

EXCERPT FROM

Chain Reaction

by Tere Martínez

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Héctor Santillana: A Puerto Rican engineer in his mid-60's. He immigrated to the United States when he was about 13 years old.

Mercedes: Yojaira's grandmother who lives in the Dominican Republic. She is in her late-50's.

Antonia Pantoja: A Puerto Rican community leader in the U.S.. The actor must be able to portray her from her early-20's to her mid-70's.

Alejandrina: Pantoja's mother. A black Puerto Rican in her 40's.

Professor Ramos: A Puerto Rican college counselor in her mid-40's. She is a native speaker of English.

Yojaira: A Dominican student at Hostos Community College. She immigrated to the United States when she was 15 years old. She is now 19 years old.

Chorus: An ensemble of six to seven bilingual actors in their 20's.

Carmen: Pantoja's friend from Puerto Rico. She is in her early-20's. She could be played by one of the actors from the chorus.

Foreman: A white American man in his 40's.

Helen: Best friend of Pantoja while in her late-20's and early-30's. She is a white American in her late-20's. She could be played by one of the actors from the chorus.

Lennie: A Jewish-American man in his early-30's. He could be played by one of the actors from the chorus.

Louis: A Puerto Rican born in New York. He is in his mid-20's. He could be played by one of the actors from the chorus.

Bill: A Jewish-American man in his early-30's. He could be played by one of the actors from the chorus.

Marco: An African-American student at Hostos Community College. He is in his early-20's.

Frank Horne: A light-skinned African-American in his early-30's.

Héctor Santillana, as a teenager: The same character when he was 16 years old.

Yolanda: Yojaira's mother. A Dominican immigrant in her early-40's.

SET

The set does not need to be realistic, but it needs to suggest a mix of a working and an academic environment. The stage should be divided into seven staging areas: upstage right, downstage right, upstage center, center stage, downstage center, upstage left and downstage left. Downstage left and upstage right should have desks with chairs to create office spaces. Upstage left and upstage center there are bookshelves with both the needed props for the play and books. Center stage there are seven to eight chairs in a semi-circle for the chorus.

SCENE I

Upstage center.

MERCEDES

Oiga, con el permiso.
[Excuse me.]

HECTOR

Sí, dígame.
[Yes?]

MERCEDES

Yo soy Mercedes Gutiérrez.
[I'm Mercedes Gutierrez.]
(They shake hands.)

HECTOR

Encantado. ¿Cómo le puedo ayudar?
[Nice to meet you. What can I do for you?]

MERCEDES

Acabo de escuchar su conferencia. Yo soy secretaria aquí en la UASD. No entendí mucho de la parte de la ciencia. Pero cuando usted dijo que se crió en el sur del Bronx....me acordó tanto a mi nieta. Ella estudia allá en un sitio que se llama Hostos como su compatriota.

[I was just at your lecture. I'm a secretary here at the University of Santo Domingo. I didn't understand a lot of the scientific stuff. But when you mentioned growing up in the South Bronx....you made me think of my granddaughter. She's in school there at a place called Hostos, like your fellow Puerto Rican.]

HECTOR

Que por cierto ustedes tienen el privilegio de tenerlo enterrado acá en la República Dominicana. Un gran patriota nuestro y de todas las Américas. Claro que conozco de Hostos Community College. Mi tía estudió allí para los setenta. Esa escuela tiene una gran historia.

[And you have the honor of having him buried here in the Dominican Republic. One of the Americas' greatest patriots. Of course I know about Hostos Community College. My aunt went there in the 70's. That school has a great history.]

MERCEDES

No me diga.

[Really?]

HECTOR

Una historia de gran lucha. Es una escuela que nació de la determinación de una comunidad.

[A history of great struggle. It's a school that was born out of a community's determination.]

MERCEDES

Ah, pues eso no lo sabía.

[I didn't know that.]

HECTOR

Y qué estudia su nieta?

[So what's your granddaughter studying?]

MERCEDES

Pues ese es parte del problema. De chiquita ella no hacía más que mirar las estrellas. Y decía yo quiero ir un día allí (pointing at the ceiling) y tocarlas. Le encantaba aprender de pequeña..

[That's part of the problem. When she was a kid, she was always looking at the stars. She'd say, "I want to go there someday and touch them." She loved learning when she was a kid.]

HECTOR

Quería ser astrónoma.

[She wanted to be an astronomer.]

MERCEDES

Siempre pensé que mi nieta sería científica. Por eso usted me acordó tanto a ella.

[I always thought she'd be a scientist. That's why you made me think of her.]

HECTOR

Estoy seguro que en Hostos puede empezar a estudiar ciencias.

[I'm sure she can begin her science studies at Hostos.]

MERCEDES

Es su mamá que quiere que estudie otra cosa. Ya usted sabe por los cuartos.
[It's her mother that wants her to study something else. You know, for the money.]

HECTOR

Y su nieta, ¿qué quiere?
[But what does your granddaughter want?]

MERCEDES

Ella ni sabe. Es complicado.
[She doesn't even know. It's complicated.]

HECTOR

Dios mío, como pasa el tiempo. Ya es el 2011. Ya fue hace casi cincuenta años.
[Boy, time flies. It's already 2011. It's been almost fifty years.]

MERCEDES

¿El qué?
[Since what?]

HECTOR

Es que hablar de Hostos me recuerda tanto a mi gran maestra, mi mentora. (He takes out a business card.) ¿Cómo se llama su nieta?
[Talking about Hostos reminds me so much of my mentor. What's your granddaughter's name?]

MERCEDES

Yojaira Peña.

HECTOR

(Handing her his business card.) Fíjese, me interesaría hablar con ella. I have some unfinished business there...no sé como se dice eso en español.
[Look, I'd be interested in talking to her. I have some unfinished business there.]

MERCEDES

Usted le podría hablar de las cosas que habló aquí hoy.
[You could tell her about the things you talked about today.]

HECTOR

Sí, si es que a ella le interesa.
[Sure, if she's interested.]

SCENE II

(PANTOJA climbs the stage stairs to take down center stage. A MEMBER OF THE CHORUS helps her climb the stairs.)

PANTOJA

Good evening. My name is Antonia Pantoja. But since I am at a university perhaps it would be best to say Dr. Antonia Pantoja. (She giggles.) How many Ph.D.'s do we have here this evening? You know? Your professors? They love that title. Well, education gives you power. And tonight we are here, in a way, to talk about power. We all want power. It's not that we want it, we need it. There's nothing wrong with wanting power. The problem is how we USE power. Oh, I forgot! Can you hear me? 'Cause I have an accent you know. I am a doctor with a very thick accent. Now I cannot be Antonia Pantoja without it. I went to a CUNY school, too. Many years ago. Hunter College. Back then they tried to get rid of my accent. Well, my professors gave up on me. Because finally I said, If you understand me, why should I get rid of it? It doesn't make me less intelligent, plus it makes me different. I like that. I don't like being like everybody else, why should I? Let's start by talking about what makes me different. Do you ever think about that? Where was I born? Where do I live now? (Pause.) I am a Nuyorican. People in this country think that's a terrible thing to be. But no, no, no. To me it's a very powerful thing.

(Transition to the 1940's. Pantoja walks down stage right.

Se acabó Alejandrina. Yo me voy pa' Nueva York.
[I've had it, Alejandrina. I'm moving to New York.]

ALEJANDRINA

Y ahora, ¿quién me va a ayudar a mí?
[So who's going to help me now?]

PANTOJA

Pues tu marido, que no hace nada. Tus hijos no son mi responsabilidad. Yo llevo muchos años ayudándote, y aquí en Puerto Rico ya no hay nada para mí.
[Ask your good-for-nothing husband. Your children are not my responsibility. I've been helping you for years. Besides, there's nothing left for me in Puerto Rico.]

ALEJANDRINA

¿Y tu trabajo de maestra en Toa Alta?
[What about your teaching job?]

PANTOJA

Esa gente no quieren escuchar mis ideas. Me quieren imponer una manera de enseñar que no sirve. Yo necesito respirar, salir de este país.
[They don't want to listen to my ideas. They're making us teach in a way that doesn't work. I need to breathe, to get out of this country.]

ALEJANDRINA

¿Tú te crees que la cosa va a ser tan fácil en Nueva York? Una mujer sola. Date tiempo, Toñita.

Tu lo que necesitas es conocer un buen hombre.

[Do you think it's going to be that easy in New York? A woman alone? Give yourself some time, Toñita. You need to find a good man.]

PANTOJA

¿Casarme? Tu con la misma cantaleta de Mamá.

[Get married? There you go with that same old song, just like Mom.]

ALEJANDRINA

¿Mamá? ¿Quién soy yo entonces para tí?

[Mom? Then what am I to you?]

PANTOJA

Es que ella me crió. La quiero como a una madre.

[She raised me. I love her like a mother.]

ALEJANDRINA

¿Y todos los sábados que pasamos juntas? ¿Ya te olvidaste?

[What about all the Saturdays we spent together? Have you forgotten?]

PANTOJA

Pero fueron tantas las veces que te espere y no llegaste. A veces pienso que no me quieres porque somos distintas.

[There were so many times when I waited and you never came. Sometimes I think you don't love me because we're different.]

ALEJANDRINA

Tu tienes la suerte de ser casi blanca.

[You're lucky to be almost white.]

PANTOJA

(Touching her hair.) Mira mi pelo, Alejandrina. Me siento tan negra como tu.

[Look at my hair, Alejandrina. I'm as black as you.]

SCENE III

(At the Hostos Counseling Center. Upstage right.)

PROFESSOR RAMOS

So, how are things at home? Any progress?

YOJAIRA

(With an attitude.) What you think? (Pause.) No.

PROFESSOR RAMOS

Did you have that talk with your mom?

YOJAIRA

She doesn't care. And what's the point? She is always right, you know? It's impossible to talk to her.

PROFESSOR RAMOS

You need to tell her how you feel. What's going on at home isn't right, Yojaira.

YOJAIRA

I'm always the last person for her to think about. (Pause.) I hate him.

PROFESSOR RAMOS

Has he hit you again?

YOJAIRA

He's been too busy hanging out at the bar.

PROFESSOR RAMOS

Why did she bring you to the States?

YOJAIRA

I don't know.

PROFESSOR RAMOS

I'm sure she wanted you here.

YOJAIRA

What for? To make me feel like I'm not worth anything?

SCENE IV

(Transition to the late-1940's in New York's Penn Station. We hear American 40's music. Upstage left.)

CARMEN

Toñita, ¿dónde estamos?
[Where are we, Toñita?]

PANTOJA

Pues en Nueva York.
[In New York.]

CARMEN

Eso lo sé, pero, ¿y a dónde está la Statue of Liberty?

[I know that. But where's the Statue of Liberty?]

(They look at each other. Suddenly they find themselves at the foot of an escalator.)

¿Y qué es esto?
[What's that?]

PANTOJA

¡Qué escalera tan rara! Mira como lleva a la gente.
[What a weird staircase! Look how it takes the people.]

CARMEN

¿Cómo se llamará esto? Yo eso en la isla nunca lo vi.
[I wonder what you call it. I never saw that on the island.]

PANTOJA

Y eso que somos de San Juan.
[And we're from San Juan.]

CARMEN

Ni los riquitos de la Central High tienen una cosa así en la casa. Espérate. ¿Y cómo se monta uno aquí?
[Not even the snobs from Central High have stairs like that. So how do we get on?]

PANTOJA

Ya yo vi como es la cosa. Pon el pie derecho primero.
[Oh, I get it. Right foot first.]

CARMEN

Hay que poner el izquierdo bien rápido también.
[But be quick with the left one!]

PANTOJA

Nena, pa' treparse en esto hay que moverse más rápido que Fred Astaire. Y ahora como nos bajamos de aquí? (Pausa.) Ah no mira, es bien fácil. Nos deja aquí mismo.
[You need to move faster than Fred Astaire. But how do we get off? Oh, I see. It's easy. It leaves us right here.]

CARMEN

(Looking at the ceiling.)
¡Mira esto!
[Look at that!]

PANTOJA

¡Qué techo tan precioso!

[What a gorgeous ceiling!]

CARMEN

(Reading a sign.)

Esto aquí se llama Penn Station.

[This place is called Penn Station.]

PANTOJA

Carmen, deja de estar mirando pa'riba que nos van a decir jíbaras.

[Carmen, stop looking up so much. People will think we're hicks.]

SCENE V

(At the Hostos Counseling Center. Upstage right.)

PROFESSOR RAMOS

So, how is English 091 going?

YOJAIRA

Do we have to talk about it?

PROFESSOR RAMOS

You need to pass that exam, Yojaira.

YOJAIRA

(Sarcastic.) Really? I didn't know that.

PROFESSOR RAMOS

Your attitude is not helping you.

YOJAIRA

I hate writing. Why can't I get into this program just with my math ability?

PROFESSOR RAMOS

Good writers have to pass math, too. It's called getting a well-rounded education.

YOJAIRA

Dental hygienists don't write essays. They only write notes in charts.

PROFESSOR RAMOS

You're going to have to write cover letters to get a job. Jobs are more complicated than you think, Yojaira. Believe me. It's best to be prepared for anything. You might want to be something else later on in life.

YOJAIRA

Oh, please! I'm not going through choosing a career again.

PROFESSOR RAMOS

What happened to becoming an astronaut? You could be the first Dominican to go to Mars.

YOJAIRA

Nah! It's just that sometimes I want to shoot myself to the moon. That's all. Get the fu-... hell out of here, go as far away as possible from You-Know-Who.

PROFESSOR RAMOS

You're already a Liberal Arts major.

YOJAIRA

Sure! That's what all the losers in this school are. You don't know what to do with your life...Liberal Arts...you don't speak a lot of English....Liberal Arts. They should rename it the Hostos School of Liberal Arts.

PROFESSOR RAMOS

I don't particularly associate science or engineering with losers. You know three Hostos students did a ten-week program at Nasa this past summer.

YOJAIRA

I can't be a scientist or an engineer.

PROFESSOR RAMOS

Why not?

YOJAIRA

Hello! I'm still stuck in 091.

PROFESSOR RAMOS

But you scored so high in math. You're very smart, Yojaira.

YOJAIRA

I should have never left the DR. I could be in dental school there.

PROFESSOR RAMOS

But you want to be an astronaut. That's why you came to Hostos.

YOJAIRA

I think for once my mom is right. Cleaning teeth is good money.

PROFESSOR RAMOS

I understand, Yojaira, believe me. We take great pride in our dental hygiene program.

YOJAIRA

It's so hard to get in. I'll feel good about myself if I do.

PROFESSOR RAMOS

Sure! But is that what you really want?

YOJAIRA

All I want right now is to pass that exam.

SCENE VI

(Downstage center.)

PANTOJA

So I get to New York. First place I live: the Bronx. A very different Bronx from today. Everything was so different from what I knew. I liked that. Different people, different cultures. My first challenge, you're gonna relate to this one.

(CHORUS creates an assembly line center stage. Pantoja is in the middle of the assembly line. They pass an object around, and each of them adds a piece to it, like factory workers. At the beginning it goes smoothly, but by the time the third object goes around Pantoja has slowed down. She has a pile of objects in front of her.)

FOREMAN

You're too slow. You must be the new Puerto Rican.

(Chorus starts the assembly line one more time. By the time the second object goes around Pantoja yells.)

PANTOJA

Ouch! I got burned.

FOREMAN

You're trouble, you know? Causing accidents at work. Go to the nurse!

PANTOJA

I think I can find myself another job.

(Chorus members look at each other, surprised at her audacity. Chorus starts another assembly line in a different factory. This time Pantoja is able to keep up with the work.)

FACTORY WORKER

Look! It's snowing!

(Pantoja gets up and looks out the window.)

PANTOJA

It's beautiful. So what? I'm exhausted all the time. I have no life with this job.

(Chorus starts a third assembly line. Pantoja is about to sit down as part of the assembly line when BILL approaches her.)

BILL

I'd like to speak to you.

PANTOJA

What did I do wrong?

BILL

Nothing. I saw that you have some education.

PANTOJA

I studied at the University of Puerto Rico. I was a teacher in my country.

BILL

I saw you took some art courses. Do you like to draw? (Pantoja nods. Bill takes her farther away from the assembly line.) I'm opening my own lamp factory. I'd like you to be my designer.

PANTOJA

What does that mean in terms of salary?

BILL

I see you're not shy. Five cents more an hour.

(Pantoja moves downstage center.)

PANTOJA

Even though Bill was very good to me, I started to see the other side of New York, the one that was not in the movies. I saw how my people were treated in factories, and how they were denied services. This infuriated me. You see, I was raised by my grandparents. My grandfather and most of my family worked for the American Tobacco Company in Santurce. He was poor but educated, very well read. He read and read. He read Lenin. And he organized workers to strike for more money.

FACTORY WORKER 1

¿Qué a ti te pagan cuánto? Pues a mí me pagan menos.
[How much did you say you get paid? Well I make less.]

FACTORY WORKER 2

Pues a mí me pagan más.

[I make more.]

FACTORY WORKER 1

Eso no es justo.
[That's not fair.]

FACTORY WORKER 3

Y además aquí necesitamos un cuartito pa' cambiarnos.
[And we need a changing room.]

FACTORY WORKER 1

Yo también le pedí al boss un sofacito, pa' aunque sea podernos sentar un ratito mientras nos comemos el lunche.
[I also asked for a sofa so we can sit down during lunch.]

PANTOJA

Ustedes tienen derechos. Para eso existen las uniones.
[You have rights. That's why there are unions.]

FACTORY WORKER 1

Mira, si ésta habla español.
[Hey, she speaks Spanish.]

PANTOJA

Yo soy puertorriqueña.
[I'm Puerto Rican.]

FACTORY WORKER 1

Como es tan amiga del boss.
[Well she's friends with the boss.]

PANTOJA

Ustedes tienen que organizarse. ¿Ustedes saben que en los Estados Unidos hay una cosa que se llama minimum wage?
[You have to get organized. Do you know that in the U. S. there's something called minimum wage?]

(They look at each other in total confusion.)

FACTORY WORKER 2

¿Qué es eso?
[What's that?]

(Workers leave the stage. Bill comes in.)

PANTOJA

We need to start a union.

BILL

Are you crazy? Are you with me or with them?

PANTOJA

What do you think? I'm Puerto Rican. When I was a child my grandfather was almost killed by strikebreakers, and today I'm honoring his name.

SCENE VII

At the Hostos Registrar's Office where both Yojaira and MARCO work. Downstage left.)

YOJAIRA

This is the third time this week that student has come asking the same question.

MARCO

Why do they keep sending her here?

YOJAIRA

I don't know.

MARCO

(Making air quotes.) "Our friends" in the B building should be taking care of her.

YOJAIRA

You think they care? I called them yesterday. And You-Know-Who said, (imitating her voice.) "Send her back here."

MARCO

And did she go?

YOJAIRA

Of course, she's desperate. And what did they do?

MARCO

(Laughing.) Sent her back here. I remember my first semester when they registered me in the wrong math course.

YOJAIRA

That must've sucked!

MARCO

Nobody communicates around here.

YOJAIRA

But let's be real, some people just don't listen.

MARCO

You know who was really helpful back then? Steven.

YOJAIRA

You think he's gay?

MARCO

It's pretty obvious to me. Why? Does that bother you?

YOJAIRA

(Not knowing how to answer.) No. Just wondering.

MARCO

Are you sure? (Pause.) Well, he's someone who has his job description down.

YOJAIRA

Speaking of jobs...here's my latest English assignment. I have to come up with a list of fifty things I'm interested in learning. Not ten or fifteen, but fifty. What does that have to do with learning how to write?

MARCO

That's so cool! And it has to do with everything.

YOJAIRA

I can't even come up with five.

MARCO

That's Professor Davis for you. I told you he comes up with the coolest assignments.

YOJAIRA

What's so cool about it?

MARCO

Yo, check yourself. I wanna learn so many things. To begin with, I want to see the whole world. There's a revolution going on in the Middle East.

YOJAIRA

There's a revolution going on here.

MARCO

In my opinion, those guys in the Middle East inspired Occupy Wall Street. And that's awesome. Then there's a million books I want to read. I've got to read more than sci-fi. I need to check out the classics. When I read Dostoyevsky in 111, that was solid. Those Russians got some

crazy, wild minds. Not to mention...what's his name? From the South. Faulkner...he was buggin'. You haven't even read Junot Díaz, and you're a Dominican York. What's the last book you read?

YOJAIRA

Sarah's Key.

MARCO

Book of the Semester.

YOJAIRA

I had no choice.

MARCO

Fucked up shit, the Holocaust, man. Did you know about Hitler and all those horrible things he did?

YOJAIRA

(Silence.) No.

MARCO

Do you know about Trujillo?

YOJAIRA

Duh! My grandmother's family fought against him.

MARCO

That's hot! I'm telling you, you've got to check out this Junot Díaz dude. You have to read stuff outside class.

YOJAIRA

I just don't like reading. The first thing I do when I'm assigned to read a book is count how many pages it has. Then I divide them into the amount of days I have until the deadline.

MARCO

Bad start. What interests you, Yo?

YOJAIRA

Not much.

MARCO

Bullshit! Hey, you loved it when we went to the Museum of Natural History.

YOJAIRA

Oh, I love the Planetarium.

EXCERPT FROM *CHAIN REACTION* BY TERE MARTÍNEZ

MARCO

Shh! (Whispering.) Gene's coming. Let's get back to filing.

YOJAIRA

(Whispering.) Why is he so mean? He's only a college assistant not Nérida Pastoriza.