

# AT HOME IN THE PROJECTS

By Fabiola Duvalsaint

The projects. A year ago I would have shuddered at the thought of visiting one and being around the people who live there.

Like most people, I didn't know anything about public housing projects because I had never been to one. But that didn't stop me from imagining what they were like.

To me, the projects were a place where dangerous people lived, a place you didn't go if you didn't live there. I mean, people in the housing projects are mostly drug dealers and prostitutes, right? Basically, they were forbidden territory.

My neighborhood wasn't the kind with white picket fences up and down the block. For a while, my neighborhood was thought of as dangerous. But I believed my neighborhood could change for the better. I didn't think that about the projects. I thought they were made for tough people who weren't to be messed with.

The way they made projects look on TV, how could you not be scared? The tall buildings that all look the same, the drug dealers racing to see who can make the quickest sale, and the daily shootings.

If a girl in school passed by with "door knocker" earrings, baggy pants with the boxers hanging out, and a bandanna wrapped around her head, one of my friends would look at her and automatically say, "Here comes the projects." And everyone at our table would burst out laughing.

Then I met Maria. We met freshman year in gym class, but we weren't really friends. Maria was tall, Hispanic, had wild, curly black hair most girls would die for, and was very blunt.

If she didn't like something, she would let you know it in a second. She spoke her mind and didn't care about the consequences.

The following year we had a math class together. One day, I noticed she had a cool blue nail polish, so I asked for the name.

She looked at me as if I was stupid and said, "It's blue." After that I was like, "Forget that!"

Then one day a girl dropped her pen in class. When she tried to get it with her foot, she got stuck. Maria and I started laughing. We were laughing so hard that the whole class was watching us. After that, we just started talking like two friends who knew each other from way back.

For a while during junior year we got separated. But one day we bumped into each other and decided to meet at a fast food place once a month after school.

Then once a month turned into once a week and, before I knew it, Maria and I were getting together every day, either to hang out at my house or at the school's athletic field.

One day I asked if I could come over to her house.

"You want to come over my house?" she asked, looking like I was talking in a foreign language.

"Yeah," I said. "What's the matter?"

Maria just looked at me and smiled. "I live in the projects," she said.

I looked to see if she was kidding, but deep inside I knew she was dead serious. How was I going to get myself out of this situation?

I guess she could tell how I felt by looking at my face, because Maria told me right away that I didn't have to go if I didn't want to.

I wanted to back out, I really did, but I sensed that not going would mean my friendship with her wasn't real.

When my last class ended that day, I went to meet Maria at our usual spot (the locker room).

As we started to walk, Maria looked at me and started laughing. I asked her what was so funny (because at this point I sure needed a good laugh).



"You're scared to go to the projects!" she said.

I turned toward her and looked her straight in the face. "I'm not scared. Why should I be?"

Great! Not only was I a coward, but I'd turned into a liar too.

I wanted to turn back, and had almost decided to, but just then Maria pointed to an orange building surrounded by other orange buildings.

"Here it is," she said.

I had been so filled with dread and my thoughts were so locked on turning back, that I didn't even realize that we had already arrived.

When I looked around I was shocked. There were no drug dealers on the corners and I certainly didn't hear any gunshots. This neighborhood was quiet and calm—as if all the people who lived here were sleeping inside their apartments. Was this what I was afraid of?

We crossed the street and went inside her building. When we got upstairs to her apartment, I met her mom and sister.

I got so comfortable in her apartment that my fears melted away. My worries were all just gone!

Her apartment was like any other and her room was just as messy as mine, which made me even more comfortable.

She had a dog named Rufus that went wild when he saw me, and a quiet cat that just sat around. Her mom looked harmless.

When it was time to leave, I told her that this time I really wasn't scared and I could manage to get to the bus stop across the street on my own. After that day I went over to Maria's house often.

Now I've grown to learn the true meaning of the saying, "Believe none of what you hear and half of what you see." And I am not as ignorant as I used to be.

WAS THIS WHAT I  
WAS AFRAID OF?

Fabiola Duvalsaint *was 17 when she wrote this story. She majored in journalism in college.*

## THiNK ABOUT iT

- ▶▶ Did you ever have a fear of a person, a group of people, or a place based on a stereotype or prejudice? Did you get over that fear? Why or why not?
- ▶▶ Has anyone ever been mistrustful or afraid of you? Why were they afraid and how did that make you feel?