this process was Abuela by Arthur Dorros. When I was thinking about how I would deal with the two languages in my book, I looked at this book for inspiration. It is told in English with a spattering of Spanish so it works for both an audience who is bilingual and monolingual in English. In this story a little girl, Rosalba, and her abuela fly around New York City. Rosalba acts as the translator between her grandmother and the reader. She represents a very realistic person living in New York who is bilingual and whose grandparent might be monolingual. The

text and fabulously inspiring illustrations give very clear and creative insight into Latin American culture in New York.

Family Pictures, Cuadros de la Familia, by Carme Lomas Garza, is a book that I choose because of the emphasis of Mexican culture in the United States. The book is a series of paintings depicting memories from Garza's community and family life: parties, making tamales, and picking oranges. They are accompanied by text in both Spanish and English which describe each picture and give insight into the author/illustrator's life and culture. This book helped me focus on what types of events are important and memorable in a child's life. The author's emphasis on family and the relationships described in the book guided me towards thinking about my own characters' families and what important roles they would have in their lives.

Another book that focuses on family is Pelitos, Hairs, by Sandra Cisneros. I had first read the story when I read her novel, A House on Mango Street, and then I found the illustrated version to read to my students. What is so fantastic about the story is the poetic focus on the different types of hair within a family. The illustrations which accompany this story are eye-catching and bold and present a non-stereotypical Latino family. The people are different colors, including purple and green, which draws attention away from the fact that they are from a specific culture, and emphasizes that within each culture, people are unique and diverse. This is a very simple and tender experience of a girl examining the variety of hair types in her family which in turn examines the differences in general within a family. I tried to find a place

within my own story that allows the characters to reflect on the different types of hair and skin tone within their own family. This reminds the reader that there are a multitude of shades of skin tones, hair, and eye colors of people who are from Spanish-speaking families.

I looked for books about penpal writing to assist in the writing of this book. Aside from Penpals mentioned earlier, and which I found very late in the search, I did not find many books that I deemed useful. This surprised me because it is such a popular subject for children. There is something so unique about the experience of writing and receiving letters from a penpal. Love from Your Friend, Hannah, PS, Longer Letter Later, and Snail Mail No More were books that I enjoyed and found useful in thinking about the language that children use in letter writing and the kinds of things that they would say to one another in letters. They also helped me focus on the feelings associated with moving away and the emotions attached to waiting for a letter from your penpal.

A series that provided me with much insight into the language that children use in their writing is Amelia's Notebook, and Luv, Amelia, Luv, Nadia, by Marissa Moss. The author has good insights into the personality and taste of a young girl who has just moved to a new town. The humorous and touching text along with the playful illustrations gives the reader deep insight into Amelia's thoughts and feelings. In Amelia's Notebook, Amelia very candidly discusses her feelings about moving, and I tried to relate these feelings to my character. Luv Amelia... is a collection of letters between the



two characters as they maintain a friendship with her best friend letters. I found these extremely helpful references of children's writing.

## Uses in the Curriculum

This book and penpal writing may be incorporated into the classroom curriculum in many ways. It may be used as a tool for a thematic study. For example, the fourth grade class previously mentioned wrote letters to their penpals in Costa Rica as an extension of their rain forest study. They had the opportunity to write to penpals who actually lived in the environment that they were studying. Similarly, this book touches on studies of one's own environment and compares it to someone else's. It can be part of a New York curriculum and used as an impetus to compare New York to other places. A study of different families and cultures could stem from this book and is a nice addition for anyone who finds it important to have a diverse library. It may also be used as a tool for children who are learning Spanish or who are already bilingual to enrich their skills. Another way to use this book in the classroom is to teach letter writing. I would strongly suggest to have the students start writing freely and then start to study the traditional parts of a letter, if this is desired by the teacher. The individual letters within the book can be used for letter writing ideas for children who have trouble getting started. I envision this book, or a book like it, in my own classroom as a book that I can personally share with the children by reading it aloud, show it to them, and let them explore the pages on their own. In addition to its functions in the classroom, it can be a pleasing book for families to read for many of the same reasons.

## Appendix A: Preliminary responses

The students of a third grade class at a school in Manhattan read the letters below, edited them, and responded to questions. Some of their responses are included after the letters. The children's feedback helped me figure out, at the beginning of my writing process, what material would be important and interesting to children of this age.

May 1

New York

Dear Monserrat,

Hola! Hi! How are you? My name is Paola! I am your cousin from New York City. I bet you're wondering why I'm writing. Well today we got the coolest assignment! My teacher told us to write a letter to someone important in our lives. I chose you.

There are so many things to say I don't know where to start. Did you get the picture that my mom sent to your family from Christmas time? The one where we are together in front of our tree? Grandma, *abuela*, Dad, Mom, my little brother, and me) had a great time. I was glad that *abuela* could come to New York to be with us. We spent the day together and then at night we had a party. My Grandma and Grandpa, who live in New York, came over also. We had a lot of fun. I ate too much.

Since it has been a long time since I last saw you, I will tell you what I look like. I have brown curly hair. My mother says that it's beautiful, but I think that it's too puffy. My eyes are brown and my skin is pink. My cheeks always turn red when I talk. My brother, Alejandro, is six years old. He has much darker skin than I do, but his eyes are green, like our *abuelo* had, remember? My grandfather in New York has green eyes, too. I live with my father and mother. You saw them last year when they went to *Abuelo's* funeral.

My brother and I couldn't come because it cost too much money, anyway we had school.

New York City is a big place with really tall buildings and lots of people. I live in a building that only has four floors. My best friend, Dana, lives on the 11th floor of her building! We live on the 4th floor which means that we can go up to the roof. My parent's have a beautiful garden up there. They grow vegetables and spices. My mother always says that we're lucky to have a garden in New York.

There's so much I'd like to know about you. What do you look like? Where do you go to school? What is your favorite movie? What do you like to do afterschool? Who lives in your house? Are you learning English? I can't wait to hear from you. Please write back.

Your cousin (Su prima),  
Paola

May 10  
Zapote, Costa Rica

Dear Prima Paola,

Hi! Hola! Thank you for the letter. I love your handwriting. I wish my handwriting can be as neat as yours. I really liked your letter. It sounds like New York is a lot of fun. I live with my mother and two brothers, Javier and Federico. Fede is my twin brother. At times we can get along really well but at other times he can drive me crazy. Javier is really fun. He always plays with me and tells funny jokes. He takes care of Fede and me when mom is working.

I have long, straight black hair. I would like to have curly hair like yours. My mother says I'm special because I am the only one in my family

with straight hair, but I think it gets tangled too easily. I have light brown eyes and my skin is the color of coffee. My brother Fede looks a little like me, except he has green eyes and his hair is very curly. We have almost the same skin color. My brother Javier has much lighter skin color than we do. He looks like our *abuelo*.

I can't believe the buildings are so tall in New York. Are there any parks to play in? Is it dangerous to go outside? What is the subway like? Abuelita told me that it can take you all around, all underground!

Now I will answer some more of your questions. My favorite movie is Toy Story 2. I go to school at Escuela Brenes. It is in my town but I still have to take a bus there. At first I was scared to go alone but not anymore. We learn English. I like school. Afterschool I like to go to the park with my brothers and play basketball. I want to be a dancer or basketball player when I grow up.

What do you want to do when you get older? What is your school like? What's your favorite food? I hope you will answer all of my questions in your letter. Please write back soon.

Good-bye,

Monse (This is my nickname)

PS Thank you for the stickers. I sent you some too. I hope you like the picture I drew of my house.

1. What do you think *abuela* means? Grandmother

2. How old do you think they are? 9, 10, 11

3. What do you like about the letters?

I liked the questions and the answers. I like how they communicate. I like how they explain a lot about their family

4. How could the letters be improved? I think that you could put more about school. The teacher they have. I also think that you can write more about life in New York and Costa Rica. It would be cool if Monse taught Paola

some Spanish words.

5. What kinds of questions do you think they should ask each other?

What is the name of your teacher? Is she nice or mean? What's your favorite subject?

6. Any other feedback. Do have any ideas for the book?

I think you should not only focus on their families I think that you should focus more on their school.

1. What do you think *abuela* means? grand

2. How old do you think they are? 10

3. What do you like about the letters?

The basketball is my favorite but I like everything. I think you should say WNBA.

4. How could the letters be improved? A little longer and ask a few more questions.

5. What kinds of questions do you think they should ask each other?

What food, favorite sport, favorite team, and the stuff you already have.

6. Any other feedback. Do have any ideas for the book?

I think it is a good story. When the book is totally finished can I have a copy.

1. What do you think *abuela* means? Grandma or Grandpa

2. How old do you think they are? 87+//

3. What do you like about the letters?

I like that their <sup>details</sup> descriptive and that they have some things in common but not everything

4. How could the letters be improved? ~~the~~ you could have them talk about

what they do in school and more about their own personality

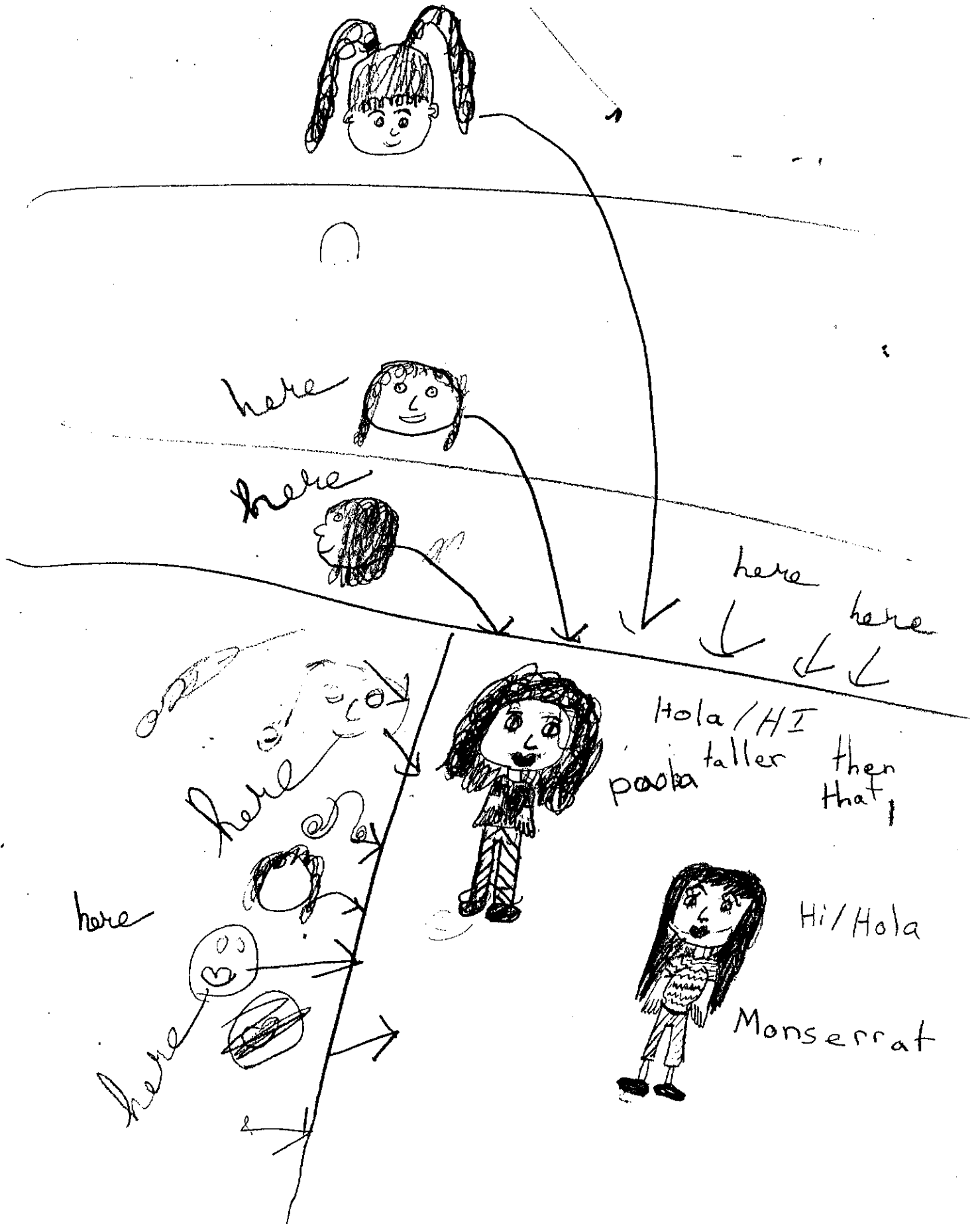
5. What kinds of questions do you think they should ask each other?

~~what does~~ do you have any pets do you want to e-mail each other? what is it like living there

6. Any other feedback. Do have any ideas for the book?

I think your book is grate I really like it because they live in different places and you get different opinions





here

here

here

here

Hola/HI

papa taller than that,

Hi/Hola

Montserrat

here

here

here

1. What do you think *abuela* means? Granma

2. How old do you think they are? 10-11

3. What do you like about the letters?

They are very thoughtful and they really sound like real letters that someone really would write to their penpal.

4. How could the letters be improved? Maybe you could put dashes to help read some of the Mexican words

5. What kinds of questions do you think they should ask each other?

Do you fight with each other I mean do you fight with your brother

6. Any other feedback. Do have any ideas for the book?

No I just really like the letters

1. What do you think *abuela* means? Grandma

2. How old do you think they are? 8 or 9 or 10

3. What do you like about the letters?

They're cool because they're from different places. I can't wait to read the rest!

4. How could the letters be improved? They can't. They're already great.

5. What kinds of questions do you think they should ask each other?

If they could meet somehow?  
What their favorite book is?

6. Any other feedback. Do you have any ideas for the book?

I love the book but you might want to make the names a tad easier.

## Appendix B: Letters from Children

The author used these letters as samples for her own writing.

Dear  
Friend  
School

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

Hi how are you? I am well.  
I am 11 years old, I like to  
play soccer and ride bike.  
I have one sister that's in kinder,  
and a brother in third grade.  
What are your hobbies, what  
do you like? O.K. write your  
another day.

Sincerely,

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

New York

03/11/98

Stephanie Hermann:

Te escribo esta carta para saludarte y preguntarte cuando vuelves a Costa Rica para ir al parque de diversiones y montar en el tobogán de agua (Rebentazón)

Espero que estes muy bien y nos sigamos escribiendo.

Perdón por no mandarte la carta antes pero no me ha dado tiempo y Javier te manda saludos (mis hermanos tambien)

Podata: Espero q' entiendas mi letra.

Adios q' te vaya bien

Atte: \_\_\_\_\_

Dear [REDACTED]

What is your favorite hobby and sport? My favorite sport is biking and my hobbies are listening to music, watching movies, and hanging out. Do you like candy? I do. How is it where you live and how is the winter?

I live in the rainforest. It is almost always raining. Sometimes it is very hot. The roads get very mucky and there is no snow.

I have a sister, two moms, two dads, a dog and a cat. I am twelve years old, almost thirteen, have blonde hair and greenish-blue eyes.

Sincerely,

MFS  
2/22/00

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and as probably already know I live in Monteverde, Costa Rica. I'm 4 years old and in the fifth grade here. How old are you and what grade are you in? My birthday is January 30<sup>th</sup> so I sort of, just had mine. When's yours?

I am from the States, but live here and all my family is from there. Even though I was born in Ithaca, NY I've been to other states including Massachusetts. In my opinion it's a very awesome state, I especially like Cape Cod. What do you like to do there?

Some of my favorite things to do are play soccer, read, be with friends, and lots more. What do you \_\_\_\_\_ do for fun? My best friend's name is \_\_\_\_\_ and she also has a pen pal. Do you have a best friend? I also have twin younger brothers that are eight and they can get very annoying.

There's lots more I'd like to ask you and tell you, but that can wait for other letters. I think it's going to be really fun having a pen pal. Your pen pal,

4-5-00

Dear [redacted]

Hi! It was so nice to hear from you and see your excellent picture. I am doing fine and I had lots of fun on my vacation which was in March.

I've been doing a lot lately so this part of my letter is going to be long. On vacation I went skiing in Park City which is in Utah. I had the most fun that I've had in my life. I am a level 6 and the levels go up to level 9. I can ski greens, blues, blacks and one double black which is like a black, so I'm a pretty good skier. When I got back to my hotel from skiing I would go to the pool with my friend Marissa and when it was snowing we would go to the outdoor pool and catch snow flakes in our mouths! I caught 111! At home I love to play with my cat and watch tv. At school I've been very busy. I am writing a story called The Test which is about a girl named Erin and how scared she is about her spelling test. In Ethics we are writing <sup>stories</sup> stories too, but I love writing so it's not that bad. In 2 weeks I am going to Frost Valley which is a 3 day trip. Yay!



enclosed 3 nights without parents!!  
That rocks! I am in room #1 with my friends  
and Ellen is in my bunk too. Ellen is also  
one of my partners for the bus so I'll be  
seeing a lot of her on the trip.

Whew! Glad that part was  
over. I told you that that would be a long  
part. I hope that this part is going to be a  
little shorter, but just a little.

To answer your question about Halloween,  
I was Yanked out of Derek Jewer. I am a  
big fan of him. No, I do not have a  
brother but I do have a sister. Even  
though I am Jewish I celebrate Christmas  
and Chanukah. I hate my middle name  
but since you asked I'll tell you my  
middle name is Rebecca. Isn't that  
horrible! This year I'm going to a  
sleepaway camp called Prince of the  
Private which is your own camp  
at home.

Now I am going to ask  
you a question. (my second favorite part of a  
letter). What sleepaway camp do you  
like best? Is it called Prince of the  
Private? Do you take any  
after school classes? Do you like your middle

name? That's all the questions I can  
think of. I'll probably ask you more  
at the <sup>Picnic</sup> picnic. Do you know about the  
picnic?

It was really fun writing  
to you and I can't wait to see you  
at the picnic. Bye!

Your friend

Dear 

Hello! I hope you like my letter that I wrote to you. I was excited to get your letter from you. I really liked your picture that you made. I am doing fine at school how about you? I am excited to write back to you.

Now I will answer your questions. I don't have any brothers or sisters. I do like different kinds of music. I like some English and Spanish music. My favorite music is from The Lion King and the music that my music teacher teaches us.

In school we are studying about birds, snails and Antarctica. We have Spelling test every Friday, we also have reading group every day. At home I do lots of homework. I have 3 Albino African Frogs and 1 black Albino. I have lots of chores, like fixing my bed or washing the table. I like to play lots of sports like basketball or soccer.

10-26-99

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

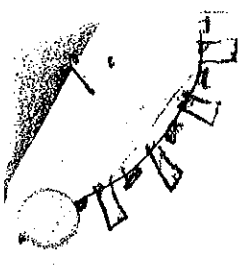
Hello! My name is \_\_\_\_\_!  
I am happy to be your pen-pal!  
I am excited to write to you!  
I hope we will become friends.  
We will have lots of things to share with each other.

descriptions

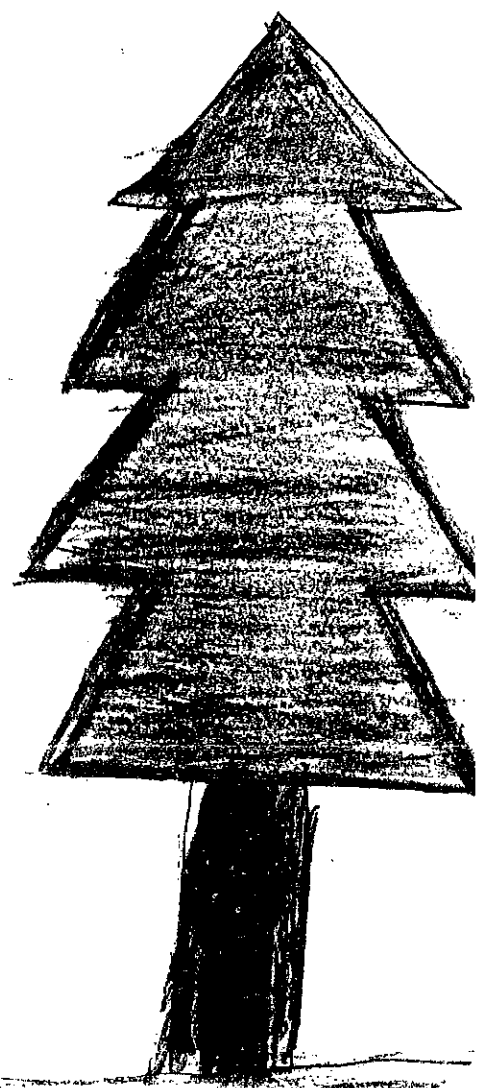
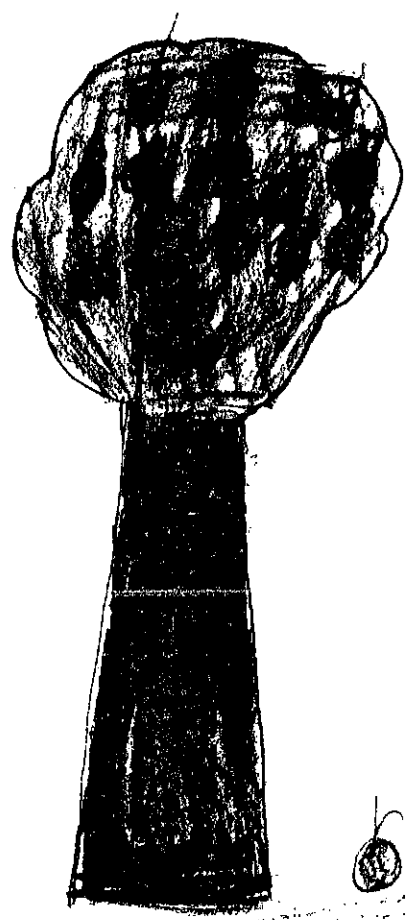
The color of my hair is black and the color eyes is dark brown. I am 8 years old. The color of my skin is tan. I think I am 6 feet tall. I was born September 26 1999, I have one brother his name is Victor. He is in sixth grade.

Some of my favorite things are, My favorite person that makes movies that I like is Walt Disney. My favorite food is salad. The color that I really like is yellow. My favorite animal is a dolphin. In class I love to do math and work period.

At recess I love to go on the monkey bars and play tag. When I get home I love to play board games with my brother. I love to make cookies with my friend when I am home.



By [unclear]





Dear Prima,  
*Querida Prima*  
 written and illustrated by Stephanie Hermann





Meet Paola. Paola usually thought homework was a waste of time but today she received the coolest assignment! The teacher, told the class, "Today I want you to write a letter to someone who is important to you. This person can live far away or just around the corner. This person can be someone you see every-day or someone you haven't even met." Paola couldn't wait to get started writing her letter. The only hard part was choosing who her special person would be.



When she arrived home, she plunked herself down on the stoop outside her building, her favorite place to think. The music from the passing cars and the loud voices of her chatting neighbors always soothed her. She had been thinking about her assignment all the way home from school. Who would she choose as her special person? Then it came to her! She would write to someone she had met many years ago. This person lived far away in a place she had visited when she was younger and vaguely remembered through the stories that her mother, *su mamá*, told. She had seen this place in the photos with creased edges that her grandmother, *su abuelita*, showed her. Paola would write to her cousin, *su prima*, Monserrat in Costa Rica. Monserrat and Paola were about the same age, and Paola had remembered how much fun they had together when they were younger. The point of her pencil was sharp enough to make bold marks on her page and she began to write. When she finished her hand was tired and she read it to make sure it was perfect.



May 1, New York

Dear Cousin Monserrat,

Hello! How are you? I'm Paola your cousin from New York City. I bet you're wondering why I'm writing. Well, today my teacher told us to write a letter to someone important in our lives. I chose you.

Did you get the picture that my mom sent from our Christmas party? I was so glad that abuela could come to New York to be with us. We ate lots of tamales. YUMMY!

It's been a long time since I last saw you so I will tell you what I look like. I have brown curly hair. My mother says it's beautiful, but I think that it's too puffy. My eyes are brown and my skin is pink. My brother, Alejandro, is six years old. He has much darker skin than I do, but his eyes are green, like Abuelo had. Remember? I live with my mother, father, Ale and my cat, Edgar.

New York City is a big place with really tall buildings and lots of people. I live in a building that only has four floors. My best friend, Dana lives on the 11th floor of her building!

There's so much I'd like to know about you. What do you look like? Are you learning English? I can't wait to hear from you. Please write back.

So long,

Your cousin Paola

Paola Crane Soto  
44 West 176 Street  
New York, NY 10033  
USA

Montserrat Villa Soto  
Apartado 664-011  
Zapote, San José  
Costa Rica  
Central America



**In Spanish  
Paola wrote:**

1 de mayo, New York

Querida Prima Monserrat:

¡Hola! ¿Cómo estás? Soy Paola, tu prima de Nueva York. Me imagino que te estás preguntando por que te estoy escribiendo. Bueno, hoy mi maestra nos pidió que escribiéramos una carta a una persona importante en nuestras vidas. Te escogí a tí.

¿Te llegó la foto que mi mamá les envió de la fiesta de navidad? Estoy muy contenta que Abuela pudo venir a Nueva York para estar con nosotros.

Ha pasado mucho tiempo desde que nos vimos. Te voy a describir como soy ahora. Tengo pelo colucho y café. Mi mamá me dice que es lindo, pero yo pienso que es demasiado inflado. Mis ojos son café y mi piel es rosada. Mi hermano, Alejandro, tiene seis años. Su piel es más oscura que la mía pero sus ojos son verdes, como los de Abuelo. ¿Recuerdas? Vivo con mi mamá, mi papá, Ale y mi gato, Edgar.

Nueva York es un lugar grande con edificios altos y un montón de gente. Vivo en un edificio que tiene solamente cuatro pisos. ¡Mi mejor amiga, Dana, vive en el piso diecisiete!

Quiero saber mucho de tí. ¿Cómo eres? ¿Estás aprendiendo español? ¡Por favor escíbeme!

Hasta pronto,

Tu prima Paola

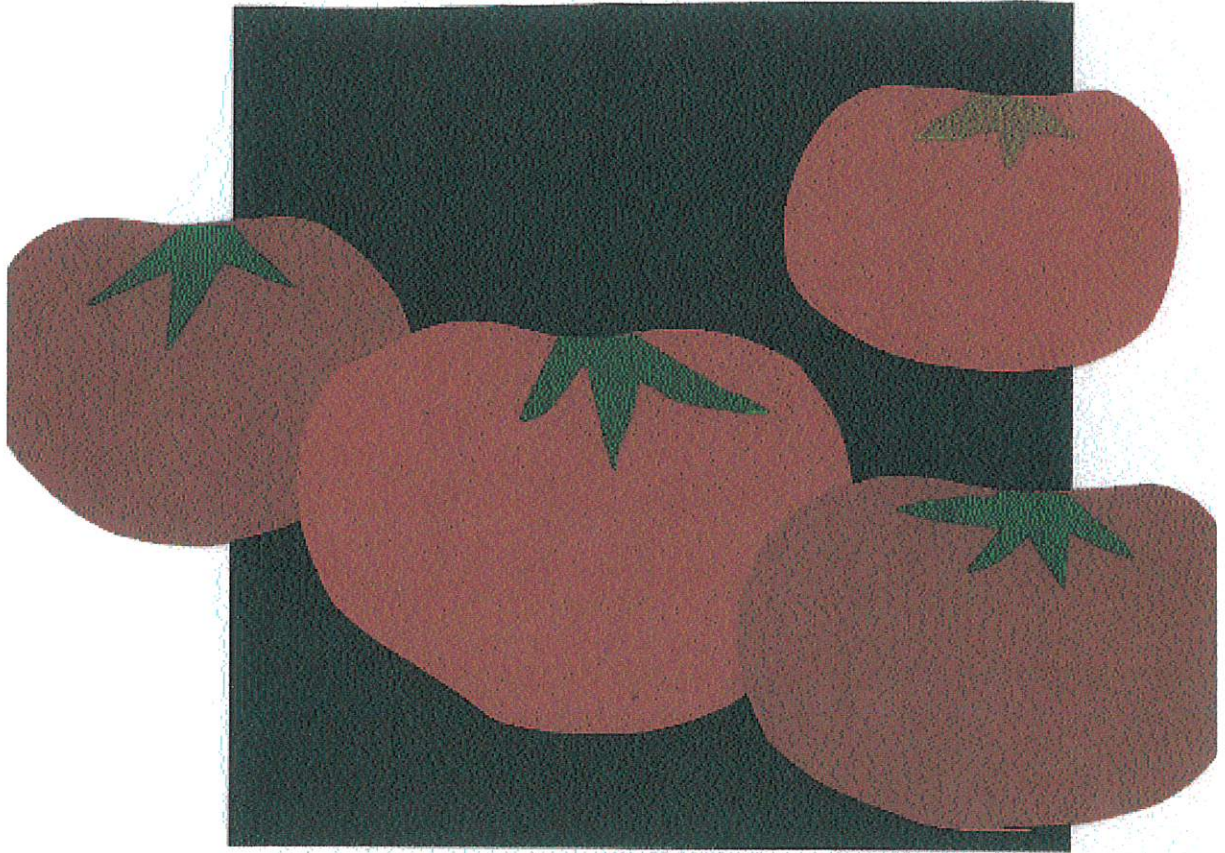


One afternoon, about ten days after Paola mailed the letter, it arrived in a town right outside the capital, San José. Monserrat's brother, *su hermano*, Javier, brought the letter back from the post office. When Monserrat got the letter she studied the unfamiliar envelope. She ran her fingers over the stamps and examined the return address. New York City! It's a letter from her prima Paola in The United States! She had not seen her since she was six when Paola came to visit. She wondered what the special occasion was.

Before she tore the envelope open, she went onto the patio and sat in the garden to read the letter. She often came to this spot when she wanted to be alone. The cool afternoon air and the sounds of the birds making their nest in the trees made her feel calm. She admired her prima's handwriting as she opened the letter.



The letter was in Spanish which surprised Monserrat. She didn't realize that her cousin could still write in Spanish so beautifully. Monserrat thought that she would only speak English because Paola was born in the United States. As Monserrat read the letter her cousin's words came alive and she was transported from her quiet patio to the busy city of New York. Monserrat imagined herself looking up at the tall buildings, so tall that you couldn't see anything green and barely see the sky. She thought about her own home, in Zapote, which was surrounded by mountains and blue sky.



Just as she finished reading the last line of the letter she heard her mother's sturdy yet kind voice call to her. Monse and her family went to the farmer's market every week to buy fruits and vegetables. "*¡Yuca fresca! Mangos jugosos!*" The familiar cries of the vendors filled Monse's head as she helped her mother fill the sack with the fresh produce. Monse hand selected each tomato, making sure that none of its sweetness had oozed out. She brought an enormous papaya right up to her nose to smell the fragrant rind and placed it in the sack. The family continued through the rows and rows of the colorful harvest and were greeted by the smell of the farmer's hard labor brought out by the afternoon sun. As they walked Monse joyfully told her mother all about the letter from her cousin. When they came home, Monse helped unpack the bags and hurried to her room to begin her response.

May 12, Zapote, Costa Rica

Dear Prima Paola,



Hi! Your letter came today. I'm really happy that you chose to write me. I still have the shells we collected at the beach when you came to visit three years ago. I live with my mother and two brothers, Javier and Federico. Fede is my twin brother, sometimes he can be a pest. Javier always plays with me and tells funny jokes. He takes care of Fede and me when mom is working.

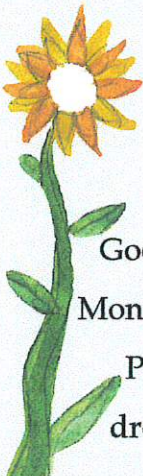
I have long, straight black hair. I would like to have curly hair like yours. I have light brown eyes and my skin is the color of coffee. Fede, looks a little like me, except he has green eyes and his hair is really curly.

I can't believe the buildings are so tall in New York. Are there any parks to play in? What's the subway like? Mi abuelita told me that it can take you all around the city, all underground!

I am learning English in school. I am not so great since I just started but I hope to be able to write to you in English one day. Javier speaks English really well so he can help me too! I like to go to the park afterschool with Javi and Fede and play basketball. I want to be a basketball player when I grow up.



What do you want to be when you get older? Do you like school? What's your favorite food? I hope you'll answer all of my questions. Please write back soon.



Good-bye,  
Monse

P.S. Thank you for the stickers. I hope you like the picture I drew of my house.

Monse Villa Soto  
Apartado 664-011  
Zapote, San José  
Costa Rica

Paola Crane Soto  
44 West 176 Street  
New York, NY 10033  
USA



**In Spanish,  
Monse wrote:**

12 de mayo,  
Zapote,  
Querida Prima Paola:

¡Hola! Hoy llegó tu carta. Estoy contenta que me elegiste. Todavía tengo las conchas que encontramos en la playa cuando viniste de visita hace tres años. Vivo con mi mamá y mis dos hermanos, Javier y Federico. Fede es mi gemelo, a veces me molesta mucho. Javier siempre juega conmigo y me cuenta chistes. Él también nos cuida cuando mi mamá está trabajando.

Yo tengo pelo largo, lacio y negro. Me gustaría tener pelo colacho como el tuyo. Tengo ojos café claros y mi piel es café con leche. Fede se parece a mí, pero él tiene ojos verdes y pelo colacho.

¡No puedo creer que sean tan grandes los edificios en la ciudad! ¿Hay parques donde jugar? ¿Cómo es el tren? Mi abuelita me contó que se lo puede usar por toda la ciudad, todo bajo la tierra.

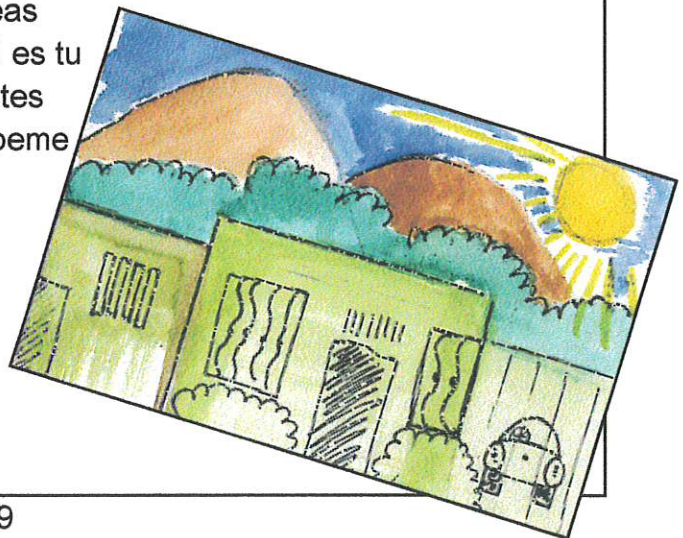
Estoy aprendiendo inglés en la escuela. No soy muy buena porque acabo de empezar pero un día quiero escribirte en inglés. Javier habla inglés muy bien y me puede ayudar. Me gusta ir al parque con Javier y Federico para jugar al basket. Quiero ser una jugadora de basket cuando sea mayor.

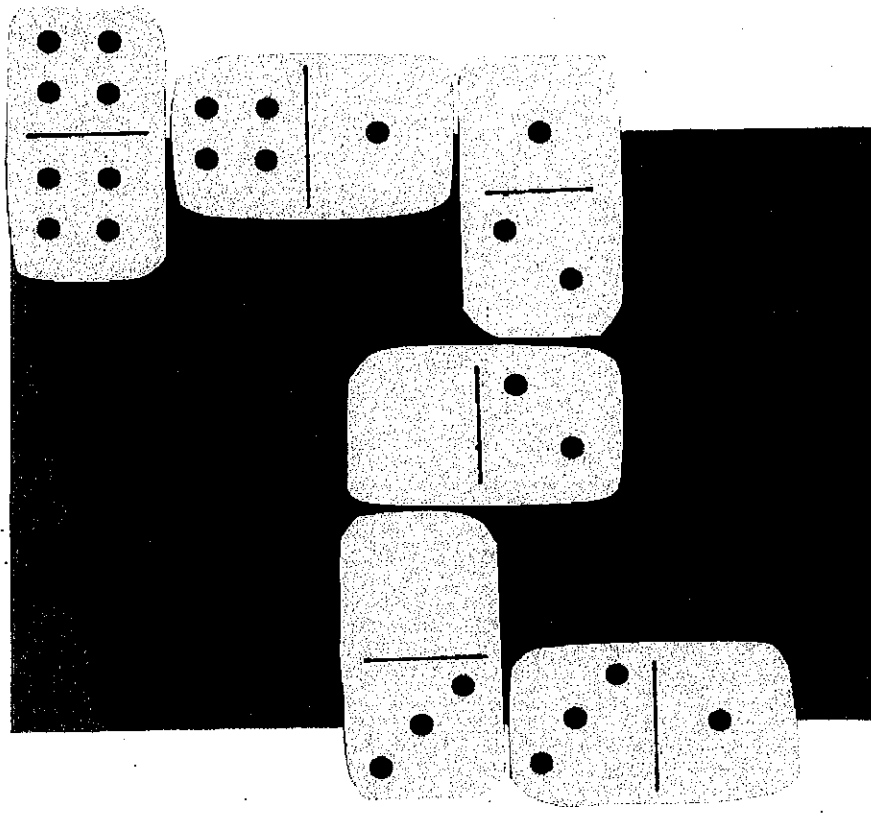
¿Qué quieres hacer cuando seas grande? ¿Te gusta la escuela? ¿Cuál es tu comida preferida? Espero que contestes todas mis preguntas. Por favor, escíbeme pronto.

Adiós,

Monse

PD Gracias por las calcomanías. Espero que te guste el dibujo que hice de mi casa.





Paola was pleasantly surprised to find a letter from Monse waiting for her on the kitchen table when she came home from school. She grabbed the letter and zoomed down the stairs to sit in her favorite spot on the stoop. She noticed the vibrant color of the stamps and decided to save them and start a collection.

Monse's letter was perfect. They had so many things in common. Paola knew they would become good friends. Paola examined the picture that her cousin drew and remembered what it was like to be at Monse's house. The cousins spent rainy afternoons on the patio drinking hot chocolate, drawing portraits of each other and playing dominos. She recalled how the birds made nests in the branches of the trees and butterflies would drink nectar from the flowers. She remembered that she could see the beautiful mountains, *las montañas lindas*, from behind the house. Paola's mother told her stories the camping trips her family would go on in those mountains. She wondered if Monse ever went camping. She would make sure to ask.





May 29, New York City



Dear Monse,



Hi! I loved your letter! The picture is great too. We are learning script in school. Are you? I like math because my teacher makes it really fun. We are taught in Spanish and English. A new girl came last month from Colombia and she only speaks Spanish. I try to help her when we speak in English. I think she's learning.



I love riding the subway. I'm not allowed to go alone, even though I think I'm old enough. The subway can seem really scary at first. There are many different trains that go in different directions. We live in Washington Heights, which is Uptown. I like it here because we are close to a big park right by the river. We come here on the weekends. My grandparents also live in this neighborhood. They've lived here for over 50 years.

I think I want to be a writer when I grow up. I love to write. I have started to write a book about Edgar. My favorite food is chicken and rice and something that my grandmother makes called matzoh ball soup. Is it true that you have mango and orange trees in your backyard? I love mangoes. I can eat them all day long.

So long,  
Paola

PS Do you have email? Mine is paolita@aol.com. Maybe we could email each other.

PSS Do you ever go camping in the mountains?



**In Spanish, Paola wrote:**

29 de mayo, New York

Querida Monse:

¡Hola! ¡Me encantó tu carta! Estamos aprendiendo a escribir en letra cursiva. ¿Y tú? Me gustan las matemáticas porque mi maestra las hace muy divertidas. Enseña en español e inglés. Una nueva alumna llegó el mes pasado de Colombia y habla solamente español. Yo la estoy ayudando cuando hablamos inglés.

Me gusta viajar en subway. No me permiten ir sola todavía pero pienso que ya soy grande para hacerlo. El subway puede darte miedo al principio. Hay muchos trenes que van en diferentes direcciones. Vivimos en Washington Heights, que está en el norte de Manhattan. A mí me gusta mi barrio porque vivimos cerca de un parque grande al lado del río. Vamos al parque los fines de semanas. Mis abuelos viven aquí también. Ellos han vivido aquí por más de cincuenta años.

Quiero ser escritora cuando sea grande. Me encanta escribir. He comenzado a escribir un libro sobre Edgar, mi gato. Mi comida preferida es arroz con pollo y algo que me hace mi abuela que se llama sopa de matzoh ball. ¿Es verdad que tienes árboles de mango y naranja en tu jardín? Me encantan los mangos. Los puedo comer todo el día.

Hasta pronto,

Paola

PD ¿Tienes un correo electronico? El mío es paolita@aol.com. Tal vez nos podemos escribir.

PDD ¿Has ido a las montañas para acampar?



*“Monse, tengo una carta para tí!”*, Javier called from the other room. A letter from Paola! It felt like forever since she heard from her cousin! She took the letter from her brother and skipped to the patio to read it. The words slide off the page as she read. She imagined the neighborhood that Paola lived in. Did a subway pass underneath her house? She thought about all of the tall buildings on top of the underground trains. She never knew Paola’s family in New York all lived in the same neighborhood, just like Monse’s family!

When she read the last line of the letter she excitedly called for her brother. "¡Javi, ven acá! Come here!" Her brother helped her start her own email address. This would surely be a faster way to communicate.

**To: paolita@aol.com**  
**From: monselo@yahoo.com**

Dear Cousin Paola,

Surprise! It's me, Monse! This is so cool! I wonder how long this will take to get to you! My brother is helping me to write in English.

Yes, we do have different fruit trees in our yard. I love mangoes, too! They're so sweet and juicy.

I've got some good and bad news. The good news is we are going camping soon. The bad news is I hurt my wrist playing basketball so I have to take it easy.

Will you write to me in English?

Bye!  
Un abrazo  
Monse

### In Spanish, Monse wrote:

Querida Paola:

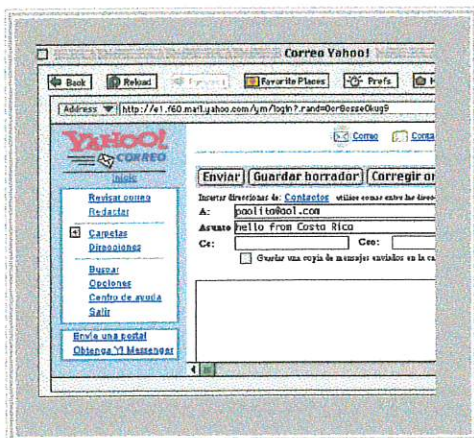
¡Sorpresa! ¡Soy yo Monse! Ésto es muy divertido. Me pregunto cuánto tardará en llegarte. Mi hermano me está ayudando a escribir en inglés.

Tenemos diferentes árboles frutales en nuestro patio. A mí también me encantan los mangos. ¡Son tan dulces y jugosos!

Tengo buenas y malas noticias. Las buenas son que nos vamos a ir de paseo. Las malas son que me lastimé la muñeca jugando al basket. Tengo que tener cuidado.

¿Me vas a responder en inglés?

Bye  
Monse



Paola was doing her homework on the computer when she got an urge to check her email. An email from Monse! She responded right away.

To: monselo@yahoo.com  
From: paolita@aol.com

Dear Monse,

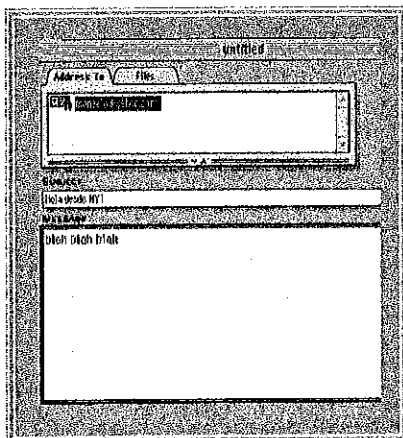
Yipee! I'm glad you have an email address! Now we can write each other more often. When's your birthday? My mother thinks it's coming up soon.

I wish I could change my name. I'm so tired of people pronouncing it wrong. In Spanish, it sounds okay but I don't like the way people say it in English -PAW-la. I need a name that can only be pronounced the same in English and Spanish.

Now I've got news for you. My mom and dad are thinking of moving to Costa Rica. They're not sure yet. It depends on if my father can get a job there. My mother is really happy because she misses her family. Ale doesn't seem to mind but I don't want to leave New York. What do you think? Please help!

Your cousin,  
Paola

**In Spanish, Paola wrote:**



Querida Monse:

¡Que bueno! Estoy contenta de que tengas correo electrónico. Ahora podemos escribirnos más a menudo. ¿Cuándo es tu cumpleaños? Mi mamá cree que es en estos días.

Desearía poder cambiar mi nombre. Estoy cansada de que la gente lo pronuncie mal. Suena bien en español pero no me gusta como la gente lo dice en inglés- PAW-la. Yo quiero un nombre que sólo pueda ser pronunciado de la misma manera en los dos idiomas.

Ahora tengo algo que contarte. Mi mamá y mi papá están pensando en mudarse a Costa Rica. Todavía no están seguros. Depende de si mi papá puede conseguir un trabajo allá. Mi mamá está muy contenta porque extraña a su familia. A Ale no le parece importar demasiado pero yo no quiero irme de NY. ¿Qué piensas? Por favor aconséjame.

**To: Paolita@aol.com**  
**From: Monse@ yahoo.com**

Dear Paola,

Wow! I can't believe that your family is thinking of moving here! That sounds great! It will be so much fun to see each other. Just think, we can go to each other's houses and go to the beach together. You'll make a lot of new friends here. You already have one!--Me! When will you know for sure?

Un abrazo  
Monse

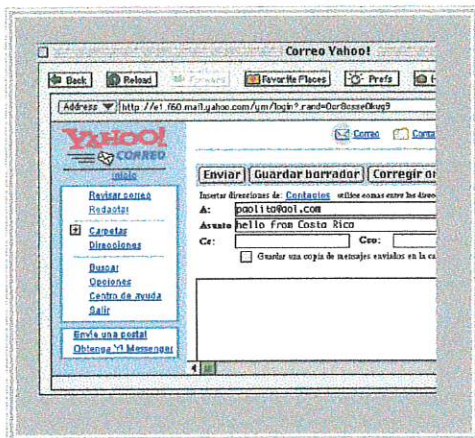
PS My birthday is June 29.

### In Spanish, Monse wrote:

Querida Paola:

¡Wow! No puedo creer que tu familia está pensando en volver aquí. ¡Suena pura vida! Va a ser muy divertido poder vivir cerca. Piensa que podremos visitarnos y también ir a la playa juntas. Vas a tener muchas amigas. Ya tienes una- ¡YO!  
¿Cuándo lo decidirían?

PD Mi cumpleaños es el 29 de junio.



**¡FELIZ CUMPLEAÑOS!**

Happy Birthday Monse!

I hope you have a fun birthday! Are you having a party? I made this card for you. I hope it gets to you on time. Yesterday was the last day of school! Yipee!! Now we are on vacation for the summer. When do you have vacation? I hope you like the necklace I made. I have one just like it.

Hugs,  
Paola

PS My father will find out next week if he will get the job! I'm so nervous!

**In Spanish, Paola wrote:**

¡Feliz cumpleaños Monse!

Espero que pases bien tu cumpleaños. ¿Vas a tener una fiesta? Yo hice esta tarjeta para ti. Espero que llegue a tiempo. Ayer fue el último día de clases. Ahora vamos a tener vacaciones de verano. ¿Cuándo estás de vacaciones? Espero que te guste el collar que te hice. Yo tengo uno igual.

Un abrazo,

Paola

PD Mi papá va a saber la semana que viene si tiene trabajo allí. ¡Estoy muy nerviosa!

July 10, Zapote

Dear Paola,

I got the card you made on my birthday! Thanks! You're a great artist! The necklace is so cool! We had a big party at our house and my mom and I made arroz con pollo, our favorite food. My best friend and I danced to our favorite song.

You're so lucky to be finished with school. We still have school until December. Then we have a long vacation. Don't forget, our vacations are different. We have our summer in December and January when you have winter.

I hope you change your mind about coming to live here! Just think, if you come to school here you'll have two summer vacations, one now and the other in December! Hey, maybe we can go to the same school! I'd really like that.

Bye for now

Your cousin,

Monse





Monse Villa Soto  
Apartado 664-011  
Zapote, San José  
Costa Rica

Paola Crane Soto  
44 West 176 Street  
New York, NY 10033  
USA



**In Spanish, Monse wrote:**

el 10 de julio, Zapote

Querida Prima Paola,

Llegó la carta en el día de mi cumpleaños. Me encantó. Eres muy buena artista. El collar que hiciste es muy lindo. Tuvimos una fiesta grande en casa y mamá y yo hicimos arroz con pollo, nuestra comida preferida. Mi amiga y yo bailamos a nuestra canción preferida.

Te envidio. Nosotros tenemos clases hasta diciembre. En diciembre comienza una vacacion larga. No te olvides que nuestras vacaciones son diferentes. Tenemos nuestro verano en diciembre y enero cuando ustedes están en invierno.

Espero que cambies de opinión. ¡Piensa que si vienes tendrás dos vacaciones de verano, una ahora y la otra en diciembre! Bueno, tal vez podamos ir a la misma escuela! Me gustaría mucho tenerte de compañera de clase.

Adiós por ahora,

Monse

Monse's thoughtful words helped Paola feel better about the move but she was still nervous. She felt badly talking about it with her parents because she knew that they already had a lot to worry about. She knew that her mother's job at the University of Costa Rica as an art teacher was too good to give up but she still couldn't believe that they were doing this to her! How could they take her away from her home, her friends, her grandparents? She didn't even have time to say good-bye to many of her friends from school who already went away for the summer. Monse was the only person who could understand her.

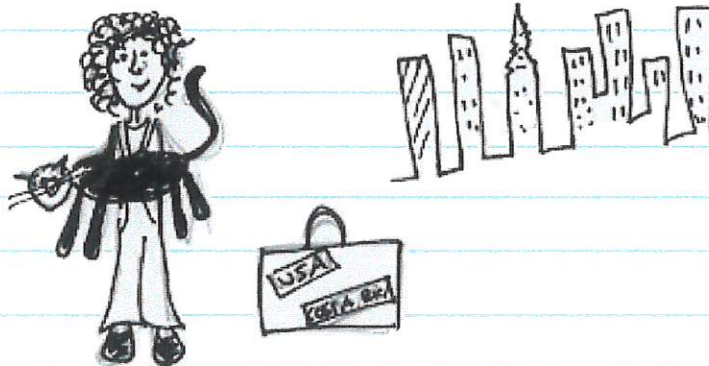
July 23  
New York  
Dear Monse,

I'm happy that you had fun on your birthday. I wish I could have been there. This will probably be one of the last emails that I will be writing to you from New York. My mother and father got jobs and we are moving in August. I'm confused. Part of me is excited because I will get to see so much family that I haven't seen in many years. I will miss it here so much. This is the only place I've lived my entire life. This must have been what my mother felt like when she left Costa Rica to come to New York to be a painter.

I have to start to pack up my stuff because my mom says that the big day will come before we know it. We can't bring everything with us. Dana is coming over to help me pack. I miss her already.

Oh yeah, the worst part is, I can't take Edgar with me.

See you soon.  
Paola





Paola Crane Soto  
44 West 176 Street  
New York, NY 10033  
USA

Monse Villa Soto  
Apartado 664-0011  
Zapote, San José  
Costa Rica  
America Central

**In Spanish, Paola wrote:**

23 de julio, New York

Querida Monse,

Me alegra que te divertiste en tu cumpleaños. Me hubiera gustado estar contigo. Esta carta será una de las últimas que te escribo desde Nueva York. Mis padres consiguieron trabajos y vamos a mudarnos en agosto. Estoy confundida. Estoy emocionada porque voy a estar con mi familia que no he visto en muchos años. Pero voy a extrañar Nueva York. Es el único lugar donde he vivido toda mi vida. Ahora entiendo lo que sentía mi mamá cuando se fue de Costa Rica y vino a Nueva York para ser pintora.

Tengo que empezar a empacar mis cosas porque mi mamá me dijo que el día llegará antes de lo pensado. No podemos llevar todo. Dana va a venir para ayudarme. Yo ya la extraño.

Y lo peor es que no puedo llevar a Edgar.

Hasta Pronto,  
Paola

To: paolita@aol.com  
From: monselo@yahoo.com

Dear Cousin Paola,

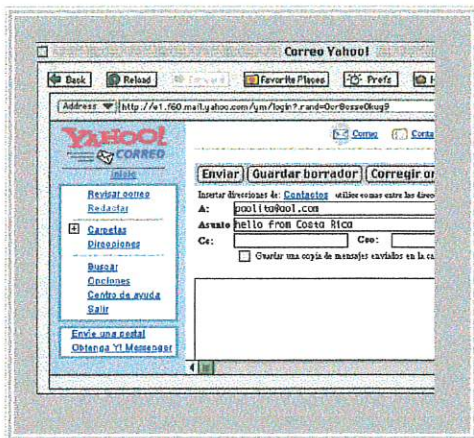
We just came back from a trip to the cloud forest. It is about a six hour bus ride from where we live. When we finally got there the long and bumpy ride was worth it. The first day we got there I saw a sloth in the trees. It was so cute! My brother thinks he saw a Quetzal, it's a rare bird! Guess what? We saw a bunch of howler monkeys in the tops of the trees.

When you come we will take you there. It is so cool! I'm so glad that you will be coming to live here. Everyone is. My mother started crying when she heard the news. She misses your mom very much. We are already planning the welcome party. We are going to make tamales! I will invite a few of my friends so that they can meet you. They're really nice. Don't worry, you will feel right at home here!!

See you in August!  
Your cousin,  
Monse

PS. I'm sorry about Edgar.

**In Spanish, Monse wrote:**



Paola:

Venimos llegando de un viaje a la selva. Son casi 6 horas en autobus de la casa. Cuando al fin llegamos me dí cuenta que valió la pena. El primer día vi un peresozo en los árboles. ¡Fue tan lindo! ¡Mi hermano piensa que vió un Quezta! ¡Adivina! Vimos un montón de monos congos.

Quando vengas te vamos a llevar allá. Es muy pura vida. Estoy contenta que vas a vivir aquí. Todo el mundo lo está. Mi mamá se puso a llorar cuando recibió las noticias. Ella extraña mucho a su mamá. Ya estamos planeando la fiesta de bienvenida. Vamos a hacer tamales. Voy a invitar a algunas de mis amigas para que te conozcan. Son muy simpáticas. No te preocupes, vas a sentirte muy cómoda.

¡Nos vemos en agosto!

PD. Lo siento por Edgar

**August 1**  
**Greetings from New York!**

Dear Monse,

Tomorrow we're off! I'm staying at my grandparent's house tonight. Guess what? They're gonna take care of Edgar! I said good-bye to Dana last night and I gave her a necklace like the one I gave to you for your birthday. I was feeling sad and scared about the move but now I'm starting to get a little excited. Dad says it will be a new beginning. I found this postcard of New York. I thought you might like it.

I have always wondered what it would be like to live in Costa Rica. Mom always talks about how beautiful it is. She told me last night that having two homes, is like having your heart in two places. Sounds hard.

See you in Costa Rica soon!

Love, Paola



Monse Villa Soto  
Apatado 664-0011  
Zapote, San José  
Costa Rica

1ero de Agosto

Querida Monse:

Mañana nos vamos. Hoy me quedo en la casa de mis abuelos. Adivina! Ellos van a cuidar a Edgar. Me despedí de Dana anoche y le di un collar como el que te regalé para tu cumpleaños. Me sentía triste y tenía miedo pero ahora me estoy empezando emocionar. Papá dice que es como un comienzo. Encontré esta tarjeta de Nueva York. Pensé que le gustaría tenerla.

Siempre he pensado como sería vivir en Costa Rica. Mamá siempre habla de lo lindo que es. Ella me dijo anoche que tener dos hogares es como tener tu corazón en dos lugares. Me parece difícil.

Nos vemos pronto en Costa Rica  
Cariñosamente, Paola

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