

Into the Beautiful North



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LUIS ALBERTO URREA

Luis Urrea was born in Tijuana, Mexico, and was listed as an American born abroad. Both of his parents worked in San Diego, and when Urrea was three, the family relocated to San Diego with the hope that it would help the young Urrea recover from tuberculosis. His mother, an American born in Staten Island, encouraged him to write and attend college. He earned his bachelor's degree in writing from University of California at San Diego in 1977 and completed a graduate degree several years later at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He worked briefly as a relief worker in the dump at Tijuana, a location that appears in *Into the Beautiful North*. Urrea has also said that his then-teenage daughter and her friends inspired some of the voices of Nayeli, Vampi, and Yolo, while his historical novels are based on his great aunt. He currently teaches creative writing at the University of Illinois-Chicago and has published a number of novels, short story collections, and poetry collections, many of which have earned awards and praise. He is a member of the Latino Literature Hall of Fame and was a 2005 Pulitzer Prize finalist for nonfiction.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though Mexican and South American people have been legally and illegally crossing the border into the United States since the early 1800s, immigration to the United States increased dramatically throughout the latter half of the twentieth century due primarily to economic crises in Mexico. These economic issues are likely what caused the men of Tres Camarones to head north in *Into the Beautiful North*. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11 and the Patriot Act, the US secured new measures that allowed Border Patrol to detain and convict anyone they thought might be associated with terrorist groups (like what happens to Tacho in the novel) and updated other policies regarding immigration. Further, though he doesn't name programs specifically, Arnie seems to allude to the National Border Patrol Strategic Plan of 1994, which sought to increase staffing at the border and overwhelmingly stopped allowing detained persons to return to Mexico voluntarily. Instead, detainees are either denied visas if caught entering illegally a second time or are criminally charged and deported. The original act coincided with a fourfold increase in the annual number of deportations, a number that continued to rise even into the 2010s. However, Arnie is also correct that the total number of illegal border crossings decreased during that time. Following the plans of 1994, many immigrants began attempting to cross in more dangerous locations, and the

Mexican government even produced pamphlets and videos advising people on how to cross more safely.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many of Luis Urrea's books, both fiction and nonfiction, deal with the issues of identity, loss, family, and the Mexican-American border. Prior to *Into the Beautiful North*, his novel *The Hummingbird's Daughter* was a great success, and his nonfiction book *Across the Wire: Life and Hard Times on the Mexican Border* details both his time as a relief worker in Tijuana as well as the hardships that Mexican people living near the border face, which ultimately influence their decision to immigrate to the United States. Richard Rodriguez's memoir, *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*, also digs into the issues of race, immigration, and belonging in America. In addition, Francisco Cantú's memoir, *The Line Becomes a River: Dispatches from the Border*, is about a Mexican-American Border Patrol agent haunted by the things he sees in the course of his work on the border. Several reviewers have compared *Into the Beautiful North* to Steinbeck's classic novel [The Grapes of Wrath](#), in that it presents an "Eden" of sorts in California for migrant workers.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Into the Beautiful North
- **When Written:** 2005-2009
- **Where Written:** Illinois, USA
- **When Published:** 2009
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Contemporary Novel
- **Setting:** Mexico and the United States
- **Climax:** When Nayeli finds her father and realizes that he has another family in the United States
- **Antagonist:** The narcos and bandidos; racism and prejudice
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Music and Theatre. In 2016, *Into the Beautiful North* was adapted into a stage play and performed in Portland, Oregon. It also inspired a musical performance performed jointly by the chamber jazz trio 9 Horses and an orchestra.

The Mexican-American Border. The border between Mexico and the United States is the most frequently crossed international border in the world. More than 350 million people cross the border legally every year, while it's estimated that half a million people cross illegally.



PLOT SUMMARY

The bandidos—Scarface and his associate, the state cop—come to Tres Camarones one hot day to deliver marijuana to a couple of American surfers. Immediately, Scarface and the state cop sneer at how provincial the town is. When they stop in at a taco shop, La Mano Caída, they harass both Tacho, the gay bartender, and Nayeli, a nineteen-year-old waitress. After the bandidos leave, Nayeli and Tacho go on about their day. Nayeli thinks about her father, Don Pepe, who's been in the United States for the last three years, and about Tía Irma's run for mayor. Nayeli even pulls out the last **postcard** her father sent, on which he wrote the phrase, "everything passes." In the afternoon, Nayeli's "notorious girlfriends," Yolo and the goth, Vampi, arrive to surf the internet on Tacho's computer.

The next day, the women of Tres Camarones travel to a lagoon to hunt for crabs. Nayeli finally admits to Yolo that when an American missionary named Matt came to Tres Camarones several years ago, she kissed him before he left. As the girls wade out of the water, Yolo is surprised to realize that nobody in town is pregnant. When she and Nayeli bring it up to the group, Irma and Tacho tell the girls that there are no men left in town to even get anyone pregnant—all of the men went north. The next day, when Irma takes the girlfriends to Mazatlán to shop, Irma tells Nayeli about her teenage love, Chava Chavarín. When Nayeli asks who will love her, Irma can't answer.

As the election draws near, Irma bullies all the women of Tres Camarones into voting for her for mayor. She even goes to García-García, the owner of the local cinema, and bullies him into hiring a female projectionist—something he feels is wrong. Irma also forces him to agree to screen a Yul Brynner film festival, as Brynner is her favorite film star, and Irma believes he's Mexican. García-García agrees, and Irma wins her election by a landslide. García-García gets the films *Westworld* and *The Magnificent Seven* to show, and the entire village comes to the cinema for the festival. As Nayeli watches *The Magnificent Seven*, she feels tingly with excitement. After it's over, she leads Vampi and Yolo to the town square, where she tells them her plan: they need to go to the United States, find their own "magnificent seven" Mexican men, and bring them back to repopulate the village and save it from the bandidos. The girls agree and decide to take Tacho with them.

A few days later, Irma gathers the village in her living room. She mentions how when she won the Ladies' Bowling Championship in the 1960s in the United States, the Americans she encountered were kind and helpful. Irma gives Nayeli a phone number for her teenage love, Chava, and instructs Nayeli to call him when they get to Tijuana. Nayeli promises her mother that she'll try to bring Don Pepe back, and her mother encourages Nayeli to take Don Pepe's postcard. The village gives the girls money, and Irma drives them to Mazatlán to catch a bus to Tijuana. The bus driver, Chuy, promises Irma that

he will care for the girls.

In the middle of the first night, Mexican police officers search the bus and pull off two Guatemalan immigrants, and the next day, Chuy stops the bus at a customs station. There, the Jefe (the customs officer) singles out Tacho and assaults him in the bathroom. The bus breaks down just outside of Mexicali, and the girls and Tacho end up catching another bus nine hours later. As they approach Tijuana, both Nayeli and Tacho think to themselves that the other side doesn't look as nice as it does in movies. When they finally arrive, they discover that their bags were never transferred from the first bus to the second, and nobody in Tijuana will help them. Tacho wonders if he's the only one who realizes how much trouble they're in. They go downtown to eat, and Nayeli tries to call Chava on a payphone. The operator insists that there hasn't been a number like the one Irma gave Nayeli since the 1960s.

Nayeli and her friends wander the streets of Tijuana until after dark. Finally, they stop at a taco stand, and a man asks Nayeli if she's lost. She admits that she is, and the man leads her to a motel in the red-light district. Though everyone is grateful and goes to sleep, Nayeli wakes up in the middle of the night to the man attempting to break into the room. Nayeli successfully uses her karate training to beat the man, but she doesn't sleep at all that night. In the morning, the group heads for the border wall and looks over to the other side. After watching the Border Patrol trucks, Nayeli leads everyone to the fruit market. There, two beggars, Doña Araceli and Don Porfirio, kindly invite Nayeli and her friends to come home with them. Nayeli is too tired to argue, and she allows the beggars to lead her to their home in the Tijuana dump. Nayeli is in awe of the poverty, filth, and how happy and kind her hosts are. In the morning, Nayeli wanders through the graveyards in the dump and thinks that the place is oddly comforting.

A young man, Atómiko, interrupts Nayeli's reverie and demands her attention. He holds a massive bamboo "samurai" staff, and he uses it to save her from meth-addicted "zombies" when they attempt to jump Nayeli. Atómiko follows Nayeli back to Porfirio and Araceli's home, where Yolo and Vampi decide that Atómiko is thrilling and interesting. He offers to get them over the border. When he whistles an obscene tune, an ancient Oldsmobile rumbles around the corner. The driver, a man named Wino, gives Nayeli and her group a tour of Tijuana before connecting them to a "coyote" who will smuggle them across the border. The coyote makes it very clear that he'll abandon his customers at the first sign of trouble. He ends up doing just that, though Nayeli and her friends realize the officer in question stopped to urinate, not to arrest them.

The group is soon stopped by officers and "taken in," but Atómiko succeeds in jumping back over the fence. Agent Anderson and Agent Smith take their "clients" to a holding pen. In the pen, Nayeli is separated from Tacho, so she studies the agents and tries to figure out what makes them different from

her. A black agent named Arnie catches her eye, and he questions her. He finds her story entirely implausible but highly entertaining, so he buys her snacks. As the deportees are herded to a bus, Tacho yells the name of his bar (La Mano Caída), but an agent thinks Tacho said "Al Qaeda." They arrest him.

When Nayeli and her girlfriends find themselves back in Tijuana in the morning, Atómiko greets them and leads them to a motel. Nayeli sleeps all day and then calls Irma, who can't believe that Chava is no longer in Tijuana. Wino appears and offers to do Nayeli a favor. He drives them to a muffler shop outside of town, where his uncle shows them into an underground tunnel. When they get to the other side, another man receives them and drives them to a gravel lot outside of San Diego. Giddy with their success, Atómiko and Vampi swing on every swing set they see as the group wanders through the suburbs of San Diego. After they buy food at a Jack in the Box, Nayeli calls Matt, the missionary she kissed several years prior. Luckily for Nayeli, Matt is in town—though he's in town to bury his mother, Ma Johnston, who died suddenly a few weeks ago. He drives to get the girls and Atómiko and bring them back to his mother's house, and he marvels that the girls are women now.

The next morning, Matt takes the girls out for pancakes. At the restaurant, Vampi comes face to face with a Mexican man who is just as goth as she is, El Brujo. They go on their first date that night, and Vampi decides that El Brujo won her heart when he sings her favorite song to her. While they're out, Nayeli and Yolo look up Chava in the phone book and manage to track him down. Matt drives the girls to see him, and they discover that he's a janitor at a bowling alley. Chava tells Nayeli how he betrayed Irma by getting an American woman pregnant—though he never told anyone that the woman left him, and that he remained in the States because he was too ashamed to admit his mistake. This heartbreak turned Irma into "La Osa," the she-bear.

After beating and humiliating Tacho, the US officers finally send him back to Tijuana. Tacho goes to a gay bar, where a slightly older and evidently wealthy man, Rigoberto, takes an interest in him. Rigoberto invites Tacho back to his house, and Tacho gratefully accepts. The next morning, Rigoberto serves Tacho tea in a glass **teapot**, which entrances Tacho. Then, Rigoberto dresses Tacho up as his partner, Wilivaldo, and uses Wilivaldo's passport to smuggle Tacho over the border. The two men awkwardly say goodbye, and El Brujo picks Tacho up.

That night, Matt goes to his neighbor Carla's house, where he suggests they turn Nayeli into Border Patrol. Meanwhile, Chava joins the Mexican group for dinner and tells Nayeli that he knows a man named Angel who might be an appropriate "hero" to take back to the village.

The next morning, Chava takes Nayeli, Tacho, and Atómiko to a grocery store, where two white nationalists, Jimbo and Sully,

harass them. Chava drives them the rest of the way to the migrant camp, where Angel appears out of the bamboo followed by none other than Jimbo and Sully. A violent fight breaks out, and Nayeli and Atómiko beat up the nationalists. When they get back to Matt's house after midnight, Nayeli is shocked and hurt to discover that Yolo is having sex with Matt. Carla tells Nayeli that Irma called and is on her way, and Nayeli decides she must go to Kankakee, Illinois to find Don Pepe.

The next day, Nayeli encourages an extremely nervous Chava to see Irma. Matt helps Nayeli plan her trip, and Nayeli and Tacho leave in the morning. In San Diego, Irma accepts Chava with giggles and then conducts interviews for Mexican men. She interviews more than seventy men who want to go back, but she only agrees to take twenty-seven home with her.

As Nayeli and Tacho make their way to Illinois, they stop in Las Vegas. Although they are entranced by it at night, they find it disappointing in the daylight. Later in their journey, they stop at a Mexican restaurant in Utah, but when Nayeli admits that she and Tacho crossed the border illegally, the cook kicks them out. As they travel, several people mistake them for being Middle Eastern. Tacho grows more and more disillusioned, a feeling that culminates when he becomes extremely ill at the Mississippi River. He drives the last day to Kankakee with a fever, and Nayeli sets out alone to find Don Pepe. A man directs her to the library, where a kind librarian named Mary-Jo helps her track down her father and even drives Nayeli to Don Pepe's house. Once there, Nayeli is giddy with happiness until she sees her father get out of a truck with another woman and a toddler. Distraught, Nayeli leaves the postcard on his truck, and Mary-Jo helps Nayeli and Tacho buy bus tickets to return to San Diego. In Arizona, border patrol agents stop the bus. One of the agents turns out to be Arnie—the agent who bought her snacks when she was initially detained by Border Patrol. When he hears that their mission was successful, Arnie he drives Nayeli and Tacho all the way to San Diego instead of arresting them.

In the epilogue, Nayeli and Tacho are seen returning to Tres Camarones with Atómiko and an entire army of men, and the women of the village know that change has finally come.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Nayeli – Nayeli is a nineteen-year-old Mexican girl from a small village called Tres Camarones. She works as a waitress at Tacho's bar, La Mano Caída, and as the campaign manager for Tía Irma's run for mayor. Three years before the start of the novel, Nayeli's father, Don Pepe, went to the United States to a town called Kankakee, Illinois. He sent her one **postcard**, which Nayeli treasures. Growing up, Don Pepe put Nayeli in soccer and karate, and Nayeli believes that her father desperately wanted a son. This belief has influenced Nayeli to think more

highly of male heroism than female heroism. It comes to her attention that there are no men in Tres Camarones, which Nayeli sees as a problem: for the first time ever, there are no babies in the village, and the "narcos and bandidos" are invading. After watching *The Magnificent Seven* at the local cinema, Nayeli hatches a plan to take her friends, Tacho, Yolo, and Vampi to the United States to find seven men who will then be able to protect Tres Camarones and keep the village alive. Once finally in San Diego, Nayeli finds that she still has a crush on Matt, a missionary who kissed Nayeli several years ago when he visited Mexico on a mission trip. She's hurt, then, when she walks in on Matt having sex with Yolo. Nayeli decides that she needs to find her father, so she and Tacho embark on a cross-country road trip to Kankakee, Illinois. She is shocked when she finally discovers that Don Pepe has a wife (or girlfriend) and a child in the US, and she decides not to confront him. Though she feels dejected and as though she failed, the epilogue shows Nayeli returning to Tres Camarones with men to save the village.

Tacho – Tacho, Nayeli's boss, is the gay owner and bartender of the local taco shop, bar, and internet cafe, La Mano Caída ("The Fallen Hand"). He is gruff and cranky, though this is part of his act: it's masculine to be a loveable jerk, even if a man is gay. Though it's unclear how old he is, he's likely at least ten years older than the notorious girlfriends. He and cares deeply for Nayeli, Yolo, and Vampi, so he accompanies the girls to the United States and plans to stay. It's implied that he believes that he'll be able to more comfortably exist as a gay man there, given that he packs his disco clothes and cuts, dyes, and spikes his hair before they leave. He's the first to feel extremely disillusioned with the entire journey after the Jefe (customs officer) assaults him in the bathroom at the customs station. This is intensified when Border Patrol arrests him because they think he's a member of the terrorist group Al Qaeda. When he's deported to Tijuana, Tacho meets Rigoberto, another gay man. Tacho is in awe of Rigoberto's wealth and is specifically entranced by his magical **teapot**. Rigoberto smuggles Tacho over the border, where Tacho joins back up with the girlfriends. After Nayeli and Yolo fight over Matt, Tacho takes it upon himself to drive Nayeli cross-country to Kankakee, Illinois to find her father, even though Tacho doesn't believe they'll find him. During the trip, he tells Nayeli that "people like them" don't marry Johnny Depp, which indicates that Tacho has learned that the US isn't the place of freedom and hope that he thought it to be.

Tía Irma – Tía Irma, who is also known as "La Osa" ("the she-bear"), becomes the first female mayor of Tres Camarones. She is a Mexican nationalist and believes that women are the future of the country. She was also the Ladies' Bowling Champion in the 1960s. As a young woman, she fell in love with Chava Chavarín, another professional bowler. He introduced her to the cinema, and when he left her for an American woman, Irma

became La Osa to deal with her sense of betrayal and grief. In the present, she acts as a mother figure to Nayeli, Yolo, and Vampi, and she organizes and finances most of the girls' trip to the United States. Though she does share the girls' desire to have men save the village, Irma also never speaks well of men and regularly refers to them as dogs and insists they're useless. When she joins Nayeli in San Diego, Irma reconnects with Chava and takes it upon herself to interview the seventy Mexican men who wish to return to Mexico.

Vampi – Verónica, who goes by Vampi, is one of Nayeli's "notorious girlfriends," and she's the only goth girl in Tres Camarones. Her goth phase began after her parents died in a tragic bus accident, and she gets away with the dark makeup and black clothes because her grandmother is too tired to fight her about her new look. She's a relatively ditzy and silly character, and her good ideas are treated as though she only has good ideas on rare occasions. In the United States, Vampi falls in love with a young man who goes by El Brujo. When Nayeli thinks about the landscape of the girlfriends' relationships, she questions if Vampi even truly knew herself, indicating that Vampi is truly a youthful and naïve character who develops much less over the course of the novel compared to the other girls.

Yolo – Yolo, whose real name is Yoloxochitl, is one of Nayeli's "notorious girlfriends" and was Nayeli's soccer teammate, though Yolo wasn't as good as Nayeli. In school, Yolo was a straight-A student, which her friends tease her for regularly. She and Nayeli enjoy having debates about all sorts of subjects, which drives Vampi nuts. When it becomes apparent that the girls' journey to the United States isn't going to be straightforward or easy, Yolo feels that Nayeli has betrayed her. When the girls meet up with Matt, Yolo sleeps with him, which makes Nayeli extremely angry and feel betrayed in return. Yolo gloats, though Irma tells Nayeli later that while Yolo wants to stay in the United States with Matt, Matt doesn't want her to, suggesting that their sexual relationship came about more out of convenience and curiosity (on his part) than mutual attraction or emotion.

Atómiko – Atómiko is a colorful figure that Nayeli meets in the dump in Tijuana. He's the self-professed king of the dump and believes he's a samurai. As such, he carries a "samurai staff," which is a six-foot length of bamboo with a gearshift epoxied in one end. It's a lethal weapon, and Atómiko wields it proudly. Atómiko has an overblown sense of his own prowess and importance; he asserts himself in Nayeli's group, demands to accompany them on their quest, and insists that they need a hero such as himself in order to make it to the US. Though Nayeli finds Atómiko generally obnoxious, she sometimes finds his presence comforting, and his skill with his staff comes in handy on several occasions. Irma doesn't like Atómiko at first but decides he'd be a great policeman if she could convince him to return to Tres Camarones. Though Atómiko does return

with Nayeli and the other men, he also misses his life in the dump at several points throughout the novel. He took a great deal of care building his shack and his fence, and he made friends with dump dogs.

Matt – Several years before the start of the novel, Matt went to Tres Camarones as a missionary, where he won the heart of every woman in town by writing their names phonetically on notecards. He also loved movies and spent every night in the theater with the women. Before he left, he kissed Nayeli. In the present, Matt works in San Francisco, but returns to his mother's home in San Diego to deal with her affairs after her sudden death. He feels lost in life, and he enjoys helping Nayeli and her friends with their mission. Though Nayeli, Yolo, and Vampi believe that Nayeli will surely win Matt's heart, Matt has sex with Yolo instead—though he also seems unaware that Nayeli still harbors feelings for him. Despite the fact that the Tres Camarones group likes Matt, and Matt helps them in a number of ways while they're in the US, Matt is also somewhat racist. For example, when he smokes with Carla, he semi-seriously suggests they call the police on the "illegals" and build a wall on the Mexican-American border.

Chava Chavarín – When Irma was a young woman, Chava was a fisherman by day and a bowling champion by night, as well as Irma's love interest. He was the most handsome man in Tres Camarones, and he and Irma had sex after she won a bowling championship. Not long after, Chava went to Tijuana to fish and never returned. He was the first man from Tres Camarones to do so, possibly catalyzing all of the other men of Tres Camarones to leave. Later, Irma discovered that Chava impregnated an American woman and agreed to marry her. In the present, Nayeli discovers that the woman ran away before she and Chava got married, and Chava was too embarrassed and ashamed to return home to Mexico. He works as a janitor in a bowling alley in San Diego and is still illegal after being in the US for more than forty years. Chava is clearly terrified of Irma and needs a great deal of coaxing to meet her. When he finally does meet her, the two fall right back in love again, and he agrees to return to Tres Camarones with her. Though he seems to have hidden the truth from himself, Chava comes to realize that he was never truly happy in the US.

Officer Arnold Davis (Arnie) – Officer Arnold Davis, also known as Arnie, is a black Border Patrol agent working on loan in San Diego. He's worked for the government for the last twenty-seven years, and he finds the changes happening within Border Patrol unsavory. Namely, he thinks that the Border Patrol's focus on terrorists is overblown, especially on the Mexican-American border. To combat this, he thinks often about his desire to retire to Colorado. When he meets Nayeli, he doesn't believe her story about the quest, but he finds it entertaining and buys her snacks. Later, when he encounters her on a bus on her way back from Illinois, Arnie realizes that she was telling the truth. His intense frustration with the

government and his sense of security in his job leads him to smuggle Nayeli and Tacho back to San Diego so that they can finish their mission, even though doing so poses a substantial professional risk for him.

Don Pepe – Don Pepe is Nayeli's father. He used to be the only policeman in Tres Camarones, and he adored his daughter. He enrolled her in karate so that she'd learn how to take care of herself, though Nayeli believes that he desperately wanted a son. Three years before the start of the novel, Don Pepe left Tres Camarones to take a job in Kankakee, Illinois. Though he began by sending money home, after he sent a final **postcard**, he stopped writing entirely. Nayeli idolizes her father and thinks that he'll surely agree to come back to Tres Camarones once he sees Nayeli again. However, when Nayeli finally tracks him down in Kankakee, she learns that he has a wife or girlfriend and a toddler. She decides not to confront him, but she leaves the postcard tucked under his truck's windshield wiper for him to find.

Doña Araceli – Araceli is a Mexican Native woman who lives in Tijuana with her husband, Porfirio. They used to be farmers but were forced to sell their animals and move to Tijuana to find work. They live in the dump in a house made of garage doors, and Araceli plants beautiful roses along her fence line. During the day, she dresses as a native alms seeker and walks the streets of Tijuana looking for dropped coins. She's an exceptionally kind woman and offers to help Nayeli when she notices Nayeli and her group looking extremely bedraggled in the fruit market.

Don Porfirio – Porfirio is Araceli's wife. He used to be a trash picker, but when the city of Tijuana closed down the dump, he began washing car windshields instead. He and Araceli only make a few dollars per day begging and washing windshields, and he believes that the worst people are those who don't want to work. Despite their poverty, Porfirio and Araceli are relatively happy and extremely kind to Nayeli and her friends.

Wino – Wino is a dump dweller who drives an ancient and decrepit Oldsmobile. He works with Atómiko to connect Nayeli and her group up with a coyote to take them over the border. To Nayeli's surprise, Wino loves Tijuana and is an excellent tour guide—though he's also crass and vulgar and honks the car horn in the rhythm of an obscene song. When the coyote fails to get Nayeli successfully across, Wino does her a favor and calls on his uncle to smuggle Nayeli to the US using a drug trafficking tunnel that goes under the US-Mexico border.

Candelaria – Candelaria joins Nayeli and the Tres Camarones group during their first attempt at crossing the Mexican-American border. She's very pregnant, which suggests that she's trying to get to the US so that her unborn child can have a better life. While the group runs, she helps Vampi when Vampi trips. The coyote is very upset that she tagged along without paying. Nayeli and her group lose track of Candelaria when

they're arrested by Border Patrol, but they believe she, too, is deported.

El Brujo – El Brujo, Vampi's newfound boyfriend, was a metal musician who came to America with the dream of becoming famous. When he arrived, however, he discovered that nobody wanted to hire an undocumented Mexican musician who didn't speak English. Eventually, he got a job in a diner, which is where he's been working for six years. Vampi immediately falls in love with El Brujo when she notices he's wearing a tee shirt for her favorite band, the 69 Eyes.

García-García – García-García is the elderly owner of the cinema in Tres Camarones and is the only rich man in town. However, he's also frugal to a fault: he shuts off his air conditioning at home, leading his wife to escape to her sister's air-conditioned home in Mazatlán, and when his projectionist leaves for the United States, García-García does the job himself rather than hire a woman. When Irma becomes mayor, she bullies García-García into hiring Nayeli's mother as a projectionist and also insists he screen a Yul Brynner film festival. Though he complies, both are unthinkable for García-García, as he's extremely sexist and is the self-professed biggest Steve McQueen fan in Mexico.

Scarface – Scarface is one of the bandidos who invades Tres Camarones. He's a "bottom-level narco" desperate to make it big as a drug cartel, and he attempts to dress the part by wearing sport coats in the swampy heat, mirrored sunglasses, and an automatic gun on a shoulder holster. He and his accomplice, the state cop, harass Nayeli when they stop at Tacho's bar and leave without paying as a show of force and power.

Ma Johnston – Ma Johnston is Matt's mother. She dies several weeks before the novel begins and is described as having been an invisible but good woman who had unending hard luck in life. She lived in a duplex on Clairemont Drive in San Diego and allowed Matt to get away with smoking and watching porn when he was in high school. She generally adored her son and supported him through his missionary phase. After her death, Matt returns to her duplex to handle her affairs.

Chuy – Chuy is the kindly, fat bus driver who drives Nayeli and her group most of the way to Tijuana. He endears himself to his passengers when he pulls off the road and spends an hour with his girlfriend, and during the drive, he offers Nayeli as much advice as he can regarding how to deal with the customs officers. He disappears after the bus breaks down outside of Mexicali, though he supposedly left to find help in the town.

Angel – Angel is a shy and polite young man who lives in the migrant camp. He fixed Chava's car at one point and refused to accept money from Chava. Angel agrees to return to Tres Camarones with Nayeli, though he finds Tía Irma absolutely terrifying. Irma, on the other hand, thinks Angel is crazy for wanting to open a mechanic's shop in Tres Camarones.

Agent Anderson – Agent Anderson is one of the Border Patrol officers who arrests Nayeli and the Tres Camarones group the first time. He and his fellow officer, Agent Smith, both speak Spanish, which surprises Nayeli, and they banter with Candelaria about what day she should attempt to cross the border. They decide not to handcuff Tacho.

Agent Smith – Agent Smith is one of the Border Patrol officers who arrests Nayeli and the Tres Camarones group during their first attempt at crossing the border. Along with his fellow officer, Agent Anderson, Agent Smith speaks Spanish, which surprises Nayeli. He has a friendly rapport with Candelaria and jokes with her about how she should attempt to cross the border on his day off.

Carla – Carla is Ma Johnston's next-door neighbor and is briefly Matt's love interest. She's a heavy smoker and uses other drugs as well. Though she's reasonably kind when she speaks to Nayeli and her friends, Carla is also quite racist in private: she and Matt joke about needing a border wall and turning Nayeli into Border Patrol.

Rigoberto – Rigoberto is a gay, slightly older man that Tacho meets in a Tijuana gay bar. He's wealthy, elegant, and kind, and Tacho is very attracted to him. Rigoberto dresses Tacho up like his partner, Wilivaldo, and smuggles Tacho over the border using Wilivaldo's passport. Rigoberto has a beautiful glass **teapot** that Tacho finds entrancing and absurdly beautiful.

Sully – Sully is a white supremacist who harasses Nayeli and Tacho in a grocery store with his friend Jimbo. Sully and Jimbo later show up at the migrant camp that Nayeli and Tacho are visiting. Although Sully and Jimbo attempt to attack and violently beat the Mexican men who live there, Nayeli and Atómiko gain the upper hand and do major damage to their attackers.

The Cook – The cook and the cook's wife are a Mexican couple who run a Mexican restaurant in the Rocky Mountains. The cook kicks Nayeli and Tacho out when they admit they illegally crossed the border. The cook feels as though people like Nayeli and Tacho delegitimize legal immigrants such as himself.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Jimbo – Jimbo, like his friend Sully, is a white supremacist who harasses Nayeli and Tacho in a grocery store in San Diego. Later, Jimbo and Sully try to violently attack Mexican immigrants at a makeshift migrant camp, but Nayeli and Atómiko succeed in beating Jimbo and Sully up instead.

The State Cop – Though the cop is a real cop, he earns almost all of his money as an advisor for the drug cartels in Mexico. He works for Scarface and carries a gun in a very squeaky holster.

Nayeli's Mother – Nayeli lives with her mother, María. María became a hypochondriac after her husband, Don Pepe, left three years before the start of the novel, and Tía Irma snaps at

her for it. She becomes the new projectionist at the cinema after Irma wins the election for mayor.

Ernesto James – Ernesto James is the old outgoing mayor of Tres Camarones. He suspects that there may have been foul play surrounding Irma's win of the mayoral election but notes that there aren't enough men to force a recount.

Pepino – Pepino is referred to as "the town simpleton" in Tres Camarones. He's a kind boy and often asks Nayeli to marry him.

The Jefe – The Jefe is the chief customs officer at the customs office in Huila, Mexico. He picks Tacho out of line and assaults and harasses him in the bathroom because he can tell that Tacho is gay.

The Coyote – The coyote is a smuggler who unsuccessfully takes Nayeli, Yolo, Vampi, and Tacho over the border at Wino's request. He's a smoker and out of shape, which irritates Nayeli. He abandons his customers when they hear a Border Patrol van on an overpass.

Don Arturo – Don Arturo is the leader of the migrant camp outside of San Diego. He is friends with Angel.

The Fisherman – Nayeli meets the kindly fisherman in a valley of the Rocky Mountains. He tells her what elk are, teaches her to fish, and gives her a sweatshirt.

Mary-Jo – Mary-Jo is the kind librarian in Kankakee, Illinois, who helps Nayeli track down Don Pepe. Later, she drives Nayeli and Tacho to the bus station and helps them buy their tickets back to San Diego.

Velma – Velma is a welcoming waitress at the pancake house where Matt takes Nayeli, Atómiko, Yolo, and Vampi. To compensate for the language barrier, she yells at her Spanish-speaking customers slowly in English.

The Cook's Wife – The cook and his wife are a Mexican couple who run a Mexican restaurant in the Rocky Mountains. They insist on speaking English and are unwelcoming and hostile toward Tacho and Nayeli for crossing the border illegally.

Nayeli's father, have since left the village to take jobs in America. Nayeli attempts to save the town by hatching a fantastical plan to illegally cross the Mexican-American border and bring home seven Mexican men who will then be able to take on the narcos and repopulate the town. Because much of the conflict Nayeli experiences has to do with the difficulties of crossing the border, the novel pays close attention to borders of all kinds. As the novel explores what borders mean, how they're enforced, and how to cross them, it also shows how borders are used to delineate and reinforce conceptions of ownership.

Into the Beautiful North shows that the very concept of borders is predicated on ideas of ownership and exclusion. Though the Mexican-American border is the most obvious physical border that appears in the novel, the novel is very careful to show that successfully crossing the geographical border into the US doesn't guarantee a sense of belonging. Though the Mexicans who manage to cross the border illegally are technically *in* America, they overwhelmingly exist on the fringes of American society and are seldom allowed to integrate, participate, or feel welcome in the country at all. For example, Chava introduces Nayeli and Tacho to Angel and other migrant farm workers from Mexico who live in a makeshift camp near the freeway. These particular illegal immigrants barely make enough money to sustain themselves, let alone find more conventional housing that would offer them a physical address and a sense of ownership over the place they live. During their road trip to Kankakee to find Nayeli's father, Nayeli and Tacho meet a Mexican couple who, upon learning that Nayeli and Tacho are illegal immigrants, swiftly kick them out of their restaurant. The couple insists that people like Nayeli and Tacho threaten the legitimacy of all the immigrants who entered the country legally. Through this, Nayeli learns that it's not enough to physically cross the border. Rather, there are many complicated legal and conceptual borders one must cross to be able to truly achieve a sense of belonging in a new place.

Everyone in *Into the Beautiful North* is focused on creating and protecting borders: the United States has a well-patrolled border wall, people who live in the Tijuana dump fence in their "yards" to define personal space, and Nayeli remains hyper aware of the boundaries created by the motel rooms where she sleeps. Notably, however, these physical borders aren't impermeable in the least. Nayeli's experience running over the physical border between the US and Mexico looks almost absurdly easy when she compares it to the official border she then fails to cross after being arrested by Border Patrol. This makes the border feel extremely real for Nayeli, even as she struggles to understand how a line in the dirt can mean so much. However, the novel also mentions that hundreds of women cross the border every day to work in San Diego, and for them, the idea of the border is extremely abstract. Essentially, while these borders are very real for those who



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



BORDERS AND OWNERSHIP

Into the Beautiful North follows nineteen-year-old Nayeli, a Mexican girl from the small village of Tres Camarones, who embarks on a quest to save the town from "narcos and bandidos," the violent men involved in the drug trade. All the men in Tres Camarones, including

cannot cross them—or who struggle to cross them—the borders mean comparatively little to those who can move through freely. This suggests that the most effective borders are the official ones. However, it's also worth noting that the combination of official borders and physical borders create a conglomerate border that is far more emotional for those trying to cross, and that emotion specifically makes it even more difficult to cross. This is reinforced both in Tijuana, when the narrator notes that migrants' desperation leads them to attempt riskier (and less successful) ways of crossing the border. A similar situation arises when Nayeli discovers her father has a new partner and a toddler in Illinois. Though only a front door physically separates her from her father, Nayeli cannot bring herself to cross it due to the emotional trauma she experiences when she makes this discovery about him.

Taken together, the novel's exploration of borders and ownership forces the reader to reexamine how borders function, what purpose they serve, and whether those purposes are even appropriate or not. For a majority of the Mexican characters in the novel, every border they encounter is policed and protected nearly to absurdity and leads to the Mexican characters being dehumanized in some way. Ultimately, the novel suggests that borders are reasonable and acceptable, but the lengths that people will go to police them and dehumanize others in the name of ownership are exceptionally cruel.



RACISM

Nayeli and her friends encounter racism on both sides of the Mexican-American border. Tía Irma's campaign policies are exceedingly nationalistic in

favor of Mexico and racist towards Central Americans, and Nayeli is shocked to see how awful some Americans act towards her and other Mexican people. This establishes racism as a central concern as Nayeli navigates along her journey, especially when she begins to see firsthand that racism isn't as benign as it initially seems when it's not directed towards her. Rather, as she moves north through Tijuana and the United States, Nayeli learns that racism has real consequences for everyone—and even though it often takes forms that seem relatively harmless and meaningless upon first glance, that appearance is what makes racism insidious and even more damaging.

The novel overwhelmingly uses humor and irony to suggest that, at its heart, racism is absurd, senseless, and unfortunately all too common. It does this by illustrating the same kinds of racist ideas happening in both Mexico and the United States, showing that neither country is innocent when it comes to fostering racism. Tía Irma speaks about Honduran and Guatemalan immigrants in Mexico in much the same way that Nayeli hears people on American talk radio speaking about Mexican immigrants. In both cases, immigrants are considered

a scourge and the undoing of their host countries. Similarly, Irma also cautions Nayeli to not have sex with Matt, so as to not bring home any "American babies." Fifty years earlier, Chava's American girlfriend left him after she became pregnant, because "nobody wants to stay with a Mexican." By calling attention to the way in which racism takes root on both sides of the border, the novel highlights the absurdity and counter-productivity of such racist beliefs.

Though it's often humorous when Nayeli and Tacho are mistaken for being Middle Eastern during their travels, the Americans' recurring mistake points to the underlying anxieties of the post-9/11 era. Border Patrol officers state outright that they don't care much about prosecuting Mexicans, as the US is focused on catching Middle Eastern terrorists. This highlights the ways in which racism is rooted in fear of the unknown "other." Similarly, when Irma gripes about the Central American immigrants getting free educations in Mexico, it is clear that racism also takes root when the "other" is seen as a strain on resources.

When Nayeli gets to the United States, she's shocked by the racism and anti-Mexican sentiment she encounters. This shock is heightened by the fact that, as far as she's concerned, she's doing the US a favor by taking illegal Mexican immigrants back to their country of origin. To those who believe that all Mexicans who cross the border must only want to remain in the US, Nayeli's story of coming to the US to find seven Mexican men to take back to Tres Camarones so they can fight off the narcos and bandidos is absurdly fantastical and entirely unbelievable. For example, Arnie, the Border Patrol agent who process Nayeli, doesn't believe her when she shares her story the first time. However, when he later encounters Nayeli and Tacho on a bus to San Diego from Kankakee, Illinois—proof that Nayeli was telling the truth, and that staying in the US is not her end goal—Arnie is moved to humanize Nayeli and help her and Tacho achieve their goal rather than deporting them outright. Though it's important to keep in mind that Arnie comes to this decision in part because he's extremely fed up with his job and with the government's obsession with policing the border, his decision to help Nayeli makes the case that humanizing someone previously thought of only as an "other" can lead to positive outcomes for all parties.

Though the novel doesn't offer a quick fix for the racism and animosity between Mexico and the United States, the small kindnesses Nayeli experiences throughout the novel suggest that humanizing people and moving away from the idea of the "other" is a simple way to combat racism. Overall, the humanity and very simple desires of the characters insist that no matter what kinds of divisions people draw, people are human and deserve to be treated as such.



DISILLUSIONMENT AND IDEALIZATION

As Nayeli, Yolo, Vampi, and Tacho travel north through Tijuana, San Diego, and finally, through the continental United States, they enter into the final throes of their coming of age as they're forced to abandon their youthful understanding of the world and their role in it. Planning to find seven men to bring back to Tres Camarones to repopulate and protect the village, the friends begin their journey with an idealized vision of how the quest will go down and how others will engage with it. However, the journey is riddled with challenges, which leaves the group with a more realistic understanding of Mexico, the United States, and humanity as a whole. Overall, the novel suggests that this process of letting go of their idealization is an essential component of the friends' final maturation, and that their ensuing disillusionment is what allows them to triumph and save Tres Camarones.

Though the female residents of Tres Camarones idealize the United States, it's important to note that they also idealize life in Tres Camarones. Both of these idealizations come about through engagement with fiction: much of what the residents of Tres Camarones know about the US comes from American-made films and stories of Tía Irma's bowling tour. Similarly, the quest to bring men back to Tres Camarones is predicated on a belief that the village would be ideal if only it had men to protect it. In terms of conceptions about the US, the films that García-García shows at his cinema are overwhelmingly emotional and idealized portrayals of the American West, while Tía Irma's bowling tour was a similarly magical experience that she's idealized over the years. Most importantly, Irma is the only person from Tres Camarones who went to the United States and returned to Tres Camarones after, meaning that her positive interpretation of the US is the one that became the prevailing interpretation in Tres Camarones. This combination of American films and Irma's understanding of the US enables the women of Tres Camarones to understand why the men went to the US to begin with. However, Nayeli and her friends' idealization of the US also means that they're ill prepared for the difficult realities involved in getting to the US to begin with, let alone completing the rest of their quest.

As the story moves into the United States, Nayeli, Irma, and the girlfriends come to realize that though their own disillusionment is extremely painful, other people's disillusionment can be an asset. Though Irma instructs Nayeli and the girls to bring back seven strong, able-bodied Mexican men like in the film *The Magnificent Seven*, more than seventy Mexican men show up to Irma's interview session in San Diego, all of whom admit that they're extremely disappointed with life in the United States. Though the novel never offers in-depth backstories of the seventy men who interview for the position, it does explain why Chava, Irma's teenage love, didn't return to Tres Camarones after leaving Mexico in the 1960s: he agreed

to marry the American woman he impregnated, but the woman left him before the baby was born. Chava was too embarrassed to tell his family the truth, and he remained in the US simply to avoid having to ever tell anyone in Tres Camarones that life in America wasn't what it was "supposed" to be. However, once given a relatively safe space and a guaranteed way back to Mexico, Chava and the other seventy men jump at the opportunity to admit their own disillusionment and return home. Even so, the novel is careful to make it clear that the men spent much of their time in America idealizing Mexico in much the same way that they had once idealized America, thereby suggesting that they might not find true happiness in Tres Camarones, either.

Despite this success, Nayeli is extremely upset when Irma comes to San Diego to find men herself, as Nayeli understands that she's being demoted. To escape the crushing disappointment of her demotion, Nayeli and Tacho embark on a cross-country road trip to find Nayeli's father, Don Pepe, whom Nayeli believes will be, like the other seventy men, eager to return home—especially once he sees his grownup daughter. Nayeli's belief that her father will return to Tres Camarones is based on Nayeli's deep admiration of her father and her naïve belief that her father similarly idealizes his daughter and wife. Therefore, Nayeli believes that any reminder that she exists will be enough to make him want to return. Nayeli is understandably shocked and hurt when she finally does find her father and discovers that he has a new wife or girlfriend and a toddler, and that he has evidently made a satisfying life for himself in the US. When Nayeli chooses to leave Kankakee without even approaching her father and returns, dejected, to San Diego, she learns the same lesson that the seventy Mexican men did: leaning so heavily on an idealized view of a person or place keeps a person from understanding or accepting the reality of a situation, and that accepting a possibly painful reality is the only way to move on and make a happier life.

Though the novel ends before offering an actual confrontation between the narcos and the twenty-seven men that Irma allows to come to Tres Camarones, Nayeli and Tacho do indeed return to Tres Camarones having accomplished the original goal. This is evidence that the combination of their own disillusionment and the men's disillusionment with America is what primarily enables this triumphant return. Given the goals of the quest (reinvigorate the town and save it from the bandidos), this suggests that the disillusionment the characters experienced in the US will indeed allow them to create a more ideal life in Tres Camarones, suggesting that though disillusionment is painful, it's not an entirely bad thing. Rather, disillusionment allows a person to create a life that is more satisfying and more realistic.



MALE VS. FEMALE HEROISM

Into the Beautiful North is, first and foremost, a novel about women. The heroes of the story are women such as Tía Irma and Nayeli, not the male "heroes"

they endeavor to bring back from the United States. Although the novel casts women in the roles of heroes, those heroic women struggle throughout the novel to define heroism as something that can be an inherently female quality. In this way, the novel poses the question of what truly makes a hero, and most importantly for the characters, insists that being male doesn't automatically make someone a hero.

It's important to acknowledge that though the women of Tres Camarones idealize men in films, the women don't think highly of men in the flesh. For example, Irma refers to men as dogs and regularly calls them useless. Tacho only escapes the brunt of this abuse because, as a gay man, he walks a fine line between being macho enough to escape persecution and effeminate enough to feel happily and appropriately "gay enough." This creates the initial sexist understanding among the population of Tres Camarones that men aren't particularly needed, apart from their usefulness as protectors and partners in the process of procreation.

Nayeli, Yolo, and Vampi embark on their journey to the United States with the goal of bringing back seven Mexican men to repopulate the village and protect Tres Camarones from "narcos and bandidos." What the girls want are heroes like they saw in the film *The Magnificent Seven*, which is what inspired the quest in the first place. However, the very nature of the quest flattens men into a monolithic group with only one purpose: protecting women. In addition, the quest also suggests that the women are incapable of protecting themselves—something that, as the women in the novel show time and again, they are more than capable of doing. As Nayeli and the notorious girlfriends travel through Mexico and San Diego, they come across men who defy these expectations. For example, even though Irma's love interest, Chava, is named the deputy mayor of Tres Camarones and returns to Mexico with her, he proves himself outright to be a poor hero. Irma sends Chava to Mazatlán for his own safety, implying that he's not heroic enough to stand up to the narcos and bandidos in Tres Camarones. Ultimately, the heroic men that the women hoped to find are little more than idealizations. The fact that the female characters perform the brunt of the work in the novel shows that they're more than capable of being their own heroes, regardless of their belief that only men can save Tres Camarones.

This unfortunate realization that men aren't the heroes the female characters desire is most evident in Nayeli's quest to find her father, Don Pepe. Though the narrator insists that Don Pepe was responsible for encouraging Nayeli to develop the skills she needs to be her own hero by enrolling her in soccer and karate. However, Don Pepe also openly wished for a son.

This explains, in part, why Nayeli so desperately clings to the idea that Tres Camarones needs men to save it. To cope with the pain of Don Pepe's disappearance to the United States, Nayeli spent three years idealizing her father and everything he stood for, even adopting his belief in the superiority of male strength and heroism. When Nayeli learns that Don Pepe has a partner and a child in Kankakee, Illinois, Nayeli must finally let go of her conception of her father as a hero who will save her and her village. Though the novel ends before offering either closure for Nayeli or a tidy solution to the problems in Tres Camarones, it does show Nayeli returning to Tres Camarones with an army of men. With this, the novel ends by focusing on the fact that Nayeli *did* accomplish her quest. Whether or not the men will be able to save Tres Camarones is less important to the novel than the fact that Nayeli proved her own heroism through the course of her quest.



FEMALE FRIENDSHIP VS. ROMANCE

For Nayeli, it's only natural that she take her two best friends, Vampi and Yolo, and her boss, Tacho, with her on her quest to the United States. Tía Irma

agrees with Nayeli's assessment, stating that their friendship will be the reason the girls that the girls succeed in bringing men home to save the village. However, Nayeli's friendships begin to unravel near the end of the novel, which coincides with Vampi and Yolo's discoveries of romance. Specifically, the novel suggests that it's not romance itself that threatens female friendship; rather, it's romantic competition and a misguided sense of ownership that causes these rifts.

Several years before the start of the novel, a white missionary named Matt spent time in Tres Camarones. He was beloved by all the women of the village, young and old alike, but Nayeli was the only one he kissed before returning home to California. When the notorious girlfriends talk about Matt in the present, they talk about him with the assumption that Nayeli will be the one to steal Matt's heart when they see him in San Diego—and further, this isn't something that seems to harm the girls' friendship at all. This suggests that when the girlfriends look back on their only experience with an eligible romantic interest, they view it through the lens of nostalgia and youth. Matt represented a romantic coming of age for the girls, but their youth and the impossibility of a long-term relationship with Matt took away much of the competition that shows up in the present.

The lack of a male population in Tres Camarones creates a unique environment in which female friendships flourish by necessity, as there are simply no opportunities for heterosexual romantic relationships. In the beginning of the novel, then, the girls are extremely supportive of each other out of necessity: the journey to the United States is conceptualized as something that can only be accomplished by the friends as a group, and further, as an experience that will strengthen the

girls' friendship. The precedence of female friendship and the fact that their friendship and teamwork gets the girls through the distress and difficulty of getting to the US in the first place is a testament to the power of loyal friendship. Further, because Tacho is gay and therefore not an eligible romantic interest for the girls, he's allowed to exist alongside their group as "one of the girls," sharing in their trials and triumphs and supporting them along their journey.

During the girlfriends' time in San Diego, it's Yolo, not Nayeli who ends up sleeping with Matt. Notably, Nayeli directs all of her anger towards Yolo, referring to her as a tramp and a traitor and saying nothing negative to or about Matt except that he's "lost" to her. With this, Nayeli demonstrates that her friendship with Yolo was predicated on the belief that Yolo wouldn't "steal" a man whom Nayeli had previously "laid claim" to by kissing him several years prior—an understanding that casts romance as competition. However, the sense of loss that Nayeli feels when Yolo enters into her relationship with Matt extends to the way that Nayeli conceptualizes her relationships to others as well, even if they haven't "stolen" her love interest: she notes that Vampi is also lost to her after falling in love with El Brujo, and Nayeli wonders if even Tía Irma will be lost now that she's reconnected with Chava. To combat this, Nayeli strikes out with only Tacho to find her father, Don Pepe, in Kankakee, Illinois. Though Tacho hates the idea of the journey, hates driving, and doesn't even believe they'll be successful when they do reach Kankakee, his willingness to go with Nayeli re-centers friendship as something powerful that helps friends grow and change together. At the end of the journey, Tacho finds himself completely disillusioned with the US as a whole, and Nayeli struggles to figure out how to exist in the world now that she realizes that her father has no intention of returning home or acknowledging his family in Mexico.

Though the novel offers no clear resolution of Nayeli's relationships with her girlfriends, it ends with the overwhelming sense that friendship and loyalty are necessary to accomplish a goal. Nayeli owes the part of the success of the quest to Vampi and Yolo, and Nayeli owes her final disillusionment to Tacho's willingness to drive her thousands of miles. In the case of Tacho and Nayeli's final triumphs, and the fact that they're the only ones mentioned by name as returning to Tres Camarones in the epilogue, the novel shows that romantic competition stands in direct opposition to friendships, while friendship and loyalty are essential to getting things done.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



POSTCARD

The postcard that Don Pepe sent Nayeli and her mother several years ago symbolizes Nayeli's idealism and impending disappointment. The photo on the card is a scared-looking turkey in a cornfield, and the message on the back is Don Pepe's favorite phrase, "everything passes." The anxiety apparent in the image indicates that Kankakee, Illinois isn't the amazing, perfect place Nayeli thinks it is, while "everything passes" suggests that Don Pepe's loyalty to his family passes, just like everything else. Up until Nayeli finds her father, the postcard shows how Nayeli can interpret reality in such a way as to make it fit her worldview, even when all signs indicate that reality isn't as good as the vision in her head. When she leaves the postcard in Kankakee, it represents her symbolically accepting her father's wisdom that "everything passes" and giving up on her idealized vision of him.



RIGOBERTO'S TEAPOT

When Rigoberto offers Tacho breakfast, he serves tea in a glass teapot, which symbolizes an ideal world that can be viewed but not inhabited. The puck of tealeaves expands to create a beautiful, miniature garden in the pot, which in Tacho's eyes represents a kind of idyllic Eden. Tacho understands that the kind of perfection he sees in the teapot isn't something he can reach in the real world, given that he's gay, lives in a small town in Mexico, and is an illegal immigrant in the US. In this way, the teapot shows that while individuals like Tacho can observe perfection but can't actually take part in it.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Little, Brown and Company edition of *Into the Beautiful North* published in 2010.

Chapter 1 Quotes

●● Traditionalists voted to revoke electricity, but it was far too late for that. No woman in town would give up her refrigerator, her electric fan, or her electric iron. So the men started to go el norte.

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator explains the fight for electricity

in Tres Camarones in the 1930s. The apparent disagreement over electricity highlights that the entirety of the town is entirely opposed to change of any sort. In this case, change is represented by electricity, something that the town only received in the 1930s. In situating the skepticism toward change as the status quo of the village, the narrator indicates that the town idealizes their past, rural lifestyle. This is representative of a certain brand of idealism and suggests that the village is disconnected from reality. The residents live in a state of constant idealism of ideas or lifestyles that no longer exist. Those lifestyles are primarily represented by instances like this, or in film, as when Nayeli heads north after seeing the Western film *The Magnificent Seven*.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☞☞ Karate, Tía Irma insisted, was good for the legs. Power on the field. But Nayeli was not fooled. To La Osa, life and love were war, and she expected Nayeli to win as many battles as possible.

Aunt Irma wanted her to beat up men.

Related Characters: Tía Irma, Nayeli

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator explains the reasoning behind Tía Irma enrolling Nayeli in karate, while all her friends took dance lessons: Tía Irma lives for the fight and expects Nayeli to follow in her footsteps. It's important to note that karate is something that Nayeli knows and can pull out at any time. It's not something physical she needs to carry with her, or remember to pack—instead, it's something that exists in her mind and in her muscle memory. This stands in sharp contrast to the ways in which men in the novel are considered powerful or masculine through association with powerful objects such as guns, staffs, or in Tacho's case, pumping gas. In this way, the novel suggests that power is something more internal and inherent to women, while it's something that men have to achieve through external means.

☞☞ A man like Tacho had to learn to survive in Mexico, and he had learned to re-create himself in bright colors, in large attitudes, thus becoming a cherished character. If you wanted to achieve immortality, or at least acceptance, in Tres Camarones, the best thing to do was become an amazing fixture. It was very macho to be a ne'er-do-well, even if you were gay.

Related Characters: Tacho

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator explains why Tacho is gruff and cranky with all the girls in Tres Camarones: it's how he survives as a gay man in a small, conservative town. The fact that Tacho needs to come up with strategies to survive, even in the town and the country that he so clearly loves, tells the reader that Tres Camarones isn't as perfect as many of the characters seem to think. Instead, Tres Camarones struggles with racism (in the form of Tía Irma's nationalist politics that target other Latin Americans), sexism, and bigotry, and its status as the final stop along the characters' journey doesn't change this. This shows, too, that oftentimes, this kind of prejudice is something almost expected and seems relatively inconsequential. However, as the novel unfolds, it illustrates how when prejudice takes these seemingly benign forms, it makes it even harder to fight and correct.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☞☞ "We are Mexicans," Irma informed the fruit seller—needlessly, he felt. "Mexicans eat corn and beans. Did you notice? The Aztec culture gave corn to the world, you little man. We invented it! Mexicans grow beans. How is it, then, that Mexicans cannot afford to buy and eat the corn and beans they grow?"

Related Characters: Tía Irma (speaker), Vampi, Yolo, Nayeli

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

In the fruit market of Mazatlán, Tía Irma is incensed when she discovers a bag of beans is too expensive for her to purchase, and she berates the seller for the steep price. Irma's multiple tirades in the market set the stage for

understanding that Mexico is a difficult place to live, and further, that there are reasons that almost all of the men in Tres Camarones left to go north—it's simply too difficult to make a living in Mexico. This explains why the US begins to look more appealing in comparison, regardless of whether or not Irma buys into that appeal. This tirade also offers more evidence of how prideful Irma is about her heritage, which later explains some of her racist and nationalist ideas.

☞ "These illegals come to Mexico expecting a free ride! Don't tell me you don't have Salvadorans and Hondurans in your school, getting the best education in the world! They take our jobs too [...] What we need is a wall on our southern border."

Related Characters: Tía Irma (speaker), Vampi, Yolo, Nayeli

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

After Irma berates the fruit seller, she yells at a Guatemalan woman and starts yelling about how all South Americans are invading Mexico to steal resources. Though this passage is very much played for humor (especially since Nayeli and the girlfriends are embarrassed), this sentiment also repeats a number of times throughout the novel as the girls move north into the United States and encounter racism there. The novel ultimately suggests that nationalism and racism exists everywhere, along with the anxieties regarding the scarcity of resources and the impulse to protect one's country from outsiders. This all works together to present the idea that racism isn't something unique to one country or the other; it exists worldwide, and it is largely the reason why people cling so tightly to creating and policing borders.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☞ He never said he wished he'd had a son, though she could tell he thought it often.

Related Characters: Don Pepe, Nayeli

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

Nayeli reminisces about her father, who doted on her but seemed to wish for a son. Notably, this belief that Don Pepe wanted a son is something that Nayeli internalizes and uses to shape her own ideas about what heroism means and who gets to be a hero. Because Nayeli idolizes her father so intensely, she naturally gives his thoughts, beliefs, and feelings precedence over her own. In this case, this translates into Nayeli's desire to find men to protect Tres Camarones. To Nayeli, finding men would be something Don Pepe would support, which gives the quest value, even though Nayeli regularly sees that women are fully capable of protecting themselves and being just as heroic. In addition, Nayeli, who is skilled in karate, beats men up on several occasions, while most of the men she's with are helpless. Nayeli's idealization of her father and of male heroism keeps Nayeli from seeing the value of her own heroism and abilities.

☞ "They took my house from me!"

She stood there in her tattered nightgown and curlers.

"Can I sleep here?" he asked.

Irma had only been in charge of the town for scant days, and already the troubles were starting.

Related Characters: García-García (speaker), Tía Irma

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Days after Irma wins the mayoral election, García-García shows up on her doorstep after the bandidos take his house and kick him out. Though it's worth noting that García-García doesn't have a lot of options as to where to go next, it's telling that he goes to Irma. This suggests that even though García-García is sexist and thinks little of women in positions of power, he does understand that female power is real and can protect him. In addition, by choosing to go to Irma, García-García reinforces the fact that Irma is one of the most powerful women in the novel and the most powerful woman in Tres Camarones.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☝ "You will see," Irma said. "The Americanos are kind. Friendly people. Generous people. They have quaint customs—they aren't really, shall we say, sophisticated like we are. You can't drink the water—it will give you diarrhea. But it's very clean there. Good food. You'll see."

Related Characters: Tía Irma (speaker), Tacho, Vampi, Yolo, Nayeli

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the village is gathered in Irma's living room, and Irma prepares the girls and Tacho for their journey north by telling them what the United States is like. Given what Irma says, it is clear that she hasn't been in the US for a number of years, and further, that she had a distinctively positive experience while she was there. Considering Irma's power as mayor and the fact that she's the only Tres Camarones resident who has been to the US (and returned to the village afterward), it seems that Irma has the power to dictate how the entirety of Tres Camarones thinks about the US, even though her firsthand knowledge is old and outdated. Further, Irma's tone indicates that she doesn't think particularly highly of Americans, a sentiment that's reinforced when she later tells Nayeli to not sleep with Matt or bring home American men. Irma finds them lesser than Mexican men, which is a direct result of her nationalistic beliefs and her insistence of Mexico's unwavering superiority.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☝ The USA didn't look as nice over there as it did on television.

Related Characters: Vampi, Yolo, Tacho, Nayeli

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

As Nayeli, Tacho, Yolo, and Vampi ride the bus into Tijuana and look over the border into the United States, Nayeli is shocked to see that the US doesn't look as perfect as she assumed it would. Though the travelers learn on their journey to Tijuana that Mexico itself isn't a perfect place,

this is the first time that they begin to question whether or not the US is as great as they've been led to believe. It's worth remembering that the girls learned about the US mostly through films, which are fictitious and idealized visions of the US. Further, Tía Irma was a guiding force in shaping how the village perceived the US, but her experience there was very specific and overwhelmingly positive—and forty years ago. In this way, the travelers carry a vision of the US that's based on idealized, out-of-date thoughts about the US, and when they have to come face to face with the reality of the situation, they're forced to understand that the US is not what they thought it was.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☝ She was so disturbed that it gave her the strangest comfort, as though something she had suspected about life all along was being confirmed, and the sorrow she felt in her bed at night was reflected by this soil.

Related Characters: Nayeli

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

Nayeli wanders through a graveyard in the dump in Tijuana, feeling both sad and comforted by her surroundings. This walk through the graveyard is the first and only time that Nayeli comes face to face with a version of truth and finds it truly comforting, making this moment a very important one in her coming of age. The graveyard and the dump show Nayeli that Don Pepe's favorite phrase, "everything passes," does indeed come true: wealth passes, as does life, and the scattered graves and the crippling poverty that surround her are a testament to that. However, it's telling that Nayeli is able to come to this conclusion when it's not about something that directly affects her. She views the dump as an outside observer, and that distance allows her to make these connections about how life and fortune are fleeting. Essentially, though her short walk through the dump offers her this insight into the value of learning the truth and letting go of misguided idealism, it's far easier to do so when it's not personal.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☝☝ Nayeli looked at the migra agents through the iron mesh. Big men. Happy, bright-faced men. Shiny and crisp. Green uniforms. Short hair. Mustaches.

What made them different from her?

She could not tell.

Related Characters: Officer Arnold Davis (Arnie), Nayeli

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

While detained in the US by Border Patrol, Nayeli tries to figure out what makes her different from the American agents who have captured her. The fact that Nayeli can't discern any differences emphasizes the novel's main argument that racism is senseless, and borders are similarly senseless and based in fear. These Border Patrol agents are not all that different from Nayeli; they just happen to live on the other side of an arbitrary line drawn between countries. The fact that Nayeli is behind bars only heightens the sense that all of it is silly and senseless: she wants to ultimately remain in Mexico, not the US. She believes she'd be doing the Americans a favor if she were allowed to complete her quest, but these officers are stuck adhering to protocol and won't take her seriously when she tries to tell them her story.

that these people are continually denied entry into the US. On American talk radio, these prospective immigrants are considered invaders, which depicts them in a malicious, threatening light. In actuality, the prospective immigrants are "hopeless and frantic with starving compulsion," which shows their desperation for a better life and the extreme degree to which they idealize the US.

☝☝ The border was an abstraction to them at best. Many citizens of Tijuana crossed it every day [...] Hundreds of women walked through the Immigration turnstiles and boarded the red trolleys that fed them into the hills and valleys of San Diego, where they vacuumed and dusted and wiped out toilets and cooked grilled-cheese sandwiches in the homes of other women who could afford to hire people to do their household chores for them.

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator mentions that to many Tijuana residents, the border means little because they can cross it freely by simply flashing their passports. This illustrates how the geographic border is relatively meaningless. Instead, what gives the border meaning is the human wall on the other side, as the Border Patrol officers are the ones who get to decide who is allowed into the country and who isn't.

In addition, even though many Tijuana residents are disdainful of illegal immigrants, the fact that so many women from Tijuana work in San Diego shows that their idealization of the US is not all that different from the illegal immigrants' idealization of the US. Both parties want to earn a living and see the US as a place with greater economic opportunity. These women in Tijuana just have the privilege to be able to afford a passport, work visa, and other necessary paperwork to cross the border without so much as a second thought.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☝☝ Nobody but Nayeli's gang was on a quest to protect and repopulate their villages. They were there for food, to send money home. These invaders, so infamous on American talk radio, were hopeless and frantic with starving compulsion.

Related Characters: Vampi, Yolo, Nayeli

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

When Nayeli, Yolo, and Vampi are deported to Tijuana after their first attempt at crossing the border, the narrator takes a moment to describe how the other prospective immigrants live and how they're perceived in the US. The mention of American talk radio illustrates clearly how racism and dehumanization are major factors in the fact

☝ "You are there to collect Mexicans," Irma reminded her.
"Don't fall in love with that missionary!"

"I won't."

"And don't screw him, either. If you give him the milk for free, why would he buy the cow?"

"Tía!"

"Don't bring me any damned American surfers. And don't bring me any American babies. Bring me Mexicans."

Related Characters: Tía Irma, Nayeli (speaker), Matt

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Nayeli calls Tía Irma from Tijuana after being deported for the first time. Irma is wary of Nayeli's plan to contact Matt when she makes it to the United States, which again shows how little Irma thinks of men. In addition, it is clear that Irma believes that romance with men gets in the way of other, more important projects, like the fate of Tres Camarones. Irma's sharp words about Matt reveal that Irma is one of the most avid proponents of treating romance with caution. By extension, Irma is also one of the greatest proponents of female friendship, as she wholeheartedly supports Nayeli taking all of her girlfriends on this journey with her. In this way, it seems that Irma hopes the girls' friendship will keep them from getting distracted, and further, that she already believes that romance will be ruinous.

Chapter 22 Quotes

☝ "Welcome to the United States," Velma shouted at them as if they were deaf.

Everyone smiled warmly, wondering if she was mad at them.

Related Characters: Velma (speaker), Atómiko, Vampi, Yolo, Nayeli, Matt

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 213

Explanation and Analysis

When Matt takes Nayeli and her friends out to breakfast on their first morning in the United States, the waitress, Velma, yells at them in English to compensate for not speaking Spanish. Though this exchange is intended to be humorous,

it also shows how Velma's attempt at being kind and welcoming actually comes off as racist and ignorant. A language barrier isn't an issue of volume, but Velma seems to assume that speaking louder in English will make the Spanish-speaking group understand her words. Through this instance and many others like it, the novel emphasizes that racism isn't always violent and overt. Instead, racism frequently emerges in small, seemingly harmless interactions that are still harmful.

Chapter 23 Quotes

☝ Only when she was back in Tres Camarones did Irma hear from Chava's mother that he had impregnated an American woman [...] Chava was marrying her.

That was the end of Irma, that day.

La Osa, her alter ego, appeared in all her relentless glory to inspire chagrin and penance in the homeland.

Related Characters: Chava Chavarín, Tía Irma

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 224

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator goes back in time to tell the story of Chava and Irma's youthful, brief relationship, which ended when Chava went north and, as far as Irma knows, married someone else. Irma's disappointing and short-lived relationship with Chava explains why Irma is so wary of romance for Nayeli or the girlfriends, seen by when she warns Nayeli not to sleep with Matt. Irma knows firsthand that romance can destroy a person and turn them into something entirely different—like the way that her own heartbreak turned her into "La Osa," or "the she-bear." Irma's rocky romantic past explains why she is adamant that Nayeli remain her heroic self and accomplish her goal.

Chapter 25 Quotes

☝ Suddenly, Nayeli said, "I still want to find my father." Idly, Tacho said, "Why would he want to go back?" "Me," she replied.

Related Characters: Tacho, Nayeli (speaker), Don Pepe, Chava Chavarín

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 245

Explanation and Analysis

As Chava drives Nayeli and Tacho to the migrant camp, Nayeli absentmindedly reminds everyone that she ultimately wants to find her father. Tacho's response seems to imply an inherent criticism of Tres Camarones, as he suggests that there is nothing about Tres Camarones that would make a person want to return to it. In contrast, Tacho suggests that the US is ripe with opportunity. When Nayeli insists that Don Pepe will surely return because of her, it shows that Nayeli believes her father idealizes her and her mother in the same way that Nayeli idolizes her father. Nayeli's simple reply, "Me," suggests that she may be overestimating her power and significance—something she will be forced to come to terms with near the end of the novel.

☞ "Ay, m'ija," he sighed. "All they need is a few hot-air balloons to make it perfect here." Ahead of them, a hot-air balloon rose. "Oh," he said. "America wins every time."

Related Characters: Tacho (speaker), Nayeli, Chava Chavarín

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 245

Explanation and Analysis

On the drive to the migrant camp, Tacho is entranced by the view of San Diego, and the presence of these hot-air balloons makes the view even more perfect. In this moment, Tacho believes that the United States is a perfect, ideal place. However, hot-air balloons are something that Tacho will (presumably) only be able to look at; they're not something he could use or actively enjoy himself. This moment points back to when Atómiko said that the US would be perfect if only it had bonfires. Sure enough, the group notices several men enjoying a bonfire near the way. Once again, Nayeli and her friends witness the idealized American lifestyle but don't actually participate in it, which suggests that life in the US may not be all that much better than in Mexico.

Chapter 26 Quotes

☞ "Men are no good."

"My father is good."

Your father is a dog like all the other dogs."

Related Characters: Tía Irma, Nayeli (speaker), Don Pepe

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 265

Explanation and Analysis

When Nayeli admits to Tía Irma that she'd like to go to Kankakee and find her father, Irma insists that Don Pepe is no different than any other man and is just as bad and disappointing. Irma's distaste for men is evident, which it makes even stranger that Irma so wholeheartedly agreed to Nayeli's plan to bring men back to save Tres Camarones. Once again, it seems that Irma idealizes the idea of men, particularly since she sees handsome, heroic men in movies but not in real life.

Irma's harsh words about Don Pepe also suggests that Irma knows something about Don Pepe that Nayeli doesn't. Irma is clearly critical of all men, so it makes sense that she would lump Don Pepe in with the rest of them. However, this is one of many disparaging comments that Irma makes about Don Pepe and Nayeli's desire to find him, which suggests that Irma has some sort of deeper understanding about Don Pepe.

Chapter 27 Quotes

☞ On the radio, they heard many angry Americans with loud voices saying Mexicans were unwanted, and immigrants carried disease and harbored terrorists. English only, the AM shouters boomed; English was the official language of America.

Related Characters: Tacho, Nayeli

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 268

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Tacho and Nayeli drive across the US on their way to Illinois to find Nayeli's father. They try to listen to the radio, but much of what Tacho finds is racist talk radio that specifically targets Mexican immigrants. This puts Nayeli and Tacho in a difficult situation, as they're unable to escape the fact that Americans aren't as benevolent and as

kind as Tía Irma promised they would be. Instead, the Americans on the radio think very little of Mexican immigrants—legal and illegal alike. The talk radio also makes it clear that what motivates these racist thoughts is a fear of the unknown and the fear that these "others" are going to "steal" resources, just as Irma insisted that Salvadorans and Hondurans only come to Mexico to receive an education. This shows that this kind of fear and nationalism exists worldwide and is borne out of anxiety and ignorance.

Chapter 28 Quotes

☝ "Where are you from, por favor?" Nayeli asked.
"Colorado," she replied.
"But...qué es la palabra...original?"
"Colorado."

Related Characters: The Cook's Wife, Nayeli (speaker), Tacho, The Cook

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 279

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Nayeli and Tacho stop in at a Mexican restaurant in the Rocky Mountains on their way to Illinois to find Nayeli's father. At the restaurant, Nayeli and Tacho ask the owners where they're from. The woman is adamant that she is originally from the United States, which shows her desire to assert her legitimacy as a true American. She is also hesitant to share that her husband is actually from Mexico, and it becomes clear over the course of the conversation that the couple doesn't think highly of Mexico or Mexicans. However, Nayeli's persistence in learning where this woman is from originally shows that for Nayeli, it is unthinkable that a Mexican person wouldn't be proud of their Mexican roots and would in fact actively try to ignore or overwrite them.

☝ "You get out of here. Illegals. What about the rest of us? What about us, cabrones? I came here LEGALLY! You hear that, LEGAL. You criminals come in here, make me look bad? I'm sorry, but you have to leave. Get out!"

Related Characters: The Cook (speaker), The Cook's Wife, Nayeli, Tacho

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 281

Explanation and Analysis

At a Mexican restaurant owned and staffed by legal Mexican immigrants, the cook kicks Nayeli and Tacho out when they admit that they crossed the border illegally. The man's anger illustrates how tenuous his position as an immigrant in the US truly is: his perfectly legitimate and fully legal existence in the country is, in his mind, threatened by the fact that not everyone from his home country goes the legal route to enter the country. This reinforces the idea that it's the human and official borders that mean the most: even though both Nayeli and this man are technically in the US, the man believes that Nayeli isn't as much a part of the country as he is because she didn't go through the legal channels.

Chapter 31 Quotes

☝ "Brother," one of the men said, "take us back to Mexico."
"Please," said another.
The voices rose.
"It is too hard. We want to go home."
"We just need jobs."

Related Characters: Atómiko, Tía Irma

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 299

Explanation and Analysis

On the morning when Irma is scheduled to interview Mexican men to come back to Tres Camarones, the hotel fills with more than seventy men, all of whom desperately want to return to Mexico. The men's cries indicate that even though they've presumably remained in the US for long periods of time, they're entirely disillusioned with the country and trying to make it work. In saying that living in the US "is too hard," the men emphasize that what they expected to find in the US—jobs, money, opportunities—didn't pan out. As such, it seems that these men have spent much of their time idealizing the place they came from. However, the novel overwhelmingly suggests that idealization always leads to disillusionment. Therefore, although the men's idealization of Mexico means that Irma has an easier time finding men who are willing to go back to

Tres Camarones with her, it also suggests that these men might be just as disillusioned with Mexico as they are now with the US.

landmarks and landforms cease to impress him. To Tacho, the US is just like the giant prairie dog. It sounds alluring and incredible, but in practice, it's just a lie and a façade.

Chapter 32 Quotes

☝☝ "Please? The sign say six thousand pounds of dog. Of the pradera!"

The woman said, "Oh. The big giant prairie dog." She leaned forward. "It's a lie. It's made of cement."

[...] Tacho went out to the minivan and massaged his forehead.

Nayeli jumped in and said, "Just in time."

She was baffled when he announced, "It is all a cruel illusion."

Related Characters: El Brujo, Nayeli, Tacho (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 303

Explanation and Analysis

When Nayeli and Tacho stop at a rest stop on their way to Illinois and ask about a six-thousand-pound prairie dog statue, Tacho is distraught to discover that the prairie dog isn't a real dog, and the signs were intentionally misleading to lure people into visiting the landmark. This discovery about the prairie dog is one of the final clinchers in Tacho's sense of disillusionment with the United States. Nothing about the US has lived up to his expectations—even the

Chapter 33 Quotes

☝☝ "Sweetheart," he said. "People like us? We don't marry Johnny Depp."

Related Characters: Tacho (speaker), Nayeli

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 315

Explanation and Analysis

As Tacho lies in bed in Kankakee, extremely ill with food or water poisoning, he tells Nayeli that he wants to go home, since their dreams will never come true in the United States. Here, Johnny Depp represents the idealized version of the US that Tacho, Nayeli, and the other girls believed was real and attainable. However, now that they've traveled across the country, met a lot of Americans, and learned that there are major barriers to their advancement or happiness in the country, Tacho believes that all their dreams will never come true. When Tacho tells Nayeli this, he's trying to be a good friend and help prepare her for what she might find when she finally meets her father. However, Nayeli is still too caught up in her idolization of Don Pepe to truly listen to Tacho and heed what he's saying.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

The narrator explains that the "bandidos" came to the Mexican village of Tres Camarones at the worst time, when the village was already in flux. Nobody there likes change—even getting electricity in the 1930s was a struggle. The mayor, García-García the First, spent two years lobbying for electricity. Even after he was successful, some citizens continued to burn candles and build bonfires in the street, necessitating a ban on street fires. García-García lost his next election but was later reelected—citizens figured there would be less change with the same mayor.

Tres Camarones only changes when inclement weather washes away parts of the town or reshapes the beaches. However, this all changed when the value of the peso dropped. Work disappeared, and tortillas were suddenly too expensive to buy. Some traditionalists voted to get rid of electricity, but none of the women wanted to get rid of their appliances. Instead, the men began going north.

The bandidos arrive in Tres Camarones as the sun rises. One is an officer with the Sinaloa State Police—he makes more than 15 times his officer's salary as an "advisor" for the drug cartels. The other is a low-level "narco" looking for his own territory so he can make it big. He's known as Scarface. He and the state cop are driving to Tres Camarones to deliver marijuana to some American surfers, though Scarface thinks that the bumpy road and the heat are a lot of trouble for marijuana.

Both men are extremely irritated: the state cop's gun holster is squeaky, and the only music on the radio is Mexican music. Scarface and the cop argue about which hip-hop artists are best and agree that Mexico is a terrible country. Driving through the dirt streets, the men are disgusted by the overwhelming smell of the town's outhouses and laugh at the skinny dogs and roosters. They see one house with a satellite dish. Finally, they come upon the town square and notice a restaurant called "Taqueria e Internet 'La Mano Caída.'" They scoff at the name—Fallen Hand—and decide to stop and wait for the surfers.

It is immediately clear that the residents of Tres Camarones (Three Shrimp) idealize the past and have done so for generations. García-García the First's reelection shows that there's a major desire among the Tres Camarones citizens to preserve some semblance of this idealized past, suggesting a desire for familiarity and stability, as well as a fear of the future.



The peso's dramatic decrease in value refers to the major economic crises that Mexico experienced throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. Some people think that simply getting rid of electricity will fix the deep-rooted economic problems, once again highlighting the residents' anxiety about change and the future, as well as their tendency to idealize the past.



Scarface's mention of needing his own territory introduces the idea that the borders in Mexico aren't always conventional ones. In this case, a Scarface wants to impose his own borders on the land so that he can achieve greater success and clout as a drug dealer. While this may be beneficial for Scarface, this would likely be detrimental for the people of Tres Camarones.



Scarface and the state cop clearly don't find rural Mexico charming, which implies that unlike the residents of Tres Camarones, these men typically exist in an urbanized, modern world and like it. However, as much as Scarface and the cop think of this place as provincial, the satellite dish suggests that Tres Camarones might not be as backwards as they think it is.



CHAPTER 2

Nayeli dances down the streets of Tres Camarones on her way to work at the Fallen Hand. She used to be a star soccer player and is still in shape, and even though she's been out of school for a year, she still wears her school uniform skirt so she can show off her legs. As she dances, she dreams of leaving town. Nayeli desperately wants to go anywhere that she's seen in the films that play at the local cinema. She sometimes dreams about going to the United States to find her father, but she doesn't like to think about him.

Nayeli is coming from Tía Irma's campaign headquarters. Irma is running for mayor, and if she wins, will be the first female mayor. She's highly qualified, as she was the Lady Bowling Champion and therefore has leadership experience, and she believes that she can bring Mexico back from "chaos and ruin." Nayeli's job is mostly to write campaign slogans in sidewalk chalk, and she earns twenty pesos per week doing that. This is why she has her second job at the Fallen Hand, as twenty pesos isn't enough to buy tortillas.

After Scarface and the state cop have been waiting for several hours for the surfers in the Fallen Hand, the cop decides it's time to eat. The owner, Tacho, brushes off the cop's insults and slurs—he's gay, and he's heard it all. Finally, Nayeli bursts through the door, flirting with Tacho on her way in, making the narcos wonder if maybe Tacho isn't gay. Tying on an apron, Nayeli approaches the table and takes the cop's order. As she turns away, the cop grabs her hand and tells her she's under arrest for stealing his heart. Laughing, he lets her go. Nayeli's face burns, and Tacho quietly calls the cop "ugly old man."

Still laughing, Scarface and the state cop holler for drinks. Nayeli delivers two beers as fast as she can so that she doesn't have to be near the men. Scarface pulls out his pistol, lays it on the table, and winks at Nayeli as he looks her over.

Nayeli idealizes the cultural products of the United States and therefore, the United States itself. Nayeli's pride in her body is also its own kind of idealization: she knows that her body attracts attention, and she generally appears to like that attention, though it's important to note that at this point, there's no indication that she's received any negative attention.



Right from the start, Irma makes it abundantly clear that women are capable of affecting change in the world and doing that work themselves. Further, like Nayeli, Scarface, and the cop, Irma seems disillusioned with Mexico as a whole—though she differs from them all in her belief that she'll be able to change it, suggesting that she truly believes in her own power to work. In addition, the mention of Irma's qualifications for being mayor—her leadership experience from her bowling league—highlights that Tres Camarones is not exactly bustling with powerful, politically minded people.



It's unclear if Nayeli flirts with Tacho for her own amusement or to rescue him from the insults of Scarface. Regardless, Nayeli's flirtation makes Scarface and the cop question Tacho's sexuality and, consequently, where Tacho fits within their system of organizing people. This shows how important it is for powerful people (like Scarface) to create carefully delineated systems and borders, as it allows them a greater degree of control.



Guns serve an important function throughout the novel. Though the female characters at large have the skills and tenacity to defend themselves, they never acquire their own guns. Within the novel, guns are exclusively masculine tools, consequently giving men a greater, more threatening sense of power over women.



The narrator explains that nobody knows if Tres Camarones is in the state of Sinaloa or Nayarit, as it boasts no major highways, police stations, or tourist destinations that would make it important. It's about as remote as a person can get and doesn't even exist on a map. The American boys who are supposed to purchase Scarface's marijuana are on spring break from college in California, and they chose to surf and camp on the beaches of Tres Camarones. The locals didn't tell them that although the beaches are beautiful, they're extremely hazardous: there are alligators, Portuguese man-of-wars, and the sand drops off suddenly just past the water line, creating a dangerous trap for swimmers or surfers.

Tres Camarones is used to Americans, as missionaries from California visit often. However, several missions failed due to a lack of converts, and one Hindu missionary left with typhoid and dysentery. The Jehovah's Witnesses left when Irma started calling them "Los Testículos de Jeová" (Jehovah's testicles).

After Scarface finishes eating his tacos, he stands and shouts about the Americans. Tacho only shrugs when Scarface asks where the surfers are, but he agrees to pass on the message that the narcos will shoot the surfers next time they see them. As Scarface and the state cop walk to their car, Scarface notes that there are no cops and no men in this town. He smiles and says that he could do very well in a town like this. They don't pay for their lunch.

CHAPTER 3

Tacho and Nayeli carry on with their work. Nayeli thinks about one particular missionary, Matt. All of Nayeli's "notorious girlfriends" loved him, especially since he was the first blonde boy they'd seen in person. When he was in Tres Camarones, he spent his evenings in the cinema with the women of the town, from the old aunties to young girls. They were all taken with him, and Matt made them love him even more by writing the girls' names phonetically on notecards. He added his address and phone number to each card and passed them out as gifts before he left, and Nayeli thinks that it's the closest thing to a love letter she's ever gotten.

Just as Scarface and the cop question Tacho's sexuality (and consequently have trouble categorizing him), Tres Camarones also resists categorization. Since it's unclear which state the city belongs to, the city is able to exist as its own independent entity and maintain a degree of control over itself. However, this lack of clarity also means that someone like Scarface will have an easier time drawing his own borders on the territory.



Tres Camarones also defies classification by swiftly rejecting missionaries of all denominations. In doing so, the village maintains ownership over itself instead of ceding power to a governing religious body elsewhere.



Scarface states that there are no men in Tres Camarones even though he has just interacted with (and stolen lunch from) Tacho, who is a man. Since Scarface and the cop previously suspected Tacho of being gay, it seems as though Scarface thinks that Tacho's sexuality makes him not even count as a man. Scarface's prejudice is significant, as it aligns Tacho with the women of Tres Camarones from the very beginning of the novel.



For Nayeli and her girlfriends, Matt was an idealized representation of masculinity and American culture, which was (and still is) supported by the girls' constant consumption of American movies. When Matt wrote out all the girls' names phonetically, he was helping himself combat racism in a small way by doing his best to pronounce the girls' names correctly, rather than in an anglicized way that would erase their Mexican identity.



Nayeli pulls out Matt's card, which she keeps in her knee sock, to inspect it. It's signed with "love, Matt!" and she wonders what kind of "love" Matt was referring to. She brushes off Tacho when he tells her to get back to work. The narrator explains that along with Matt's card, she also keeps a **postcard** from her father in her knee sock. It came from Kankakee, Illinois. Her father, Don Pepe, has been gone for three years.

The fact that Nayeli spends time wondering if Matt truly loves her (when it's implied that he wrote the same message on other girls' cards, too) shows how desperately Nayeli wants to believe that Matt loves her. At this point, it is clear that Nayeli is doe-eyed about Matt, romance, and America. All of these idealizations will be challenged over the course of the novel.



Nayeli sweeps the sidewalk outside and thinks that boys no longer whistle at her. She wonders if at nineteen, she's already too old to attract their attention, and she feels like everything is changing. Because she's female, she can't be a champion soccer player. It's too expensive to go to college, as Nayeli's mother does laundry for a living. They survive mostly because Tía Irma gives Nayeli's mother money. Nayeli muses that Irma was the reason she started playing soccer, and it was Irma and Don Pepe who enrolled her in karate. She thinks that to Tía Irma, who is known as "La Osa" (the she-bear), life is war—and as far as Irma is concerned, Nayeli must be prepared to win.

Nayeli's concern about being too old points back to Scarface's assertion that there are no men in the town—if he's right, then Nayeli's not too old, there just aren't any young men around to whistle at her. This passage also introduces the theme of male and female heroism. When Don Pepe and Irma enrolled Nayeli in karate, they were attempting to give Nayeli the tools she'd need to be her own hero. This karate training will come in handy later in the novel, when Nayeli must save herself from several dangerous situations.



As Nayeli sweeps the floor, she sighs over Matt. Finally, she tosses her broom inside and declares that she's going on the internet—the bar became an internet café when Matt donated his computer to Tacho. Tacho scolds Nayeli, but the narrator explains that he's cranky with everyone, and it's just part of his act. It's macho to be a lovable jerk, even a gay one, and that act allows Tacho to find acceptance in Tres Camarones. The name of his bar comes from a common Mexican slur for gay men: the "fallen hand" refers to the stereotypical limp wrist. When Tacho named his bar the Fallen Hand, even the macho men loved it because they thought it was witty.

The assertion that Tacho's grumpiness is just an act suggests that Tacho has created this role for himself to achieve a sense of safety and belonging, not because he actually enjoys being a jerk. This shows that one must navigate many obstacles in order to find a sense of belonging in a place. In addition, the backstory about the name of Tacho's bar provides an explanation as to why Scarface and the cop were disdainful of the bar's name and swiftly assumed that Tacho was gay.



Tacho sighs, thinking that these days, the bar only attracts old ladies and Nayeli's friends, none of whom spend money. He started selling shoes out of his bedroom after he discovered eBay, and he makes more money doing that. Both Tacho and Nayeli use the computer to "spy on" big cities, as both dream about leaving Tres Camarones.

Again, though Tacho doesn't mention that there are no men in the town, his assertion that only women frequent his bar suggests that Scarface is right.



Tacho groans—Nayeli's friends, "the notorious girlfriends," are approaching his bar, yelling "Adios," the customary greeting in Tres Camarones, to everyone. Nayeli is thrilled. Yoloxochitl is a pin tender at the bowling alley, and Verónica is a shrimp peeler. Neither likes their jobs. Per usual, everyone stares at Verónica, as she's the only goth in town. The phase began three months ago, though only the notorious girlfriends noticed that the change coincided with the death of Verónica's parents. They call her La Vampira, or Vampi for short.

These first few chapters give the indication that there isn't much to do in Tres Camarones, given that three employed young women are hanging out in an empty internet cafe during the middle of the workday. This paints a bleak picture of the village and again shows how isolated Tres Camarones is from the rest of the modern world. Similarly, Vampi's goth appearance is also striking because of the village's isolation and the residents' skepticism regarding change.



The girlfriends burst into Tacho's bar, exchanging insults with him and using rough slang. Vampi slumps onto a barstool and declares dramatically that she doesn't know how much more she can take. Yolo and Nayeli roll their eyes, but Tacho makes up a bowl of cut fruit sprinkled with chili powder. He implores Vampi to eat.

Nayeli and Yolo pull up videos on the internet. When they find one of Captain Jack Sparrow, Yolo jokes that Nayeli will marry Johnny Depp. Tacho agrees with the girls that Jack Sparrow is hot, but Vampi is dismissive. She claims she can only marry one man. Nayeli grumbles, but she searches for a gothic band called The 69 Eyes. She pulls up Vampi's favorite song, "Gothic Girl," and Vampi dances enthusiastically. She sings along with her heavy accent, and the others laugh at her.

When Nayeli gets home late, her mother tells her that they're going to the lagoon the next day. Later, Nayeli dreams that she lives in a big white house in the foothills of a snowy mountain. She speaks English and eats ice cream. Her husband, Johnny Depp, tells her that the next day, they're going to Kankakee, Illinois.

CHAPTER 4

The next morning, Nayeli hurries after Tía Irma as they walk down to the dock. Nayeli's mother slides into a boat behind Irma, who snaps pictures of orchids. After an hour, the boats reach a bend in the river. The crabbing party climbs over a hill to the beautiful, idyllic lagoon. Nayeli fetches the crabbing supplies from the storage boxes, as Irma tells Nayeli's mother that if Don Pepe had come to the lagoon before he left, he would've stayed. Nayeli's mother sadly replies, "You cannot eat beauty."

Nayeli and Yolo wade through the lagoon and giggle at Tacho, who is on the shore making a sauce for the crabs and wearing a sarong. The girls reminisce about the time Matt came crabbing with them and a crab pinched his toe, and the girls argue about whether or not Matt kissed Nayeli. Nayeli finally admits he did, and Yolo splashes her.

The lagoon is filled with pairs of women, with floating straw baskets tied between the pairs. Each woman carries a stick, and they throw their caught crabs into the basket. In the basket, the crabs wrestle each other and never let any of their companions escape. Nayeli remarks that the crabs are much like the women in Mexico, and Yolo tells her to not let Irma hear.

Tacho is able to act like both be a friend and a guardian to Nayeli and her friends. He seems like one of the girlfriends, perhaps because of his sexuality or perhaps because there are no other men around for him to spend time with.



In this passage, the girls are able to bond over celebrity crushes and hypothetical relationships with celebrities. However, later in the novel, real-life relationships have the power to threaten the girls' friendship. In addition, Tacho and Nayeli's mutual love for Johnny Depp foreshadows Tacho's profound realization at the end of the novel about America, immigration, and upward mobility.



Nayeli's dream is an insight into what Nayeli idealizes—that is, the rich life she believes she could lead in the United States, an unaccented grasp of English, and finding her father in Kankakee.



The fact that Don Pepe never visited the lagoon suggests that going crabbing at the lagoon is a strictly female activity, showing that Tres Camarones maintains firm ideas about gender roles, masculinity, and femininity. In addition, Nayeli's mother's reply, "You cannot eat beauty," highlights her family's extreme financial strain—likely the reason Don Pepe left for America.



The fact that Tacho attends this seemingly female-only event shows that he's able to comfortably blur the lines between masculinity and femininity. Meanwhile, Yolo splashing Nayeli upon finding out about the kiss suggests that actual romantic relationships might lead to strife between the girls.



At this point in the novel, there's little indication that women even try to leave Mexico. However, Nayeli's observation suggests that women are more interested in creating community and helping each other stay than men are. It also implies that women, like the crabs, are trapped.



Suddenly, Nayeli spots a crab and dives for it. When she pulls it out of the water, she and Yolo celebrate: the crab is a female and carries eggs, which means that Tacho will be able to make a delicious paste with the eggs. Yolo asks Nayeli if she feels guilty for taking an expectant mother, insisting that the crab is their sister. Yolo begins to clarify that the crab is only a sister to pregnant women in Tres Camarones but cannot think of anyone in town who's pregnant. The girls find another crab and decide to take their dozen crabs to Tacho. As they emerge from the lagoon, they again wonder if anyone in town is pregnant.

Later, as Tacho and the women eat their crabs, Nayeli asks the group if anyone in town is pregnant. Irma jokes that she and her friends are too old but finally asks Nayeli why she's asking. Nayeli insists that it's odd for Tres Camarones to not have any babies, and Tacho says matter-of-factly that they need men to have babies. Tacho tries to tell Nayeli that all the men are gone, and Irma finally butts in. She insists that there's nothing sillier than a teenage girl, as teenage girls are engrossed in their own dramas. Irma says that all the men went north and walks away from the group.

That night, Irma turns her color television towards the window so the village can watch TV. Nayeli watches those gathered to watch TV and those who pass on the street. She realizes that Tacho is right: there are only women, old men, and children left in Tres Camarones.

CHAPTER 5

The next morning, Tía Irma steers her ancient Cadillac towards Mazatlán. Vampi, Nayeli, and Yolo snore peacefully in the backseat. As usual, Irma points out a mountain, promises to take the girls there someday, and says that she went there once with Chava Chavarin. The girls sleep through Irma's monologue.

In the fruit market, Irma berates the vegetable seller for charging an exorbitant amount of money for beans. The seller mistakenly refers to Irma as a señora—Irma has never been married and thinks that señora is a "slave's moniker." The seller cannot answer Irma when she asks what the poor are supposed to eat. She goes on to explain that they're all Mexicans, and Mexicans eat corn and beans. Irma asks how it's possible that Mexicans can't afford their own country's crops, and the man points out that the beans are from California. He says that they grow the beans in California, sell them to the US, and then the US sells them back. Irma insists that the system is stupid, and the man simply says, "NAFTA" in reply.

The fact that Yolo is surprised to realize that nobody in Tres Camarones is currently pregnant suggests that this isn't a normal state of affairs, pointing back to the way that the residents of Tres Camarones dislike change. In addition, the lack of pregnant women or babies in the village also implies that there really are no men left in Tres Camarones.



When Irma calls attention to the fact that Nayeli and her friends are self-absorbed because of their age, it shows that the girls still have some growing up to do. Irma's blunt criticism of the girls also suggests that learning hard truths and possibly experiencing some disillusionment will be an integral part of this final coming of age.



Nayeli's willingness to admit that Tacho is right is a small step toward maturity. Her realization that Tres Camarones is devoid of men will serve as a catalyst for the events later in the novel.



Even the drive to Mazatlán is regimented and predictable—further evidence that Tres Camarones is stuck in the past and unwilling to embrace change. Meanwhile, Irma's comment about Chava suggests that she idealizes this man and the time she spent with him, though it is unclear to the reader who he is.



The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) helped create a framework and eliminate trade barriers between the US, Canada, and Mexico. However, as Mexico's agricultural exports increased, its agricultural imports decreased. Overall, this negatively affected the poor in Mexico and also took a toll on Mexican corn farmers. Here, Irma's argument with the seller shows that she's cognizant of this system's shortcomings and how it doesn't make sense that Mexicans can't afford to purchase their own crops.



Irma storms out of the man's stall and snaps at a Guatemalan woman picking through spoiled fruit. She tells the woman to go home and says that Mexico is for Mexicans. Nayeli, Yolo, and Vampi are appalled and embarrassed, but Irma goes off on a tirade anyway. She insists that "illegals" come to Mexico for a free, quality education, and declares that Mexico needs a wall on its southern border. She purchases some vegetables and cheese but decides to buy tortillas in Tres Camarones.

Irma agrees to let Nayeli drive home. As Vampi and Yolo sleep in the backseat, Nayeli whines that she's lonely. She says that she wants to see city lights, and Irma reminds Nayeli that Mazatlán is a major city. Nayeli continues that she wants someone to serenade her and touch her face and asks Irma if she's ever been serenaded. Irma very nearly sighs as she mentions Chavarín again, but Irma cannot answer when Nayeli asks who can do that for her.

CHAPTER 6

In the days leading up to the election, Nayeli and Irma work hard to make the women of Tres Camarones believe that they should vote for a woman. According to Irma, many of them have spent their entire lives believing that women are moody, illogical, and incapable, but she has a plan to fix this.

Irma's distant cousin and the only rich man in town, García-García, owns the theater. Recently, his projectionist (the person who operates the projector at a cinema) left town to pick apples in the US. As hard as García-García tried, he wasn't able to find a new projectionist, so García-García now spends his evenings sweating in his projection booth, worrying about money the whole time. He struggles to keep a constant stream of new double features running, and the films are often of questionable quality.

A few days before the election, Irma and Nayeli knock on the door of García-García's big, white house. One of his five housekeepers answers the door and shows them to García-García's office. Irma informs García-García that "we are tired of this shit," referring to the movies that play at the cinema. When Irma introduces Nayeli as her campaign manager, García-García holds Nayeli's hand a little too long and looks at her chest for even longer. Irma explains that Nayeli knows karate, which García-García deems unfeminine. Nayeli suggests it's time for a "new kind of femininity" and studies García-García's poster of Steve McQueen.

Irma is exceptionally racist and nationalist here, which makes it clear that racism isn't unique to America or anywhere else. The fact that the girlfriends are embarrassed shows that they believe Irma's views are outdated and rude. However, when the girls don't call Irma out on her inappropriate behavior, it shows that the girls find racism and nationalism less offensive when it's not directed at them.



As Nayeli mourns the lack of men in Tres Camarones, it tells the reader that Nayeli desperately wants to experience romance. This sets romance up as a goal and something that she can achieve—not something that comes naturally. This naïve understanding of romance will later contribute to the girls' falling out.



Irma recognizes that the boundaries of "femininity" are manmade. This narrow understanding of femininity is what keeps the women of Tres Camarones from either being their own heroes or voting for other women who can be their heroes.



The constant necessity for new films suggests that the entire economy of Tres Camarones is built on the idealization shown in movies. This in turn means that García-García has a great deal of power, as he chooses the movies and therefore chooses how Tres Camarones thinks about the US and the world.



Nayeli's comment about needing a "new kind of femininity" means that it's time for the kind of strong-willed, take-charge femininity that Irma and karate represent. García-García's insistence that karate isn't feminine falls in line with the assertion that Tres Camarones doesn't like change: it's not in García-García's best interest to accept that women can change the village, as that means he'll have to give up some of his power.



Irma says that she expects new employment opportunities for women after the election, and García-García insists that he already hires women. Irma says that his female employees sell food and clean, and García-García explains that the real money goes to management and the projectionist. When Irma smiles, García-García begins arguing with her that she must be joking. Irma says that she demands that García-García hire a female projectionist. She leans over his desk and explains that one day, she'll be president, and it would be a wise move to support the women who will soon be in charge.

When Irma is finished, she takes one of García-García's cigarettes and waits for him to light it. Nayeli thinks that she watched this happen on TV, and that Irma looks like Bette Davis. Finally, García-García agrees and shakes hands with Irma. Irma asks for one favor: a film festival featuring her favorite Mexican movie star, Yul Brynner. García-García yells that Yul Brynner isn't Mexican, but Irma won't hear it: she explains that she saw his house in Puerto Vallarta when she was bowling, and he spoke perfect Spanish in the film *Taras Bulba*. When García-García says the film was dubbed, Irma says he's being ridiculous. Nayeli follows Irma out.

On election day, everyone in Tres Camarones votes. The narcos' cars cruise past the town but don't stop. At ten in the morning, the voting is over, and Irma wins by a landslide. The outgoing mayor, Ernesto James, notes that women counted the ballots, but there aren't enough men to force a recount. Finally, he gives in and declares Irma the winner. The women light off fireworks, and Tacho plays loud music. Irma hugs Nayeli and says that a new age has arrived.

CHAPTER 7

That night, Nayeli wanders around her mother's dark house and thinks about poor orphaned Vampi. Vampi's parents died in a bus accident: the driver fell asleep and drove off a cliff, killing all the passengers but not himself. Vampi is able to get away with her goth phase because her grandmother is too tired to fight her.

The fact that García-García isn't willing to hire a female projectionist shows that he relies on his sexism to remain in power and keep men in power. Meanwhile, Irma's insistence reveals that she represents positive change for Tres Camarones and the idea that change can be a good thing. Further, by claiming that her rise to power is inevitable, she capitalizes on the current gender imbalance in Tres Camarones to seize power for herself.



This moment, while comedic, shows that the residents of Tres Camarones rely on idealized, cinematic versions of reality for entertainment and guidance as to how to interact with each other. For all Irma's power, however, she is wrong about Yul Brynner—he was a Russian actor, and the fact that Irma insists that he's Mexican reinforces her deep-rooted nationalism. It also seems that Irma's love for Yul Brynner has nothing to do with his talent and everything to do with the fact that she believes he is Mexican.



With this win, Irma finally obtains the official power to be the hero Tres Camarones needs, indicating that women are capable of being heroes and effecting change in the world. When the other women celebrate by lighting fireworks, it suggests that Tres Camarones (or at least its female residents) is beginning to accept change.



The particulars of Vampi's parents' deaths suggest that nothing in life can be trusted—not even a simple bus ride. In this way, the novel suggests that there's disillusionment and heartbreak to be had everywhere.



Nayeli approaches her mother's small altar to Don Pepe. A few candles surround a framed photo of him in his police officer's uniform. Nayeli smiles as she remembers how he used to set up bottles and let her shoot at them with his pistol. Even though Don Pepe loved his daughter, Nayeli could always tell that he wanted a son. Nayeli thinks about the day he left and how he simply couldn't earn enough money as an officer to take care of her and her mother. He had been a philosopher and a fatalist—on his **postcard** from Kankakee, Illinois, he'd written his favorite phrase, "Everything passes." Nayeli knows that this means that joy, as well as sorrow, will pass, and times will change.

The next day, news spreads that García-García's cinema will stage a film festival, with Nayeli's mother as the new projectionist. García-García orders Yul Brynner movies to appease Irma. For the first film of the double feature, García-García decides to show a German-dubbed version of *Westworld* that has Spanish subtitles. Then, because he is the self-proclaimed biggest Steve McQueen fan in Mexico, García-García decides to show one movie that features both Yul Brynner and Steve McQueen: *The Magnificent Seven*.

García-García's cinema, the Cine Pedro Infante, fills for the festival. Nayeli attends with Tacho and shouts at Vampi and Yolo across the theater. The entirety of *Tres Camarones* comes, even Pepino, the "town simpleton." Nayeli and Tacho sit behind Tía Irma, who snaps at them to not say stupid things during the movie. Nayeli purchases a soda from Pepino, declines his offer of marriage, and whispers to Tacho that she hates Yul Brynner. Tacho agrees.

García-García shows cartoons first, and the laughter from the moviegoers is so loud that the bats leave their perches. Irma puts her lighter in the air to scare them off, and then *Westworld* begins. Nayeli and Tacho groan and giggle, and Irma glares at them. At one point, Irma remarks that Brynner's accent is so slight, you can hardly tell he's Mexican.

During intermission, Nayeli lounges with her friends in the aisles as a band plays. Father François tells Nayeli about *The Magnificent Seven* and explains that it's based on another film called *The Seven Samurai*. He attempts to explain the premise, but Yolo keeps blurting rude interjections, and Father François gives up. Nayeli follows him back to his seat and he finishes telling her about how, in the film, the villagers go to the US to find seven gunmen to fight off banditos that threaten their village. Nayeli feels tingles and returns to her seat.

The fact that Nayeli and her mother keep this small altar suggests that they idealize Don Pepe and view him as the hero that Nayeli and her mother want and need. When Nayeli mentions that Don Pepe wanted a son, it suggests that she feels unworthy of being a true hero because of her sex. By idealizing her father in this way, Nayeli thinks less of herself. Even though Nayeli is supportive of Irma's rise to power and wants a "new kind of femininity" to come about, Nayeli still seems to think more highly of male heroism than female heroism.



*The 1973 science fiction film, *Westworld*, is a motif that carries throughout the novel: the film features robots that malfunction, playing into the novel's exploration of idealization (as represented by the robots) and disillusionment (as represented when the robots malfunction and wreak havoc). Showing the film now foreshadows the disillusionment to come.*



It's unclear if Nayeli is aware that Yul Brynner isn't actually Mexican. Regardless, when she and Tacho admit that they hate Yul Brynner, it symbolizes the youth rejecting the misguided and ill-informed nationalism of the older generation.



As powerful as Irma is, it's telling that she's so caught up in her belief that Yul Brynner is Mexican. It seems that she'll happily bend or ignore the truth in order to see the world as she wants it to be rather than how it is. This illustrates how Irma's idealization blinds her to the realities of the world.



*The gender breakdown of these films is telling, as the characters specifically find male gunmen to save the village. Because Nayeli idealizes the world based on the cinematic representations of reality that she sees in movies, Nayeli likely thinks that men will solve their problems, not the strong women who are already in *Tres Camarones*.*



When the movie begins, Nayeli feels more tingles. Irma and García-García engage in a shouting match over who is better, Yul Brynner or Steve McQueen, during a particularly exciting scene, but nobody else in the theater seems to feel the same kind of excitement Nayeli does. When the movie is over, Nayeli pulls out her **postcard** and drifts out the door. Yolo and Vampi attempt to grab Nayeli, but Nayeli is lost in thought. The girls follow Nayeli to the town square, where she sits down and thinks for a moment.

Finally, Nayeli says, "*The Magnificent Seven*." Yolo and Vampi just stare. Nayeli declares that they have to go to the US and bring home seven men, as the bandits are coming, and there's nobody to protect Tres Camarones now that there aren't any cops. Yolo suggests that they bring home only cops or soldiers, and Vampi complains that this will ruin her week's plans. Finally Vampi agrees and suggests that Nayeli can find her father while they're there. All three girls sit, stunned by the plan. They decide that they'll only stay as long as it takes to find the men, and reason that the Americans will be thrilled to have them.

Nayeli whispers that they'll finally have boyfriends, babies, and no bandidos, and they could even find one gay boy for Tacho. Vampi suggests they take Tacho, and Nayeli says that they're on a mission from God to repopulate the town and save Mexico. The girls give each other high fives and argue about whether to tell Tía Irma.

Late that night, Irma wakes up to a knock on her door. It's García-García, and he has a black eye. He explains that the bandidos came to his house and threw him out. He asks to sleep at Irma's house. Irma agrees but slams the door after he enters.

CHAPTER 8

Many of Tres Camarones' residents are gathered in Irma's living room. Tacho daydreams about going north with the girls. In his fantasy, they cross the border under hay in a truck, and it resembles Allied heroes escaping occupied France in Nazi movies. Tacho thinks he's so ready to see Hollywood and "Los Beberly Hills." Irma promised to manage the Fallen Hand in Tacho's absence and also negotiated with Vampi and Yolo's family members.

Nayeli's tingles suggest that she is thinking about how to apply the fictional films to her own life—perhaps considering how Tres Camarones can obtain their own seven gunmen to save the village from the bandidos. In addition, by pulling out the postcard from her father, who now lives in the US, it seems that Nayeli is also considering how to get him to return to the village as one of the seven. In this way, Nayeli again considers her father to be a hero figure.



When the girls say that the Americans will be happy to see them, it shows their naivete and blind optimism. For them, the world resembles the world they saw in the film—a world that, notably, is based upon idealized images of the United States, heroism, bad guys who are relatively easy to overthrow. The girls' distorted perception of reality suggests that their journey will be a shock and will possibly lead to disillusionment with the US.



When Nayeli asserts that this plan will save all of Mexico, it illustrates how sheltered she is, as the idea of reinvigorating the entirety of Mexico by saving one town is fantastical and very clearly overestimates Nayeli's power in the world.



This exchange shows the reader that men aren't capable of defending themselves in the face of the bandidos. This casts some doubt on Nayeli's plan, given that she wants to bring back men to save Tres Camarones.



Thus far, life hasn't seemed particularly great for Tacho in such a small town on account of his sexuality. For him, the US (and liberal California, specifically) represents a place where he believes he'll be able to be himself in a way he's not able to in Tres Camarones. However, when he describes his fantasy in the context of a film, it shows that he, too, has a distorted picture of reality.



In the living room, Nayeli asks what harm can come to them if God is with them, and Tacho thinks of all the biblical tragedies but says nothing. Irma addresses the room and says that she represented Tres Camarones when she was the ladies' bowling champion, and she insists that she faced many horrors to do so. She says that she fought alone for the women and "useless men" of Tres Camarones and admits that at the time, she illegally crossed the border into the US. Getting into her stride, Irma lists the bowling alleys she bowled at, and says that she won for Tres Camarones—just like the girls will.

Irma tells the women that they're stupid, first for allowing themselves to be subjugated for hundreds of years, then by allowing their men to escape, and finally by denying Nayeli, Vampi, and Yolo the future. She snaps her fingers at Tacho to get her coffee, and he grumbles but complies. Irma reminds her listeners of the first man to leave Tres Camarones: Chava Chavarín, the most handsome man in the village who moved to Tijuana in 1963. Irma says she posed as his wife, and he drove them right over the border. Standing, Irma announces that she just sent a telegram to Chava, and he will certainly get the girls into the US. She hands Nayeli an outdated phone number, LIB-477.

Irma explains that the Americans are kind and have quaint customs, but you can't drink the water there. Pointing to Nayeli, Yolo, and Vampi, Irma says that God himself came from Tres Camarones, and she won't allow bandidos or weak, disappearing men ruin the village.

Later, Nayeli packs her belongings. She tucks Matt's card and the phone number from Irma into her pocket, and her mother insists she take Don Pepe's **postcard**. Nayeli's mother says she wishes Nayeli could bring Don Pepe back to Tres Camarones, and Nayeli promises to try. Later, Irma makes the girls bags of toiletries. Tacho cuts his hair, dyes the tips platinum blond, and spikes it straight up. García-García gives Tacho \$500, as he doesn't trust the girls with that kind of money. The rest of the town places over \$1,000 into Nayeli's hands, and the "warriors" pile into Irma's Cadillac.

Irma's sense of national pride is evident when she speaks about bowling, which reinforces her political platform: saving Mexico from chaos and ruin through the work of women and girls. When she speaks about crossing the border illegally, it's worth noting that she did so in the mid-1960s, when there wasn't nearly as much animosity or obstacles to cross the border. This suggests that Irma is stuck in the past.



The fact that the narrator tells the reader outright that the phone number is outdated provides more evidence that Irma is stuck in the past. As far as she's concerned, crossing the border should be as easy and as thrilling as it was in the 1960s. Meanwhile, when Irma snaps her fingers and demands that Tacho get coffee for her, Irma acts sexist and treats Tacho as her butler, which he is not. This appears as a reversal of the way men traditionally treat women, but it is still sexist, unjust, and unproductive.



To a contemporary reader, Irma's assertion about American water may seem comedic and ill-informed, but it's actually true. While American tourists must avoid drinking Mexican water as to not get sick, Mexicans must also avoid drinking American water. This is because Mexican tap water and American tap water contain different microbes that can make a person sick if he or she isn't usually exposed to them.



Tacho's new haircut is further proof that he believes he'll be able to be himself in the US, as he thinks the US will be more liberal and accepting of gay people. Meanwhile, when García-García gives Tacho the money instead of giving it to Nayeli or one of the other girls, it indicates that sexism and misogyny still pervades in Tres Camarones.



At the train station, Irma buys tickets for the girls and Tacho. The ticket taker smirks at the four one-way tickets to Tijuana, and Irma snaps at him. She buys the girls water and soda and accompanies them to the bus. The driver, a large man named Chuy, loads their bags under the bus and promises Irma that he will take care of the girls. As Nayeli boards the bus, Irma reminds her to bring home *only* cops or soldiers. Irma tells Nayeli to call her if things go wrong, and Irma will come to Tijuana. Blushing, Irma says that everything depends on Chava. Nayeli thinks that Irma is in love.

Nayeli blurts that she's going to find her father, and Irma says simply that they'll see. After the girls board, Irma tells them to make her proud and hurries away. Nayeli, Tacho, Yolo, and Vampi take over an entire row of seats in the back of the bus, and the girls flirt energetically when an American boy gets on and sits behind them. When everyone is on the bus, Chuy announces the planned stops, turns on the air conditioning, and the bus rolls off. After forty minutes, Chuy drives off the highway and parks the bus by a small house. Chuy gets out, and the passengers watch as a woman greets him at the door with a passionate kiss. Chuy and the woman go inside and slam the door. The passengers applaud when Chuy gets back on the bus.

In the middle of the night, Nayeli jerks awake as the bus stops. She meets Chuy's eyes in the rearview, and he makes a calming motion at Nayeli before opening the doors for armed soldiers. Nayeli wakes Tacho, Yolo, and Vampi as Chuy turns the light on. The soldiers make their way down the bus aisle, asking passengers if they have drugs or are illegal. They taunt Tacho and tell him to not come back to Mexico after he crosses the border. In the back of the bus, the soldiers accuse a Colombian couple of being illegal and roughly pull them off the bus. The soldier motions to Chuy to move on, and Nayeli watches the soldiers load the Colombians into a Humvee.

Just before dawn, Nayeli and Tacho wake suddenly to the sound of gunshots. Nayeli creeps up the aisle and asks Chuy what's going on, but he doesn't know. Chuy puts the bus in gear and speeds up, and a wobbly pickup truck passes them. Nayeli and Chuy laugh—the men in the truck are holding a sign for a political rally. Chuy tells her about all the things he's seen while driving long-haul trips, including the story of a driver who drove off a cliff and killed everyone on the bus except for himself.

The ticket taker's smirk implies that one-way tickets to Tijuana are usually purchased by Mexicans who want to cross the border and not come back. Further, the smirk suggests that crossing won't be as easy as Irma would like to think, as it's reasonable to assume that a ticket taker who interacts with a wide variety of travelers would know that crossing successfully isn't easy.



Even though Irma generally maintains a misguided understanding of what the US is like, her reply to Nayeli regarding Don Pepe suggests that Irma is at least more realistic than the girls. In casting a shadow of doubt on Nayeli's ability to find Don Pepe, Irma seems to hint at the fact that she knows something that Nayeli doesn't. However, Irma doesn't outright discourage Nayeli, which suggests that Irma knows that Nayeli will have to discover things for herself in order to truly believe them.



These passages of arrests and fear highlight that Mexico isn't an idyllic, perfect place—nor will it be simply with the addition of seven more men. The soldiers' Mexican nationalism is terrifying and has very real consequences for those who come across it. This also begins to show that Tía Irma's nationalism isn't as benign or as funny as it may have seemed at first glance.



Chuy's story about the driver who drove off a cliff is, presumably, the same driver who killed Vampi's parents. In bringing this story full circle, the novel creates a sense of interconnectedness and shows that Mexico itself is extremely interconnected, even if just through stories.



CHAPTER 9

In Huila, the bus stops for a thirty-minute break and to pick up a relief driver. Tacho, Nayeli, Yolo, and Vampi cross the street to a diner to freshen up and eat. However, the toilets are so disgusting that the girls pee in the sink, and Tacho uses newspaper as toilet paper. In the diner, Tacho orders arroz con pollo (rice and chicken), and the girls order eggs and tortillas. When their food comes, Tacho inspects his rice and finds cockroaches in it, but the cook seems unconcerned. Vampi is the only one who eats her breakfast.

When the bus departs again, Vampi and Yolo sleep while Tacho listens to talk radio. The radio hosts talk about keeping Guatemalans and Salvadorans out of Mexico. Nayeli sits behind the new driver, who points out car wrecks, an Indian woman walking with her baby, and patrol vehicles. Nayeli watches the cattle become more and more emaciated and finally says that the suffering cows are sad. The driver jokes with her for a minute before laughing and saying that the cows are "northern rabbits."

When the bus reaches a customs station, Chuy tells Nayeli to not say anything to the officers and if she has marijuana, to get rid of it now. Yolo remarks that it'll be a miracle if they survive Mexico, and Tacho says he's not worried about the US anymore. Yolo thinks about writing a memoir as the officers wave the passengers off the bus and into the station with their bags. As Nayeli enters the station, one of the officers refers to her in a way that indicates he'd like to have sex with her, but Nayeli keeps her head down.

The officers ask each traveler if they have drugs or other illegal items and then ask if they're Mexican or not. One officer points and laughs at Tacho, whispering with his coworkers. Nayeli whispers that this man is the Jefe (boss). The Jefe approaches Tacho and accuses him of being on cocaine. Tacho attempts to tell the man that he's not on drugs but jumps when the Jefe touches him. The Jefe accuses Tacho first of being a male prostitute and then calls him a faggot. A single tear rolls down Tacho's cheek as he argues with the Jefe, and Nayeli and Yolo tell the Jefe that they're all going to Tijuana for Tacho and Nayeli's wedding.

The disgusting bathrooms and food at the diner again illustrates that Mexico as a whole isn't as perfect as Tía Irma would like Tacho and the girls to believe. These disgusting experiences may only further the group's idealization of the US, leading them to think that everything will be better once they cross the border.



Again, the nationalist sentiments expressed on the radio create the sense that racism and nationalism are widespread problems and are not unique to the US. The fact that Tacho listens to it rather than change the station possibly suggests his complicity with these ideas.



This scene in the customs station shows that Mexico is corrupt, and those in charge are hungry for power. Chuy's advice suggests that playing along and allowing the officers to believe that they're wholly in charge is the only way to get Tacho and the girls out in one piece.



Although Tacho's new haircut may make him feel better and more like himself, it also puts him at a greater risk of violence at the hands of men like the Jefe. By insisting that Tacho is indeed straight and going to get married, Yolo attempts to give Tacho some control by insisting that he's just as masculine as the Jefe. This highlights that people like the Jefe define masculinity by sex with women.



The Jefe looks Nayeli up and down, suggests he search her for marijuana, and leads Tacho away. A kind agent tells Nayeli to not cry or yell. Meanwhile, the Jefe whispers in Tacho's ear that he might have drugs in his anus. The Jefe shoves Tacho into the men's restroom, bumps into Tacho, and then accuses Tacho of bumping into him. He makes Tacho apologize, calls him a faggot again, and then grabs Tacho's genitals roughly. The Jefe hits Tacho, throws him once, and tells him to get out.

Even in the midst of this horror, the presence of the "kind" agent indicates that not everyone shares the Jefe's concerns about power and control—though it's also worth noting that the agent is complicit in the Jefe's violence against Tacho, suggesting that this kind of violence is normal and not something that can be stopped.



Tacho hurries to the bus and pretends to sleep. The Jefe calls to Nayeli to come see him sometime as she leaves the building, and the officers laugh. The bus breaks down twenty miles outside of Mexicali, and Chuy gets out to walk towards the city. Tacho cries silently with his head in Nayeli's lap, and Nayeli listens to the coyotes howling outside.

For the Jefe and the other officers, assaulting Tacho and instilling him with fear is a way for them to assert ownership over his body. The Jefe and the officers also assert their superiority and sovereignty by catcalling Nayeli.



CHAPTER 10

Nine hours later, another bus pulls up and offers to take passengers to Tijuana if they are willing to stand the rest of the way. Nayeli, Tacho, Yolo, and Vampi board the new bus, and Nayeli is nauseated by the smell of her own and others' body odor. Tacho's eyes are swollen from crying, and Yolo's eyes are dark with disbelief. Vampi manages to swoon into an old cowboy's lap. Finally, the driver points out the American border. Tacho notes that the other side looks just like Mexico, and Nayeli tries to meditate.

Tacho's observation about the border suggests early on that things won't be much different in the US than they are in Mexico. Tacho's comment is also implies that borders aren't all that meaningful—in this case, the border imposes geographic boundaries, but the land still looks the same on both sides.



Nayeli watches the landscape as the bus drives down into Tijuana. Shacks give way to small houses, and the bus enters the center of the city. Tacho points at the tall fence with white trucks on the other side. Nayeli thinks that the US doesn't look as nice as it does in movies. The bus stops at the far side of the city and lets them off, and Nayeli decides to call Chava so they can take showers at his house. They discover that their bags were never transferred from the last bus, and Yolo begins to cry.

Nayeli is already beginning to understand that the US is probably not as nice, kind, or clean as Tía Irma (or the movies) told her it would be. The Border Patrol agents on the other side also mean that the girls are in for a shock: policing the border suggests outright that the Americans don't want Nayeli there, despite Nayeli's previous belief that the Americans will surely welcome her.



When Nayeli asks a man where she can find a phone booth, he briskly tells her to use her cell phone and rushes away. Tacho suggests they go downtown to find food, and Vampi whispers to Nayeli that she started her period, and her supplies are in her missing bag. Nayeli finds a tampon in her purse, and Vampi's eyes widen: her grandmother doesn't let her use tampons, so Vampi doesn't know how to use one. Nayeli and Yolo accompany Vampi to the restroom to help her, and Tacho wonders if he's the only one aware that they're in trouble.

The man's unwillingness to help Nayeli shows the contrast between rural, community-minded Tres Camarones and urban, (seemingly) unfriendly Tijuana. In addition, Vampi's grandmother likely didn't have access to tampons while she was growing up, so she perceives tampons as being strange, scary, and different. Echoing Tres Camarones' dislike of change, Vampi's grandmother forbids Vampi from using tampons and shelters her from new ideas and ways of doing things.



Tacho, Nayeli, Yolo, and Vampi pile into a taxi with two other people to go downtown. Loud music pulses out of bars and shops, and Tacho begins to think he might like Tijuana. A man in blue eye shadow calls Tacho handsome, and Vampi comments on the eye shadow. Tacho notices the soldiers with machine guns but says nothing, and finally, the group is swept into the upstairs of a restaurant. They all order beer and watch the tourists.

Tacho orders carne asada and scoffs at the idea of flour tortillas when the server asks if he wants corn or flour. The server says that he can tell Tacho is from the south and tells him to be careful. He directs Nayeli to a payphone but tells her not to call her "coyotes" from the restaurant. Tacho asks how the server knows they want to cross the border, and the server insists he's seen it a million times. When Tacho asks for advice, the server says to get a passport.

Nayeli gets coins for the payphone and admires the American women in the hallway by the phone and the bathrooms. She drops in coins and tries to dial the number Tía Irma gave her. The phone spits the coins back out, and Nayeli dials the operator. The operator insists that phone numbers haven't begun with LIB since 1964, and there are no listings for a Chavarín in Tijuana or any nearby cities. Nayeli nervously returns to the table, where Yolo and Vampi are drunk on two beers each and laughing. She shakes her head at Tacho, and Tacho turns away.

CHAPTER 11

After dark, the group stands against a wall, and Yolo suggests they call Irma. Vampi and Yolo insist they've already failed, but Nayeli vows to herself to find Don Pepe. Tacho calmly says they need to find a place to stay for the night, and the group begins walking north. A group of street kids grab at them on a dark street, and Nayeli stops at a taco cart after the kids disappear. Two men and the taco chef look the group over, and the chef asks if they're lost. Nayeli admits they are, and one man calls her "prieta," or "dark-faced girl," which is an insult in Tres Camarones.

The man in eye shadow suggests that there might be openly gay men (who are presumably far more comfortable presenting a less traditionally masculine front) in Tijuana, which is again an indicator that Tijuana is a part of the modern world. The machine guns, however, suggest that the modern world has its dangers as well.



The term "coyote" refers to people who smuggle individuals over the border. The server's advice to get a passport indicates that the coyotes are not an effective or safe way to cross the border. Like the ticket taker at the bus stop, the server automatically recognizes that Tacho and the girls are trying to cross the border illegally, which shows that they are not as discreet as they think they are.



Tacho and the girls now have proof that Irma's conception of the US and of their journey is based on extremely outdated information. This means that Tacho and the girls must press on and figure out independently how the modern world works. In addition, the tone of this passage implies that being drunk on two beers is indicative of youth and immaturity, suggesting that Vampi and Yolo are young, innocent, and unprepared for this journey.



This moment with the taco stand workers sets Nayeli up to encounter different types of racism, especially racism that's based on skin tone rather than nationality. Interestingly, "prieta," or "dark-faced girl," is an insult in Tres Camarones, even though everyone there has dark skin and (almost) everyone is female. Meanwhile, Nayeli's desire to find her father and bring him back to Tres Camarones illustrates how she still places more importance on male heroism than her own female version.



Nayeli asks the men to direct her to a hotel, and one offers Nayeli, Yolo, and Vampi fifty pesos each to have sex with him. Finally, the man leads them to a small hotel in the red-light district. The door of the hotel room is cheap plywood with a defective lock, so Tacho puts a chain on the door. The group shares the two towels, put their dirty clothes back on, and climb into bed. Nayeli hears a woman and a man having sex next door. She tries to shut out the sound, but when the man moans, Tacho yells for somebody to "milk that cow." They all laugh at their neighbor's expense.

Around three in the morning, Nayeli hears whispers outside the door. She watches as the knob turns, the latch pops, and a man's arm reaches into the room to find the door chain. Nayeli gets out of bed and recognizes the man's sleeve—it's the man from the taco stand. She grabs Tacho's pepper spray. When the man finds the chain, Nayeli kicks the door closed on his arm. She snaps his pinkie finger backwards, pulls the door open a crack, and fires the pepper spray into the man's face. Tacho, Yolo, and Vampi start screaming. Nayeli allows the door to open fully and stomps on the man's genitals when he falls back. Nayeli wedges the chair under the doorknob and doesn't sleep the rest of the night.

CHAPTER 12

In the morning, the group returns to the street. Yolo and Tacho discuss how they both loved Matt, and Tacho calls Nayeli promiscuous for kissing Matt. Nayeli leads them to a metal wall. They study the graffiti and remark that people don't like George W. Bush or Calderón, the Mexican president. Tacho spouts off frustrated insults directed at the girls and walks down the street. The girls tease him for it.

A man selling ice cream approaches, and Nayeli purchases ice cream bars for everyone. Nayeli asks the vendor what the wall is, and he explains it's the border fence. Before walking away, he declares that it's ugly. Nayeli and her group walk east along the fence. Finally, they reach a point where the fence stops, and they climb up a steep bank. From there, they can see cars waiting to cross the border legally and the American freeway on the other side. On the hills of the other side, they can see restaurants and the Border Patrol officers' white vehicles.

Here, the novel highlights that Nayeli and her group have been sheltered from the outside world and are consequently inexperienced in big cities. Admitting she's lost opens Nayeli up to being taken advantage of, especially since she still seems willing to trust anyone who appears to want to help. This shows that Nayeli idealizes both life in the city and the people who live there; she seems unaware that these people could be planning to take advantage of her.



Even though Nayeli unwittingly enabled this attack by trusting these men, she ultimately proves that she's capable of defending herself and is the hero that she and the rest of the group need. This suggests that the plan to bring men back to Tres Camarones to protect the village may be unnecessary, as Nayeli is living proof that women are more than capable of defending themselves. In addition, it seems that Nayeli's karate training is what allows her to protect herself and her friends from the men.



Tacho struggles with the new knowledge that this trip isn't an easy or guaranteed way to become a happier gay man. Instead of swiftly crossing the border under a pile of hay in the back of a truck (Tacho's original fantasy), the group is faced with an impenetrable metal wall.



The fact that Nayeli can see clearly what's on the other side of the border reinforces the idea that the border is somewhat tenuous and arbitrary: though what's on the other side is technically American, the landscape itself looks pretty much the same.



Nayeli watches a Border Patrol agent standing next to his truck. They wave at each other, and Nayeli smiles, points to herself and the other side, and mimes praying. The agent laughs and gets in his truck. Tacho suggests they follow the fence west and swim around, and one of the poor boys sitting nearby starts laughing. In a dialect they can barely understand, the boy says that the wall extends into the sea. Tacho harrumphs, looks around, and says he doesn't get it.

The group wanders around Tijuana, always veering north toward the border in the hopes that they might find someplace the Border Patrol has overlooked. They wander into the nice part of town and finally sit down in the fruit market. Yolo grabs Tacho and drags him towards a chapel, and Vampi pesters a group of American missionaries. A man stops next to Nayeli and asks if she's tired, but she just glares at him. He hands her a mango and says it gets better. Nayeli thinks the mango tastes like home.

The story introduces two beggars, Doña Araceli and her husband, Don Porfirio. They were once corn farmers, but now they beg and work in Tijuana. Araceli is an indigenous beggar, and Porfirio works as a windshield washer since the dump closed down and put the trash pickers out of work. The couple meets in the fruit market to count their day's earnings and purchase potatoes and bread. Araceli notices Nayeli's group looking even more beaten down and bedraggled than she and her husband do.

Araceli and Porfirio approach Nayeli and ask her if she's alright. Nayeli replies that they're in trouble, but they'll get out of it. Vampi tells Porfirio that she wants to go home, and Araceli asks if they're going north. Nayeli tells the couple that they've lost their belongings. Araceli and Porfirio talk for a moment and then invite the group to come home with them. Nayeli isn't sure if she should trust them, but she's too tired to think of another plan. Porfirio compliments Tacho's hair.

When they board a bus, Nayeli pays the fare for Porfirio and Araceli. When the bus begins to climb a rocky hill, Porfirio motions for the group to disembark. As they walk, Araceli pats Nayeli's back and promises to fry potatoes. Nayeli begins to smell something tart and smelly, and as the group reaches the top of a hill, they all stop. They stare in awe at a massive mountain of black garbage, and Porfirio says, "home." He points to the top of the mountain and says that you can see America from there.

When the US Border Patrol officer shows that he's willing to engage and even laugh with Nayeli, it suggests that he views Nayeli and other Mexicans as human, despite the fact that his job is to keep illegal immigrants from crossing the border.



When the man shows Nayeli kindness by giving her a mango and an encouraging word, it indicates that not everyone in Tijuana is unfriendly or disdainful of people like Nayeli who wish to cross the border. Instead, it tells the reader (even if Nayeli doesn't seem convinced) that kindness can come from unexpected places.



Araceli and Porfirio are likely some of the corn farmers who were negatively affected by NAFTA, which once again emphasizes Mexico's economic difficulties. Unlike the residents of Tres Camarones, this couple did their best to embrace the modern world by moving to Tijuana instead of remaining isolated and rural.



When Porfirio compliments Tacho's hair, it shows that Porfirio is willing to embrace people who are different than him and treat strangers with kindness and compassion. Although Araceli and Porfirio are genuinely good people, Nayeli's willingness to talk to them suggests that Nayeli didn't truly learn from her experience the night before to not trust strangers.



The dump dwellers represent a different kind of poverty than Nayeli has ever seen before; though much of Tres Camarones likely lives in poverty as well, the dump illustrates how poverty differs from rural areas to urban centers. As Nayeli then expands her understanding of the world, it helps her to see people like Porfirio as just as human as she is.



CHAPTER 13

Nayeli watches men burning the plastic sheaths off of wires and is shocked to see the Pacific Ocean on their right. Plastic bags float on the wind, and all around the base of the trash mountain are graves. On one hill are the graves of children; Tacho points out names written on baby furniture. Next to this part of the cemetery, Porfirio stops them in front of a blue shack and ushers his guests inside.

Tacho made the mistake of purchasing rum as a gift when he went to purchase eggs, and now, hours later, Porfirio dances drunkenly. Tacho primly sips his rum, and Nayeli, Yolo, and Vampi just sit on a bunk bed and stare at the filth. Araceli slices potatoes and onions and fries them in lard and then fries the eggs. Porfirio stops his jig to arrange six plates around a table and place two rolls on each plate. He cries as he says grace, and they eat their feast. A while later, a piglet and a duckling wander in. Porfirio throws them bits of his roll.

Yolo claims the top bunk for herself, and Tacho insists on sleeping on the floor. Nayeli shares the bottom bunk with Vampi, who mutters, kicks, and tosses in her sleep. At dawn, Nayeli gets up and goes outside. She's startled to see blooming roses planted around the couple's fence line, she but continues on down the alley. She hears a Dave Matthews song coming from a radio and feels as though this is the loneliest, saddest, most profound place she's ever been. The sorrow is almost comforting.

Nayeli wanders among the graves, straightening headstones and putting flowers on one. At the top of the hill, Nayeli turns and looks back. Suddenly, she hears a young man calling for her attention. Nayeli tells the man that she's not going to listen to him, and he says that that's a mistake.

CHAPTER 14

This man is the warrior Atómiko. He's the "master of the dompe," with baggy pants, a sleeveless white undershirt, and exposed tattoos. He carries a samurai staff made out of a massive length of bamboo, with a gearshift stuck in one end wrapped in copper wire. Though every garbage picker needs a staff of some sort, Atómiko's is bigger and more lethal than anyone else's. He catcalls Nayeli, and she waves a hand and walks off.

The graveyard illustrates the dump dwellers' humanity, as it is clearly important to them to honor the dead and their relationships with the dead. The graveyard's extensiveness also shows how difficult life is for those who live in the dump.



Sharing bits of his roll with the wildlife is an indicator of Porfirio's deep kindness: he understands that the animals need food just as much as he and his guests do. The shock on the girls' faces indicates that they never imagined a place or a lifestyle like this—further proof of their sheltered lives in Tres Camarones and their growing understanding of the world and of different ways to live.



The roses tell Nayeli that these are people who are just as entranced by beauty as anyone else, and they do what they can to make their living situation ideal. Seeing the sadness of the dump allows Nayeli to understand that her situation isn't as bad as she thought it was yesterday.



When Nayeli turns this young man down outright, it shows that perhaps she has learned something about trusting strangers.



When comparing Atómiko and Nayeli, it's worth noting that both believe themselves to be the hero other people need—though Atómiko's power and strength comes in part from carrying a weapon, while Nayeli needs only her karate training. This continues the motif of men needing guns or other weapons to be powerful, situating female power as something natural and inherent, not something that comes from association with powerful objects.



Atómiko introduces himself, but Nayeli continues to brush him off and walk further away. The narrator explains that Atómiko is prone to grand visions and is in desperate need of a quest, hence his pestering of Nayeli. She finally explains that she and her friends came from a place under threat to find soldiers, and Atómiko declares that he was a sergeant in the Mexican Army until he ran away. Nayeli shakes her head and walks away from him. As she does, two "ice zombies" (dump dwellers who are addicted to meth) decide to jump her and steal her shoes.

Now that Nayeli is somewhat disillusioned with her quest, it's telling that she finds Atómiko's idealization of himself so frustrating and silly. It shows that Nayeli is growing up and becoming more aware of how the world works in reality and is beginning to abandon her own grand visions. Meanwhile, the presence of the "ice zombies" shows that not everyone at the dump are as pure and kind as Araceli and Porfirio.



The zombies put out their hands to block Nayeli, and one asks her for a kiss. Out of nowhere, Atómiko's staff comes down on the man's head. The other zombie watches as if hypnotized before Atómiko uses it to smash his shoulders and head. As she watches, Nayeli notes that Atómiko feels the need to announce his name constantly. When Atómiko is finished with the zombies, he introduces himself again.

By constantly stating his name, Atómiko insists that others pay attention to him and think of him as a real person with a name—not just another anonymous dump dweller.



Atómiko follows Nayeli to a small bodega, where she calls Irma. Irma doesn't pick up, and Nayeli almost cries. Atómiko then follows her back to Porfirio and Araceli's, where he decides that he and Tacho are great friends. Though Nayeli insists she doesn't need anyone to save her, Atómiko insists that doing so is his duty.

Nayeli's discomfort at Atómiko's advances are understandable given how many men thus far have given Nayeli ill-intentioned, unsolicited attention.



CHAPTER 15

Vampi and Araceli water the roses, while Yolo and Porfirio drink a cocktail made with the rum. Tacho tells Atómiko the group's story, and finally, Atómiko confirms that they're serious about sneaking illegally into the US to illegally bring back illegal aliens. He finds the story thrilling. Yolo, bored, suggests they take seven men from the dump home, but Tacho insists on seeing Hollywood. Vampi agrees with Yolo, but Atómiko insists that they can't do that: he declares that the "warriors" in the dump aren't worthy, and the Tres Camarones group needs the men who made it over the border. The girls find his fervor and enthusiasm somewhat stirring.

The roses are one way for Araceli to claim ownership over the land, much like farming allowed her to claim ownership over her land before she was forced to become a beggar. Tacho's insistence on going to the US indicates that despite his misgivings, he still perceives the US as an ideal place. It seems that the girls also want to think that the US will be wonderful, and they just need someone's help in negating their doubts—something Atómiko manages to do with his unbridled enthusiasm.



Atómiko ends his speech by saying that the group needs a warrior like him to accompany them over the border, and Nayeli rudely insults Atómiko's "elegant" life and the fact that he used to sneak over the border when he was a soldier. Tacho shoots Nayeli a look and tells Atómiko that they want his help crossing the border. Atómiko steps outside the yard and whistles an obscure tune. Promptly, an ancient Oldsmobile creeps out from an alley and pulls up by the gate. Nayeli calls him a loser, and Atómiko boasts that he has powers.

The rivalry developing between Nayeli and Atómiko is very much a rivalry between two different kinds of heroes. Nayeli represents a quieter, more subdued female heroism, while Atómiko represents a scrappy, unthinking, gallant version of heroism that the novel suggests is uniquely male. However, when Atómiko can conjure help, it shows that male heroism isn't useless.



A man named Wino jumps out of the car and jokes with Atómiko and Tacho in broken English. Nayeli tries to decline Wino and Atómiko's help, but Tacho speaks over her. Wino promises to take them to a guide who will take them to the US. He asks for \$150 per person, and though Tacho and Nayeli pretend to discuss the offer, they don't know if it's a good or bad price. They finally agree, and Atómiko gleefully runs off to get his things.

Nayeli dislikes Atómiko, but Tacho, Yolo, and Vampi insist on allowing him to come. Atómiko tells Nayeli he's coming with them because there's nothing on TV, and Yolo suggests that he and Nayeli are going to get married. Wino turns out to be a fantastic tour guide, and he drives them through the neighborhoods of Tijuana, pointing out all the sights.

When the group reaches Colonia Libertad, they discover that it's the place where millions of people have made their way over the border. In the 1970s and 1980s, the US put up stadium lights and the fence. Now, dozens instead of hundreds of people wait and watch for their chance to cross. The narrator says that many will be caught, but most of them will try again the next day. Coyotes (crossing guides) mill around, and Christian missionaries drive through. Nayeli watches for Matt.

Atómiko and Wino negotiate with a coyote. The girls are scared of the coyote, and Tacho tries to hide his fear. Finally, the men strike a deal and Wino leaves. Suddenly, Nayeli notices a commotion. People are throwing rocks at a white Border Patrol truck on the other side of the fence. The truck stops, the agent gets out, and he flips off the Mexicans with a smile before getting back in his truck. Yolo and Vampi wonder if they should just go home, and they brush off Atómiko's attempts to soothe them. Tacho insists that he's going, and when Nayeli suggests they call Matt once they cross, Yolo and Vampi agree to go.

The coyote begins to address the group. He explains the path they'll take to cross the border and tells them that if Border Patrol catches them, he's abandoning them. He runs through the dangers of the crossing: rapists, junkies, "rateros," and Border Patrol. When he's finished, another Border Patrol truck drives by. Mexicans throw stones at the truck, and two more trucks arrive and begin firing teargas grenades. The coyote leads Nayeli and the group to a safe spot, and they wait for nightfall.

In this situation, Tacho acts as the girls' guardian because he is male. This shows that the novel does still afford men some degree of power, given that Nayeli seems to listen to him and allows him to be her protector.



It's telling that all of Nayeli's friends fight her on the issue of Atómiko—and make jokes about romance—as this suggests that his straight male presence is somehow threatening to the status quo of the girls' friendship. This in turn foreshadows the girls' issues to come.



Here, the narrator situates the group in a greater historical context. In doing so, the novel suggests that Nayeli and her friends are not the only ones to idealize the United States, given the sheer number of people who try to get across the border despite the risks.



Again, there appears to be a relatively friendly, teasing rapport between the Border Patrol officers and the Mexicans who presumably wish to cross. This shows again that the idea of the border is somewhat absurd, as it fosters this cat and mouse game between the officers and the illegal immigrants. When Nayeli is able to tempt Yolo and Vampi with the possibility of finding Matt, it indicates that he also represents some sort of ideal in their minds.



Although the border is an arbitrary line in the desert, for Nayeli and her friends, the border is the difference between poverty and shining idealism. Meanwhile, the teargas suddenly shifts the dynamic between the Border Patrol officers and the Mexicans from friendly and teasing to serious and dangerous. Just as the group will find kindness and compassion in unexpected places, they will also be faced with brutal racism, nationalism, and violence.



Atómiko promises that if Nayeli and the group get caught, he'll meet them at the deportee drop off site in Tijuana. After another Border Patrol truck passes, the coyote leads them forward. He pulls a section of the fence loose and crawls through. Nayeli cuts her scalp on the sharp edge as she runs through after the coyote, and Tacho panics before remembering their first meeting point. Once they all reach the first meeting point, the coyote takes off through the tall brush. Nayeli follows, with Yolo, Tacho, and Vampi behind her. They notice a pregnant woman (later revealed as Candelaria) running with them, and the woman pulls Vampi up when she trips.

Nayeli soon becomes frustrated with the coyote—he's a smoker and out of shape, and she feels as though she could run all night. Finally, everyone, including the pregnant woman, reaches the bridge overpass, which is the final meeting point. The coyote snaps at the pregnant woman, who introduces herself as Candelaria, but before they can argue over Candelaria paying for her passage, they hear vehicles on the bridge. When one stops and they hear a door open, the coyote vanishes. Nayeli hears an American voice above, and then they see a stream of urine coming down off the bridge. They try not to laugh but do so freely once the agent gets back in his car and drives away.

CHAPTER 16

Nayeli knows she has to take charge; she declares that they should travel east towards San Diego. The group climbs up to the road and soon, Atómiko joins them. As they walk, they loudly argue about attractive American actors. They hide from helicopters, but after less than a mile, the group suddenly finds themselves illuminated by headlights. Nayeli hears a voice telling them that they're under arrest.

Agent Anderson shines his light in Tacho's face as Agent Smith drives up. They hear yelling and cursing from the south. The entire group looks to see the light of the helicopter illuminating Atómiko, who appears to want to fight the helicopter. In Spanish, Anderson asks Tacho what's up with Atómiko. Tacho explains he's crazy, and Anderson decides to not handcuff Tacho. Atómiko waves his staff around, yells that Nayeli rules, and then pole vaults over the wall. The agents are impressed. They turn their attention back to their "clients" and usher them into the back of their car.

Atómiko's promise indicates that he knows the border is heavily policed, and that the group is likely to be caught. It seems that Atómiko has no illusions about crossing the border and is instead doing so for the thrill. Meanwhile, the fact that the pregnant woman helps Vampi shows that there is a sense of camaraderie and teamwork among those who are trying to cross the border.



Candelaria's presence expands Nayeli and her group's conception of what the border means to different people—for Candelaria, getting across likely means a better life for her baby. This shows that Candelaria also idealizes the US and what it will bring for her, but later events will show that this idealization is somewhat misguided.



The group's carelessness suggests that they wrongly believe that crossing the physical border was the hard part—in reality, it's getting deeper into the country that's the difficult task. This sets Nayeli up to expand her understanding of what borders can do and what they even consist of.



When Agent Anderson decides to not handcuff Tacho due to Tacho's cooperation and candidness, it shows that Anderson doesn't necessarily dehumanize these people he's arresting.



Agent Smith helps Candelaria into the car and suggests she try to cross on Sunday, his day off. They apparently know each other, and this seems a common exchange. The agents drive off but soon stop when they see two agents beating a Mexican boy. Smith seems embarrassed, and Vampi and Yolo cry. Smith gets out to help the agents, and when he returns, he asks why they don't all just stay home. Tacho laughs that he wishes he stayed home, and Nayeli offers that her group isn't bad.

Again, the banter between the agents and their detainees suggests that this is all very commonplace, and everyone is simply doing their job—everyone involved, save for the boy being beaten, are treated relatively humanely. However, the boy being beaten is significant, as it's a reminder of the dark side to border crossing.



Finally, the agents reach a school bus and drop off their clients. Agent Anderson and Candelaria acknowledge each other, and Nayeli's group loses track of Candelaria on the bus. Nayeli is shocked to see that some men on the bus are asleep. A guard with a huge gun boards the bus and explains what will happen: they'll conduct interviews and send them home. Tacho thinks the US is disappointing, while Yolo shakes with anger and Vampi cries.

The sleeping men indicate that this is a normal part of life on the border. Their nonchalance shows that being detained means little to them and suggests that they'll surely try again soon. Once again, it is clear that the most difficult part of crossing the border is getting past the agents and the official channels; crossing the line is relatively easy.



A number of government officials, from ICE agents to a San Diego city cop, usher the Mexican detainees into a holding pen. Nayeli feels a hand grab her buttocks and another touch her breast. This distracts her, and when she turns her attention back to Tacho, Yolo, and Vampi, she can't find them. She looks around at the others in the pen and is shocked to see mothers with children.

The presence of children in the pen is an even more poignant reminder that the US represents the hope of a better life for many people. Nayeli realizes that the mothers surrounding her are willing to put themselves and their children at risk (maybe even repeatedly) to one day make it to the place where they can live out that better life.



When Nayeli looks at the agents on the other side, she thinks they look big and crisp. As she watches them move, she wonders what makes them different from her. A female agent catches Nayeli's attention, and then she sees a black agent. She's never seen a black man in the flesh, and when he notices her staring, she shyly tells him his skin is beautiful. Agent Smith walks by and calls the black man Arnie. Arnie ushers Nayeli out of the pen to process her.

Nayeli's reaction to Arnie's skin signals that Nayeli is not racist but has been extremely sheltered. However, it's also possible that Arnie allows Nayeli to feel white in comparison, given that the men in Tijuana referred to her as "dark girl."



CHAPTER 17

Agent Arnold Davis has been working for the government for twenty-seven years, and he's just about ready to call it quits. He thinks that all the new Border Patrol agents don't know anything about the border, and they're all desperate for action despite the number of crossings being at a historic low. He shakes his head thinking about agents' desire to find terrorists and bombs, and he thinks that the new government policy to catch illegal immigrants heading *back* to Mexico is enough to make him want to quit.

The new policy of catching immigrants returning to Mexico indicates that the Border Patrol is as much about making a show of power (and of racism) than of preserving the integrity of the border. When Arnie indicates he doesn't agree with the policy, it makes him a more sympathetic character, as he presumably feels compassionate toward the immigrants.



Arnie ushers Nayeli out of the holding pen and seats her at a desk. When he asks Nayeli about her American money, she begins to tell her story. It's the dumbest thing he's heard but also the most original story all week. He and another agent laugh at Nayeli, and Nayeli insists she's not a liar. Arnie thinks she looks a lot like his daughter and leads her to a vending machine. He buys Coke and snacks for Nayeli and her friends before putting her back in the pen. Nayeli feels ashamed; she thought the Americans would be happy to let her in.

When Nayeli finds Yolo, Tacho, and Vampi, Yolo is incensed. She pushes Nayeli, attracting the attention of an officer, and Tacho tries to calm everyone down. Finally, Yolo accepts a hug, and Tacho tells the girls to think of home. Buses arrive, and the scene becomes extremely noisy. Tacho yells again to think of home, and yells that he thinks about La Mano Caída. The Border Patrol agents zero in on Tacho and ask if he's Al Qaeda. Tacho doesn't understand and repeats the name of his bar. The agents jump on him, and the girls are swept up with the others and onto buses.

CHAPTER 18

In the morning, street men in Tijuana jeer and laugh at deportees, and coyotes wait to try to sell the deportees an immediate return. Many deportees find ways to pay: they want to make it to America so they can earn money and send it home. The higher-class residents of Tijuana ignore the returnees and the coyotes. To them, the border is an abstract idea, as many cross daily to work or shop and others just don't like all the deportees crowding Tijuana and bringing crime.

Nayeli leads Yolo and Vampi through the streets. She watches American men and wonders again what makes them different. She feels as though the border is strange and nonsensical: there are a number of Americans in Tijuana, and according to people she met in the holding pen, there are more Mexicans in Los Angeles than in the Mexican city of Culiacán. Nayeli looks up and sees Atómiko waiting for them. He leads the girls through the streets to a juice stand and instructs Nayeli to buy everyone juice. He then leads them to a cheap motel and instructs Nayeli to book two rooms. The girls fight for the shower and the toilet and then sleep until 5:00 p.m.

When Arnie compares Nayeli to his daughter, it begins to break down the borders between them and allows Arnie to see Nayeli as more human. In turn, this causes him to treat her with kindness and buy her food. Arnie's reaction to Nayeli offers an indication that listening to other people's stories is a way to bridge racial and cultural gaps.



The novel takes place after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which means that the "War on Terror" is likely in full swing—and any mention of a terrorist group can get a person in trouble. When Tacho says "La Mano Caída," the agents mishear him, thinking instead that he said, "Al Qaeda." The fact that Tacho isn't immediately aware that he's in deep trouble is another indicator of how isolated Tres Camarones is from the rest of the world.



The prevalence and strength of the smuggling industry makes it abundantly clear that the Mexican idealization of the United States isn't something that's damaged by not making it across the border the first time.



Nayeli doesn't clarify if the Mexicans in Los Angeles are legal or otherwise. Legal immigrants presumably went through the proper channels and respected the American idea of what constitutes a border. For Nayeli, who wants to cross illegally, the border is an entirely different beast, since it's not just somewhere she has to flash a passport.



When Nayeli wakes up, she pulls out her **postcard** and reads her father's message, "everything passes." Then, she pulls out her card from Matt. She notices that Yolo is awake and is also looking at her card from Matt. They wonder what Matt is like now and decide to call him. Nayeli pulls on her clothes and is irritated to find Atómiko outside her room with Wino. She finds a payphone and calls Irma. When Irma picks up, Nayeli begins to cry. She tries to explain to Irma that Chava is no longer in Tijuana.

Irma suddenly asks about Atómiko and Tacho. Nayeli sighs, ignores her, and says that they're going back across the border and will call Matt when they get there. Irma curses and calls Matt a "simp" before reminding Nayeli of her mission. She tells Nayeli to not sleep with Matt or bring home American babies. Nayeli tells Irma that she wants to find her father in Kankakee. Irma sighs, but knows she won't be able to dissuade Nayeli. She promises to kick Don Pepe when he returns home.

Back in the hallway, Wino and Atómiko lament Tacho's fate. Yolo and Vampi open the door, and they discuss the phone call to Irma with Nayeli. They decide to call Matt when they get to the US, but they agree that they don't want to cross the border. Wino clears his throat and says he feels bad and is going to do them a favor: he's going to "take them to the hole." Nayeli asks what the hole is, but Wino only says they'll have to pay him someday when they have money. He insists it's a guaranteed way into the US, and they must forget they've seen the hole once they make it to the other side.

CHAPTER 19

Wino drives Nayeli, Yolo, and Vampi out past the Tijuana airport to a muffler shop. Yolo and Vampi are entranced, but Nayeli fears that they're going to be raped and killed. Strangely, she finds Atómiko's presence comforting, as she doesn't believe he'd allow Wino to hurt them. Wino leads the girls into the shop. Men with machine guns greet them, and they tell Nayeli to tell people that Atómiko led them across the border. Vampi suddenly yells "marijuana," and Nayeli notices that bales of marijuana line the walls. As he opens a trapdoor, the man snaps that if Wino weren't his nephew, they wouldn't be doing this.

Nayeli's attempt to explain the Chava situation to Irma indicates that Irma isn't particularly interested in hearing that Chava isn't where or what she thought he was. Irma is caught up in her idealized vision of Chava in the same way that Nayeli is caught up in her fictitious, idealized vision of the US.



Irma's command to not bring home American babies is another indicator of her sense of nationalism: American babies are lesser than Mexican babies, per Irma's understanding of the world. In addition, Irma seems to know already that finding Don Pepe is going to be different or simply more difficult than Nayeli realizes, showing that in some ways, Irma does have a greater understanding of the world.



Nayeli is rightfully wary of taking Wino up on such an offer: he didn't truly get them over the border the first time, so there's little evidence that he'll be able to get them through a second time. The presence of a hole suggests that there is a way to make the border meaningless—by going underground and simply circumventing the official border as represented by Border Control.



The fact that the tunnel is a drug cartel tunnel muddies the simple good versus bad and narcos versus Tres Camarones dichotomies the novel has set up. It's very possible that the very tunnel the girls will use to enter the US is one that Scarface and other bandidos use.



When everybody is in the tunnel, Atómiko whistles that he could make a million dollars off of the tunnel. The man laughs and explains that the tunnel runs for a half a mile and ends in a stitching company in the US. At night, his associates will open the door. When Nayeli asks what happens if the man is caught, he explains they'll blow up the tunnel, but he hopes that his "donations" are enough to keep him safe. The man sends the girls and Atómiko off through the tunnel, assuring them that they can't get lost.

When they reach the end of the tunnel, Atómiko mentions that he could use some cocaine. The girls are in awe; they've never met a real drug user. They all sit at the end of the tunnel and argue about going to Kankakee and visiting Matt. Suddenly, they hear a scraping above and a male voice tells them to climb up. He directs them to a garage and from there, into a box truck. Nayeli, Yolo, and Vampi clutch each other as the truck winds through traffic. After a while, they feel the truck exit the freeway and drive into a gravel lot. When the truck stops, the man lets them out and drives away.

Nayeli, Yolo, and Vampi look around and wander out of the lot. They come to a playground, and Vampi and Atómiko swing on the swings. They laugh as they walk, entranced by the clean sidewalks and playgrounds. They find a clean public restroom and finally, a visitors' center. They wave at city policemen on bikes, and Nayeli sighs that she loves America. Atómiko complains that there are no bonfires in America, and Vampi points across the bay towards men sitting around a bonfire. A car full of girls drives by, blasting Eminem. Vampi shouts with glee and hugs Atómiko.

Vampi asks the group what they want to do now that they're in America. Nayeli wants to find her father and Matt, Yolo wants to find Matt and Tacho, and Atómiko declares he wants to go to Disneyland. The girls stare and giggle, and Atómiko says he wants to hit Mickey Mouse with his pole. The girls start weeping for Tacho, and Atómiko points across the street to a Jack in the Box and insists they need food. Nayeli attempts to call Matt at the payphone but realizes she's out of American money.

CHAPTER 20

Yolo, Vampi, and Nayeli are lucky to discover that the Jack in the Box is staffed by undocumented Mexicans and one Guatemalan. They exchange pesos for dollars, and Nayeli buys everyone food. The girls order tacos while Atómiko orders burgers and pie.

This man makes "donations" to local law enforcement, which recalls the arrangement between Scarface and the state cop and provides more evidence that this tunnel might be connected to the very people Nayeli is trying to evict from her village.



The girls' are shocked to find out that Atómiko uses drugs, which points back to their sheltered lives in Tres Camarones. Meanwhile, the girl's continued interest in Matt indicates that as interesting as Atómiko might be, Matt is still the ideal version of manhood the girls desire, possibly because he is American.



In this passage, it seems as if America has lived up to the group's idealized expectations. However, the brief moment about the bonfires highlights that although America may seem ideal, the characters still can't participate in the idealized American lifestyle. In this case, Nayeli and her friends notice a group of men enjoying a bonfire on the bay, but Nayeli and her friends only witness it, they don't get to take part in it.



Atómiko's reasoning for wanting to go to Disneyland appears to be more of a face-saving afterthought than anything else, which indicates that he's not just the warrior he wants the girls to think he is. In comparison, the girls' interest in finding the men in their lives implies that they still think of heroism as being male rather than female.



The fact that the employees will exchange dollars for pesos suggests that there's a sort of immigrants' community in the US out of necessity.



The narrator introduces Ma Johnston, Matt's mother. She lives in a duplex, and after leaving her garbage cans out for several days, Ma Johnston's neighbor, Carla, knocks on Ma's door. Carla finds Ma dead on the floor. In the present, several weeks later, Matt is still at Ma Johnston's house. He spent a few nights with Carla, even though he doesn't have feelings for her, and scattered his mother's ashes in the ocean. He finds the duplex depressing, as all he does is drink beer and watch TV. Matt feels trapped and is shocked to receive a phone call from Nayeli.

The interconnected relationships between Matt, his mother, and Carla point to a relatively strong sense of community within Ma Johnston's neighborhood. Notably, this sense of community isn't really affected one way or the other when Matt and Carla have sex, which suggests that there aren't heightened emotions surrounding their sexual relationship. This will be an important comparison later.



Matt pulls into the Jack in the Box parking lot in Ma Johnston's minivan. Nayeli, Yolo, and Vampi rush to him and hug him, and Matt is delighted to see the girls. They look like women now, not the teenagers they were when he last saw them. He doesn't like the look of Atómiko but allows him to come back to the duplex too.

Thinking the girls look like women now indicates that there will be sexual tension within the group, and further, that it will be Matt's perceptions and whims that will create that tension.



Matt is prepared to apologize for Ma Johnston's home, but Atómiko whistles and the girls declare the place a palace. Atómiko makes himself at home by turning on the TV and asking Vampi to get him a beer, and Matt offers the girls a shower. When Vampi asks to take a bubble bath, he fetches bubbles from Carla. Later, he watches the girls watch MTV.

The group's reaction to the sad duplex only reinforces their sense that America is an amazing place, especially since Matt's shame surrounding the state of the duplex suggests that it's not a particularly extravagant place.



CHAPTER 21

Tacho sits in a dull green room, hurt and swollen. He is both thrilled and shocked that the Americans haven't discovered his money belt. Finally, an American man in a suit sits down across from Tacho and addresses him in English. The man says that there's been a miscommunication and blabbers about heightened security in the post-9/11 world. They argue over whether Tacho mentioned Al Qaeda or not. As the man shows Tacho to the door, he asks if Tacho will cross again. Tacho says he will.

It's worth noting that Tacho's experience here means that he's no longer so interested in crossing because he believes the US to be ideal. Rather, he wants to cross for the girls' sake, which is a testament to Tacho's friendship with the girls and his loyalty towards them, as he's willing to push through his disappointment (and abuse) to find them.



Once he arrives in Tijuana, Tacho calls Tía Irma. She explains that Nayeli supposedly went to Matt's house, but she doesn't know if she made it. Tacho vows to cross the border again and find the girls. He asks if the Fallen Hand is out of business yet, and Irma taunts that it's missing Tacho's "feminine touch." Tacho yells at Irma, but she hangs up the phone.

When Irma taunts Tacho for his sexuality, it adds more evidence that Irma isn't necessarily the amazing hero the girls thought she was. Her prejudiced opinions about those who are different from her begin to chip away at the unwavering heroism that the novel initially assigned to her.



Tacho hails a taxi and asks the driver to take him to a gay bar. At the bar, Tacho downs one martini and rebuffs a sad man's advances. A man named Rigoberto sits next to him and offers him a chocolate cigarette. Rigoberto comments on Tacho's bruised face but looks disapproving when Tacho explains that the Border Patrol beat him up. However, Rigoberto listens to Tacho's story and seems to accept it.

Tacho looks around, and Rigoberto deems Tacho exotic since he's the only criminal in the bar. Tacho allows Rigoberto to buy him a third martini, and remarks that he feels like he's home—there are no gay bars in Tres Camarones. The men toast each other, and Rigoberto mentions that he's a doctor and could look at Tacho's injuries. Tacho can barely believe that Rigoberto is flirting with him, but Rigoberto signs the check and suggests they go to his house. Tacho falls asleep immediately upon climbing into Rigoberto's BMW and wakes up in the driveway of a beautiful villa.

CHAPTER 22

Late at night, Atómiko and Matt giggle drunkenly in Matt's living room. They speak a strange mixture of Spanish and English and try to keep quiet so they don't wake the girls. However, Yolo emerges from Matt's room wearing nothing but one of Matt's t-shirts and asks the boys to be quiet. When Atómiko offers to "help her sleep," Yolo slams the door. Atómiko asks Matt if he has any shorter t-shirts, which sends them into another fit of laughter. Yolo opens the door and yells at them again.

Atómiko tells Matt about a woman who once showed him her breasts, but Matt barely listens. He announces that he's lost, but Atómiko insists he's just drunk. When Matt insists he's actually lost in the world, Atómiko says that the world is lost, citing the melting ice caps and the Arabs as evidence. He admits that his real name is Kiko, and he became a soldier to kill everyone. When Matt asks, Atómiko says he ended up in the dump because someone caught him stealing a chicken. Atómiko says the Mexican Army pays in American dollars and teaches them English, and finally, the boys go to sleep.

In the morning, Nayeli, Yolo, and Vampi quietly wash their clothes. They giggle at how fast asleep Atómiko and Matt are—the girls are dressed and drinking coffee before the boys move at all. When he wakes up, Atómiko yells for pancakes. Matt greets all the girls and calls them beautiful, and Vampi crawls under the covers with him. Nayeli wonders how Yolo can both scowl and smile at the same time.

At the gay bar, Tacho is able to let his guard down and not be quite so vigilant about protecting himself. This makes it clear that being constantly on guard is exhausting.



The kindness that Rigoberto shows Tacho illustrates that some individuals are willing to reevaluate their first impressions of someone to form a more well rounded understanding of a person. In this way, Rigoberto begins to grapple with his own sense of superiority and acknowledge the humanity of those he once deemed "other." This shows again that empathy is one of the first steps towards combating racism.



Matt and Atómiko are drunk, obnoxious, and objectifying Yolo, which shows the boys' immaturity. The girls seem to think of Matt as a hero and Atómiko as a warrior, but in this instance, neither boy lives up to the girls' perceptions.



Atómiko's story about stealing a chicken indicates that a relatively small mistake is enough to ruin somebody as heroic as a soldier in the Mexican Army, which provides further evidence that heroism isn't something that's infallible.



Vampi and Yolo flirt with Matt frequently, which suggests that Nayeli's prevailing belief that she'll be the one to win Matt over might be incorrect. Nayeli's silent curiosity also shows that she's turning inwards and consulting herself, not her girlfriends, something that could have consequences for their friendship.



Later, Matt drives the group to get pancakes. Nayeli tries to explain what a pancake is to Vampi, but Vampi declares she'll order huevos rancheros. When they walk into a diner, a woman named Velma shows Matt and the girls to a booth, offering condolences for Ma Johnston. When Matt tells Velma that his friends are Mexicans, Velma yells "welcome to the United States" at them. They wonder if she's mad at them.

Vampi turns and freezes—a short Mexican man with black hair puts down waters at their table, and he's wearing a black 69 Eyes tee shirt. He smiles at Vampi, who breathlessly tells him she's a vampire. Later that evening, the man, El Brujo, picks Vampi up. He takes her to a hill where many cars filled with couples park to watch the city. Vampi swoons as El Brujo explains that he doesn't do drugs or drink and insists that Vampi is his drug. Vampi puts her head on his chest as he explains that the rich people live on the hill and that someday, the two of them will live on the hill, too. When he begins to sing "Gothic Girl," Vampi knows El Brujo has won her heart.

El Brujo had been a guitarist for a metal band but came to the US when it was apparent that his small Mexican town couldn't support a metal band. He was shocked to find that nobody in the US wanted to hire him either, since he's undocumented and didn't speak English. After a year or two, he got a job in the diner and has been working there for the last six years. After he tells Vampi his story, he says he'll probably work for another six years. He asks Vampi if she's his girl, and Vampi agrees she is. She climbs on his lap, kisses him, and tells him her story.

Back at Ma Johnston's house, Matt and Yolo search the phone book for Chavarín. They find a Salvador Chavarín, and Yolo places the call. Chava is shocked when Yolo explains that she's calling on behalf of Irma in Tres Camarones. Yolo discovers that Chava works at a bowling alley, but he doesn't want the girls to come see him at work. Yolo and Nayeli wonder if he was actually Irma's boyfriend, and they ask Matt to drive them to the alley.

CHAPTER 23

Long ago, Chava was Irma's bowling guru. He also introduced her to the cinema. Though Irma never cared much for movies or music, she was jealous watching Chava take girls to the movies. He was extremely handsome, which he played up by buying nice clothing with his bowling winnings. Irma, on the other hand, felt fat and awkward. She sat in the back of the theater and watched Chava with his dates, knowing that he would kiss them after the movie.

Though the narrator doesn't offer any insight into Velma's tone, it's reasonable to assume that she's trying to compensate for not speaking Spanish by increasing the volume of her voice. This offers an example of attempted kindness falling flat on account of latent racism.



Discovering El Brujo suggests that accomplishing the goal of finding seven men to take home might not be as difficult as it initially seemed. However, the speed at which this relationship moves creates the possibility that this romance won't be a great thing for the girls' friendship. In addition, it seems that Vampi is smitten with El Brujo because he likes her favorite band—not the most substantial basis of a relationship.



El Brujo's story shows that the United States doesn't hold the promise of a better life for all of its immigrants. El Brujo is the first male character to make this clear, which sets a precedent that the other men the girls will meet might be similarly disillusioned with the States, even if they came with grand ideas about what America would hold for them.



Chava asks Yolo and the other girls to not come see him at work, which suggests that he is ashamed of his job at the bowling alley. Chava's possible shame surrounding his job implies that he might be just as disillusioned with the United States as El Brujo is.



Irma feels an overwhelming sense of jealousy and competitiveness when she sees Chava romantically linked to another girl (or girls). This foreshadows the way that Nayeli will harbor similar feelings of jealousy and competitiveness when she sees Matt with Yolo.



Things came to a head at the state bowling finals. Chava lost early on to an upstart, so he sat and watched Irma bowl. Irma felt him staring at her backside, and the tension helped her throw strike after strike. Later, they had sex in Chava's car, which was Irma's first and only sexual experience. She didn't enjoy it much, but she never forgot how Chava blotted her thighs with a silk hankie, or how the moon looked hazy.

Chava was a fisherman by day and surprised all of Tres Camarones by going to Tijuana to fish in 1963—but unlike everyone else, he didn't come back. He wrote home saying that he was winning bowling tournaments in America, and finally, in 1965, Irma went to America to bowl with him. Though Irma expected a wedding, Chava only kissed her on the cheek when he put her on the plane home. Later, Irma learned that Chava was expecting a baby with an American woman. On that day, Irma became La Osa.

In the present, Matt drives Yolo, Nayeli, and Atómiko to the Hillcrest bowling alley. Nayeli takes Matt's arm as they walk in and ask for Chava. The man at the front desk calls to a man named Sal and asks if he knows anyone named Chávez. Sal has just finished cleaning a restroom, and he looks at Nayeli with a frozen smile. Sal is Chava.

Yolo and Matt bowl while Atómiko insults them, and Nayeli and Chava talk. He tells her how he betrayed Irma. Nayeli explains that Irma never married and is now mayor and asks what happened to his wife. Tears roll down Chava's cheeks as he admits that the woman ran off with a sailor before the baby was born. He admits that he was too ashamed to come home. Nayeli takes his hands and tells him her story.

Nayeli convinces Chava that Tres Camarones will be thrilled to have him back, and he agrees to join the girls on their mission. When Nayeli, Yolo, Atómiko, and Matt get back to the duplex, Vampi and Carla are grilling, and El Brujo is engaged in a game of Guitar Hero with the neighbor. Yolo tells Vampi they have one man, and Vampi smiles, looks towards El Brujo, and says they have two.

Irma's relatively unhappy first sexual experience suggests that she idealized her passion for Chava. This offers a situation in which romance was desired but was unsatisfying in practice—an experience that likely adds more clout to Irma's earlier counsel for Nayeli to not sleep with Matt.



The narrator connects Irma's transformation into La Osa to her heartbreak over Chava's betrayal, suggesting that intense female power is often borne out of disillusionment and disloyalty. Irma's falling out with Chava ultimately made her stronger, begging the question as to if the same thing will happen to Nayeli as she pines over and idealizes Matt.



The way that the man at the front desk speaks implies that he doesn't know much Spanish and isn't very interested in saying names correctly, which is another example of latent, underhanded racism.



Chava's story shows that he was disillusioned with the life he found in the United States. Chava's unwillingness to come home to Tres Camarones suggests that his idealism was also tied up with pride.



It is possible that Chava's overwhelming disappointment with the United States has caused him to idealize Tres Camarones. Although this is beneficial for the girls' mission to repopulate their village with men, it may mean that Chava will be disappointed with Tres Camarones after idealizing it for so long.



CHAPTER 24

Rigoberto asks his housekeeper and cook to recolor Tacho's hair. The housekeeper serves tea in a glass **teapot**, and Tacho is entranced when the tealeaves unfurl into a miniature garden. Rigoberto explains that his partner, Wilivaldo, is conveniently bleach-blonde and about Tacho's size. Rigoberto dresses Tacho in Wilivaldo's clothes and offers Tacho a photo of Wilivaldo, and the resemblance is striking. He pulls Wilivaldo's passport out of his pocket.

In the lanes of traffic waiting to cross the border, Rigoberto explains to Tacho that Border Patrol treats people in BMWs differently. He laughs and says that nobody really cares about Mexicans, as the Iranians are attracting all the attention. At the booth, Rigoberto rolls down the window and smiles, while Tacho looks moody and keeps his sunglasses on. Rigoberto hands the agent both passports, and Tacho ignores her when she asks his nationality. Rigoberto blushes and explains that he and "Wilivaldo" are hoping to have a nice weekend away to rekindle their sex life. The agent waves them through, and Tacho and Rigoberto laugh as they speed into California.

Rigoberto buys Tacho lunch and then passes him a cell phone to call Irma and Matt. Rigoberto later drops Tacho off at a visitors' center. They gruffly say goodbye, and Tacho struts around the parking lot until the car is out of sight. He sits and tries not to cry before finally calling Matt's house on a payphone. Fifteen minutes later, a pickup pulls into the lot, driven by a terrifying man covered in "devil tattoos." The man, El Brujo, approaches Tacho and gives him the password: Yul Brynner.

CHAPTER 25

Later that night, Matt escapes to Carla's side of the duplex. They pass a bong back and forth, and Matt slurs that there's nowhere for him to sleep in his house. They talk about illegal aliens and mention building a fence, and Matt suggests calling Border Patrol. They both laugh, and Matt declares that the trouble with "illegals" is that they settle in and then never leave, though he admits that he has a crush on "the cute one." Carla admits she can't tell the girls apart.

At Matt's house, El Brujo fries beans and meat and Tacho blasts disco music. Atómiko sits outside, smoking, drinking, and reminiscing about his parents and the dump. He had a cozy hut there, fenced with mattress springs like the other huts, and he made friends with the dump dogs.

Rigoberto's plot to smuggle Tacho over the border is based on playing to the Border Patrol agents' racism—its success rests on the Americans believing that Mexicans look enough alike to not investigate further.



Rigoberto's plan illustrates his acute awareness of how racism plays out in the real world. Meanwhile, his comment about Iranians attracting all of the attention is another reminder that this novel takes place immediately after the September 11 tragedy.



By revisiting Yul Brynner, the novel reminds the reader that the entire quest was inspired by a "Mexican" movie star (who is actually Russian) and a fictional, far-fetched movie. In other words, the quest is imbued with idealism, which suggests that in reality, the quest won't go over as planned.



Thus far, Matt has been portrayed as a kind, sympathetic character. However, this exchange with Carla reveals that he, too, harbors a great deal of latent racist beliefs. Further, Matt's racism isn't affected by the fact that he has a crush on one of the girls (it is unclear which one), highlighting that his racist beliefs are more deeply rooted than his romantic feelings.



Atómiko's musing about fences reminds the reader that the dump dwellers are just as interested in defining their own borders as everyone else, which is an indicator of their humanity and the human impulse to carve out a space for one's self in the world.



Chava accepted the girls' invitation to come for dinner, and as he drives to Matt's house, he realizes the girls delight him. He misses Tres Camarones and Irma, and he thinks that nobody in the US can fathom how wonderful Mexican women are. He thinks that he has so few nice evenings in the US—being around the girls makes him realize how lonely he is. At one point during the dinner, Chava pulls Nayeli aside and explains that he knows a young man named Angel who used to be in the Mexican Navy. He suggests that Angel might be more in line with Nayeli's mission and offers to take Nayeli to him the next day.

Chava's inner monologue provides proof that he idealizes the life he left behind in Mexico, specifically in terms of the romantic opportunities. The fact that he knows a man who might be interested in returning to Tres Camarones suggests that disillusionment with the US might be widespread among immigrants, and that the United States doesn't actually live up to its allure and provide immigrants with a better life.



Chava picks Nayeli and Tacho up at eight the next morning. As they head for the car, Atómiko insists on coming and bringing his staff. As they drive, Chava explains that he met Angel when Chava's car broke down. Angel fixed his car and wouldn't let Chava pay him, so Chava slips Angel free meals when he comes to the bowling alley. Nayeli interrupts and says she wants to find her father, and Tacho says that America would be perfect if only there were hot air balloons. He sees a hot air balloon rise in front of them and insists that America wins every time.

The hot air balloons rise as if on cue, making America seem perfect and cinematic. However, the hot air balloons are just something for Tacho to look at—he doesn't actually get to take part in the experience of riding in a hot air balloon. This highlights that though the US can appear ideal, many elements of an idealized American life are things that Tacho and other immigrants will never be able to experience firsthand.



Chava explains that he's only been to the migrant camp a few times, and he always takes supplies. He drives to a grocery store, and Nayeli is in awe of the abundant produce and clean cuts of meat. As Nayeli and Tacho laugh at the man on the oatmeal box, two white men with shaved heads approach from either end of the aisle. The first, Sully, blocks Nayeli and Tacho's way out, and Jimbo comes up behind them. Sully and Jimbo snicker at the "wetbacks," and Sully says he'd impregnate Nayeli if she didn't have AIDS.

Jimbo and Sully demonstrate overt racism in their actions, words, and even their appearances—tightly shaved buzzcuts are often adopted by white supremacists. Jimbo and Sully use the term "wetbacks," which refers to illegal Mexican immigrants who often arrive in the US via the Rio Grande—that is, the immigrants arrive in the States with actual wet backs from the river.



Chava runs his cart into Sully's heels, frantically apologizes for being a "stupid Mexican," and ushers Nayeli and Tacho into the checkout line. He instructs them to not look at Sully and Jimbo, who hover and glare at them. Chava explains mildly that some people don't like Mexicans.

Chava's way of getting Nayeli and Tacho out of the supremacists' grasp mirrors the way that Rigoberto got Tacho over the border: Chava plays into Sully and Jimbo's racism and preconceived notions by calling himself stupid, which seems to placate the men.



Chava steers the car inland and drives on roads that run through fields of flowers. He pulls over next to a barrier, and he, Nayeli, Tacho, and Atómiko each grab a bag of groceries. Chava muses that they're in the richest city of the richest state in the richest country before leading them down into a canyon. Soon, they see the camp ahead, and Chava calls out to the residents. When they finally push through the bamboo, Nayeli sees dark, thin men and a crude altar to the Virgin Mary. Chava introduces himself as Angel's friend, and the men immediately smile. Atómiko helps himself to coffee, and the camp's leader, Don Arturo, says that Angel is washing up.

The camp itself reveals that making it into the US and making it past Border Patrol doesn't guarantee a person a better life than the one they left behind. This migrant camp is tenuous and exists on the fringes of a rich city in a rich country. The makeshift nature of the camp is also suggestive of the makeshift houses at the dump in Tijuana, highlighting that life may not be all that different for immigrants in the US.



As the men distribute donuts, Don Arturo tells Nayeli how they live in the camp. They split costs and often throw out clothes that are too dirty to wash. Suddenly, Angel steps through the bamboo with Sully, Jimbo, and four other white men behind him. Sully and Jimbo are armed with a chain and a bat, and Angel apologizes for bringing the supremacists to the camp. Jimbo pushes Angel to his knees, spits, and declares that the "mud people" stink. Atómiko burps and marvels that all the migrants all look terrified of these "thugs." He casually hangs up his coffee cup and begins taunting the supremacists, his staff balanced loosely across his shoulders.

Atómiko continues to taunt Sully and Jimbo in his broken English, which Nayeli struggles to understand. She stands up, Sully calls her a bitch, and the back-and-forth taunts continue. Sully is confused—normally, his victims beg or flee—and when Angel stands up, Atómiko twirls his staff and brings it down across Sully's face. Nayeli kicks Jimbo, and Angel throws Sully into the creek. The fight continues until Tacho and Angel attack from behind with frying pans. Nayeli smiles at the final thug, which terrifies him, and he runs away. Nayeli offers Angel a job.

Chava drops Tacho, Nayeli, and Atómiko back at Matt's house around midnight. They find Carla in an inflatable pool in the yard. Atómiko pulls his shirt off and jumps in with her, and Carla explains that Vampi is off with El Brujo, and Matt and Yolo are inside. Nayeli steps inside and calls for Yolo but hears only her cries of pleasure. Nayeli walks to the door of Matt's room and sees Matt and Yolo having sex. She backs out of the house, shocked and hurt.

Carla calls for Nayeli's attention and says that Nayeli received a call. Nayeli can barely listen; she tries to rationalize that she never staked a claim on Matt. Carla finally says that Tía Irma called to say she's in a hotel in San Diego. Tacho is surprised, and they hear Yolo cry out from inside the house. Tacho watches Nayeli cover her eyes and walk down the alley. Tacho understands immediately and says, "what a day."

CHAPTER 26

Nayeli sinks into the water of the pool, thinking that nobody knows she's here. She feels like she lost Yolo, Matt, and Vampi, and she wonders if she'll lose Irma now that Chava is in the picture. Nayeli understands that she's being demoted since Irma is here, and she decides that the only thing to do is for her and Tacho to go to Kankakee, Illinois.

Sully and Jimbo seldom refer to their victims as actual people. By using slurs, Sully and Jimbo are able to avoid acknowledging that their victims are actually their fellow human beings. Meanwhile, Atómiko's overblown sense of his own heroism has some possibility for positive effects here, as his belief in his heroism is what gives him the courage (or dumb lack of fear) to take on Sully and Jimbo.



When Nayeli joins the fray, it shows that Atómiko's slapdash heroism is not the only kind that can be effective: Nayeli's karate training is just as useful in this situation. It's also worth noting that Nayeli's confidence here comes from training, not in an inherent belief in her own superiority and strength—this suggests another reason why Nayeli wants to bring back men, as she may view their confidence as more inherent.



Nayeli's sense of betrayal indicates that she believed she did have a right to Matt—something that Yolo violated by sleeping with him. This moment also suggests that "the cute one" Matt referred to earlier while talking to Carla may have referred to Yolo, not Nayeli.



Nayeli focuses on how she and Yolo "negotiated" who had a claim to Matt, effectively ignoring the fact that Matt has feelings of his own and is just as complicit as Yolo. By ignoring Matt's role in the situation, Nayeli makes the betrayal Yolo's fault—something that will surely damage the girls' relationship.



It is telling that Nayeli decides that Tacho must be the one to accompany her on the trip to Illinois. Tacho is her only companion who is fully disillusioned with the US, suggesting that Nayeli is beginning to feel the same way.



The next day, Nayeli, Tacho, Vampi, and Yolo walk into the hotel where Irma is staying. Irma greets them in the lobby with kisses, though she slaps Tacho. She notices Atómiko and El Brujo outside and asks what they are, and before Nayeli can respond, Irma mutters about drug addicts, grabs a cigarette, and goes outside. She demands the boys' names and calls them degenerates. Angel politely says that he's not a degenerate. Irma looks Angel over, insists that Angel is a pimp name, and asks if he's started puberty yet. She turns to El Brujo, who introduces himself as Alex and "Vampi's man." Irma laughs and asks if both he and Vampi will dye their hair purple for the wedding. Atómiko's slang is too much for Irma. She heads back inside.

A bit later, Nayeli knocks on Chava's door. He refuses to answer and asks if "she" is with Nayeli. Nayeli says that "she" sent her, and finally, Chava opens the door. He's wearing pajamas and is unshaven. Nayeli tells him to shower and shave while she waits. Chava complies, and then Nayeli tells him that he must help Irma recruit the rest of the men, as Nayeli must leave to find her father. Nayeli hands him Irma's hotel information and insists he must go. Chava gives her cash and a gas card.

Back at the hotel, Irma is incensed: Vampi promised El Brujo control of the cinema one night per week, and Angel wants a mechanic's shop. She rents a conference room to conduct interviews for the remaining four slots, thinking that romance is no way to run a government operation. She finds she likes Atómiko and thinks he'd be a policeman if she could convince him to come to Tres Camarones. Though Irma thinks Nayeli's trip to find her dad is foolish, Irma gives Nayeli a debit card and tells her that men, Don Pepe included, are no good.

Matt spreads out his road atlas and helps Tacho and Nayeli plan their route. Yolo watches and openly admires Matt, and Nayeli sneers at her. Tacho and Nayeli plan on going through Vegas, up to Colorado, and then east to Illinois.

CHAPTER 27

Tacho and Nayeli begin their road trip early in the morning. The desert between San Diego and Las Vegas is dull, brown, and dusty. Nayeli flips through Matt's Spanish-English dictionary, learning as many words in Spanish as she does in English. Tacho tries to listen to the radio, but they only hear angry Americans yelling about how Mexicans carry diseases. Finally, Tacho turns it off.

*By using the word "what" instead of "who," Irma dehumanizes Atómiko and El Brujo and shows how little she thinks of men in general. Instead of being grateful to the men for their willingness to help the girls with their quest to repopulate and protect Tres Camarones, Irma is rude and critical. It seems that Irma is looking for versions of men that don't actually exist in real life, pointing back to the way that the movie *The Magnificent Seven* was the sole reason this quest began in the first place.*



Chava seems terrified at the possibility of coming face to face with Irma. Given that Irma so wholly terrifies one of the seven men who will, in theory, protect Tres Camarones, the novel implies that the women of Tres Camarones don't need men after all.



Irma is derisive about Nayeli's desire to find her father, which suggests yet again that Irma knows something about Don Pepe that Nayeli doesn't. In addition, Irma's assertion that all men are bad—including Nayeli's father—once again shows that Irma is sexist and thinks very little of men in general.



It seems that Matt is completely oblivious to the way he hurt Nayeli by sleeping with Yolo. Meanwhile, Yolo and Nayeli's nonverbal interactions in this passage show that the girls' relationship is unraveling.



This cross-country trip mirrors the bus ride from Mazatlán to Tres Camarones, which implies that a similar brand of disillusionment awaits Nayeli and Tacho at the end of their journey.



After an hour, Nayeli comments that the desert is harsh. Tacho, lost in thought about **Rigoberto's teapot**, insists that Mexican deserts are more brutal. They reach their first turnoff point, which is the world's biggest thermometer. Matt laughed when he told him about it, but Tacho doesn't get why it's so funny. The narrator says that Tacho doesn't understand that these massive statues that pepper America represent a kind of patriotism, and Tacho is bored with the entire project of this road trip. Tacho doubts they'll actually find Don Pepe, but he feels obligated to support Nayeli by driving across the US.

Tacho thinks the US is far too big, and he wonders if the country's hugeness is why Americans seem so crazy. Nayeli is moody and quiet, which annoys Tacho. They slow down to gawk at an RV on fire and finally reach the Nevada border. Finally, by evening, they reach Las Vegas. When Nayeli sees the lights of the city, she starts laughing—it all looks absurd. They park and walk along the strip. Tacho purchases a disposable camera to take photos, and once they figure out how to get coins at a casino, they promptly lose \$75 at the slot machines. Tacho adores the slot machines, and Nayeli has to drag him away.

When Tacho and Nayeli drop into a curio shop, Tacho suggests they get a wind-up penis for Yolo. Nayeli doesn't find it funny, and she drags him out of the shop. They find the motel that Matt booked for them and sign in as Shakira and Ricky Martin and then eat dinner in the diner next door. Once they get to their room, they stare out the window for a while and watch TV. As Nayeli snuggles into bed, she asks if they'll ever go back home, and Tacho confesses he doesn't know. He plays slots after Nayeli goes to sleep. In the morning, they're disappointed to see that Vegas is dusty and cracked in the daylight.

CHAPTER 28

Tacho finds an oldies radio station, and he and Nayeli reminisce about life in Tres Camarones. Tacho discovers he loves pumping gas, as it makes him feel masculine. Nayeli continues to translate words to Spanish as they drive, and they laugh when she translates "taxidermy." When they reach I-70, the turnoff to head east, an attendant at the gas station corrects Tacho's pronunciation of Salina, Utah.

Rigoberto's teapot represented a beautiful, untainted world—something that Tacho desperately wants but knows that he'll never find in America. His unwavering loyalty to and friendship with Nayeli is what keeps him from sharing his new understanding of the world with her. Like Irma, Tacho understands that Nayeli will have to come to her own understanding of the world and learn lessons herself.



Gambling represents a way for people to search for success in a controlled environment that's also possibly ruinous financially. Tacho's interest in the slot machines suggests that even if he has outgrown some of his idealism, he certainly hasn't given up on all of it.



Tacho and Nayeli sign into hotels as celebrities, gesturing back to their previous obsession with the cinema, which made them idealize the US in the first place. Interestingly, they choose to sign in as two Latin American celebrities: Shakira, who is from Colombia, and Ricky Martin, who is from Puerto Rico. Perhaps this aligns with the way Irma thought Yul Brynner was Mexican, or perhaps Tacho and Nayeli are simply playing into the absurdity of Las Vegas by pretending to be celebrities themselves.



When the narrator notes that pumping gas makes Tacho feel masculine, it's another indicator that male power and heroism often comes from association with objects or actions. Meanwhile, Tacho and Nayeli's reminiscence about Tres Camarones indicates that they now idealize life there rather than in the US—suggesting that it will disappoint them when they return.



When they reach the town of Green River, Nayeli is nervous when nobody at the gas station laughs. She and Tacho find a Mexican restaurant and are thrilled to smell familiar foods. The Mexican cook welcomes them, and Tacho greets him in Spanish. Nayeli thanks their waitress (the cook's wife) in Spanish when she brings them chips and salsa, but the woman informs Nayeli that they speak English. When the woman returns to take their food orders, Nayeli enunciates her English as best she can, but Tacho insolently orders in Spanish.

When the cook's wife returns to deliver a Coke for Tacho, Nayeli asks her where she's from. The woman replies that she's from Colorado, and she and Nayeli look at each other strangely. Nayeli asks where she's from *originally*, and the woman admits that her parents are from Durango and her husband is from Chihuahua. When the cook comes out to check on how the food is, he asks Tacho and Nayeli if they're on vacation. Nayeli explains that she and Tacho "came across," and the cook glares. He yells at them to get out and shouts that he's a legal resident, and people like Tacho and Nayeli make him look bad. Tacho and Nayeli rush out, ashamed, and cry in the car out of confusion.

All the landmarks Tacho and Nayeli encounter fail to amaze them, and they fear that every car is filled with people who will accuse them of being illegal. Tacho pulls off at a trading post, where they purchase a plastic model of the twin towers to put on the dash and an American flag decal for the windshield. Tacho purchases a tee shirt with Apache warriors on it, and the narrator notes that Tacho didn't realize that Apache warriors would've killed him outright.

CHAPTER 29

Back in San Diego, Chava polishes his shoes and dresses nicely. He feels confident as he drives to Irma's hotel but starts feeling shaky when he pulls into the parking lot. He tries to walk into the hotel as though he's still a young man, and the actual young man at the front desk gives him Irma's room number. Suddenly, Chava is terrified. When he reaches Irma's floor, he tiptoes towards her room and imagines running away. As he prepares to knock, Atómiko bursts out of Irma's door and heads down the hallway.

Chava hears Irma call him from inside, and he retreats to the elevator. Atómiko sends Chava back towards Irma's room before getting into the elevator. Irma yells again, and Chava turns to see her standing in the doorway. She looks magnificent and blushes when their eyes meet. He greets her by calling her his love, and she rushes into the room. Chava follows her.

For the waitress and the chef, the best way they know to feel like a part of the United States is to adopt English and outright reject their Mexican heritage—though their jobs in a Mexican restaurant suggest that they understand that their culture is something they can earn money from. Nayeli is shocked because it hasn't occurred to her to be ashamed of her heritage.



The chef's anger makes it very clear that his status and sense of belonging in the US is tenuous. As far as the chef is concerned, two illegal immigrants visiting his restaurant is enough to ruin his acceptance in the US. Though Tacho and Nayeli were just looking for a comforting piece of home, they are shocked to find out that even their fellow Mexicans are unwilling to show them kindness or understanding.



The narrator's aside about the Apache warriors shows that to find belonging, it's sometimes necessary for a person to embrace things that are in direct opposition to who they are and what they believe, showing again that these kinds of arbitrary divisions are pointless and hurt everyone.



Chava's fear is, again, indicative of how much power Irma has and the kind of respect she inspires in others. His reaction also shows that she's been this way for a long time, given that Chava hasn't seen her in more than forty years. This continues to develop the idea that female strength and power are somewhat inherent.



When Irma so readily accepts Chava back into her life, it shows that she is just as human and desirous of love as anyone else, despite her tough image.



CHAPTER 30

When Nayeli and Tacho reach the Rocky Mountains, they stop at a Burger King near a hot springs. They sit outside to eat, and a group of girls asks them if they're Pakistani. Tacho proudly replies that he's Mexican and queer. Later, as they continue east, Nayeli watches rafters in the river as they sit in a traffic jam, and suddenly, mayflies burst out of the gorge. Nayeli laughs at how beautiful it is. When they pass the Native American flagger, Tacho points to his Apache tee shirt and the flagger gives him a thumbs up.

They continue to climb the mountain and stop at a viewpoint. Nayeli cries again at the view, and Tacho shrieks excitedly when he sees mountain goats. When they reach the Continental Divide tunnel, they honk their horn with the other cars as they drive through. Tacho tries hard to not fry the brakes on the downslope on the other side. He pulls over so that Nayeli can look at the buffalo, and when a blue jay scolds Nayeli, Tacho notes that even the birds hate Mexicans.

As night arrives, Nayeli is thrilled and intrigued by the cold, though Tacho is less impressed. They find a motel, and the woman who checks them in thinks they're Iraqi. Nayeli purchases food, Tacho buys gas, and upon getting to their room, Tacho gets into the bathtub to escape the cold. Nayeli watches the HBO channel on TV.

The next day, Tacho and Nayeli smirk at the skinny people jogging in Boulder, Colorado. They climb another mountain, and when they begin their descent on the other side, Nayeli catches her breath again: the valley below looks just like paintings from Nayeli's copy of *Heidi*. She asks to pull over near the lake at the bottom so she can look at the "horses with antlers," and Tacho complies, though he's bored and uninterested. He insists the beasts are robots.

When Nayeli jumps out, she's immediately freezing. She watches the animals eat and greets a fisherman fishing in the lake. In broken English, she asks the fisherman what the big animals are. He asks if she's cold, and though he tries not to smile, he finds it impossible to *not* smile at Nayeli. He leads her to his truck and gives her a massive sweatshirt and then explains that the creatures are elk. Nayeli looks it up in her dictionary and finds that she's never even heard of elk in Spanish. He teaches Nayeli to fish and tells her about the wildlife in the valley. She kisses him goodbye on the cheek and is far away before she realizes she didn't learn his name.

When the girls mistake Nayeli and Tacho for being Pakistani, it's humorous, but it also speaks to Americans' overwhelming anxiety about terrorism in the post-9/11 world. This moment also shows that racism isn't always as overt as it was in the case of Jimbo and Sully—the girls mistaking Nayeli and Tacho for being Pakistani is its own kind of cultural ignorance.



Now that Tacho is disillusioned and feels as though the US is out to get him, he's even more attuned to any possible sleight towards him on account of his nationality. This illustrates how oppressed people are often more in tune with these smaller aggressions, as they have to be in order to survive.



Again, though the woman at the hotel isn't unkind, she demonstrates cultural ignorance in mistaking Nayeli and Tacho for being Iraqi. Her mistake also suggests she spends a great deal of time listening to the news saturated with stories of the Middle East.



*When Tacho says that the beasts are robots, it's another reference to the movie *Westworld*. By thinking of these strange animals as though they're fake, the novel explores further how Tacho's disillusionment means that he doesn't want to even acknowledge that what he's seeing is real.*



When Nayeli finds that she is learning as many words in Spanish as she is in English, it reinforces the fact that this isn't just a learning experience about the United States. Nayeli is learning just as much about herself and where she fits in the world, which will eventually help her to grow up and reach a greater sense of maturity. However, learning these things, especially when they seem fantastical, also contributes to her sense of idealism.



At the gates of Rocky Mountain National Park, Tacho hands the ranger money. She kindly counts out the proper amount and hands him a map. When Tacho notices a bobcat and shrieks, Nayeli reminds him that it's just a robot. Later, when it starts to snow, they get out and run through the flakes. Back in the van, Nayeli hides her face so Tacho won't see her cry. Finally, they reach the Kansas border. At a gas station, a siren begins to howl and a state trooper waves Nayeli and Tacho into a shop to escape the coming tornado. When Nayeli explains they're headed for Kankakee, Illinois, the cop turns to the woman next to him and laments that "illegals" can drive cross-country, while working Americans can't afford gas.

Note that this ranger is female, just like the Border Patrol officer who let Tacho and Rigoberto into the US. By including these female characters as part of the landscape, the novel shows that women can absolutely hold positions of power. This implies that the women of Tres Camarones don't actually need men to protect the village. Meanwhile, the Kansas cop's rude comment about "illegals" shows his racism. Although Tacho and Nayeli are illegal immigrants, the cop seems to think the very fact that they are Mexican means that they must be illegal immigrants. In addition, by calling Tacho and Nayeli "illegals" rather than people, the cop dehumanizes them.



CHAPTER 31

At nine in the morning in San Diego, Irma waits at a table in a conference room. Atómiko drinks all the coffee he possibly can, and Irma indulges him when he asks for donuts. Chava sits next to Irma: he's now the Deputy Mayor of Tres Camarones. Yolo and Vampi sit with Irma as well, and El Brujo and Atómiko act as security guards. Matt and Angel sit in the corner, and Matt wonders how Nayeli is doing on her trip.

Though Irma has given several of these men positions of relative power, she's still the one running this show, and the men are just here to support her. Meanwhile, Matt's errant thoughts suggest that Nayeli may have been wrong to read so much into his fling with Yolo.



A hotel employee informs Irma that the applicants have arrived, and Irma asks him to send them in. When twelve men enter, Irma states she only needs four. The employee pokes his head back in and says that there are *many* men still waiting. Atómiko goes to the lobby to inspect and finds an entire line of Mexican men. They ask Atómiko to take them back to Mexico, saying that it's too hard in America, and they just want jobs. Atómiko returns to Irma and declares that the revolution has begun.

These men show very clearly that they're all disillusioned by what they've found in the United States. Their overwhelming desire to go to Tres Camarones suggests that they've been idealizing Mexico since leaving, which means that Mexico could fall short of their expectations just like the US did.



CHAPTER 32

When they reach the Great Plains, Nayeli feels as though they've stopped moving because the land is simply so vast and empty. Tacho comments that the van's engine doesn't sound great, and Nayeli feels menstrual cramps starting. They pass signs for a six-thousand-pound prairie dog, and Nayeli attempts to translate "prairie dog" without success. She asks Tacho to stop so she can buy supplies, and Tacho asks the lady at the counter what a "dog of the pradera" is. When the lady figures out what Tacho is referring to, she tells him that the prairie dog is made of cement.

Earlier, the narrator asserted that these giant statues represent a kind of American patriotism. This situates Tacho's sense of betrayal and disillusionment with the prairie dog statue as general disillusionment with the United States as a whole. The tone of the lady at the counter suggests that this disillusionment is also an intrinsic part of the US.



When Tacho and Nayeli reconvene at the van, he announces that everything is a cruel illusion. They stop at the prairie dog anyway, and Tacho initially thinks it must be a popular spot given the number of cars in the lot but is disappointed when he discovers grass growing through and around the cars. They stop in at the souvenir shop, and the shopkeeper tells them a joke they don't understand.

Tacho is confused when they pass a sign for another town named Salina. They drive through Kansas City the next day, and immediately upon crossing the state line into Missouri, they pass through *another* Kansas City. Tacho is extremely confused, and the van's engine continues to make strange noises. Feeling queasy, Tacho declares that the trip is torture, and Nayeli apologizes and fights back tears. Tacho is almost crying too.

They stop in Saint Louis to look at the Mississippi River. Tacho feels stabs in his stomach and tells Nayeli to not drink the water. They purchase Pepto-Bismol and stop for the night at a motel in Illinois. Tacho throws up his dinner around midnight.

CHAPTER 33

The next day, Tacho has a raging fever. He shivers and stops at every rest stop to use the restroom. The van seems sick as well, and Nayeli speaks comfortingly to Tacho as they drive. Tacho thinks that Don Pepe probably isn't even in Kankakee, and this is a pointless trip. They pass town after town and finally, they cross the Kankakee River. Nayeli yells that it's beautiful, but Tacho sniffs that the river at home is better. Nayeli wonders what her father will say when she sees him, but she knows he'll smile.

Tacho turns towards downtown, and Nayeli exclaims over a Mexican grocery store. Finally, they stop at a motel, and the van's engine begins to steam. Tacho declares that Nayeli killed him as a rainstorm rolls over them. He makes Nayeli stand outside while he uses the toilet and then falls into bed. Nayeli puts a washcloth on Tacho's forehead and assures him that she can find her father alone.

The cars parked around the giant prairie dog suggest that whoever owns the statue wants it to be a major attraction and is willing to create the kind of reality he or she would like to see—though for Tacho, it represents the way in which America is one big illusion and disappointment.



The repeating names of towns and neighboring towns make Tacho feel confused, alienated, and even more unwelcome in the US. Nayeli's tears suggest that she's feeling the same way.



The disappointment in the US culminates when the water makes Tacho physically ill—just like Irma said it would. This gives Irma more credibility, even if most of her information about the US is extremely outdated.



When Nayeli continues to believe that Don Pepe will surely be thrilled to see her, it builds her idolization of him and points back to the way she assumed Americans would be thrilled to let her into the country. So far, everything about America has been disappointing, which suggests that finding her father will be, too.



For Nayeli, the presence of a Mexican grocery store suggests a reasonably strong Mexican presence in the town, which offers the possibility that the town will be more welcoming than others she's passed through.



Nayeli buys soda and crackers in the lobby, and the receptionist tells her how to make long-distance calls from her room. Nayeli pulls out her **postcard** and notices that the crease down the middle now forms a lightning bolt through the photo. She wonders if it's a sign. She showers, crawls into bed, and dials Irma's number. Irma shares that Yolo decided she wants to stay in the US with Matt—but Matt doesn't want her to stay. Nayeli is shocked.

Nayeli tells Irma that they made it to Kankakee, and Tacho is sick. Irma tells Nayeli that she's doing a great thing, and Nayeli asks if Irma found the men. Irma explains that she interviewed seventy men but only agreed to take home twenty-seven. Chava apparently fell for every hard-luck story, and Irma says that if they had Yul Brynner, seven men might be enough. However, she insists that all the men are weaklings and cowards, and twenty-seven will be barely enough to fight off the bandidos. Irma says she's flying home with Chava, and Nayeli hears him in the background.

Nayeli admits that she and Tacho broke the minivan, and Irma snaps that they'll just have to take the bus back to San Diego. She adds that one of her girlfriends from a neighboring town is going to come to San Diego to interview the rest of the seventy men, and she says that Chava thinks Irma will become president after this.

When Nayeli confesses she's tired, Irma insists that she changed the world. Irma orders Chava out of the room and tells Nayeli that she is the future and did something that Irma could've never done. Irma says that she'll deny ever saying it, but she admits that she's a coward, and Nayeli is stronger than she is. She tells Nayeli to get her father and kick ass before hanging up. Nayeli hears Tacho say he wants to go home and reminds him that he hasn't seen Beverly Hills. Tacho shakes his head and says that people like them don't marry Johnny Depp.

CHAPTER 34

In the morning, Nayeli walks to a drive-through taco shop and asks the man if he knows her father. He suggests she go to the library and assures her that everyone likes Mexicans in Kankakee. Nayeli walks downtown to the huge silver building. She passes a group of Mexican kids and steps through the doors. All the books and computers make her feel extremely rural, but she feels too embarrassed to walk past the Mexican kids again. She sits down and looks around.

Though the revelation about Yolo and Matt doesn't do anything to repair Nayeli and Yolo's relationship, it does make it clear to Nayeli that she jumped to conclusions too quickly. It also shows that Matt is casual about sex, pointing back to the way he had casual sex with Carla.



When Irma continues to talk about men as though they're useless (and specifically, in comparison to Yul Brynner), it continues to develop the idea that Irma only likes the idea of men, not men in practice. Along the same lines, Irma isn't giving up any power when she brings these men home, which shows that they're not a threat to her.



Irma sees the quest as a positive thing for Tres Camarones, but she also seems to realize that it's a re-assertion of ownership over these Mexican men to bring them back to Mexico. Once again, this highlights Irma's nationalistic leanings.



Irma's encouragement sends a clear message that Nayeli and women in general are the true heroes of the story. Meanwhile, Tacho's bitter comment about Johnny Depp points back to the beginning of the novel, when Tacho and Nayeli bonded over their love for the actor. Now, Tacho's lack of interest in Beverly Hills implies that there's nowhere else to go but home, as he knows now the US won't let him truly live out his dreams.



When Nayeli begins to lose confidence so close to the end of her personal quest, it shows that she's grappling with whether or not she's actually capable of completing it.



Nayeli makes eye contact with a woman behind the counter, and the woman smiles. Nayeli goes to a computer and searches for Tres Camarones, and the woman comes over and asks Nayeli if she needs help. The woman's nametag says Mary-Jo, and Nayeli tells her that she's looking for her father. A young man walks by and says that Mary-Jo runs the city, but Mary-Jo explains to Nayeli that she's not the mayor.

Mary-Jo leads Nayeli behind her desk and calls the police. Nayeli is alarmed, but Mary-Jo assures her that it will be fine. She offers Nayeli a cookie, and soon, a Mexican-American officer shows up. Nayeli explains she's looking for her father, and the cop dials around as Mary-Jo says brightly that she loves Mexico. After a half hour, the cop jots down an address on a sticky note and says that Don Pepe might be in the north end of town. Mary-Jo offers to drive Nayeli there, and Nayeli thinks she loves Kankakee.

Mary-Jo agrees to drop Nayeli off down the block from Don Pepe's house and sends her off with a hug. Nayeli studies the houses on the street as she walks and gets to a dead end. Beyond is a field and the highway. Nayeli turns back and wonders if her father shares a house with other men. She imagines him picking her up and laughing when he sees her, and she laughs as she thinks of her trip. She decides the entire thing was worth it.

A big Dodge truck passes Nayeli. It has stickers of the American and Mexican flags in the back window, and it stops on the street. A round woman gets out of the passenger side and fishes a toddler out of the backseat, and Nayeli starts walking towards her to ask after Don Pepe. Nayeli stops in her tracks when she sees Don Pepe get out of the driver's seat. He kisses the woman and leads her to the house, slapping her bottom as she crosses the threshold. Nayeli stands for a moment and then races to the field. She cries there for an hour, and then tucks her **postcard** under Don Pepe's windshield wiper and walks away.

Learning that Mary-Jo can both run the city and not be mayor continues to expand Nayeli's conception of what female power can look like. According to this young man, Mary-Jo is a true hero in town even though she doesn't occupy a major role in local government.



It's worth noting that these figures in Kankakee are kind to Nayeli in part because the town itself embraces its Mexican population and does what it can to make them feel welcome—essentially, it rejects some of the crueler notions of borders and immigrants in favor of accepting people for who they are.



It's telling that Nayeli decides the trip was worth it before she even sees her father, as it illustrates clearly how much she idolizes him and believes that he has spent the last three years thinking about her in the same way she's thought about him.



When Nayeli realizes that her father is never coming back, she finally embraces the phrase on the postcard, "everything passes." As she comes to the understanding that even her relationship with her father will pass—and her hope that he will ever return to the village—she comes to see the world around her as it actually exists, not as she'd like to see it. Irma's previous disparaging remarks about Nayeli's quest to find Don Pepe suggest that Irma anticipated that Don Pepe had found someone else in the States and was never coming back to Tres Camarones.



CHAPTER 35

Tacho and Nayeli decide to leave the dead van in Kankakee, and Mary-Jo drives them to the bus station. Nayeli tells her that she's going to tell her mother that she simply didn't find her father, and Mary-Jo offers her apologies. Mary-Jo helps them purchase their tickets to San Diego, and they stand transfixed as the TV above the ticket counter shows Mexicans jumping over the fence into Arizona. The ticket seller looks embarrassed, shuts off the TV, and apologizes, and Nayeli thinks she loves the man. When the bus arrives, Mary-Jo hugs Nayeli goodbye. Tacho races onto the bus and Nayeli follows him.

When Nayeli decides to lie to her mother, it shows that Nayeli has learned that disillusionment is painful and difficult to come to terms with. By not telling her mother that Don Pepe has a wife (or girlfriend) and a child in America, Nayeli allows her mother to hold on to a sliver of hope that Don Pepe will one day return. Also in this passage, Mary-Jo engages with Nayeli and Tacho as people worthy of help and respect, offering a remedy for the racism Nayeli encountered in San Diego.



CHAPTER 36

Arnie is back in Calexico after his stint in San Diego, checking cars at a tourist checkpoint. He's hotter than ever and thinks it's almost time to escape to the Rockies. When he sees a bus coming, he decides to wave it over and check it. The driver lets him on, and Arnie makes his way down the aisle. At the back of the bus, he stops and stares at Nayeli and Tacho. Too tired to smile, Nayeli greets Arnie and reintroduces herself. Tacho puts out his wrists for handcuffs, and Arnie remarks that it's a small world. He motions for them to follow him off the bus, and the driver gets their bags out for them.

Even though Nayeli and Tacho are fully disillusioned with the United States, the fact that the driver makes sure they don't leave without their bags suggests that the US isn't all bad—Nayeli and Tacho didn't even get their bags in Mexico, a place they now idealize entirely, given their disappointing journey through the US. Meanwhile, for Arnie, coming across Nayeli again shows him that she wasn't lying about her quest (which he previously thought was a fantastical, made-up story). In recognizing Nayeli, Arnie thinks of Nayeli and Tacho as human beings rather than anonymous illegal immigrants.



Arnie shows Nayeli and Tacho into the back of his truck and tells his coworker that he's taking his "clients" in. As he drives, he asks Nayeli where her smile went and if she found her father. Nayeli says she found him, but it wasn't good. Finally, Arnie pulls over and asks Nayeli to tell him about her progress since he processed her in California. Nayeli explains that she's taking twenty-seven Mexican men back to Mexico with her, and Arnie can barely believe it. He gets out, offers Nayeli and Tacho water, and asks them to tell him their story again.

Again, offering water is a very concrete way for Arnie to acknowledge that Nayeli and Tacho are human beings just like he is. Considering Arnie's growing dissatisfaction with his job and the Border Patrol agency as a whole, this situation with Tacho and Nayeli offers Arnie a chance to use his position for something good and meaningful.



Finally, Arnie decides that Tacho and Nayeli aren't lying about their quest. He sighs, knowing that Tacho and Nayeli will never make it back to San Diego. He wonders what the government can do to him and drives Nayeli and Tacho to his house in Yuma. He feeds them, and when night falls, he drives them all the way to San Diego.

When Arnie questions what the government could do to punish him, Arnie seems to think that helping Tacho and Nayeli get to San Diego won't have any serious consequences for him. However, he's clearly cognizant of the fact that he's taking a huge risk by helping Tacho and Nayeli, as Arnie chooses to drive them in the safety and anonymity of night.



EPILOGUE

Back in Tres Camarones, the bandidos park their big, black cars at the major corners of the village. Irma sends Chava and García-García to Mazatlán so the bandidos won't beat them up, and grandmothers keep their granddaughters inside. Irma promises the women that change will come soon. As the sun rises, women make purchases in the market, not making eye contact with the men in the cars.

Pepino rides his bike to the town square to sweep and clean windows and then to La Mano Caída to sweep and wash the windows. When he's finished, he climbs onto the roof and looks east towards Mazatlán. Suddenly, Pepino starts yelling, which alarms the old women—they fear the bad men will shoot him. He yells "Nayeli!" and then, "Nayeli and Tacho walking with a monkey!" He says the monkey has a big stick. The bandidos get out of their cars, and Pepino warns them that Nayeli and Tacho are bringing an army. From the distance, the women and Pepino hear the "monkey" yell, "I am Atómiko!" The women smile and know change has arrived.

Sending Chava and García-García to Mazatlán makes it extremely clear that even if Chava did return to Mexico as one of Irma's "magnificent seven," he's still useless in the face of the bandidos, and Irma's sense of female power holds strong. However, the bandidos' guns allow them to maintain power even over the women.



Nayeli finally accomplishes the bulk of her quest, which reinforces that her heroism is absolutely real and powerful. As a result of Nayeli's heroism, the village will presumably be able to evict the bandidos and reestablish safety and harmony within the city limits of Tres Camarones. Atómiko's presence suggests that even Irma was entirely successful in her quest—as Atómiko was reticent to go to Tres Camarones—which leaves the reader with the understanding that the women truly triumphed.





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