

A Smart Cookie
Susan Cisneros
(translated by Elena Poniatowska)

I could've been somebody, you know?
my mother says and sighs. She has lived
in this city her whole life. She can speak
two languages. She can sing an opera.
She knows how to fix a TV. But she
doesn't know which subway train to
take to get downtown. I hold her hand
very tight while we wait for the right
train to arrive.

She used to draw when she had time.
Now she draws with a needle and
thread, little knotted rosebuds, tulips
made of silk thread. Someday she
would like to go to the ballet. Someday
she would like to see a play. She
borrows opera records from the public
library and sings with velvety lungs
powerful as morning glories.

Today while cooking oatmeal she is Madame Butterfly until she sighs and points the wooden spoon at me. I could've been somebody, you know? Esperanza, you go to school. Study hard. That Madame Butterfly was a fool. She stirs the oatmeal. Look at my comadres. She means Izaura whose husband left and Yolanda whose husband is dead. Got to take care all your own, she says shaking her head.

Then out of nowhere:

Shame is a bad thing, you know. It keeps you down. You want to know why I quit school? Because I didn't have nice clothes. No clothes, but I had brains.

Yup, she says disgusted, stirring again. I was a smart cookie then.