

**PROSE FICTION:** This passage is adapted from the short story “American History” by Judith Ortiz-Cofer (©1992 by Judith Ortiz-Cofer). The story appeared in the anthology *Iguana Dreams: New Latino Fiction*.

There was only one source of beauty and light for me my ninth grade year. The only thing I had anticipated at the start of the semester. That was seeing Eugene. In August, Eugene and his family had moved  
5 into the only house on the block that had a yard and trees. I could see his place from my bedroom window in El Building. In fact, if I sat on the fire escape I was literally suspended above Eugene’s backyard. It was my favorite spot to read my library books in the summer.  
10 Until that August the house had been occupied by an old couple. Over the years I had become part of their family, without their knowing it, of course. I had a view of their kitchen and their backyard, and though I could not hear what they said, I knew when they were arguing,  
15 when one of them was sick, and many other things. I knew all this by watching them at mealtimes. I could see their kitchen table, the sink, and the stove. During good times, he sat at the table and read his newspapers while she fixed the meals. If they argued, he would leave and  
20 the old woman would sit and stare at nothing for a long time. When one of them was sick, the other would come and get things from the kitchen and carry them out on a tray. The old man had died in June. The house had stood empty for weeks. I had had to resist the temptation to  
25 climb down into the yard and water the flowers the old lady had taken such good care of.

By the time Eugene’s family moved in, the yard was a tangled mass of weeds. The father had spent several days mowing, and when he finished, from where I  
30 sat, I didn’t see the red, yellow, and purple clusters that meant flowers to me. I didn’t see this family sit down at the kitchen table together. It was just the mother, a red-headed tall woman who wore a white uniform; the father was gone before I got up in the morning and was  
35 never there at dinner time. I only saw him on weekends when they sometimes sat on lawn-chairs under the oak tree, each hidden behind a section of the newspaper; and there was Eugene. He was tall and blond, and he wore glasses. I liked him right away because he sat at  
40 the kitchen table and read books for hours. That summer, before we had even spoken one word to each other, I kept him company on my fire escape.

Once school started I looked for him in all my classes, but P. S. 13 was a huge place and it took me  
45 days and many discreet questions to discover Eugene. After much maneuvering I managed “to run into him” in the hallway where his locker was—on the other side of the building from mine—and in study hall at the library where he first seemed to notice me, but did not  
50 speak; and finally, on the way home after school one day when I decided to approach him directly, though my stomach was doing somersaults.

I was ready for rejection, snobbery, the worst. But when I came up to him and blurted out: “You’re  
55 Eugene. Right?” he smiled, pushed his glasses up on his nose, and nodded. I saw then that he was blushing deeply. Eugene liked me, but he was shy. I did most of the talking that day. He nodded and smiled a lot. In the weeks that followed, we walked home together. He  
60 would linger at the corner of El Building for a few minutes then walk down to his house.

I did not tell Eugene that I could see inside his kitchen from my bedroom. I felt dishonest, but I liked  
65 my secret sharing of his evenings, especially now that I knew what he was reading since we chose our books together at the school library.

I also knew my mother was unhappy in Paterson, New Jersey, but my father had a good job at the blue-  
70 jeans factory in Passaic and soon, he kept assuring us, we would be moving to our own house there. I had learned to listen to my parents’ dreams, which were spoken in Spanish, as fairy tales, like the stories about  
75 life in Puerto Rico before I was born. I had been to the island once as a little girl. We had not been back there since then, though my parents talked constantly about  
buying a house on the beach someday, retiring on the island—that was a common topic among the residents of El Building. As for me, I was going to go to college  
and become a teacher.

But after meeting Eugene I began to think of the  
80 present more than of the future. What I wanted now was to enter that house I had watched for so many years. I wanted to see the other rooms where the old people had lived, and where the boy spent his time. Most of all, I  
85 wanted to sit at the kitchen table with Eugene like two adults, like the old man and his wife had done, maybe drink some coffee and talk about books.