

The mom next door  
invited me over, and  
a new world beckoned

## THE CURIOUS WORLD OF Mrs. Reese

BY HEATHER SELLERS

**I** GREW UP IN A TROUBLED HOME in the 1970s, on the outskirts of downtown Orlando, Florida. Our subdivision was one of many that backed up to a dwindling orange grove. One remnant farm, an island of pastureland with horses, a few cattle, and an enormous garden, remained among the sea of tract houses. The home was an early-1900s Arts and Crafts three-story with a great porch, complete with a swing. I loved that storybook house.

It was nothing like the one I lived in with my mother, a dark place with strict rules about befriending others. As in: Don't. Never, ever talk to anyone, my mother said. She suffered from profound depression and paranoid delusions. Just getting through the day was a war for my mother.

Who lives on that utopian plot of

land next door? I wondered. Sometimes I glimpsed the father on a horse with a lasso. Sometimes I saw the two boys—dark curly hair—running around the land, chased by two border collies. I never saw the mother, but the whole operation looked like heaven, and I yearned to join that family.

One day, in sixth grade, a petite, raven-haired woman wearing ruby-red lipstick, gold eye shadow, and thick mascara was introduced to our class: Mrs. Reese. Mrs. Reese explained that she was starting Spanish Club. She invited anyone interested in learning Spanish language and culture to stay after school.

I could not take my eyes off her tortoiseshell bracelets, her sparkling aquamarine rings.

The bell rang, and to my shock, no one went up to Mrs. Reese. I was under a strict order to go straight home. But that day, I lingered. I finally asked Mrs. Reese when the club started.

"We could begin right now if you like," she said.

She smiled with her eyes, as though we were in on a secret. I felt beautiful. I felt fluent in Spanish, fluent in everything. We met right there in the hallway, and that day she taught me this question: *¿Dónde está su casa?* That's when I learned that Mrs. Reese lived in the mansion with the kids and the collies. The house of my dreams was her house. That day, I learned how to answer questions about my age, my favorite food (*jelado!*), and the names of every *perro* I had known. And I learned, Do you want to come over tomorrow after school for cooking lessons?

*Sí, sí, sí.* What is another word for yes?

But my mother had been definitive. Never. We could not mix with the neighbors.

I harangued my mother all summer and into fall, well after Spanish Club had dissolved. *I have been*

*invited to that house.*

*You have to let me go.* I spoke as though my life depended on it. It did. I wept at night sometimes, so worried that Mrs. Reese and her cowboy husband and those two beautiful boys with the black curly hair would move away before I could get my cooking lesson. Before I could get inside.

At some point, I managed to wear my mother

down, and one Saturday afternoon, I got on my bike and rode out to the little farm. Fuchsia bougainvillea ran rampant around the porch. There was a great bronze hand, a door knocker. Mrs. Reese opened the door grandly and ushered me in.

We had tea on her red velvet sofa. She painted my toenails crimson. She showed me how to water the African violets that lived in clusters in nearly every room. The details of that afternoon are etched in my mind: We made guacamole and then a garlicky picadillo. I carefully wrote out the recipes on white paper, making

notes as she explained the steps. *You can't have too much garlic.* We spoke in Spanish. In Spanish, my voice was loud, romantic, assertive. This is the real me! I remember thinking.

Mr. Reese pulled onto the property in a gigantic blue Ford truck and went straight to the barn. Ty, who was in my class at school, came in from playing outside. Mrs. Reese put one hand on top of his head—those gorgeous black curls, those wild blue eyes. She put her other hand, all those sparkling rings—on my back. She pressed us toward each other. *Mi novia, mi novio.* It was alarming. And thrilling.

Ty ran up to the attic—three flights. Mrs. Reese encouraged me to follow. She nodded, serious, vibrant, as though saying, Step into your life. But it wasn't quite right. I did not want to kiss a boy; I wanted to bake *dulces*.

When I got home, I announced to my mother that we had to get the ingredients for picadillo immediately. "You smell different," she said, eyeing me suspiciously. I am

different. I am completely different.

She said no. "You know I can't have garlic in the house." She hated the smell. I felt hurt, proud, disloyal, and brilliant, all at once, when I told my mother, "Mrs. Reese doubles the garlic." My toenails, secret jewels, sparkled in my sneakers.

I knew I'd always have garlic in my house. I knew I'd paint my nails the deepest, bloodiest red, first chance I got. I knew I'd learn to dance, become fluent in Spanish.

For Christmas, Ty gave me a silver necklace from their family trip to Colombia, slipping it to me at school.

My mother never permitted me another visit to Mrs. Reese's house, and I saw her only occasionally from a distance, hanging laundry on the line or sweeping their cavernous front porch. But four decades and countless moves later, I still have the necklace: a little silver man, carved with strange symbols, a talisman from the life she showed me, proof of a possible future. **R**

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## BEING GROAN-UPS

So much of being an adult is bringing a bottle of wine someone brought to your house to someone else's house.

**@EAXFORD (EMILY AXFORD)**

Hey, empty-nest parents: If you want your kid to call you, just change your Netflix password.

**@CRAYDRIENNE (ADRIENNE AIRHART)**