

Make Your Home Among Strangers



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JENNINE CAPÓ CRUCET

Jennine Capó Crucet, the first member of her family born in the United States, has made a name for herself over the last decade as a chronicler of the Cuban-American experience. Her debut story collection, *How to Leave Hialeah*, garnered praise from readers and critics alike. Her first novel, *Make Your Home Among Strangers*, was named a *New York Times Book Review* Editor's Choice, won the International Latino Book Award for Best Latino-themed Fiction in 2016, and was longlisted for the 2015 Center for Fiction First Novel Prize. Crucet, a professor of English language and literature at the University of Nebraska Lincoln, holds a BA from Cornell University and an MFA from the University of Minnesota. She is a frequent columnist for the *New York Times*, where she writes, among other things, about her hometown of Miami, her experiences as a first-generation college student, and her Cuban-refugee parents.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The most obvious real-life historical parallel in *Make Your Home Among Strangers* is the story of Elian Gonzalez. Though in the novel, Elian's story is loosely embellished and transmuted into the story of the fictional Ariel Hernandez, the structure of events surrounding the political fracas over one boy's chance at asylum remains more or less the same. In November of 1999, Elian and his mother set off from Cuba for Miami on a small aluminum boat, which flooded midway through the journey when an unforeseen storm hit. Elian survived by floating on an inner tube, and was eventually helped to shore along with two other survivors. Elian's paternal relatives sheltered him in Miami and advocated for him to stay in the United States—even as his father, back in Cuba, petitioned for the boy to be sent back. The ensuing legal battle and media frenzy called into question the United States' nebulous "wet-foot/dry-foot" rule, the intersection of the familial and the political, and the ethics of custodial battles. On April 22, 2000—the day before Easter—Border Patrol agents, who believed that Elian's relatives possessed weapons and would use force to keep the boy in their home, raided the house, secured Elian, and took him to the Andrews Air Force Base to be reunited with his father and ultimately returned to Castro's Cuba. The incident is suggested to have influenced the hotly contested 2000 presidential election, in which Florida was a major point of contention and subject to a recount, which secured George W. Bush's ascendance to the presidency.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Jennine Capó Crucet's debut work of fiction, *How to Leave Hialeah*, is a collection of short stories that wrestles with many of the same themes and narrative questions as *Make Your Home Among Strangers*. Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*, though set in New York and not Miami, similarly follows a Cuban-American family adapting to life stateside, using a nonlinear plot and point-of-view shifts. Nancy Osa's *Cuba 15* follows a young girl, Violet Paz, who longs to understand her Cuban-American family's complicated history, and who, like Lizet Ramirez, struggles with a "dual identity" born of wondering whether she is, or will ever be, "Cuban enough."

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Make Your Home Among Strangers*
- **When Written:** 2010s
- **When Published:** July 2016
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Coming of age novel
- **Setting:** The Miami neighborhoods of Hialeah and Little Havana; upstate New York and the fictional Rawlings College
- **Climax:** Government forces storm the Miami apartment where five-year-old Cuban refugee Ariel Hernandez is being cared for by relatives in order to deport him back to Cuba; Lizet and her mother, who has become a member of the radical Madres Para Justicia (Mothers For Justice) are present for the raid.
- **Antagonist:** Lizet's family (Lourdes, Ricky, Leidy) and Omar
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Stranger Than Fiction. Though Lizet Ramirez is more or less on her own as she settles into life at Rawlings College in *Make Your Home Among Strangers*, Jennine Capó Crucet's real-life story of being a first-generation college student is a little different. Unsure of how most families handled dropping their kids off at college, Jennine's family accompanied her to orientation at the prestigious Cornell University—and didn't leave for several days, during which they accompanied their daughter to classes, lunches, and more.



PLOT SUMMARY

Lizet Ramirez, a successful research scientist, reflects on her first year at Rawlings College. She begins her story on Thanksgiving Day, 1999—she and **Ariel Hernandez** are both arriving in Miami as the holiday comes to a close. Ariel

Hernandez is making headlines as the only survivor of an ill-fated journey by raft from Cuba to America; Lizet, a first-generation college student who has been struggling socially and academically throughout her first semester, has just returned home to Miami. Home, though, is perhaps even more complicated than school. Lizet's parents, Ricky and Lourdes, have recently split, and Lizet's older sister Leidy is raising her infant son Dante alone with no help from her deadbeat ex-boyfriend, Roly. Lizet spends the weekend debating if she should reveal that she is in the midst of an academic integrity trial up at school for inadvertently plagiarizing a section of an English paper. When she tries to discuss school with her family, they don't understand and still consider her choice to go to college in the first place as a tremendous betrayal. Lizet returns to school after just a couple of days without having seen either her father or her boyfriend, Omar, and without having told her family the truth of what's going on at school. Lizet leaves as the house where Ariel is staying—just down the block from Lourdes's new apartment in Little Havana—becomes the epicenter of city-wide rallies in support of Ariel's plea for asylum under the United States' "wet-foot/dry-foot" policy for Cuban refugees.

Lizet returns to Rawlings, and within a few days has resolved her plagiarism charges under the condition that she pull her grades up. With a newfound work ethic, Lizet starts studying harder than ever. Meanwhile, Lizet's privileged white roommate, Jillian, both wants to engage her in debates about the Ariel Hernandez situation and simultaneously believes Lizet, as a Cuban-American, is "too close" to the situation to offer an objective opinion. Meanwhile, Lizet strikes up a friendship with Ethan—though their relationship is slightly flirtatious, Lizet remains committed to her tenuous relationship with Omar.

Lizet returns home to Miami for Christmas to find that her mother has become totally preoccupied with Ariel Hernandez and his family. She spends her days making posters, attending rallies, and supporting Ariel's family—especially his older cousin, Caridaylis, a girl who is just about Lizet's age. Lizet is also constantly fending off insults from Leidy about how "white" she's acting since she went off to college, and when she finally tracks her father down, she discovers he is living in a dangerous part of town with a roommate she's never met. A few days into Lizet's visit, Omar presents her with a promise ring. Lizet accepts it, and despite her promise to herself to avoid sleeping with Omar until she knows more about her grades and her future at Rawlings, the two have sex. Lizet's grades finally arrive on New Year's Eve, and she is relieved to find that she has done well, and will not need to take any remedial courses at all. That night, Omar and Lizet go out clubbing to celebrate; Omar suggests that before Lizet returns to school, she pay a visit to his mother, so that she doesn't think something is wrong with Lizet "too." When Lizet asks what the "too" means, Omar

reveals that he, his mother, and more people in the community are concerned about Lourdes's obsession with Ariel Hernandez; she has apparently been featured on the local news several times, and has been spinning stories about how she brought her own daughters over from Cuba on a raft when Leidy and Lizet were really born in Miami. Lizet vows to go with her mother to the New Year's Day rally in support of Ariel and see for herself what's really going on.

At the rally, Lizet is surprised to find herself swept up in all of the emotional support for Ariel; she catches a glimpse of the boy himself and recognizes that for many Cuban-Americans, he is a mirror of their own struggles. Lizet is also surprised to realize that Lourdes really does seem to be friends with Ariel's family, including Caridaylis. Lizet begins to empathize with her mother; she feels angry that Omar—not to mention Leidy, Ricky, and Zoila—have made disparaging remarks about Lourdes's preoccupation with Ariel. All Lourdes is doing, Lizet thinks, is trying to survive in her new neighborhood and adapt to her recent separation from Ricky and Lizet's departure for college.

On Tuesday, there is another rally, and Ariel's uncle reveals that Ariel's father back in Cuba has been granted custody of the boy, and he will be deported in two weeks. The entire crowd gathered in front of Ariel's house erupts in wails and howls—Lourdes is so upset that she collapses to the ground in a faint. She is about to be trampled in the chaos, and Lizet attempts to wake her mother up, but Lourdes's friends shoo Lizet away—Lizet realizes that no one there knows that Lizet is her daughter. During Lizet's last few days in Miami, Ariel's family sues for temporary custody; when Lizet lands in New York, on her way back to Rawlings, she sees on the news that the government has granted it to them. In her first few days back at Rawlings, Lizet longs to push the affair aside and focus on her studies. She is enjoying her new lab class, taught by a research scientist named Dr. Kaufmann. As Lizet thrives in her studies, though, she struggles to negotiate her friendship with Ethan now that she is "sort of" engaged to Omar, and worries when Jillian pressures her into securing a summer internship. Lizet is doing so well in lab that Dr. Kaufmann offers her a summer research internship in Santa Barbara; Lizet is delighted by the news but is unsure how to tell her parents, who surely won't be pleased.

One afternoon, Lizet walks past the TV lounge in her dorm building to see that her mother is on the national news on behalf of a group Lizet has never heard of: Madres Para Justicia, or Mothers For Justice. Lizet is confused, upset, and even enraged; in all of her phone calls with Leidy and Omar the last several weeks, they have told her that Lourdes was barely involved with Ariel and his family anymore. When some other girls from Lizet's dorm who are watching the broadcast question Lizet's claim that it's her own mother on the television—and more broadly insinuate that Lizet is unqualified

to speak on the Ariel issue as an American—Lizet lies and tells them she was born in Cuba. Lizet’s lies are bolstered when, miraculously, her mother begins talking on the television about bringing her children over from Cuba, in a lie of her own. Over the next several days, Lizet makes sure to ask during her phone calls home how Lourdes specifically is doing; Leidy insists that Lourdes is fine. Lizet wants to talk to Ethan about her mounting problems, but he reveals that he has been accepted to Berkeley for graduate school. Lizet has trouble being happy for Ethan—she feels sad he’s going to go away soon, and realizes this must be how her parents felt when Lizet herself was accepted to school. Ethan and Lizet have a terrible fight; with no one to talk to, Lizet begins shutting everyone else out, and leaves even Professor Kaufmann hanging by refusing to accept the prestigious internship. With things deteriorating at school and at home alike, Lizet books a flight home for Easter, planning to try and talk some sense into her mother.

When Omar picks Lizet up from the airport, the two end up getting in a huge fight during which Lizet asks why Omar wouldn’t have told her the truth about Lourdes—he insists that there was nothing Lizet could do from all the way up at school. Omar urges her to consider that it was her own selfish choice to leave Miami in the first place, and thus her fault that Lourdes has gotten in so deep. The next day, at Lourdes’s apartment, Lizet confronts Leidy over her dishonesty concerning Lourdes and demands to know the truth. Leidy reveals that Lourdes has been spending all her time over at Ariel’s, praying around-the-clock as part of the Madres Para Justicia’s vigil, which will last through Easter weekend. Lourdes brings Lizet to a house across the street from Ariel’s, where gets into a hostile confrontation with a boy named Victor that she knows from high school; he calls Lizet a “sellout” for leaving Miami and implies she’s only returned to spy on the Madres. That night, Lizet falls asleep on the sofa. Just before dawn, Lizet is awoken by a woman screaming, and runs outside to see what is happening; there has been a raid on Ariel’s family’s house, and Lizet watches as Ariel is loaded into a van and taken away to be reunited with his father. Lizet runs into Ariel’s house looking for Lourdes—she finds her cradling Caridaylis in Ariel’s racecar bed, and realizes that her mother has replaced both her and Leidy with Caridaylis. She heads home as the sun rises. The next day, no one will take Lizet to the airport except for Omar. As he drops her at the terminal, he asks her if their relationship is over, and she confirms that it is.

Back at Rawlings, Lizet gets into another confrontation with Ethan. She knows she could tell him the truth about what’s been going on with her, but ultimately decides it’s easier, and less painful, for her to just let him go. Professor Kaufmann asks why Lizet is not going to participate in the internship, and Lizet reveals that she needs to be at home in Miami with her family this summer. Kaufmann doesn’t seem to understand why Lizet is sacrificing her own happiness for her family, and urges her to

reconsider taking the internship one last time. Nonetheless, at the end of the semester, Lizet returns home, where she spends her days watching Dante and driving Lourdes around to protests and rallies, despite the fact that Ariel has been deported. After several weeks of this, Lizet reaches a breaking point, and calls Professor Kaufmann to ask if she can take the internship after all—she books a 600-dollar flight for the following day. When she breaks the news to Leidy and Lourdes, Leidy becomes enraged, but Lourdes coldly states that if Lizet wants to choose herself over her family, she should be allowed to. Lourdes calls Ricky and tells him to come Lizet, who is no longer welcome under her roof. The next day, after a tearful goodbye with Ricky at the airport, Lizet boards a plane bound for Santa Barbara.

Some years later, Lizet is preparing for the possibility that her work will soon take her to Cuba to study the pristine coral reefs there. She feels that going to the island her parents left—and can never return to—would be a huge betrayal, but at the same time, knows now that she must pursue her own goals and dreams no matter the cost. She reflects on the 2000 election—she voted via absentee ballot from her dorm room. The race between George W. Bush and Al Gore was complicated by the fact that rumors had spread that Al Gore ordered the raid on Ariel’s house; as Lizet punched the hole in her ballot, she never could have known the voting scandal that would unfold in the wake of the election, or the fact that though her vote in all likelihood would not be counted, her choice in the election would hurt no matter what she chose.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Lizet Ramirez – The protagonist of the novel, Lizet Ramirez is a first-generation Cuban-American and the first person in her family to go off to college. Lizet is intense, reflective, and deeply insecure. Throughout the course of the novel, she is torn between her childhood home of Miami and her new home at Rawlings College in New York. Lizet is profoundly saddened by the fact that her family sees her decision to go to college as a “betrayal,” and wonders constantly why they can’t congratulate her for her unprecedented success; she was the first person in her high school’s history to be admitted to Rawlings, and yet her parents and sister see her choices as selfish ones that neglect their own feelings, hopes, and dreams. Throughout the novel, Lizet is torn between the desire to strike out on her own, make a name for herself at Rawlings, and fit into the new world she’s exploring, and the longing for the familiarity, comfort, and ease of home. Lizet’s inability to translate her personal and academic successes, failures, frustrations, and joys to her family and friends back home wear on her as the book goes on. As Lizet wrestles with her own problems up at school, she finds herself pulled back time and time again to Miami, where her

mother, Lourdes, is getting dangerously close to the emotional and political vortex at the center of the **Ariel Hernandez** case, her sister, Leidy, is flailing amidst the isolating, demanding work of being a single mother, and her father, Ricky, is systematically shutting himself off from everyone he knew and loved in a rejection of the community around him. In the end, Lizet must choose between staying true to herself and being who her family wants her to be.

Leidy Ramirez – Leidy Ramirez is Lizet’s older sister and Lourdes and Ricky’s daughter. A single mother to Dante, Leidy is practical, hardworking, and has never entertained dreams of achieving the things Lizet dreams of achieving: an education, independence, worldliness. Leidy longed so badly to settle down straight out of high school with her then-boyfriend Roly, that she stopped taking her birth control pills and became pregnant, but her plan backfired when Roly declared that he wanted nothing to do with the baby—or Leidy. Now, Leidy lives with Lourdes in an apartment in Little Havana and works at a hair salon. Clearly tired and stressed out by her life, Leidy takes her frustrations out on Lizet, whom she mocks for talking like a “white girl” and focusing on her studies instead of her family. It seems Leidy loves Lizet but is incapable of understanding or supporting the choices her sister has made—just as Lizet is ultimately incapable of understanding or supporting Leidy’s.

Lourdes Ramirez (Lizet’s Mother) – Lourdes Ramirez is Lizet and Leidy’s mother and Ricky’s wife. Lourdes, devastated by Lizet’s departure for college and her husband’s abandonment, seeks to fill the void left in her life by throwing herself into the **Ariel Hernandez** affair, showing up to protests, rallies, and vigils day in and day out and slowly working her way into the Hernandez’s inner circle, often through deceit. As Lizet and Leidy watch Lourdes become increasingly absorbed in Ariel’s case—and drift further and further from the truth of her own life as well as her allegiance to her own family—they become concerned about her mental well-being. Lizet and Leidy are mystified by Lourdes’s ability to worm her way into the lives of the Hernandez family, especially Caridaylis, Ariel’s cousin and primary caretaker in America. Ultimately, Lourdes’s involvement in the Ariel Hernandez affair is an attempt—conscious or unconscious—to mitigate her profound sense of emotional isolation by losing herself in a narrative that is not her own.

Ricky Ramirez (Lizet’s Father) – Ricky Ramirez is Lizet and Leidy’s father. He is a Cuban immigrant who dropped out of high school to start a family with Lourdes when she became pregnant over twenty years ago. Ricky has always worked hard on behalf of his family and has for a long time been striving to make a better life for them—and yet, when Lizet decides to go off to college, he realizes that his marriage is irreparably flawed and decides to leave the family. Ricky is stoic and emotionally unavailable, and Lizet’s attempts to connect with him are fraught with pain, distrust, and misunderstanding. Ricky’s

assertion that Lizet has “betrayed” the family by opting to go off to college is a way of lessening his own betrayal of them in the form of leaving and selling off the home the girls grew up in. Ricky does have a soft spot for Lizet, though, and in the end he is the only one who supports her, even marginally, as she chooses to continue to pursue her education, career, and personal growth away from Miami.

Omar – Lizet’s high-school sweetheart, Omar, is a tough but sensitive boy—obsessed with his Acura Integra, Omar goes through the motions of school and work hoping all the while that Lizet will return to Miami and settle down with him. Omar loves Lizet intensely, and their passion for one another is undeniable—yet she finds herself unwilling to commit to Omar, afraid that choosing a life with him will preclude her from pursuing her own education and finding out who she truly is, even as Omar attempts to tighten his grip on her each time she visits home.

Jillian – Jillian is Lizet’s freshman roommate at Rawlings College in New York. Jillian is a beautiful, privileged girl from “the good part” of New Jersey, who has a lot of high-minded—but deeply offensive—ideas about race and identity. She introduces Lizet to her friends as her “Cuban” roommate, highlighting and accessorizing Lizet’s otherness, but then calls Lizet “racist” when Lizet says that Jillian is not qualified to make assessments about the **Ariel Hernandez** affair. Jillian is not overtly cruel to Lizet, but rather pelts her with micro-aggressions that confuse and destabilize her sense of self. Crucet uses Jillian to demonstrate how difficult it is for immigrants and people of color to convince other, more privileged people—namely, white people—that their own stories and opinions are valuable, and to show how insidious the effects of such treatment are.

Ethan – Ethan is a senior at Rawlings College who is drawn to Lizet after they meet at the library. Ethan knows that Lizet has a boyfriend back home, and respects her boundaries; nonetheless, he wants to spend time with her, and invites her to multiple on-campus events, parties, and study sessions. As the two grow closer, a tension develops between them, and yet Lizet denies her feelings for Ethan until it is too late—when he is accepted into a Ph.D. program in Berkeley, California, Lizet is visibly upset, and Ethan is in turn hurt by her inability to be happy for him because of her unvoiced, unresolved feelings. Ethan and Lizet’s relationship ends in an anticlimax, with Ethan heading off to Berkeley with barely a word of goodbye to Lizet. She attempts to repair the relationship via email, but Ethan, it seems, has already moved on.

Professor Kaufmann – Professor Kaufmann is Lizet’s professor during her second-semester practical lab class. Dr. Kaufmann notices Lizet’s enthusiasm and aptitude for lab research early on and takes Lizet under her wing, offering her the chance to participate in a selective research program out in Santa Barbara. Professor Kaufmann clearly wants Lizet to pursue her

newfound interest in biology and lab research, and when Lizet—unwilling to burden the professor with the reality of her demanding home situation and lack of access to funds—begins shutting Kaufmann out, the professor does not give up on her student.

Caridaylis – Caridaylis is [Ariel Hernandez's](#) cousin. A young woman not much older than Lizet, Caridaylis becomes Ariel's primary caretaker and most fierce protector during his stay in the United States. It is eventually revealed that Caridaylis and Lourdes have an extremely close relationship—discovering this fact makes Lizet feel as if her mother has tried to replace her not just with Ariel but Caridaylis, too.

Victor – Victor is a young man about Lizet's age who attended her high school. Victor's grandmother is involved with the [Ariel Hernandez](#) case and the Madres Para Justicia—and by proxy, so is Victor. Lizet meets him when she goes with Lourdes to Ariel's apartment complex, and he speaks to her cruelly, calling her a “sellout” for leaving Miami and accusing her of spying on the people working on Ariel's behalf so that she can report on them.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Dante – Leidy's infant son.

Roly – Dante's father and Leidy's ex-boyfriend from high school, the aloof Roly wants nothing to do with either of them and is never seen within the novel's pages.

Jaquelin Medina – A Latina student from California whom Lizet befriends.

Caroline – A girl who lives in Lizet's dorm at Rawlings.

Tracy – A girl who lives in Lizet's dorm at Rawlings.

Dean Geller – One of the deans who sits on the Academic Integrity Committee at Rawlings. She shows Lizet some empathy and kindness, whereas the other members of the committee talk down to Lizet and accuse her of profound ignorance.

Linda – A kind administrative secretary at Rawlings.

Fito – Ricky's brother.

Zoila – Zoila and Lourdes are cousins, but they refer to one another as sisters. When she first arrived from Cuba, Lourdes lived with Zoila and Zoila's mother.

Rafael – Ricky's new roommate.

David A police officer who Leidy begins dating and then marries near the end of the book.

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.



HOME

The central theme at the heart of Jennine Capó Crucet's *Make Your Home Among Strangers* is that of questioning what constitutes—and what can become—a “home.” As Lizet Ramirez, the daughter of Cuban immigrants, prepares to leave her hometown of Miami for her first year at the prestigious Rawlings College in New York, her home life crumbles: the house she grew up in is sold, her parents suddenly divorce, and her family scatters. At college, Lizet finds herself pulled back towards Miami several times throughout the year as a national news crisis concerning a five-year-old immigrant from Cuba threatens to tear her family apart even more. Throughout the novel, Lizet is forced to reimagine what home is, and to wonder, as she watches her family struggling just to survive in Miami, whether the city was ever really a home for her. Ultimately, Crucet's argument about what constitutes home is folded into her novel's title: one must often make a home out of nothing and among strangers, discarding all previous conceptions of what home means in the process.

As the book unfolds, Lizet returns to her hometown of Miami three times throughout the school year—and, with each trip, feels the distance between her hometown as she remembers it and as it actually is widening. Lizet is reorganizing her concept of “home” and coming to terms with the uneasy idea that one's home must often be made or constructed. This arduous becoming reflects the journey of Lizet's own parents, Ricky and Lourdes, who made their home among strangers in a new country after escaping the dangers of Cuba many years ago. “They had carved their names and address on me, and I would come back,” reads the epigraph to the novel, taken from Maxine Hong Kingston's [The Woman Warrior](#). With this, Crucet begins the novel on a note of foreboding and promise, and shows throughout the text how Lizet is pulled home to Miami again and again, even as she is struggling to make a new home for herself, independently from her family, up at Rawlings. Lizet is the first member of her family to attend college, and is doing so with little emotional or financial support from her family. Her parents see her decision to leave home as an emotional betrayal and a financial burden, while her older sister Leidy—a single mother raising her infant son with no help from the child's father—sees her sister's ambition as an indictment of her own life choices. When Lizet returns for Thanksgiving in order to surprise her family, she quickly realizes that her presence in Miami is not a celebrated homecoming, but rather something that adds to the tension her fractured family is already experiencing. Lizet doesn't feel at home in Miami anymore—least of all because her mother and sister have



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes

moved into one shabby apartment while her father has moved into another. Both the physical and emotional atmosphere of Lizet's home have evaporated, leaving Lizet feeling stranded, alone, and indeed homeless. Moreover, Lizet finds that she cannot even communicate with her family in a way that feels familiar. Her sister criticizes her "white girl" speech and her mother, preoccupied to the point of obsession with the story of **Ariel Hernandez**—a five-year-old Cuban refugee whose mother died on the boat over to Miami, leaving Ariel at the mercy of the US immigration forces—is too distracted to even try to ask Lizet simple questions about how school is going. Lizet begins to wonder whether her home has changed, or she has—a question which will pursue her throughout the novel as she travels back and forth in search of the feeling of home.

Lizet has trouble making a home for herself at college, too; though the smartest girl at her hard-knocks Hialeah high school, Lizet is woefully underprepared for university academic protocol and has become embroiled in a plagiarism charge that threatens her standing within the school, making her feel reluctant to even try to call the place home for fear she could be kicked out at any moment. Lizet struggles socially, too—her roommate, Jillian, always introduces Lizet as her "Cuban" roommate, making Lizet feel othered and uncomfortable for reasons she can't quite articulate. Lizet only feels at home at college on a few rare occasions; one night, she is invited to dance party, and takes advantage of the chance to dress up as if she is going clubbing in Miami. At the party, though, Lizet has trouble enjoying herself, and finds that she cannot replicate the experiences of her home in her new East Coast college town, surrounded by her new college friends. She is stuck in a remote place between two ideas of home, neither of which really make her feel safe, seen, or supported.

In the end, Crucet does not go easy on Lizet—or her readers. Lizet's next two trips home, for Christmas and for Easter, mirror the first trip in that her family continues to grow apart from one another while Lizet becomes increasingly desperate for the trappings of her home and her childhood, even as it becomes evident that though she can return "home" to Miami, she will never be able to truly return home again. Ultimately Lizet must distance herself even farther from home both physically and psychologically in order to make a new "home" for herself; when she takes a coveted internship position in Santa Barbara, California instead of traveling home to Miami for the summer, she abandons one home in hopes of making a new one among strangers—just as her parents did when they came to America from Cuba so many years ago.

just a few of the types of loneliness and seclusion that Lizet and her family reckon with as the novel unfolds. As Lizet, the daughter of Cuban immigrants, searches for a way to end her own feelings of isolation—and watches her family do the same—she eventually realizes that perhaps these feelings of loneliness will never be erased. As Jennine Capó Crucet explores her characters' profound feelings of isolation and the inherently isolating nature of the immigrant experience, she ultimately argues that though the impulse to mitigate isolation and seek out community and validation is strong, doing so often ends up having the opposite effect, secluding one even further from the things and people they love.

Lizet's emotional and cultural isolation up at Rawlings College in New York is at the forefront of Crucet's exploration into different kinds of loneliness and seclusion. However, as Lizet wrestles with the feeling of being cut off from the cultural touchstones of her hometown and the emotional support of her once-tight-knit family, the supporting characters' own reckonings with feelings of isolation come to the forefront of the narrative to demonstrate how, in many cases, little can be done to make one feel less alone in the world. **Ariel Hernandez** is much a more a symbol throughout the novel than a character, and yet so much of the book's action revolves around him and the isolation his situation represents. Taken from Cuba by his mother and other family members at just five years old, Ariel was one of the only members of their journey to survive the trip to America, and was picked up by two men fishing just off the coast of Miami. Due to a "wet foot-dry foot" policy which states that Cuban refugees are allowed to stay in America if they make it to shore unassisted, Ariel does not qualify for asylum—and yet his family members in Miami strenuously work to secure his right to stay, even as his father, back in Cuba, pressures the American government to send Ariel home. The divisive nature of the debate over what should happen to Ariel places a child at its center—and doesn't for a moment consider how isolating that must be for an individual so young. Like Lizet, Ariel is in a liminal state; unable to call either Cuba or Miami home, he is both logistically and physically isolated, and his isolation is further compounded by the media circus that soon springs up around him. In an attempt to prevent him from being "isolated" in communist Cuba, Ariel's family in Miami actually isolates him further—though as the fight for Ariel's right to asylum rages on, more and more characters become casualties of his case's isolating nature as well.

On her visit home for Christmas, Lizet flies into Miami International to find her mother, Lourdes, waiting for her in the airport terminal. Lizet immediately sees her mother in a new way: "a tacky-looking woman, the Cuban lady the girls on my floor [at school] would've seen, alone in an airport." As Lizet sees her mother in this new and unflattering light, Crucet uses the moment as a metaphor for the often-isolating perception shifts that occur when one sees and experiences new things.



ISOLATION

The majority of the characters in *Make Your Home Among Strangers* struggle with intense feelings of isolation. Cultural isolation, physical isolation from loved ones, emotional isolation, and intellectual isolation are

Lizet's isolation in this moment is terrible and palpable. At school, she is culturally isolated, but back at home, she finds herself removed from her family, too—separated from them by the new things she has seen and learned, and the ways in which she has had to reframe herself in order to adjust to life at Rawlings. As the novel unfolds, Lizet attempts to return to her family again and again in order to mend fences with them, but doing so simply reminds them each time of her initial choice to leave—and the fact that she will always have to return to college and her own individual pursuits. As the novel progresses, Lizet's relationship with her mother deteriorates and falters as Lourdes becomes increasingly swept up in the movement aiming to keep Ariel Hernandez in the United States—a movement that she has thrown herself into, it becomes evident, in order to try to mitigate the feelings of loneliness and isolation that assaulted her when Lizet left for college.

Lizet's older sister Leidy also struggles with intense feelings of isolation. She is raising her infant son Dante in her mother's apartment, unable to secure any emotional, financial, or logistical support from her high school sweetheart, Roly. Though teen motherhood is far from unheard of in Leidy and Lizet's community, Leidy is isolated even from other young mothers like herself. Cooped up in her mother's apartment with no one, it seems, going through what she's going through to keep her company, Leidy's loneliness is compounded by her inability to understand Lizet's desire to get out of Miami, act like a "white girl," and pursue goals other than marriage and family. Leidy, like her mother, attempts to mitigate her isolation by reaching out to Roly time and time again, even going so far as to show up at his house unannounced. Each attempt to get closer to her child's father, however, only ends in rejection, forcing Leidy to seek help from her mother and from Lizet in order to ensure her child is cared for.

In the end, Lizet chooses to more or less embrace the isolation that has tried and tested her through her first year of school. She accepts an opportunity to travel to Santa Barbara for an internship opportunity, leaning into feelings of loneliness and seclusion and learning to see solitary pursuits as a gift rather than a burden. Having witnessed her family and community struggling to comprehend how isolation functions and failing to rid themselves of the feeling of being alone in the world, Lizet at last chooses to accept that life is often lonely, and endeavors to accept this fact with grace and prioritize her own needs—even if doing so does not make her feel any less alone.



IMMIGRATION AND ASSIMILATION

The question of what it means not just to immigrate to a new country, but to assimilate into the fabric of one, is a central part of the narrative of *Make Your Home Among Strangers*. Lizet, who was born in America, struggles in her hometown of Miami with feelings of being not

Cuban enough; at Rawlings College, though, as one of the few students of color there, Lizet's "Cuban-ness" (and therefore, on the predominantly white Rawlings campus, her otherness) is constantly pointed out to her by her white peers—especially as the story of Cuban refugee **Ariel Hernandez** grips the country, and Lizet's peers alternately beg her to offer her "authentic Cuban" opinion on the matter, or dismiss her as being too close to the situation to comment on it objectively. Set against the sprawling, emotional legal battle for Ariel's protection on American soil, *Make Your Home Among Strangers* examines the toll that both immigration and assimilation take on individuals, families, and larger communities. Cruet ultimately argues that immigrants—and their children, whether born in their family's old country or their new one—will be pressured almost nonstop either to assimilate or to resist assimilation. It is at the confusing intersection of these two directives that Cruet's protagonist finds herself.

Cruet uses her characters—many of whom are first-generation immigrants—to highlight the cruel sacrifice demanded of all immigrants: leave your country, family, and heritage behind and seek a new life, or risk danger and violence in order to stay in touch with the familiar and remain loyal to your roots. Lizet faces this crisis on a much smaller scale—as a first-generation college student, she is being made to choose between her own edification and advancement and her loyalty to her family and her hometown. In choosing to attend college—and not just any college, but the prestigious, far-flung, mostly-white Rawlings—she is decidedly pursuing a course of assimilation. Her parents, Ricky and Lourdes, both refugees, see their child's choice as a betrayal. In their eyes, Lizet is abandoning the Cuban-American community in Miami to go on to bigger things, and in doing so is choosing a path that will no doubt estrange her from her culture at least to some degree. Lizet longs for more than her family has; in seeking it, she takes a path that she knows will wound them, but sees a liberal arts education and, by proxy, assimilation into the American intellectual mainstream, as the surest way towards her dreams.

Lizet's family, meanwhile, is caught between the desire to assimilate and the desire to remain loyal to their culture, community, and heritage. Lizet's mother has recently moved to the Little Havana neighborhood, which Lizet feels is a parody of a Cuban neighborhood; when tour buses drive through, Lizet believes that the Cuban men playing dominos on the street are performing for the tourists in a way, confirming other people's (white people's, namely) expectations and in this way both bringing their culture to America and warping it, making it more palatable, by putting it on display. Lizet's sister Leidy chastises Lizet for speaking like a "white girl" and putting on educated airs, not realizing that her sister, up at college, is held up as a token student of color and often introduced as "Cuban" before anything else. Lizet's family condescends to her, believing she wants to assimilate and leave them—and her culture—behind,

but don't comprehend the ways in which Lizet will always, in some spheres, be othered, singled out, and prevented from doing just that. The tension between Lizet's family's perception of her choice to assimilate and the fact that Lizet alone realizes she will perhaps never quite be able to demonstrates the immense amount of pressure immigrants face. Lizet comes to realize that even in putting her cultural and familial obligations on the backburner, she will still be called upon to speak for all Cubans—and her family—in the mostly white arenas to which her career will take her.

During a visit with her father on one of her trips home to Miami, Lizet's father tells her she's not Cuban—she's American. The confused Lizet struggles to understand how this can be; at school, she is *the* Cuban girl, the authority on all things Miami and all things Ariel Hernandez. She attempts to explain this to her father—"other people think I'm Cuban," she says—but her father seems weary and unwilling to debate the matter. Lizet feels pulled in two directions, just as so many immigrants eventually do. Not Cuban enough for her father but so noticeably "other" at her hegemonic East Coast college, Lizet must choose whether to assimilate even further or to try to wind her way back into her roots, even as her own parent suggests she is firmly an American. Through Lizet, Crucet demonstrates the often unattainable, unassuageable pressures immigrants face in their new homes.



FAMILIAL DUTY AND BETRAYAL

As Lizet Ramirez grows over the course of the novel, which charts her first year in college, her ambitions expand. Her first year at Rawlings

College in New York tests and tries her, but she ultimately encounters teachers such as Professor Kaufmann (and friends such as Ethan) who take a vested interest in her success and attempt to help her seize her own potential. Lizet, a first-generation college student and the daughter of Cuban immigrants, has trouble getting her family to understand her desire for more. As she chases down opportunities that will broaden her horizons and help her to survive in the world of academia and research science, Lizet is forced to confront the idea of familial duty—what her family owes her, and what she owes to them in return. Ultimately, Crucet shows Lizet, having chosen to leave her broken family for the summer and pursue an internship on the West Coast, struggling with the realization that whether she had chosen to "betray" her own ambition or her family's needs, she would still be hurting someone either way. In this way, Crucet—herself a first-generation college student—argues that it is necessary to prioritize oneself, even if such action feels like, in Lizet's own words, a "betrayal."

Crucet's book is in many ways an exploration of what constitutes betrayal—and whether prioritizing one's duty to oneself is more a fulfillment of a kind of familial duty than the betrayal it might seem to be. Lizet's parents, Ricky and Lourdes,

use the word betrayal "over and over again" to describe their daughter's decision to go off to college. They say it "so much that the word stop[s] meaning anything" to Lizet eventually—she comes to understand that the only way her parents can communicate how hurt they are by her choice to leave them and pursue her own education is through that one loaded word. Lizet's parents see her choice to go off to college as a betrayal for several reasons: they are hurt that she wants to leave them, they are burdened by the financial demand college imposes on them, and they are confused as to why Lizet is placing herself ahead of the rest of her family when they have worked so hard to secure a safe life for her in America. They see Lizet's choice as a breakage of the bonds of familial duty; they believe she owes them more, though what, precisely, that is never quite made clear. The nebulous nature of their frustration and disappointment deepens Lizet's desire to strike out on her own; as her parents express their mounting frustrations with her, Lizet longs to escape their ire, and thus does, actually, ultimately wind up abandoning them when they need her most.

Lizet's pursuit of her own education is something she longs to be congratulated for. She wishes her parents would be proud of her for getting into such a selective school, and is instead heartbroken when they see her choice to leave Miami as a treacherous one. All throughout her first year of college, as Lizet navigates the ins and outs of Rawlings alone, she wishes her parents would be supportive of her in the ways her friends' parents are. When she secures a nomination to participate in a prestigious internship, she cannot move herself to pick up the phone and tell her parents. Instead, she imagines how the conversation would go if she were to call her roommate Jillian's parents instead: "Oh my god, honey! That's fantastic! When does it start? Maybe we can come out at the end and make a vacation out of it. Oh, sweetheart, what an opportunity! We're thrilled for you, so thrilled..." Lizet tortures herself with visions of parents who "recognize good news when they hear it," and it becomes clear that she feels her family has shirked their duty to her—their inability to understand or appreciate her achievements is its own betrayal, and this, in part, perhaps fuels Lizet's actions towards the end of the novel. Lizet decides not to take the internship opportunity, at first, feeling she's needed more at home, where Lizet's sister Leidy is struggling to raise her son Dante alone and Lourdes is reeling from the government's decision to deport **Ariel Hernandez**. After several weeks home in Miami, though, Lizet realizes how badly she wants the spot, and calls the program to inform them she's coming after all. When she breaks the news to her family, her sister rails against her for abandoning them—and not even having "the balls to go away and stay away," like their father Ricky—and her mother kicks her out of the house. Again, Lizet's choice to further her own success has been met not with the congratulations and support she craves, but with an accusation of betrayal yet again. Her family cannot see that her desire to

make more for herself carries with it an invisible weight, along with the promise that because of Lizet's own sacrifice, things will be better for further generations of their family in the future.

In the novel's conclusion, Lizet reveals that the choice she made "the summer [she] left [her family] behind" has reverberated through the years. Her mother never formally forgave her for leaving, and Lizet has been forced to reckon, time and time again, with the realization that no matter what she had chosen that fateful summer—or that first year of college more broadly—she would have hurt herself. Leaving her family behind created one kind of pain, but sacrificing her own ambitions would have engendered another. By concluding the novel on the note of this massive revelation, Crucet solidifies her argument that if things are going to be painful either way, it is necessary to prioritize oneself—even if it seems like the selfish choice to do so, education, edification, and advancement are fulfillments of familial duty in their own way.



SYMBOLS

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



ARIEL HERNANDEZ

Ariel Hernandez, a five-year-old Cuban immigrant, symbolizes the ways in which immigrants'

experiences, opinions, and histories are twisted for personal, political, or ideological gain. Although Ariel becomes in many ways the emotional and political epicenter of the novel, he has no role in its action—he is infantilized, politicized, judged, and used by every major character in the book without having any say in his own story.

Ariel, whose mother attempted to bring him to America but died in the crossing, is found floating off the coast of Miami by fishermen. Paternal relatives in Miami take the child in and insist that he should stay; as the months wear on, however, his father back in Cuba petitions for his return, and the United States government becomes the decider of one boy's fate. As the U.S. government takes up Ariel's case, so too do the citizens of Miami, desperate for him to stay. To them, Ariel is more than one boy—he symbolizes their collective experience, the hope for an escape from the brutal regime in Cuba, and the possibility of a happy ending for so many still toiling under a dictatorship.

Ariel Hernandez's case closely mirrors the real-life case of Elian Gonzalez, a young Cuban boy who came to Miami in a similar way to Ariel, and whose father, back in Cuba, did ultimately succeed in getting his son back. The case was extremely divisive, and the Miami community was torn apart by the painful, emotional spectacle that culminated in a border patrol

raid on the apartment where Elian was being sheltered by Miami relatives. Elian, too, was denied agency in his own case; when in America, any picture of him smiling was said to have been manipulated by his paternal relatives to make it seem like he was happy, and when he returned to Cuba, given a hero's welcome, any joy he expressed back in his home country was said to have been manipulated or forced by the Cuban government.

In using Ariel's story (and Elian's) throughout her novel, Jennine Capó Crucet constructs a powerful central symbol that points out the hypocrisy and cruelty inherent in peddling, dramatizing, and scrutinizing a child's story—or the story of anyone who either cannot speak for themselves or is not given the space, freedom, and respect needed to do so.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Picador edition of *Make Your Home Among Strangers* published in 2015.

Chapter 2 Quotes

Even to someone from Hialeah, Little Havana was a joke back then, the part of Miami only the most recent of refugees called home, a place tour buses drove through, where old Cuban men played dominos for tourists and thought that made them celebrities. But none of these geographical distinctions mattered at Rawlings. There, when people asked, So where are you from? and I said, Hialeah, they answered: Wait, *where?* And so I gave them a new answer: Miami, I'm from Miami. Oh, they'd say, But where are you *from* from? I was *from* from Miami, but eventually I learned to say what they were trying to figure out: My parents are from Cuba. No, I've never been. Yes, I still have family there. No, we don't know Fidel Castro. Once I learned what I was supposed to say, it became a chant, like the address I'd memorized but didn't think of as home.

Related Characters: Lizet Ramirez (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

As Lizet returns home to Miami for Thanksgiving midway through her first semester in college, she reflects on the nuances of her hometown and the vastly different neighborhoods, each of which has a distinct personality of its own. Up at school on the East Coast, no one is familiar with Miami's neighborhoods enough to know what Lizet means when she says she's from Hialeah or Little

Havana—she has been forced to adapt her speech and change the technicality of where she is “from,” and even that answer isn’t good enough for her mostly white classmates who demand to know Lizet’s cultural roots as a young woman of color. Lizet has adapted, too, to this invasive line of questioning, developing automatic, rapid-fire answers that allow her to survive in the stifling social atmosphere of her prestigious college.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☝️ [...] I started to tell anyone who asked that Omar was a monster. He was an animal—more like an animal than a human. It seemed like what other people wanted to hear. [...] Other girls would feel bad for me and claim they understood: the girl who'd made everyone hot chocolate, Caroline, even went so far as to mention she'd read [The House on Mango Street](#) in AP English. She said she knew about *the kinds of relationships that plagued my community*, had nodded in a solemn way when I told her yes, Omar could be rough. [...]

I was happy to have something to add to those late nights in the dorm's common room when I was otherwise quiet, to be included in conversations even if I didn't totally understand the part I was playing. When everyone around you thinks they already know what your life is like, it's easier to play in to that idea—it was easier for me to make Omar sound like a psycho papi chulo who wanted to control me. At the very least, it made trying to make friends simpler than it would've been had I tried to be a more accurate version of myself.

Related Characters: Lizet Ramirez (speaker), Omar, Caroline

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 65-66

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lizet reflects on the other ways in which she has twisted the details of her life to make it seem more palatable and comprehensible to her new, predominantly white friend group at Rawlings. They have all read novels and heard stereotypes about Latino men and their relationships with women—painting her sensitive, complicated boyfriend Omar as a stereotypical “psycho papi chulo” and turning him into a one-dimensional character is “simpler” for Lizet than rejecting her racist friends’ assumptions about what her life in Miami is like. Sacrificing her friends and family back home in this way gives Lizet an in with her new friends. In order to survive and thrive at Rawlings, Lizet feels she must warp the details of her life to

align with her friends’ expectations, even if it requires existing as a false version of herself throughout the entirety of her academic career there.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☝️ —You're too connected to the whole thing.

I tossed the book on the desk behind me and said—too loud and leaning too far forward—What the fuck does that mean, connected? I'm not fucking related to the kid.

—Don't get ghetto, Liz, she said. I'm just saying that, no offense, but as a Cuban person, you can't really expect people to believe that you'll be completely rational about this.

She held the water bottle loosely now, between only a couple fingers. I tried to match her ease by leaning back in my chair.

—I was born in this country, I said, not knowing what point I was trying to make.

I righted my chair and tried again. I said, Look, I would argue that I - I can speak more intelligently about this than you because I know more about it than you ever could.

—Wow, she said, her water bottle heading back to her mouth. Let's just leave that there before you get any more racist.

Related Characters: Lizet Ramirez, Jillian (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 89-90

Explanation and Analysis

After Lizet returns from Thanksgiving, her white roommate, Jillian, wants to hear all about what people in Miami think about the Ariel Hernandez case. Throughout the novel, Jillian treats Lizet as an authority on all things Cuban, all things Miami, and all things Ariel—and yet rejects her opinions and suggests she's too close to the situation to respond “rationally” to it. As Lizet listens to Jillian manipulate the conversation and delude her into believing she has nothing useful to say about the matter, being as “close” as she is, Lizet herself becomes confused about what she has to contribute to the conversation, and what her true feelings about Ariel really are. Throughout the school year, Jillian's racist rhetoric about Lizet's identity remains confusing and offensive. She and her friends force Lizet to exist in a liminal state, where Lizet is both too Cuban (like in this instance) and too American (like when Jillian's friends suggest that Lizet doesn't know anything about life in Cuba

since she was born in America).

Chapter 11 Quotes

☝☝ —So our decision to place you on probation is based on things like that, [Dean Geller] said, which taken all together means that we think your old school didn't foster something that we're calling a culture of success. [...]

The old man [...] half barked, What she's trying to say is we believe you sincerely didn't know better. You haven't been given, at any point in your academic career prior to coming here, the tools to know better. So yes, you are guilty, but you are also blameless, and so that requires a more nuanced penalty.

[...]

—Lizet, we feel strongly that, having admitted you, it is our responsibility to help you succeed. And we see no better place for you to do that—

—Remaining at Rawlings, the old man interrupted again, is the fastest way we can see you overcoming these deficiencies.

The balding man and Dean Geller shifted in their chairs, and Dean Geller fixed her eyes on the old man until he met her glare. She seemed embarrassed for me, but I felt humiliated enough on my own, though I didn't really understand why.

Related Characters: Lizet Ramirez, Dean Geller (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 96-97

Explanation and Analysis

On her first day back to classes after Thanksgiving break, Lizet is called before Rawlings' Academic Integrity Committee to hear the final verdict on her plagiarism case. Lizet failed to cite a resource correctly in a research paper earlier in the semester, and as a result has been flagged for plagiarism and threatened with expulsion. Before the committee, though, Lizet is told that because her “underserved” high school failed to give her the “tools to know better” than to cite material incorrectly, Rawlings is giving her another chance. The way the committee speaks to Lizet is condescending and patronizing, and though the kindly Dean Geller attempts to soften the words of the older white men on the committee, Lizet feels “humiliated” for reasons she can't articulate. She feels inadequate and overwhelmed as she faces down the truth: Rawlings wants to “better” her and help her overcome her inadequate background. Lizet is being told that she isn't yet a good

enough student—or a whole enough person—for Rawlings, and will be subjected to academic probation until she proves herself worthy.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☝☝ I was exhausted and very near tears, actually. I was shocked to find that it did not feel good to be home, to have seen her standing there in the airport. The entire three hours of the last flight, though I'd been nervous about seeing her, I mostly felt very happy to be getting away from Rawlings and that first semester. But spotting her before she saw me in the terminal—in that fake gold outfit, her face oily, her hands fidgeting with the rings on her fingers—had made my stomach turn [...] I'd seen my mother in that moment as not my mother; I saw her as a tacky-looking woman, as the Cuban lady the girls on my floor would've seen, alone in an airport. And I did not like that I suddenly had this ability to see her that way, isolated from our shared history.

Related Characters: Lizet Ramirez (speaker), Lourdes Ramirez (Lizet's Mother)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

Lizet arrives home for Christmas and is surprised to find her mother standing in the airport waiting for her. Lizet sees Lourdes before Lourdes sees her, and is upset to realize that she sees her mother through new eyes for the first time. She suddenly finds Lourdes's appearance “tacky” and embarrassing, and judges her mother the way Lizet's pretentious white friends at Rawlings might, illustrating the extent to which she's internalized their opinions and has sought to fit in with them. This ability to see her mother through a new lens makes Lizet feel “isolated,” cruel, and uncomfortable—she has received a kind of double vision through her time at Rawlings, which allows her to see the world of her family and her hometown as inadequate, embarrassing, and below her.

●● As much as I was ashamed of my hearing results, by what that long letter stated the committee had decided—that I was the product of a poor environment—I willingly took it: I wanted to be at Rawlings, and I was grateful that they'd taken my background into consideration. I wanted to rise—I used exactly that word in the thank-you e-mail I wrote to the committee after printing out the resource list—to rise above what I'd come from. I'd felt sick as I typed it, felt like a traitor after I hit send, but now at the clash of my mom's bangles as she turned the steering wheel to cut off a car in retaliation for them cutting her off moments before—all the while lowering her window, her arm extending out, then her middle finger at the end of that arm, waving a fuck you as she yelled the same phrase in Spanish at the driver—I knew I'd meant it.

Related Characters: Lourdes Ramirez (Lizet's Mother), Lizet Ramirez (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 139-140

Explanation and Analysis

On the drive home from the airport, Lizet considers the new double vision she must wrestle with due to the two very different worlds she inhabits. On the one hand, she found the committee's statements about her "poor environment" cruel, offensive, and condescending—on the other hand, she was willing to kowtow to them and grovel as she expressed her gratitude for a second chance and her own desire to "rise above" the place she has come from. This makes Lizet feel like a traitor to her past, to her family, and to her hometown; but now, returning home and seeing her mother through her new double vision, she recognizes that she wasn't simply selling out or sucking up. She really has changed during her time at Rawlings, and harbors a secret but intensifying desire to leave the world of her past behind and prove that she is better than the place that made her. This conflict resonates throughout the entirety of the story, as Lizet is repeatedly forced to reevaluate her identity and choose between her life at Rawlings and her life in Miami.

Chapter 16 Quotes

●● The fourth or fifth time [Leidy] accused me of acting white was the afternoon of my second day home, when I told her how, when I'd gone to pick up Dante from daycare, the girl ranked ninth in my graduating high school class was there, working as a teacher's helper and five months pregnant with her boyfriend-turned-fiancé's kid. Without really thinking about it, I told Leidy that seeing that girl there was depressing. I think my exact words were, *It just really bummed me out*. She'd said, *What the fuck is bum you out? Jesus, you sound so freaking white.* [...] I'd hurt her feelings without realizing it, which, based on my time at Rawlings, felt to me more *white* than anything else I'd done since being back [...] My inability to get as upset as my mom about Ariel's possible deportation made me for the first time worry that Rawlings could change me in a way that was bad.

Related Characters: Lizet Ramirez (speaker), Leidy Ramirez, Dante

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

On a visit to her cousins' house in Hialeah while home for Christmas break, Lizet considers telling them about college—until she remembers how badly her sister Leidy has been teasing her about acting "white." As the days of Christmas vacation have gone by, Lizet has been forced to confront the ways in which she has actually changed over the course of her first semester at school; now, as she thinks carefully about her ambivalence to the Ariel Hernandez affair, her altered vocabulary, and the ways in which having an education has already separated her from the rest of her family, it occurs to Lizet that perhaps college is changing her in ways she does not want to change—in ways that are alienating, isolating, and "bad." Once again, Lizet is torn between two entirely different worlds: the prestigious world of Rawlings College, where most of her classmates are wealthy and white, and the vibrant, lower-class Cuban neighborhood of her childhood back in Miami.

Chapter 20 Quotes

☹☹ —You don't know shit about sacrifice. You don't know shit about shit!

—Zoila's right, you only care about Ariel because what else do you have going on?

She shoved me again and the room spun [...]she was letting me fall. So I reached back instead and caught myself, slid my hands against the sandpaper of the wall, pressed my spine against it and sank to the ground, my butt hitting the floor too fast and too hard.

—You can go to whatever college for as long as you want, but about some things, you'll always be fucking stupid, she said.

She tossed the paper at me on the floor and said, You think you have problems? You, your sister, your idiot tía out there? You made your problems.

She turned her back to me and walked out of the room, screaming as she left, Nobody has any idea what Ariel and Caridaylis are going through right this second, but I do. I know what it means to lose so much. None of you know shit because you haven't sacrificed shit for anyone. Selfish pigs, that's what you and your sister are.

Related Characters: Lourdes Ramirez (Lizet's Mother), Lizet Ramirez (speaker), Zoila, Leidy Ramirez, Caridaylis

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lizet and her mother argue verbally and then fight physically in the midst of a Christmas Eve celebration at Lourdes's sister Zoila's house. As Lourdes attacks Lizet and lets her fall to the ground, Lizet realizes that her mother feels a great deal of resentment towards her for leaving for college and making problems for herself and for Lourdes, too. Lizet's father left Lourdes shortly before Lizet went off to college, and Lourdes to some degree blames Lizet for the vast emptiness in her life. When Lizet calls Lourdes out on throwing herself into the Ariel Hernandez affair in order to stave off these feelings of loneliness and emptiness, it is too much for Lourdes to bear, and she reacts violently. As she walks away from Lizet, she mutters that no one but Ariel and his family know true suffering—everyone else has made their own problems out of a selfish desire to be noticed.

Chapter 21 Quotes

☹☹ —Damn, El, he said. Do I need to ask if that's a yes? He laughed at his own joke. I didn't look at him—I couldn't yet. I looked at the ring. My

almost-engagement ring. A ring that said, You're a good investment. It felt heavy on my finger.

Related Characters: Omar (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 210-211

Explanation and Analysis

On Christmas Day, Omar drives Lizet to the beach, where he gives her a promise ring meant to symbolize their commitment to one another. Though Lizet has been ambivalent about her relationship with Omar all year, she accepts the ring enthusiastically, and the two have sex in Omar's car. After, as Lizet looks at the ring, she sees it as a totem that signifies she is a "good investment." Lizet has been working hard in school all semester and struggling socially and academically. Although she craves just a shred of recognition for her efforts, no one in her family or friend group back in Miami has congratulated her or even really asked her about her life at school. Omar's promise ring has nothing to do with her academic life, but it is a token of her worth, so Lizet is quick to accept it. The ring feels "heavy" on Lizet's finger as she contemplates what the ring means and what it binds her to; this weight foreshadows the way that Lizet's home life (her family and Omar included) will increasingly weigh her down as the novel progresses, ultimately threatening to confine her to a small life.

Chapter 22 Quotes

☹☹ The grades in bio and chem meant that I'd done so well on the finals that I'd counteracted my earlier failing mid-term exam grades, but the B-minus in my writing seminar meant both that I'd done well on the final paper and that my professor had shown mercy. I latched on to that last aspect—mercy—and instead of basking in the idea that these grades were a huge accomplishment, I sobbed: they'd all let me off easy. I remembered the tone of my hearing and thought, *They want to keep their Cuban above water for another semester.* [...] But almost as quickly, another fact pushed that feeling away: the exams in the chem, bio, and calc courses were graded blindly—we were assigned ID numbers, and only those appeared on our answer sheets. So those scores were, in a way, pure.

Related Characters: Lizet Ramirez (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 214-215

Explanation and Analysis

Lizet, who was on academic probation for the tail end of last semester after incorrectly and inadequately citing a source in a research paper led to allegations of plagiarism, now finally receives her grades for the semester. Lizet's grades are good enough that she does not have to take any remedial classes, and will be able to keep her current financial aid package. As relief washes over Lizet, her nagging self-doubt causes her to wonder whether her grades are just the result of her school's desire to keep one of their rare minority students enrolled. Lizet has been working so hard in school and receiving almost no recognition for her efforts—when good news finally comes, she can barely accept that she has genuinely earned it, and must think her way through every possible scenario until she is able to convince herself that her achievement is “pure” and earned. Lizet's inability to recognize her own success perhaps speaks to the way that her family perceives her academic success and ambition as betrayal; they've corrupted Lizet's self-worth, leading her to believe that her hard-earned success is not actually something to celebrate.

☝ I didn't want to see myself anymore—I recognized it as exactly that, even at the beginning of it, when I couldn't name it: Lizet playing a part. I'd thought a shirt from Leidy's clubbing stash would cover me by not covering me, would turn me back into El, but I was separate from her now, aware I was putting her on, and that colored everything. Omar was grabbing my wrists to stop me from running away again.

Related Characters: Lizet Ramirez (speaker), Omar, Leidy Ramirez

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 223

Explanation and Analysis

In the middle of a club on New Year's Eve, Lizet gets into an argument with Omar over her mother's involvement in the Ariel Hernandez rallies. As the night devolves into fighting and screaming, Lizet laments that she has been playing a

part the whole evening—she dressed up in her sister's clubbing clothes, hoping that she could revert to the more carefree party girl she once was. However, Lizet's time at college has clearly changed her—she cannot relate to Omar anymore, and she cannot reconcile her old self with the new person she is becoming. Lizet's internal struggle reaches a fever pitch amidst the flashing lights and thumping music, and she feels both emotionally and physically “separate” from herself, seemingly having a borderline dissociative experience.

Chapter 23 Quotes

☝ Her version of our life made me more Cuban than I technically was, degrees of Cuban-ness being something I'd never thought about until Rawlings, until the *Where Was I From From* question. Mami's invented version made me a more authentic Cuban, and part of me wanted to hear her tell it. I wanted to see how she pulled it off—if she had to convince herself before she could convince anyone else, or if just saying something and having people believe it could make it real.

Related Characters: Lizet Ramirez (speaker), Lourdes Ramirez (Lizet's Mother)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 229

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lizet is preparing to accompany her mother, Lourdes, to a rally in support of Ariel Hernandez despite Leidy's warnings that Lizet should stay home. Lourdes has been spinning stories to other protestors and newscasters alike, lying about how she brought her two daughters over from Cuba on a raft when they were infants—though this is not the truth (both girls were born in America), Lizet is more intrigued than worried by the fact that her mother has become a prodigious liar. Lizet is struggling privately with her identity as a Cuban-American up at school on the East Coast—at Rawlings, she is either too Cuban or not Cuban enough for her mostly white friends, and she feels that being able to hear a version of her life story in which she is more authentically Cuban is an enticing prospect. She is inspired rather than off put by her mother's lying, and begins considering the ways in which she can augment her own life and life story through subtle untruths. When Lizet returns to Rawlings, she too begins to flirt with dishonesty,

spinning stories of her own about her Cuban roots to seem more credible to her white classmates.

“ I felt in that moment the power he held and wielded by accident. He was more than a cute little boy. I had the very strong desire to carry him myself, to fold him into a little ball that fit in the circle of my arms. Hidden behind the pebbles of his baby-toothed grin, you sensed a loss so profound it made anyone want to hold him, to cradle and rock him and say you were so sorry, over and over again. For so many people there, he was a mirror, some version or idea of yourself, some Baby You, fresh off a boat or a plane and alone but still hopeful that what's been set into motion around you is just fine.

Related Characters: Lizet Ramirez (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 236

Explanation and Analysis

As Lizet glimpses Ariel for the first time at a New Year's Day rally in support of his asylum case, she finally understands the reason why the small boy has gripped the hearts and attentions of Americans all over, and especially why he's so important to the people of Miami. She understands that he represents a mirror for many Cuban-Americans; they see their own painful journey reflected in Ariel's raft trip, during which he lost his mother and several other relatives. Though Ariel has suffered greatly, he is now in a bright new land of opportunity, surrounded by paternal relatives and other community members who love him deeply. The idea that he could be sent back to Cuba is devastating to many, and as Miami rallies around the boy, his status as an icon grows and grows until he becomes a veritable symbol of the American Dream, fragile as it is.

“ [...] Did you see that? There's something so special in her. God bless her, she is trying so hard.

[...] My mom knew I was the first student from Hialeah Lakes to go to Rawlings even though she never acknowledged it. In the grand scheme of human achievement, I recognize this is not a big deal, but still, when I eventually showed Mami the acceptance letter and pointed out the handwritten note near the bottom stating I was the first, she'd said, Maybe you're just the first one who ever applied? [...]

—Mom, I said. It's not the first time someone's taken care of a kid. I mean, I get it, but it's not like what she's doing is actually that *hard*. She's – she's a glorified babysitter.

She released my arm, almost threw it back at me. Her now-shut mouth, the way she rolled her shoulders to push out her chest, the ugly flash of a tendon in her neck: I knew then this was the wrong thing to say. I didn't even really believe it, but I needed to say it to her. *I was trying hard*. What *I was doing* was fucking hard. My mom stared at me so long that her eyes seemed to shake in her head.

Related Characters: Lourdes Ramirez (Lizet's Mother), Lizet Ramirez (speaker), Caridaylis

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 239

Explanation and Analysis

At the Ariel Hernandez rally, Lizet watches Lourdes fawn over Caridaylis—Ariel's cousin, who is just barely older than Lizet but has become the boy's mother figure in the States. Lizet becomes upset that her mother seems to worship Caridaylis, a “glorified babysitter,” as the pinnacle of goodness. Lizet has achieved so much, but her mother has barely recognized her hard work in school—the fact that Lourdes sees Caridaylis's quotidian achievements as more worthy than Lizet's causes Lizet to speak out cruelly against Caridaylis, drawing her mother's ire. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear to Lizet that her mother has effectively replaced her and Leidy with Caridaylis, who appears to be the daughter that Lourdes has always wanted. Lizet also comes to realize that Lourdes' relationship with Caridaylis—and her entire involvement in the Ariel Hernandez case—is a way for Lourdes to sidestep the feelings of loneliness and emptiness that plagued her when Ricky moved out and Lizet went off to school.

☝ Mostly I was disappointed in Leidy and Omar for not recognizing what was really going on with Mami: she was becoming her own person finally, trying to learn who that even was via a newfound passion. So maybe she'd retrofitted the circumstances of her life to fit in to her new surroundings. So what? I of all people couldn't fault my mom for having the wherewithal to adapt her behavior, for being a creature thrust into a new environment and doing perhaps exactly what it took to survive there.

Related Characters: Lizet Ramirez (speaker), Omar, Lourdes Ramirez (Lizet's Mother), Leidy Ramirez

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 241-242

Explanation and Analysis

After attending an Ariel Hernandez rally with her mother, Lourdes, Lizet finds herself empathizing with her mother's fervent commitment to the cause and doubting her father, Omar, and Leidy's warnings that Lourdes's devotion to Ariel and his family is getting out of hand. Lizet's thinking is a little bit of a stretch, but she wants to empathize with Lourdes because she wants for them to be going through the same thing. As Lizet is adapting to her environment at school—sometimes altering key details of her life to fit in or appear more credible—she believes that her mother is simply adapting to life as a single woman whose daughter is away at college. Though Lizet's reasoning is flimsy, she desperately wants to believe she and her mother are grappling with similar issues.

Chapter 25 Quotes

☝ —We never, ever use pencil because we never erase anything. You must keep the mistakes there. Mistakes are vital to every scientist's process. Just put a line through whatever you did incorrectly and keep going.

I wrote down this sentence and stared at it. It made perfect sense. The forgiveness built into this basic research philosophy—so simple and obvious—instantly validated my first semester in a way I could finally accept: everything led to this moment in this lab, the beginning of a new challenge of my own choosing. Put a line through it and keep going—I looked around to the other benches to see if anyone else registered the power of what she'd just said, but I was the only one taking notes, the only one nodding as my pen hovered over the page.

Related Characters: Lizet Ramirez (speaker), Professor Kaufmann

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 254

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lizet is attending her first class of the new semester at Rawlings—a best practices laboratory class in which she and her fellow students will learn how to work safely and efficiently in a lab environment. When Lizet's new professor, Dr. Kaufmann, explains to the class how to properly keep a laboratory notebook, Lizet is touched by her instructions, which she sees as a metaphor for the embarrassment of her difficult first semester at school. She understands at last that she can stop berating herself for her social and academic struggles and see her first semester as the beginning of the great experiment of her academic career. Just as "Mistakes are vital to every scientist's process," so too are mistakes necessary for Lizet's personal and academic growth at school. This revelation brings Lizet relief and makes her feel less isolated as she heads into the new year.

Chapter 30 Quotes

☝ I slapped my own chest and yelled, Why don't you watch the news and figure it out yourself like I did?

—That's why you're mad at me? El, what the fuck were you gonna do from up there?

I pointed at him and said, Exactly, Omar! That right there, what you just said? That's exactly why I'm here. To fucking do something since you and Leidy obviously didn't.

—Oh! Okay yeah, he yelled. So now you know how to handle everything, huh? You got it all figured out, don't you. You think you're so fucking smart.

He threw the car in reverse, shook his head as he turned the wheel. I'd made it halfway up the concrete leading to my dad's door when Omar lowered the passenger-side window and yelled my name, made me stop.

—Whose fault is it that you weren't here, huh? Maybe you need to think about *that*.

Related Characters: Omar, Lizet Ramirez (speaker), Lourdes Ramirez (Lizet's Mother), Leidy Ramirez

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 310

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lizet reveals to Omar that the reason she has come down to Easter is to stage an intervention and pry Lourdes away from the Ariel Hernandez protests. Omar has been lying to Lizet on the phone for months, assuring her that Lourdes is fine and there is nothing to worry about, even going so far as to claim that Lourdes's involvement with the protests has ceased entirely. Lizet has recently learned, though, that her mother is more firmly dedicated to the cause than ever. When Lizet yells at Omar for being inert and not helping Lourdes in her hour of need, Omar turns the blame back around on Lizet, chastising her for leaving home in the first place and implying that if Lizet hadn't gone off to chase her own dreams, she'd better be able to serve her family. This pains Lizet, whose central struggle throughout the novel has been the internal battle between chasing her own dreams and remaining loyal and available to her family.

☹️ —We get the news, you know, up there [...] do you have any idea how the rest of the country is seeing this? I'm tired of it. We look like a bunch of crazy people.

—What's with this we crap? he said. I'm not with her, you're not even here.

—We as in Cubans, I said. He smiled with only one side of his mouth. He laughed again.

—You're not Cuban, he said. This hurt me more than anything else he could've said—more than *Who cares what anyone up there thinks*, more than *Like there's anything coming down here is gonna do*—and I think he saw it in my face, saw how impossible what he'd just said sounded to me.

—Don't look at me like that! he said. You're American. I'm wrong?

[...]

—Yeah, I said. I'm—what do you mean I'm not Cuban? I was born here, yeah, but I'm Cuban. I'm Latina at least, I said.

—Latinos are Mexicans, Central Americans. You're not that either he said.

—What? Dad, are you—other people think I'm Cuban.

He stood up from the bed and moved out through the door, leaving me alone as he said, Okay, sure you are. Whatever you say, Lizet.

Related Characters: Ricky Ramirez (Lizet's Father), Lizet Ramirez (speaker), Lourdes Ramirez (Lizet's Mother)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 314

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lizet is discussing her mother's overzealous involvement in the protests surround Ariel Hernandez's impending deportation with her father, begging him to help him intervene before her mother gets herself in danger. When Lizet says that "we" look crazy on the news, Ricky thinks she means their family—when Lizet explains she means Cubans more broadly, Ricky laughs and firmly declares that Lizet isn't Cuban. This comes as a major blow to Lizet who has, for the better part of the last year, been forced to consider her Cuban identity and the way her largely white peers at Rawlings see her as an ethnic "other" who speaks for her entire community. The idea that Lizet is not Cuban or Latina enough (or at all) in her father's eyes, but not American enough in her classmates' eyes, upsets her greatly. In this passage, Lizet stutters and struggles to articulate her thoughts, barely capable of processing the pain her father's offhand comment has inspired.

Chapter 36 Quotes

☹️ I already know what each would say should I ever have to tell them about an upcoming research trip to Cuba: my dad would talk about being a *little disappointed* in me, about the unfairness of me being able to travel to a country he can't enter, but he'd mostly not say anything, only leave me guessing at his meaning [...]; my mother would bring out familiar words—*betrayal*, *loyalty*, *traitor*—words that have come to define our relationship no matter how much time passes but whose sting has faded and turned into something I can manage [...].

To tell them would also mean inviting them along in a way. We still have family there. [...] And when I tell them there'll be no time for that, that this is a work trip, that I'll mostly be on the water, in or under a boat, that what they want me to do takes me clear across an island I don't know: Oh, I see. You don't have time to take a piece of paper and a crayon to your grandmother's headstone? You don't have time to do that for me who will never see it? Oh, that's right, of course you don't. I should've remembered how busy you always are. I shouldn't have even asked.

Related Characters: Lizet Ramirez (speaker), Ricky Ramirez (Lizet's Father), Lourdes Ramirez (Lizet's Mother),

Leidy Ramirez

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 385

Explanation and Analysis

Lizet, now an adult and a prominent research scientist, knows that her research will soon take her to Cuba. The isolated country's coral reefs are pristine, among some of the cleanest and most intact in the world. Lizet isn't exactly looking forward to the trip, though—she knows that if she tells her parents she will have to “invite them along in a way,” and fulfill obligations on their behalf while she's there, which directly impacts her desires and needs. However, if she doesn't tell them, it will be an immense betrayal—just like every other time that she chose to not bend to their will. Either way, Lizet finds herself in adulthood still forced to choose between living her life for herself, or living her life for her family, who sacrificed so much for her and wants to make sure she knows it.

●● I almost threw the whole thing out. *This is too hard* [...]. But we all know the history, and I'm sure my vote was never counted. I'm sure it sits—even now, probably in that state's capital—in some vault, the envelopes unopened, the paper moldy and dank [...].

I wish I'd known as I sat there hovering over that radiator-warmed punch card—having waited until the postmark deadline to commit a decision to it; the little pin that I'd detached from the instructions, which mandated I use only that tool to puncture the spot that proved where my loyalties lay, slipping in my sweaty hand—how pointless it would be. I wish I'd known that no one would ever see it or count it. I wish I'd known, as I pushed through one choice over the other, how little it mattered which side I ended up betraying, how much it would hurt either way.

Related Characters: Lizet Ramirez (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 388

Explanation and Analysis

As Lizet ends her story, she reflects on the controversial and scandalous 2000 election, in which the state of Florida was subjected to a recount. The Cuban and Latino communities in Miami, having heard that Al Gore ordered the raid on Elian Gonzales's house (Ariel Hernandez in the story), were faced with a predicament: choose between the Democratic candidate who betrayed them, or the Republican candidate who had not yet betrayed them but surely would. As Lizet reflects on the day she punched her absentee ballot, adding her voice to the many discarded, uncounted votes, she uses the election as a metaphor for the hurt she feels at the thought of having to choose, over and over again throughout her life, between putting her needs first, or putting her family's first.



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

An adult Lizet Ramirez reflects on her childhood memories of Miami, “the city [she] used to call home.” The city was crisscrossed by canals, and many of her memories are centered around those canals—now, she is a research scientist who works to save coral reefs and rehabilitate bodies of water, and she horrifies and amuses her coworkers with tales of all the “highly illegal” things her parents used to dump into Miami’s canals, such as motor oil and dead hamsters. Once, when Lizet’s father, Ricky, was thirteen, he and his friends found a dead body in a canal but didn’t tell anyone—the corpse got “worse and worse” until one day it was gone. Lizet did not hear this story until she was older—until the summer after **Ariel Hernandez** was sent back to Cuba “after months of rallies and riots.”

Years after her father told her this story, Lizet was working in a lab under a parasitologist when she fell into a filthy canal and had to be hospitalized and given a strong course of antibiotics. The fall reminded Lizet of a story from when she was three years old: One day, her older sister, Leidy, was watching her briefly while their mother was in the backyard talking to a neighbor. Lizet found a pair of pool floaties, slipped her arms into them, and jumped right into a nearby canal. Her parents took an “embarrassingly long” time to discover her floating in the canal, and, after pulling her out, took her to the emergency room. Every time someone in Lizet’s family tells this story, it is slightly different, but it always ends the same: with someone declaring, “She was fine!”

CHAPTER 2

Lizet writes that she and **Ariel Hernandez** had their “Miami Homecoming[s]” on the same day: Thanksgiving 1999. Ariel, a five-year-old Cuban boy, was rescued from a broken raft by fishermen early on Thanksgiving Day, and was the only person on his raft who survived the dangerous journey; Lizet arrived in Miami that evening, later than she had planned, after her flight home from college the previous day was overbooked.

Lizet begins her story by describing a major contrast between her past and her present. As a child, she didn’t care what was thrown into the canals around her house; now, her life is dedicated to keeping bodies of water clean and clear. Crucet forms this contrast to show readers that the young Lizet they are going to be reading about is very different from the adult Lizet narrating the story of her life.



As a child, Lizet’s parents were constantly worried about her, only to find that she was always “fine”; the story Lizet is about to tell is one in which she will face trials and tribulations, but this passage implies that everything will be “fine” in the end.



Lizet describes her own story and Ariel’s as parallel here, demonstrating how their stories—though very different—will converge around one another in a series of strange coincidences. Readers do not yet know how Ariel and Lizet will figure in one another’s lives, but this passage foreshadows how their stories will be twinned throughout the novel.



Lizet had originally planned to stay on campus for the holiday—coming home was not in her family’s budget. At the time, Lizet’s family could barely afford to pay the 4,000 dollars a year (out of 45,000 dollars) it cost to send Lizet to the prestigious Rawlings College after financial aid. Lizet, though, used money from her work-study job on campus to come home for the holiday despite the fact that her Cuban-born-and-raised parents have really never celebrated Thanksgiving. As the holiday approached, Lizet’s mostly-white classmates could not stop talking about family and food—and though Lizet had been “fine” without the holiday her whole life, she was seized by the need to be with her family for it.

Now, Lizet shuffles off a plane and into the Miami International Airport “a good hour after most of East Coast America” has already finished celebrating Thanksgiving. She arranges a spot on a ride-share shuttle, then goes outside to board the van. The ticket in her hand says she’s getting dropped off in Zone 8: Little Havana. Having grown up in Hialeah, Lizet is still unfamiliar with her mother’s new neighborhood; all her life, she and her family have known it as a “joke,” a part of Miami “only the most recent of refugees called home.” Up at Rawlings, none of Lizet’s classmates are aware of Miami’s different neighborhoods—when they ask her where she’s from, they always want to know where she’s “from from,” and she has learned to tell them about Cuba, and give them the answer they want to hear.

As people pack into the shuttle, Lizet notices a young-looking Latina lady who is dressed professionally and looks like she could be a professor somewhere. Lizet has never seen a Latina or Latino professor on Rawlings’ campus. The van starts to move, and as it winds through the different neighborhoods of Miami, Lizet wonders whether she should use this trip home to tell her mother about the problems she’s been having at school. In addition to struggling in chemistry, she accidentally plagiarized part of a paper in her freshman writing class by failing to cite a source correctly, and has been embroiled in an ongoing Academic Integrity Hearing to determine whether she will even be able to stay on as a student at Rawlings.

The Academic Integrity Committee has mentioned to Lizet that they are taking where she went to high school into careful consideration as they review her case. Lizet’s high school, Hialeah Lakes, is what the Committee refers to as an “underserved” school—it is so “shitty,” Lizet knows, that it was recently the subject of a *New Yorker* article about such schools across America.

This passage shows how Lizet has changed in just the few months she’s been away at school. Though Thanksgiving has never been an important celebration for her family, Lizet’s homesickness now combines with her desire to seem more similar to her white peers, and so she imposes an importance on Thanksgiving that it never had to her before.



This passage shows how the Miami Lizet grew up in and the Miami of her classmates’ imaginations are two very different things. Cruet uses Miami and its diverse neighborhoods as a metaphor for how outsiders view the experiences of people of color, and especially immigrants of color—by lumping them all together and ignoring the nuance inherent in each experience.



The revelation that Lizet is struggling at school further explains her desire to come home to her family for the holiday. In returning home, Lizet wants to escape the unfamiliar and unpleasant environment of Rawlings and be comforted by the family she left behind.



The fact that Lizet comes from a “shitty” high school is both a curse and a blessing at Rawlings—though she’s unprepared in many ways, the college sees her background as a kind of handicap, which is embarrassing but also serves as a cushion for Lizet as she learns the ropes.



Looking back on the van ride home, the older Lizet reflects on how she already had so much to contend with that fateful Thanksgiving—and she hadn't even heard the name **Ariel Hernandez** yet.

The retrospective voice of the adult Lizet will reappear throughout the novel at crucial moments to foreshadow trouble.



CHAPTER 3

Everyone else on the ride-share van has disembarked except for Lizet and the “imaginary profesora.” Lizet studies the woman, and notices that she is visibly crying. The woman pulls herself together and opens up a compact mirror to adjust her makeup, at which point she realizes Lizet is looking at her. The profesora apologizes for “being weird,” and then asks Lizet if she is also headed to Hialeah. Lizet lies and says that she is. The profesora asks Lizet where she went to high school, and when Lizet doesn't answer right away, says that she herself went to Hialeah Gardens. Lizet replies that she went to Hialeah Lakes, to which the profesora replies, “That's *rough*.”

At school, Lizet has to contend with people feeling pity for her because she comes from an “underserved” school—and now, even in Miami, Lizet has encountered someone who has the same kind of pity and awe when learning where Lizet was educated.



Lizet asks the woman if she was crying—she admits that she was, and tells Lizet that she is visiting home from Michigan, where she is in the final year of her postdoc. The woman asks where Lizet goes, and when Lizet answers “Rawlings College,” the profesora is visibly impressed, noting that Rawlings is one of the top liberal art schools in the entire country. The profesora profusely congratulates Lizet on getting into such a prestigious school—especially from a high school as tough as Lakes. The woman asks how Lizet is doing in her classes, and when Lizet, choosing to be vulnerable, answers honestly that she's doing “bad,” the profesora corrects her. “You're doing *badly*,” she says, “Not bad.” Lizet, embarrassed, feels her eyes fill with tears.

Though the profesora is impressed by the fact that Lizet attends Rawlings, she turns their positive interaction into an embarrassing one when she condescendingly corrects Lizet's speech. This interaction, though cruel, is important to Lizet—as she gets older, she will learn more and more about what it means to leave Miami and return as a new person who has “risen above” one's circumstances. Lizet will eventually see that the profesora couldn't help making this observation—her inappropriate remark foreshadows the ambivalence Lizet will have about her own developing “double vision” in regards to her identity.



The profesora begins to apologize, but the shuttle driver calls her stop. Before leaving the van, she hands Lizet her business cards, and strongly urges her to keep in touch. They are both girls from Hialeah who left for “better things,” the profesora says, and as such they should “stick together.” Lizet only nods. As soon as the profesora is out of the van, Lizet rips the card up into several pieces and drops them all onto the floor of the van. The driver heads onward to Little Havana.

Though the profesora makes a gesture of good faith, it is too late—Lizet has been hurt, and wants no part of whatever solidarity or support the profesora is offering.



CHAPTER 4

Lizet barely recognizes her mother's new building—Lizet spent only three days in the new place at the end of the summer before heading off to Rawlings. Lizet approaches what she hopes is the right apartment and knocks—when no one comes to the door despite sounds of the television leaking through the door, Lizet announces her arrival, ruining the surprise she'd planned. Lizet's sister, Leidy, opens the door and rudely asks what Lizet is doing home.

Lizet ignores her sister's brusque tone, spotting Leidy's baby, Dante, crawling around on the floor inside. Lizet fawns over the baby, and then, at the sound of her mother Lourdes's voice inside, pushes her way into the apartment. Her mother, though, is not particularly excited to see her, either—she tells Lizet she's supposed to be up at school, but then wraps her in an embrace and immediately begins asking what she can fix Lizet to eat. On the news there is coverage of a dirty, tanned little boy—it is Lizet's first glimpse of **Ariel Hernandez**, who has beaten her to Miami by just a few hours.

As Lizet settles in, she realizes that her mother is in fact angry with her—Lourdes says that Lizet has “stolen” from her the chance to meet her daughter with flowers at the airport on her first trip home from college, and accuses Lizet of “lying” to her about her plans for weeks. Lizet tries to explain, but her mother is more focused on the breaking news about **Ariel** than anything her own daughter has to say. Leidy paces the room, bouncing Dante and trying to get him to fall asleep; she is skeptical about the news, and asks what makes Ariel so special—her mother explains that Ariel's mother died on the journey from Cuba, and that he is alone in America save for a few paternal relatives.

Lizet, Leidy, and baby Dante go into Leidy's room. Lizet begins unpacking while Leidy folds laundry and explains that their mother was too preoccupied with the **Ariel Hernandez** news to focus on having a “real” Thanksgiving, even though it was Dante's first. Lizet doesn't ask about Dante's dad—Leidy is a single mother, and her high school sweetheart, Roly, is not involved in their child's life. Lizet also doesn't ask about her and Leidy's own father, who is living elsewhere in Miami after separating from their mother just a few months earlier. They, too, had children just out of high school, and Lizet feels their relationship was forever frozen in their teenage years.

Lizet's homecoming is anticlimactic and tinged with anxiety, reflecting the uneasy way she left things with her family and the ways in which she has changed in the short time she's been away at school.



From the moment Lizet arrives home, she finds herself competing with Ariel Hernandez for her mother's attention. This thread will continue throughout the entirety of the book, highlighting the growing estrangement between Lizet and her mother, as well as Lourdes's need to throw her focus into something new in the wake of Lizet's heartbreaking departure for college.



Lizet thought she was doing a nice thing by using her own money to surprise her family with a Thanksgiving visit, but as she realizes that her mother is not delighted or charmed by the idea of a surprise, she sees the ways in which things are already getting lost in translation between them.



Leidy already begins feeling the effects of her mother's fixation with Ariel in this passage. Lourdes is more interested in watching the news about Ariel, a boy she doesn't know, than celebrating her own grandson's first Thanksgiving. Even though the holiday is not that important to their family, this indifference stings Leidy, who has been disappointed severely in the past and is looking to secure stability for her son.



Leidy chides Lizet for not telling anyone she was coming home—it's dangerous, she says, to not let anyone know where she is. Leidy and Lizet squabble for a moment, but Leidy admits she's happy to have Lizet home. Leidy tells Lizet she has the day off work tomorrow; when Lizet replies, "Awesome," Leidy laughs, and asks "what other stupid words" Lizet has picked up at school.

There is tension between Leidy and Lizet, too; already, the sisters are beginning to have different values and paths, and Leidy here attempts to shame Lizet for having changed while away.



CHAPTER 5

Lourdes wakes early and heads out to a rally in support of **Ariel** and his Miami family—it is being held just two blocks away, in front of a house owned by Ariel's U.S. relatives. Lizet spends the morning playing with Dante—she remembers how Leidy got pregnant in high school by intentionally skipping her birth control pills in an attempt to get her high school sweetheart, Roly, to propose to her. Roly was less than pleased by the pregnancy, though, and has had little to do with Leidy or the baby.

As the neighborhood comes together in support of Ariel and his family, Lizet reflects on her own fractured family. As the narrative unfolds, the overwhelming support for Ariel will be repeatedly contrasted against the lack of support Lizet and other members of her family receive from those around them to highlight questions of familial duty and betrayal.



Dante's birth coincided with Lizet learning that she had been accepted to Rawlings—in shock, Lizet sent off her deposit waiver to confirm her place right away without telling anyone, not even her boyfriend, Omar. Lizet didn't tell anyone she'd been accepted for weeks. Though Leidy didn't much care, Lizet's parents saw her choice to go to college as a "betrayal." Lizet's father took Lizet's "impending fall exit" to do the same—soon after Lizet told everyone she was going to college, he left their family.

As Lizet reflects on how her own family has fallen apart over the course of the last year, it becomes clear that she sees herself as being at the epicenter—and possibly the main cause—of the ruptures that have plagued her parents and her sister.



CHAPTER 6

The street is abuzz with noise from the rally. As Lizet hears voices and music wafting in through the open windows, she contemplates the beautiful weather, and laments the fact that in just one day she will have to return to the cold, unforgiving climate up at Rawlings. She remembers the first time she saw snow, just a few weeks ago, at the start of the month—she had been so excited that she'd jumped into a pile of it outside her dorm in her pajamas, much to her roommate Jillian and the rest of their floor's amusement. That evening, Lizet had called Leidy and Lourdes to tell them about the snow—she'd wanted to call her father, too, but didn't have his new phone number, and wonders now if he even has a landline yet.

As Lizet reflects on being unable to properly communicate to her family how exciting it was to see snow for the first time, Crucet creates a metaphor for the ways in which each new experience Lizet has thrusts her deeper into her own new life, and pulls her further away from her family's life and experiences together back in Miami.



Lizet wants to ask Leidy if she has heard from their father, but instead Leidy asks Lizet how she's doing at school. When Lizet admits it's harder than she thought it would be, Leidy teases her for not being able to "hack it," then turns on the news. After a few minutes, Lizet musters the courage to ask about their father—Leidy is reluctant to answer her at first, but then admits that he has called a few times, though their mother hangs up the second she realizes that it's him on the other end. Lourdes and Leidy are both still furious with him for selling their family's home, which made things particularly hard for Leidy, who now has limited space to raise her baby.

Lizet asks Leidy if she wants to go drive by their old house, but Leidy says that it's unrecognizable—"like eighteen SUVs" are packed in the driveway at any given time, and Leidy suspects the house is being used as a garage or a car-alarm installation operation. As Leidy turns back to the news, Lizet tries to get her sister's attention by confessing that she is having "issues" up at school. Leidy barely hears her though—their mother's face is on the television screen.

The girls watch their mother talk to a reporter about **Ariel Hernandez**—Lourdes is telling the interviewer that Ariel should be allowed to stay in Miami, as his mother's "ultimate sacrifice" to get him to the States must be honored. Leidy is excited that their mother is "famous," and decides to head down to the rally so that she can try to get on TV, too. As Leidy scrambles to get ready to leave the house, Lizet watches her mother on TV—she thinks Lourdes's voice sounds like a stranger's. When Lizet sees Lourdes hold two fingers up to the reporter, she realizes that Lourdes is telling him she has "two little girls" at home; afraid of what her mother will say next, she shuts off the TV and screams to Leidy that they need to hurry.

CHAPTER 7

By the time the girls get down to the rally, the camera people have moved on from their mother. Lizet is surprised and almost disappointed that Leidy does not ask her to elaborate on the confession she made about struggling at school.

There are several important things Lizet wants to talk to Leidy about, but it seems as if Leidy is disinterested in hearing about Lizet's problems or discussing the problems that still exist at home. Leidy has enough on her plate, and Lizet's life is so foreign to her that she doesn't have the mental energy to even begin to understand it.



Lizet's family's old house, now repurposed as a garage, makes it clear that Lizet can never truly go home again. Not only has the physical space changed beyond recognition—the emotional and psychological elements of home are gone too.



The girls are at first excited and happy to see their mother on TV—it is a novelty, and they think it's exciting that she's about to be "famous." However, as Lizet continues watching her mother talking to the reporter, she realizes that her mother is spinning the beginnings of a lie—and she wants to rush down to the rally to see what's really going on, and possibly hush her mother up.



Lizet both dreads telling her family about how much she's struggling to and wants desperately to get the truth off her chest.



That night at dinner, Lourdes talks excitedly about the rally. As Lizet eats the delicious meal Lourdes has made, she considers confessing to both her mother and to Leidy the truth of the problems she's been having at school, but the dinner conversation is all about **Ariel**. Lourdes seems to have learned a lot at the rally, but some of it appears to Lizet to be hearsay—especially the fact that Ariel's father, back in Cuba, gave Ariel's mother his “blessing” to bring the child on a raft over to America. As Lizet and her mother argue about the truth of all the rumors surrounding Ariel, Lizet wishes she could talk to her mother about her own life and her own problems.

As the meal goes on, Leidy and Lourdes ask Lizet about school—what she's been eating, what her hardest classes are. Lizet tries to ease them into the idea that she's struggling in English—the class in which she's been accused of plagiarism—but her mother gets hung up on the fact that Lizet is taking an English class in the first place, unable to wrap her head around the idea that Lizet is not learning the English language in class but rather studying literature and writing. Frustrated, Lizet goes back to eating, ignoring the hail of questions and judgements her mother and sister rain down upon her.

Lourdes asks Lizet if she is planning to see Omar while she's in town. Lizet privately doesn't even know if she wants to continue her relationship with Omar—though her mother loves him and treats him like part of the family, Lizet has been thinking of breaking up with him.

Lourdes asks Lizet what time she needs to be at the airport the next day—Lizet lies and says noon, though her flight doesn't leave until two. Lourdes says that's a perfect plan, as there is an “**Ariel** meeting” on the street at two, and she wants to make it back in time. As Lourdes begins cleaning up the meal, she remarks upon what an “exciting time” it is—Lizet pretends the comment is intended to be about her rather than Ariel.

CHAPTER 8

Lizet and Omar have been together since the summer before her junior year of high school. Omar graduated a year before her and began taking classes at a local community college while working at an auto shop to finance his passion—his car, an Acura Integra. Omar had hinted about getting engaged when Lizet graduated from high school, but the two never made anything official, and since leaving, Lizet has “drifted away from that kind of certainty” even further.

Lizet's problems have been placed on the backburner to make room for the developing situation over at Ariel's. As Ariel usurps Lizet in Lourdes's consciousness, Lizet feels increasingly isolated not just from her mother but from her entire family.



When Lourdes and Leidy do finally try to talk to Lizet about university life, they are focusing on all the wrong things. They can't begin to understand what college is like for Lizet, and though she wants to help them see into her world, she grows easily frustrated with their failure to understand the ins and outs of the new world she's exploring.



As Lizet feels increasingly estranged from the vestiges of her former life in Miami, she is considering even letting her romantic ties go.



Lizet has been thoroughly disappointed by her visit home, and wants to head back to school as soon as possible. She did not receive the warm welcome she expected, and feels sad and betrayed to learn that she doesn't occupy as much space in her family's lives and minds she thought she did.



Lizet isn't sure what she wants out of life. In going off to college, she is already shirking tradition, and her new life at college seems directly in conflict with the life that Omar could give her. This isolates Lizet and makes her feel as if she doesn't belong anywhere or with anyone.



Omar knows the truth about Lizet's problems at school, but despite having confided in him, Lizet feels he doesn't really understand what she's going through. Lizet loves Omar but worries that he sees her going away to school as "an experiment that could fail," or an adventure she might give up.

Throughout her first semester at college, Lizet has found herself telling her new college friends about Omar in the terms she knows they want to hear—she describes him as an "animal" and a "psycho papi chulo." Lizet knows that everyone around her expects to have that "kind of relationship" based on stereotypes they've read, heard, and seen.

Lizet remembers how, on her last night in Miami, Omar became upset and defensive when a miscommunication led him to believe that Lizet was going to break up with him, when really she'd just admitted to being excited about leaving for college.

Lizet decides to call Omar once she is already at the airport, using a pay phone across from her gate. The two have a brief conversation—Omar is surprised but not angry that Lizet came to town without telling him. He asks if Lizet will "pull some shit like this at Christmas," and she promises him that she won't. Lizet, wanting the conversation to end, lies and tells Omar that her flight is boarding. He asks her to call him when she gets back to her dorm to let him know that she made it back okay.

Before hanging up, Omar asks Lizet if she's heard anything more about her academic integrity investigation—she tells him she has one more meeting, the date of which she'll find out when she gets back to school. Remembering this makes Lizet feel nervous. Omar wishes her good luck, and hangs up—Lizet is shocked that he hung up first.

CHAPTER 9

Lizet returns to Rawlings to find her dorm largely empty. Her roommate, Jillian, is not due back until the following evening. As Lizet walks to the dining hall through the freshly fallen snow, she notes that campus feels "post-apocalyptic empty."

Lizet feels worried about confiding too much in Omar, since she thinks that part of him is secretly rooting for her to fail at school so that she'll come home and pursue a life with him.



Lizet knows that her life in Miami does not fit so easily into her Rawlings classmates' racist stereotypes, but in attempting to adapt at any cost, she has twisted things to align with her peers' expectations.



In reality, Omar is not as "animalistic" or controlling as she leads her new friends to believe—he cares about Lizet, and has real and painful emotions.



Lizet has betrayed Omar by avoiding him while being home—she feels slightly guilty about it, but is mostly interested in protecting her own needs. She is nervous about how Omar fits into the new life she's trying to construct for herself, and reluctant to give him too much priority.



Though Lizet has been keeping Omar at arm's length, she is still shocked and annoyed when he is the first one to hang up, signifying that he needs her less than she thought he did.



The emptiness of campus is reflective of Lizet's empty, isolated mood as she returns from a strange, lonely Thanksgiving.



On the way back from dinner, Lizet stops at her mailbox in her dorm and rifles through the letters that have gathered there over the last several days—among all the junk and flyers is a letter from the Office of the Dean of Students. Lizet takes the letter back up to her room and, without even removing her boots or coat, rips it open. It informs her that she is to report to the office where her first hearing was held on Monday at 3:30 P.M. The letter also states that the time has already been cleared with her work-study job at the library. Lizet imagines that she is going to be expelled, and that the committee scheduled the meeting in the afternoon so as to give her “one last day” to enjoy being a Rawlings student.

Lizet decides to call the office and lie to them, telling them she is still in Miami participating in a protest going on in support of Ariel. When she picks up the phone, though, Omar’s voice is on the other end—Lizet has picked up the phone just as he began to dial her. Startled, she tells him she was just about to call someone. Omar becomes angry, asking Lizet why she was picking up the phone to call someone other than him and demanding to know how long she has been back. Lizet can hear Omar’s friends’ voices in the background, and she hangs up the phone.

Lizet angrily begins unpacking. When she’s finished, she crawls into Jillian’s bed and puts a movie on using Jillian’s computer. It’s a British film—*Monty Python’s Life of Brian*—and Lizet doesn’t find any of the jokes funny. Nevertheless, she watches it on repeat until she understands the spots where she’s meant to laugh.

Lizet thinks back to orientation week, when she attended a meeting scheduled by the Office of Diversity Affairs. There, she met the other students of color, who make up a very small percentage of the Rawlings population. Lizet introduced herself to the girl sitting on her other side—a kind, timid girl named Jaquelin, who almost immediately began crying, and confessed to Lizet that coming to Rawlings had been a mistake.

Lizet and Jaquelin exchanged stories of homesickness, and revealed that neither girls’ parents had come up to school to move them into the dorm. As the meeting began, several Rawlings “retention specialists” warned the gathered group that students of color struggled more in college, and those from low-income families had only a twenty percent chance of graduating on time. The speakers instructed everyone to look around the room and imagine most of the other students in it disappearing; Lizet noticed some other students looking at her, and knew they were “imagining [her] gone.”

Lizet is convinced that she is going to be kicked out of Rawlings just as she is getting adjusted. Her imposter syndrome—feelings of inadequacy in the wake of achieving something great—is in full force in this passage, and these feelings will continue to haunt Lizet throughout the novel as she pursues loftier dreams for herself.



This passage illustrates that Lizet is not the only one who acts and purports to feel differently about Omar around her friends—with his friends around, Omar becomes more controlling and indignant. This shows that Lizet and Omar are both malleable people who adjust and adapt to the moods and personalities of those around them.



Lizet’s desire to make herself understand Monty Python despite not really enjoying it shows just how badly she wants to adapt to Rawlings and adopt the tastes of her white peers in order to fit in.



As Lizet thinks about the few other students of color she attends school with, she reflects on how her peers such as Jaquelin are facing the same fears and doubts as she is. Despite knowing this, Lizet still chooses to spend a lot of time either in isolation or attempting to connect with people who are very different from her, and don’t understand—or care about—her background.



The cruel reality, Lizet learned in the diversity meeting, is that many students of color or from low-income brackets simply cannot adapt to life in predominantly white spaces such as Rawlings. This fact no doubt hangs over Lizet every day she spends on campus, and influences many of her decisions and actions as she tries desperately to fit in and convince others—including herself—that she truly belongs at Rawlings.



Now, watching *Monty Python* in Jillian's bed, Lizet begins crying. She worries that the prediction made at the meeting has come true for her. Lizet drags herself out of bed and calls home to let her mother know she has made it home okay, but Leidy answers the phone. She tells Lizet that their mother is not yet back from the **Ariel** meeting that started that afternoon, though it is past ten at night.

Lizet's own problems are given some competition in this passage; Lourdes's burgeoning obsession with the Ariel case is overzealous and intense from the start. It does not worry Lizet as much as it should—she has enough on her own plate with her academic integrity hearing coming up, and she can't pay attention as closely as she should to what Leidy is revealing about their mother.



CHAPTER 10

The next morning, Lizet straightens up Jillian's side of the room, hiding all evidence of having used Jillian's things. When Jillian blusters in, she drops herself straight onto her bed, greeting Lizet as "Liz." Lizet has told everyone at college to call her Liz—it is easier, as many people in her first weeks either misheard or mispronounced her name. Back in Miami, Omar and all her other friends call her El—she did not, however, want to use her special Miami nickname up at Rawlings.

As Cruet shows Lizet and Jillian interacting for the first time, she highlights the ways in which Lizet has erased and changed parts of herself in order to fit in with girls like Jillian—girls who, to Lizet, are emblematic of how she should behave and who she should be now that she is a student at Rawlings.



Jillian wants to hear all about "that baby from Cuba"—**Ariel's** story is all over the news everywhere—but Lizet deflects, stating that her family is uninvolved in all the hubbub surrounding Ariel's arrival. Jillian asks Lizet why she's lying, pointing out that even in New Jersey she could tell from the news that people in Miami are "losing their minds" over Ariel's predicament. Jillian wonders aloud "what could possess a woman to force a little boy to make that kind of trip." Lizet wants to speak up, but tries to force herself not to.

As this dicey conversation with Jillian begins, Lizet is careful to try and distance herself from the truth of what's going on in Miami. Lizet doesn't want to seem too different, too other, or too Cuban to Jillian—she is trying as hard as she can to assimilate and downplay her cultural roots.



During her time at Rawlings, Lizet has noticed that her classmates know almost nothing about what is really happening in Cuba—they hang posters of Che Guevara in their dorms, not knowing most Cubans see him as a murderer, and talk about the "excellent healthcare system" in Cuba without realizing that its citizens are deprived of soap, bandages, tampons, and other basic medical supplies. While Jillian is not guilty of this behavior, she does introduce Lizet to everyone by saying: "This is my roommate, Liz. She's Cuban." This bothers Lizet for a reason she can't quite place.

Because Lizet is singled out as the "Cuban" girl by her new white friends, she feels that she is, despite all her best efforts, constantly going to be separated from them due to her cultural heritage. It's understandable, then, that Lizet is trying to distance herself from being Cuban, since it is her primary signifier at Rawlings whether she likes it or not.



Lizet decides to simply tell Jillian that Jillian can't imagine how bad things are in Cuba. Jillian points out that Lizet has never even been to Cuba. Lizet knows Jillian is trying to "wreck the credibility" of anything she's saying, and counters that she still has a lot of family left in Cuba. Jillian points out that she has never heard Lizet on the phone with anyone in Cuba. Lizet says that you can't just call someone in Cuba—not everyone has phones. Jillian doesn't respond to this point, and instead says that it's "insane" that "all the Cubans" in Miami think **Ariel** will be allowed to stay.

This verbal struggle between Jillian and Lizet demonstrates how Jillian is setting up Lizet to fail no matter what she says. Because of her privilege, Jillian thinks that whatever she says or believes is right, and that it's Lizet who has to prove herself and her "credibility." Rather than thoughtfully listening to Lizet's points and valuing her opinion—both because they're friends and roommates and because Lizet is from Miami—Jillian shuts Lizet down and ignores her at every turn.



Lizet is almost too angry to say anything else, but after a moment she asks why Jillian thinks that. Jillian warns Lizet not to get defensive—she’s too “connected” to the whole thing. Lizet asks “what the fuck” Jillian means by connected, and Jillian warns Lizet not to get “ghetto.” As a Cuban person, Jillian believes, Lizet can’t be “completely rational” about the affair. Lizet states that she was born in America—not Cuba—and posits that as a Cuban-America, she can speak more intelligently about the Ariel situation than Jillian, or anyone else on campus. Jillian tells Lizet she wants to drop the matter “before [Lizet gets] any more racist.”

Lizet insists she’s not being racist, but Jillian ignores her and busies herself by unpacking her suitcase. Lizet, hoping to get Jillian’s attention back, confesses that **Ariel** is currently staying two blocks from her mother’s own apartment. Jillian does not react visibly to the news, and instead says that she hopes “people can manage to stay calm” about the whole incident. Lizet opens up a book to begin doing some homework, and agrees that she hopes they can, too, before asking Jillian if she can borrow one of her blazers to wear to class the next day.

CHAPTER 11

After waiting in the administration office—with Jillian’s borrowed blazer scratching the back of her neck—Lizet is led back to a conference room by an older assistant, who urges her not to worry. Each member of the committee is in the room, in the same seats they sat in during Lizet’s initial hearing. Whereas in the last meeting, each dean on the committee had a thick folder full of files in front of them, the conference table they sit at is now bare. Lizet is nervous about what this could mean, and is already mentally saying goodbye to Rawlings.

The oldest man speaks up to tell Lizet that though they have found the claim of “egregious plagiarism” justified, the committee has decided not to penalize her too harshly due to extenuating circumstances. Lizet doesn’t know what this means for her future—a kind woman on the committee, Dean Geller, explains to Lizet that she will be allowed to stay at Rawlings. Lizet will, however, be placed on “a kind of probation.”

Lizet isn’t being punished, one of the committee members reveals, because after contacting Hialeah Lakes, they realized that Lizet’s high school had no code of academic integrity. The oldest dean tells Lizet that because her high school did not foster a “culture of success,” Lizet should not be punished for having made an honest error—albeit one most of her peers never would have made.

Jillian employs racist speech while at the same time urging Lizet not to be “racist” against her. Jillian’s utter lack of self-awareness—and political awareness—is staggering, and Lizet employs an enormous measure of grace and patience while dealing with her entitled and ill-informed roommate (perhaps out of a desire to make sure that Jillian likes her).



Even when Lizet gives in and tells Jillian what she thinks she wants to hear, Jillian is uninterested in what she has to say. This passage shows that when up against racism and prejudice, Lizet can’t win. At Rawlings, Lizet is learning that, perhaps for the rest of her life, the deck will often be stacked against her. When she casually asks to borrow Jillian’s blazer in spite of Jillian’s cruel words, Lizet shows how Lizet is desperate to assimilate and fit in—no matter the cost.



Armed in Jillian’s blazer—symbolic of her desire to “pass” as her idea of someone who belongs at Rawlings—Lizet readies herself to face the disciplinary committee that will effectively decide her fate at Rawlings.



The committee has decided that Lizet is not at fault for the “crime” she has committed. As they will go on to explain, their reasoning behind this decision relates directly to where Lizet comes from—an idea that will prove isolating and embarrassing to her.



Lizet is not the average Rawlings student—she comes from a marginalized high school and has had to fight her way to college. Because of this, the committee sees Lizet as a special case—they are willing to cut her some slack, understanding that she has had an upbringing and education that are, in their eyes at least, lacking.



Dean Geller tells Lizet that, having admitted her, it is now Rawlings's job to help her succeed. Lizet feels humiliated rather than comforted, though she doesn't quite understand why. The deans slide some papers over to Lizet and ask her to sign the "contract" outlining the terms of her academic probation. Lizet's grades this semester will determine what happens next; if she does poorly, she will need to take remedial classes in the spring—classes not covered by her financial aid, which do not count towards her major.

Lizet doesn't fully understand what's happening, but she signs the contract anyway, and then feels foolish all over again for having made a commitment without knowing what is expected of her. The committee dismisses Lizet, wishing her good luck in her studies. They tell her that the secretary, Linda, will have a copy of the contract ready for her outside.

Lizet goes to her shift at her work-study job at the library, and reads over the contract several times during work. The contract details a series of "if this, then that" scenarios, and outlines the potential penalties Lizet will face in terms of coursework and financial aid changes if she does not succeed in school this semester. She will need C-minus grades across the board in order to move on to the next set of classes and keep her financial aid package intact.

Lizet is so busy worrying about the contract that she gets spooked when someone goes through the security scanner at the front of the library and sets it off. Lizet jumps in her seat, eliciting the laugh of the boy who set the scanner off. He is tall and redheaded, with a grungy, nerdy vibe. Lizet sifts through his bag quickly and determines that his CD player set the scanner off. The boy introduces himself as Ethan; still dazed and distracted, Lizet does not introduce herself, replying only, "Okay." Ethan, jokingly calling Lizet "OK," tells her he'll see her around, and then leaves. Lizet returns to her desk and begins making a study plan for the next three and a half weeks, determined to pull her grades up by Christmas.

CHAPTER 12

In search of a way to quickly pull her grades up before the end of the semester, Lizet pays a visit to an on-campus tutoring service, the Learning Strategies Center. Lizet is surprised to find that upperclassmen are the tutors—and even more surprised and relieved to find that the services offered there are free, and there is no limit on the number of appointments one can make. Lizet excitedly books twice-weekly slots for chemistry tutoring, along with once-a-week sessions in biology and writing.

This assessment of Lizet's background as underprivileged is an insult to her—she has never thought of her life in Miami as deprived or insufficient, but in light of the committee's assessment she is forced to see the ways in which her schooling and upbringing are considered inadequate.



In the face of scrutiny and embarrassment, Lizet panics, signing the contract without reading it in a desperate attempt to give the committee whatever they want—perhaps so that they'll think better of her and see how hard she's trying to fit in and do well at Rawlings.



Lizet reads the contract and sees that she must work harder than ever in order to maintain her place at Rawlings. The school has already demanded so much of Lizet—financially, emotionally, and psychologically—and now she must prepare herself to put even more of herself on the line in order to prove that she deserves to stay.



Lizet is so focused on making a plan for how to succeed at Rawlings in the coming weeks that she has no time for anything else. Although making friends was an important part of the first half of Lizet's semester, as the second half bears down on her, she feels disconnected from those around her and isolated in her need to hunker down and study.



Lizet is refocusing her attentions entirely on her studies, and is surprised to find that there are so many resources available to her. She has been struggling so much with the social and logistical aspects of college and has been unable to get any help in those departments; the idea that free study help is available any time is a relief.



On each visit to the writing center the next week, Lizet, walking through the student union, passes several big-screen TVs mounted on the walls; they broadcast news about “impending Y2K doom” and, surprisingly, the **Ariel Hernandez** situation. Ariel’s father, back in Cuba, is demanding his son be sent back. Every time the news shows the protests going on in Little Havana, Lizet strains her eyes to see her mother or Leidy, but can never make them out.

On the way to one of her study sessions, Lizet bumps into Jaquelin Medina, the girl she met at the mandatory Diversity Affairs welcome meeting. Lizet is surprised when Jaquelin gives her a huge hug and seems really excited to see her. Jaquelin confesses she’s been thinking about Lizet because of the ubiquity of the **Ariel** news. Jaquelin asks if Lizet is free Saturday, as there’s a dance party Jaquelin has been invited to but doesn’t want to attend alone.

Lizet has been unimpressed by the few Rawlings parties she’s attended so far this year, but at the prospect of a dance party, she gets excited. Back in Miami, Lizet went clubbing with her friends all the time, and misses the feeling of being out a dance floor. Jaquelin and Lizet agree to meet at the party on Saturday night—and to wear their best, most outrageous clubbing clothes to show all the other Rawlings student’s “what’s up.”

On the night of the party, Lizet flatirons her thick, curly hair in the communal bathroom, sending the smell of smoke wafting through the halls of her dorm; Jillian and her friends are going to the party, too, and as the other do their makeup, they make nasty comments about the way Lizet is doing her hair, suggesting she is damaging it. Jillian and her friend Tracy try to get Lizet to be their designated driver, but Lizet has a feeling that the girls are just using her, and declines.

Lizet heads back to her dorm room to get dressed. When she’s ready, she heads out into the hall, looking for Jillian and the other girls, but an RA tells her they have already left on the campus shuttle. Lizet tells the RA she “wasn’t really going with them anyway,” and heads back to her room, where she takes a large swig of Jillian’s vodka and waits for the next campus shuttle to come around.

As Lizet tries to buckle down and focus on her studies, she can’t fully block out the news from home. Lizet’s inability to escape the Ariel Hernandez situation, even all the way up at Rawlings, points to Lizet’s other failed attempts thus far to shut out where she comes from.



Lizet hasn’t pursued a friendship with Jaquelin all semester, but now, frustrated with people like Jillian who don’t actually care about Lizet, Lizet decides to befriend someone a little more like her in hopes of truly connecting.



Lizet has spent the summer trying to get as far away from home as possible, both physically and emotionally. Now, though, she embraces how much she misses the things she used to do—and the person she used to be—back home in Miami.



As Lizet prepares to go out, she finds herself once again at odds with her white classmates. Not only do they not understand her and make fun of her for her beauty routine, but they attempt to use her rather than truly include her in their social circle.



Lizet’s abandonment by Jillian and her clique is representative of the larger emotional isolation she feels from those girls, and all the other students on campus like them. Lizet will get herself to the party, just as she has had to do everything for herself since the moment she got into Rawlings.



CHAPTER 13

Lizet arrives to the party about an hour late to find Jaquelin waiting for her just inside the foyer of the large house where the party's being held. The music coming from within is loud, and as Jaquelin and Lizet enter the party, Lizet puts on her practiced game face. She struts through the party, flipping her hair and avoiding eye contact with other partygoers, even as she feels everyone looking at her. A few steps away from the dance floor, Lizet hears a voice calling to her—she turns around and realizes it is Ethan, from the library, who knows her only as “OK.”

Ethan tries to engage Lizet in conversation, but she's in party mode—she yawns and tells him she has a boyfriend. Ethan seems uninterested in this, and continues talking with Lizet, though he's not exactly flirting with her. He asks her what her real name is, but before she can tell him, Jillian stumbles over—she is massively drunk, and apologizes for leaving Lizet behind at the dorm. Jillian goes off to get some air—after calling Lizet a “hawt mamacita”—and Lizet introduces herself properly to Ethan at last.

Ethan asks Lizet where she's from, and she tells him she's from Miami—she braces herself for the follow-up question she's grown used to over the past several months (“But where are you from from”), but Ethan doesn't ask it. Lizet asks Ethan if he's going to dance, but he tells her he's only here to watch out for some of his residents—he's an RA on campus. He tells Lizet he's graduating in the spring and urges her to enjoy her time at Rawlings. He checks his watch and declares it's time for him to leave if he wants to stop by some bars around campus—before he does, he invites Lizet to an ice-skating event on campus the next day. She says she'll consider going, and Ethan encourages her to “stop being a poser and just show up” before ducking out of the party.

Jillian stumbles back over to Lizet, and tells her that Ethan is clearly into her before heading back out onto the dance floor. Lizet spots Jaquelin up on a platform near the DJ—she joins her, and the two dance together, impressing the Latino DJ and the rest of the guests at the party. Lizet is happier than she's been in weeks.

Lizet is finally in her element. She has been isolated, uptight, and nervous throughout her whole first semester—now, at a party that is the closest thing she's experienced to a Miami clubbing experience in months, she feels a renewed surge of confidence even in the face of all the self-doubt she's suffered these last few months.



Lizet tries to ignore Ethan and tells herself that she's above interacting with him or making friends with him—she is in club mode. As she remembers where she is, though, Lizet acknowledges that she is actually in need of genuine friends, and decides to introduce herself to Ethan.



Ethan is not like the other people Lizet has met at Rawlings—he doesn't judge her, he doesn't pry into her life, and he seems genuinely interested in helping her make her college experience better. He wants her to be herself, relax, and enjoy Rawlings—which is more than anyone else either at home or at college has done for Lizet.



Lizet, perhaps taking Ethan's advice, relaxes even more into her element and begins having fun with her new friend. Experiencing this small taste of home brings Lizet happiness—even though her feelings about Miami are conflicted and complicated.



CHAPTER 14

The next morning, after studying in the library for a few hours, Lizet heads to Ethan's dorm for the ice-skating event he told her about. He greets her warmly and introduces her to the other students who have showed up to ice skate; most of them look tired and worn out from studying so hard for their upcoming exams. Ethan enthusiastically congratulates his residents on earning a much-deserved study break.

On the way over to the ice-skating rink, Lizet talks with Ethan and a few other students about the party the night before. It is very cold out, and Lizet considers putting on a pair of mittens she has borrowed from Jillian—they are expensive and fancy, and Lizet feels conflicted about wearing them. Ethan enthusiastically points out Rawlings landmarks to the freshmen as they head across campus, offering them weird little facts and tidbits about the school's history. Lizet watches Ethan happily, hoping that when he graduates, he will be able to find a job “as some sort of RA for the world.”

Lizet puts on ice skates for the first time and clumsily enters the rink. She hugs the railing but still keeps falling—Ethan comes over to help her off the ice after she falls for a third time, hurting her tailbone. He makes conversation with Lizet as she takes off her skates, and when she implies that he's flirting with her, he insists he would never be “lame” enough to hit on a freshman. Both Lizet and Ethan blush, embarrassed, but continue to talk. Ethan asks Lizet if she would consider applying to be an RA—he tells her that the job comes with free room and board, and admits that being an RA is the only way he's able to afford Rawlings.

Lizet bristles a little bit, worried that Ethan has sized her up and assumed she, too, can't “afford” to be at Rawlings. She coldly says that being an RA doesn't sound like it's for her. As she finishes unlacing her skates, she sees Ethan looking at one of Jillian's mittens, which she wore out on the rink. He tells her he understands—Lizet obviously doesn't “need” to take an RA position to get by. Ethan stands up to go back out on the rink, teasing Lizet in a friendly way about her abominable ice-skating skills once more before he goes. Lizet watches him skate away, thinking about how and when she'll be able to “make it clear” to Ethan that the mittens don't belong to her, and she is not exactly who he thinks she is.

Lizet is attempting to find a community and make some friends at Rawlings, even if it means participating in an event that's foreign to her and out of her comfort zone.



Just as Lizet borrowed Jillian's blazer to feel more like everyone else for her hearing, Lizet has borrowed Jillian's mittens so that she can feel a little bit more like an average Rawlings student as she prepares for a big social event.



There is a flirtatious energy between Lizet and Ethan, but Ethan is quick to deny that there is any chemistry there. He doesn't seem to want to take advantage of Lizet or make her feel uncomfortable—he genuinely wants to help her have a good time at college. As money comes up, though, Lizet feels the situation becoming dicey.



Lizet isn't sure what she wants Ethan to think of her—she doesn't want him to assume that she's poor and in need of financial aid, but she also doesn't want him to think she's haughty, snobby, and rich. She is so used to being judged by everyone else on campus that she is attempting to fit herself into neat, tidy boxes—but as she wavers between who she actually is and who she wants to be, she realizes she should have been true to herself all along.



Study week begins the following day, and a somber, studious mood overtakes the campus. Everyone is working overtime, and being able to brag about how little one has slept becomes a sort of status symbol. Strung out, tired, and homesick, Lizet decides to use her calling card to reach out to her father, to whom she hasn't spoken since she left Miami for school. He is excited and surprised to hear her voice—he is on his way out to work at a jobsite. He sounds slightly hurt that Lizet didn't reach out to him when she was home for Thanksgiving, but Lizet insists the trip was uneventful and a waste of money.

Lizet and her father catch up for a few minutes, and he asks repeatedly if she's doing all right in school. She insists over and over that she's fine. After the phone call, Lizet goes back to studying. That night, at exactly midnight, a campus-wide tradition takes place: every student, no matter their location, leans out of the nearest window and lets out a primal scream. This campus-wide shriek at midnight the night before the first scheduled exams start is an old tradition, but one Lizet is unfamiliar with; when she hears the screams, she worries she has lost her mind.

In her disoriented state, Lizet vows to confront her father at Christmastime about his own betrayals: selling the family home, and never calling her once all semester.

CHAPTER 15

Lizet flies home once again—this time, her mother greets her at the airport terminal, commenting immediately on how skinny Lizet has gotten. Lizet notices that Lourdes, too, looks worryingly thin. On the drive home from the airport, Lourdes asks Lizet about everything in her life other than school. Lizet answers the questions brusquely—she is surprised to find that it does not feel like a relief to be home for the holidays. Most of all, Lizet is disturbed by how, upon glimpsing her mother in the airport terminal, she saw her through new eyes as a “tacky-looking woman” the girls on her floor at Rawlings might make fun of. Lizet feels that she now sees her mother in a way that is “isolated from [their] shared history,” and is unsure of whether it is her mother who has changed, or her.

Lizet recalls having written the committee a letter after her hearing, stating that she was grateful for their mercy and looked forward to working to “rise above” the place she'd come from. At the time, she felt like a traitor writing the email—now, Lizet realizes that her words were true.

As study week overtakes Rawlings, Lizet feels more isolated than ever. She is so desperate for some familiarity in the strange, insular world she's joined that she even reaches out to her father, with whom her relationship is on shaky ground at best.



The campus traditions that are so familiar to everyone else isolate Lizet and even cause her to question her sanity—she has no guidebook for what it's like to be in college as a first-generation student, and little knowledge of Rawlings' peculiar customs.



Lizet's phone call with her father has not made her feel better about him—in fact, she feels angrier and more betrayed than ever.



When Lizet returns home for the second time since starting school, she is amazed—and worried—by how much she has changed in such a short amount of time. The things that once seemed familiar to her now seem garish and strange; she sees her mother through new eyes, but is not grateful at all for the double vision her time at Rawlings has given her.



Lizet's sycophantic words to the committee—which she saw as a betrayal of her hometown, her family, and her values—now register as genuine feelings. She is ashamed at what she sees as a series of continued betrayals of her former values.



When Lourdes turns onto her street, Lizet is shocked to see how the block has changed. Signs and flags welcoming and supporting **Ariel** hang everywhere. One of the posters features a picture of a girl not much older than Lizet—when Lizet asks who she is, Lourdes answers that her name is Caridaylis; she is a cousin of Ariel’s, but has lately become more like a mother to him, and the two are inseparable. Lourdes calls Caridaylis—or Cari—a “saint.”

Lourdes helps Lizet retrieve her bag from the trunk and bring it to the front of the apartment building, where Lizet greets Dante and Leidy with kisses. On the way up to the apartment, Lourdes talks nonstop, gossiping about her neighbors. Lizet feels something is “off” about her mother. Inside the apartment, Lizet finds that there are flyers and posters featuring images of **Ariel** everywhere. Lizet is nervous, but then becomes happy when she sees that her mother has gotten her a welcome-home balloon and teddy bear. Lizet hugs Leidy and thanks her for the bear, but when she goes to hug Lourdes, she has already left the room.

The girls hear the sound of their mother’s bedroom door shutting. Leidy sits down on the couch with Lizet, and remarks on how “white” Lizet looks; she urges her to spend some time over the three-week break tanning at the beach.

CHAPTER 16

Ricky calls the apartment on the first night Lizet arrives from Rawlings. The call is short, but he promises to call back. Three days later, the morning before Noche Buena, or Christmas Eve, Lizet still hasn’t heard from him. Remembering her promise to herself to confront her father over his own betrayals, but not knowing where it is her father is currently living, heads over to her uncle Fito’s house. Fito is her father’s brother, and was the one to take him in directly after the split.

The previous day, Leidy called Lizet a “white girl” after she used a stilted phrase to describe the paint job on the front of Lourdes’s building—now, Lizet wants to do the “most Latina” thing she can do, and feels that showing up at her uncle Fito’s house and demanding to know where her father is living fits the bill.

Lizet is surprised by how the Ariel case has gripped her mother’s neighborhood; it is clear that things have continued to escalate since Thanksgiving, and Lizet worries what this will mean for her own family dynamic.



Lizet is unsure whether the strange energy she senses coming from her mother is due to how her mother has changed, or how Lizet herself has. She grows concerned, but is momentarily distracted by the warm welcome home and the gifts her mother has gotten for her.



Leidy’s comment on how Lizet has changed implies that Lizet has assimilated and grown distant from her heritage during the time she’s been away at school—and Lizet knows sadly that Leidy is right.



Lizet is determined to confront her father over his betrayals and get her feelings off her chest—but the fact that her father has isolated himself from his family so profoundly makes this a difficult task.



Lizet wants to do something stereotypically “Latina” in order to negate Leidy’s hurtful comment and prove that she is the same person she once was—even if she doesn’t realize that she’s parodying her own culture.



At Fito's apartment in Hialeah, Lizet greets her cousins and tells them she's just gotten back from college in New York. They are impressed by the news, but confess they didn't even know she was in college—Lizet is sad to realize that her father never mentioned the fact that she'd gotten into Rawlings or decided to go. Lizet considers telling her cousins about her time at college so far, but remembers Leidy taunting her for acting "so freaking white," and decides not to. She is worried that Rawlings has changed her "in a way that [is] bad."

Inside, Lizet greets her uncle Fito, and speaks to him in English as she asks where her father is. Her cousins accuse her of forgetting her Spanish and tease her for not knowing where her own father lives. Fito calms his sons down and gives Lizet the name of the complex and the apartment number where Ricky is living—he informs her that Ricky has a roommate whom he met at work. Lizet finds this funny: she and her father both have roommates.

Lizet arrives at her father's new apartment, in a complex called The Villas. It is shabby and run-down, and is widely known as a place where "trashy" residents throw raucous parties and fight in the street. Lizet parks in a visitor's spot, and steels herself to approach her father's unit. After working up the courage, she approaches the door—covered by steel bars—and knocks. A man answers the door, but it is not her father—it is his roommate, Rafael.

Rafael greets Lizet warmly, hugging her like she is his own daughter. Lizet looks around at their ramshackle apartment, disoriented by Rafael's kindness and the disorganization of the living room furniture. Rafael tells Lizet that he has heard a lot about her from her father—he reveals jokingly that he has heard all about her time at college, and how much money it is costing Ricky. Rafael tells Lizet that Ricky is working all day today and won't be home for a long time. Before Lizet can ask any more questions, Rafael jumps up, goes into the kitchen, and comes back with a Rawlings brochure. He tells Lizet how proud Ricky is of her, and Lizet can hardly believe what she's hearing; her eyes begin to water.

Rafael offers to call Ricky, but Lizet insists she has to go. She asks Rafael not to tell Ricky she came by—she is overwhelmed by the realization that her father is, on some level, proud of her, and upset by the slightly squalid way he's living as she pursues her own dreams. Lizet prepares to leave, promising Rafael she'll return tomorrow, though they both know she's lying. Rafael writes down the telephone number at the apartment so that Lizet will have it. He walks her to the door and lets her out; Lizet runs down the walkway back to her car through the burning Miami heat.

The more people Lizet sees during this trip home, the more she is forced to confront the ways she's changed in the time she's been away—and the fact that the changes she's gone through at college have made her strange to her own family and isolated her from them in irreversible ways.



Lizet is struck by the fact that she and her father—despite being in very different stages in their lives and in conflict with one another—are in fact going through similar things at the same time.



Lizet's father has moved off, sold their family home, and taken up residence in a dangerous and isolating part of town—this frightens Lizet, who realizes that her father is perhaps purposefully trying to keep everyone away.



Lizet, who has been readying herself to lash out against her father for all the bad things he's done to her and the rest of the family, finds herself touched profoundly by the fact that he keeps a Rawlings brochure in the house—tacit proof that he is in fact proud of Lizet, despite having railed on and on about her "betrayal" in the months before she left for school.



Lizet isn't sure what she's feeling—she's happy and relieved, but also sad and confused. She doesn't want to make things with her father any worse, and tries to pretend like her visit never happened, even though doing so involves lying—yet another betrayal.



CHAPTER 17

Lizet, Leidy, and Lourdes eat a light dinner in preparation for the “onslaught of food” that will come with tomorrow’s Noche Buena celebration. When Lizet’s mother asks her what she did during the day, she does not mention hunting down her father, and talks only about taking a trip to the library and picking up Dante from daycare—a job Lizet has taken on so that Lourdes can “volunteer” at **Ariel**’s house.

Lizet notes that Lourdes talks about **Ariel** and Caridaylis as if they are close friends—when she mentioned this to Leidy the night before, Leidy confirmed that Lourdes was in fact friends with Caridaylis and many other members of Ariel’s family.

Lourdes asks if Omar is coming to their family’s Noche Buena celebration—he was there the year before, but Lizet confesses that she hasn’t really talked to Omar since she’s been home. Leidy reveals that Omar called the house three or four times earlier in the afternoon—each time, Leidy answered the phone, and Omar hung up right away. Lizet thinks that this behavior doesn’t sound at all like Omar, who usually goes out of his way to be charming with Leidy and Lourdes. Lourdes urges Lizet to go call Omar back right away.

Lizet takes the cordless phone into her and Leidy’s bedroom—but rather than calling Omar, she calls her father. When he picks up, she asks if he called earlier, but he will not admit to doing so. Instead, he asks Lizet if she’s happy to be back—she can sense a cheeriness in his voice, and he excitedly begins asking her more questions about school. It is the first time in the three days she’s been home that anyone has asked Lizet about her semester, and she has realized that it is not because no one around her wants to know how school is going, but rather that they don’t have the tools to ask the right questions.

Ricky asks Lizet if she has time to get together tomorrow, and she says she does. He asks her to meet him for breakfast at a restaurant their family used to go to together. Lizet knows that the roundabout way her father is inviting her out is his way of communicating—sometimes, she can only glimpse the “sad echo” of what it really is he wants to say.

Lizet has picked up extra slack around the house, acting like the mature and responsible one so that Lourdes can spend time at Ariel’s while Leidy is working. Lizet shoulders duties that are not her own in order to make everyone else happy, a tendency that echoes her eagerness to appease her classmates at Rawlings by conforming to their expectations of her and telling them what they want to hear.



Lizet is uncomfortable with the way her mother talks about Ariel’s family, but Leidy seems to know something Lizet doesn’t—Lizet realizes that in leaving home she has missed much more than she thought.



Lourdes is concerned, again, that Lizet is not maintaining her relationship with Omar. Meanwhile, Lizet is frustrated by the fact that Lourdes is more interested in her ability to hang on to Omar—and consequently hang on to the trappings of her life in Miami—than her accomplishments in school.



Whereas Lourdes has barely asked Lizet about school or her life in New York, Ricky is brimming with questions for his daughter. Though Ricky struggles to ask the right things, he is clearly trying, and this fills Lizet with even more feelings of goodwill towards her father.



Lizet and her father do not communicate in the same way, and sometimes they misunderstand each other—in spite of this, Lizet cherishes her father, and is grateful that every once in a while they can get through to one another.



The next morning, Lizet kisses her mother goodbye as she is waking up, and lies that she is going to meet Omar for breakfast. Lourdes urges Lizet sleepily to be nice to Omar, who loves her “so much.” As Lizet heads to the door, she walks past Leidy, who asks if Lizet is planning on breaking up with Omar. Lizet cheekily says that will depend on whether or not Omar brings a present, and Leidy urges Lizet to do what’s best for her.

Lizet is lying to her family, committing yet another small act of betrayal. She cannot yet see how this lie will negatively affect the rest of her time at home, and send lasting reverberations through her family and her relationship with Omar, too.



CHAPTER 18

Lizet arrives at the restaurant to meet Ricky very early. She sits at a table by herself for over half an hour drinking café con leche and observing the other patrons. As she prepares the coffee by stirring espresso and sugar into a mug of steamed milk, she feels “suddenly aware of [her] performance of making café con leche.” Having been away at Rawlings for so long, she feels disconnected from the act—and herself.

Lizet has been away from home for so long that even old familiar behaviors feel forced or practiced—she has a lot of anxiety about her identity and feels like an impostor in her own hometown.



Ricky arrives at the restaurant. As he approaches the table and gives Lizet a hug, she is unsure of how to react. Just a day ago, she was furious at her father, ready to call him out for abandoning the family and not even giving Lizet and Leidy his new number or address; now, though, she feels an overwhelming tenderness towards him, and decides to put off her anger for the time being.

Lizet has decided—at least for the moment—to forgive and forget her father’s actions and behavior. His apparent feelings of pride in Lizet and her accomplishments mean a lot to her, and outweigh his past betrayals.



Ricky and Lizet order their food; he apologizes for being out of touch, and explains that he has been working hard each day. He asks Lizet if she’s doing well in school and earning straight A’s—Lizet doesn’t know how to explain, though, that her college is very different from her high school, where it was easy for her to do well and make perfect grades. She tells him that school is “intense,” and that everyone is “obsessed” with studying—Ricky says that it sounds like people up at Rawlings are as crazy about their studies as some people in Miami are about the **Ariel Hernandez** case—specifically, Lourdes.

As Lizet and Ricky make conversation, Lizet is happy for the chance to tell someone about her studies—even if the telling requires a bit of translation. When Ricky brings up Lourdes and Ariel, though, Lizet is distracted and nervous, afraid that her father knows something she doesn’t.



Lizet asks what Ricky knows about her mother and **Ariel**—her father doesn’t answer. When Lizet asks if he’s talked to Lourdes recently, Ricky confesses that he hasn’t. He asks if Lizet gets any Spanish news channels up at school, and Lizet confesses she hasn’t checked. Ricky states that he’s seen Lourdes on the news a few times. He seems concerned, but Lizet doesn’t seem to think it’s a big deal, and she grows defensive. Ricky tells her to forget she said anything, but advises Lizet to urge Lourdes to “relax” about the Ariel case.

Ricky seems to realize he has stepped into dangerous territory by bringing Lourdes up. Once he realizes that Lizet doesn’t understand what’s going on, he tries to calm her down—but a seed of doubt and suspicion has been planted, and Lizet is not sure whether her father is overreacting or whether her mother really is acting up more than she’s letting on.



Ricky and Lizet begin eating, and Ricky continues talking about Lourdes and her **Ariel** obsession. He admits that it must be hard for her to hear about Ariel's painful crossing—it has been tough for him, too, he says, as he was fourteen years old when he came over from Cuba and remembers the journey in harrowing detail. Still, he believes Lourdes needs to remember that Ariel is not her child—she has two of her own to worry about. Lizet again insists that Lourdes is just “volunteering,” but is unable to convince even herself that this is entirely true.

As Ricky and Lizet finish eating, Ricky asks whether everyone is attending the annual party at Lourdes's sister Zoila's house tonight. Lizet says they are, and asks him what his own plans are. He doesn't answer, but instead sits up and tells Lizet he has something for her. He pulls three envelopes from his wallet—one for her, one for Leidy, and one for Dante. Lizet insists she doesn't need the money, but Ricky assures her it's not much. Lizet suggests Ricky give Leidy and Dante their presents in person, but Ricky says he's “not interested in the drama.” This infuriates Lizet, and she urges her father to pay the two of them a visit; he firmly insists that he can't. As Ricky pays the bill, he asks Lizet to tell him if she ever needs extra money for school.

Lizet heads home with the envelopes from her father in her back pocket. She is determined to drive by her old house, and wonders if the house will somehow be able to tell her what to do about her disjointed family. When she arrives, however, the house is practically unrecognizable. The mango tree in the front yard has been ripped out and paved over; the fence around the house has been replaced with a bunch of cinder blocks stacked along the sidewalk. Lizet thinks that the house looks like “a bad copy” of itself; she feels nervous, alone, and lost as she puts her car in reverse and heads for her mother's new apartment.

CHAPTER 19

As soon as Lizet walks into the apartment, Leidy notices the envelope, even though she is busy changing Dante's diaper. She teases Lizet, asking if they are her and Omar's divorce papers, but Lizet quickly reveals that she didn't go to see Omar; she went to see their father. Lizet begs Leidy not to tell their mother; Leidy insists she's not telling their mother anything, as she “value[s her] life.” Lizet asks if Lourdes is home, but Leidy says she's down at **Ariel**'s house.

Ricky concedes that there are reasons for Lourdes's behavior, and alludes to the trauma they both faced on the way over from Cuba and in the wake of their early adjustments to life in America. Still, his assessment that Lourdes's behavior is strange and out of control resonates with Lizet, who begins worrying despite her earlier belief that Lourdes's involvement in the affair was relatively normal.



Lizet's visit with Ricky has been mostly pleasant, but with the whole Lourdes conversation, it began to take a turn—now, as Lizet realizes that she is meant to be the go-between for Ricky and Leidy, she balks at the imposition and wonders why her father won't just visit their family in person. She is seeing that her father is still flawed, still aloof, and still wary, for some reason, of spending time with his family.



Lizet, upset and put off after a strange ending to her breakfast with Ricky, hopes that seeing her old house will make her feel at home—since being with her mother and sister has made her feel alienated and out of the loop, and being with her father has made her feel worried and burdened. The visit just makes her sadder, though, and Lizet realizes that perhaps “home” does not exist anymore.



From this conversation with Leidy, Lizet realizes that things between her mother and her father are not just strained but actually volatile. Luckily, Lourdes is out of the house, leaving Lizet free to ask Leidy some questions about the situation at home and get some answers as to what she's been missing.



Leidy asks where Ricky is living now, and Lizet is relieved to realize that her sister doesn't know her father's address—she hasn't been keeping it from Lizet all these weeks. Lizet instantly feels bad for having thought her sister capable of such deceit. Lizet hands Leidy her and Dante's envelopes and explains that they are Christmas presents. Lizet decides to embellish, though, and explains that Ricky wanted to get everyone "real" presents, but has been so busy with work that he hasn't had the time.

Leidy hands her envelope back to Lizet, and says it has Lizet's name on it. When Lizet looks at it more closely, she can see that it indeed does. She hands Leidy the other envelope, and Leidy tears it open. Lizet opens hers slowly, peeling back the flap bit by bit. Inside is a 50-dollar bill. Leidy and Dante each got 50 dollars, too; but Lizet notices that inside her envelope, on the flap, her father has written her a message.

Lizet wanders into the other room to read the note. In it, Ricky explains that he knows 50 dollars for Leidy and 50 dollars for Dante basically equals 100 dollars for Leidy. He apologizes for the unequal presents, and instructs Lizet to call him before she goes back to school so that he can give her another 50—"YOU deserve it," he writes at that end of the note.

Lizet folds the money into her pocket and tells herself she will not see her father again before she goes back to school—she doesn't want him to think she's just seeing him to get some more cash. She heads back to the bedroom and watches from the doorway as Leidy carefully places the two bills in the back of her underwear drawer. Lizet knows that her father's present to them is not enough for either of them to get all of the things they need.

CHAPTER 20

Lourdes's side of the family is "big and messy." Though they don't see each other often, they have a ton of fun at noisy family gatherings a couple of times a year. On the drive over to Zoila's house, Lizet wonders how much her mother's family knows about the split—or, for that matter, about Lizet herself going away to college.

Lizet wants to make it seem as if Ricky is more invested in Leidy and Dante—and herself, too—than he actually is, hoping that she will be able to restore some balance to her family by making everyone seem a little bit better than they are.



Lizet's lie turns out to be closer to the truth than she thought; her father, it seems, has actually put more thought into the gifts than it first appeared he had.



Lizet has been waiting and waiting for her parents' perception of her going off to college as a "betrayal" to dissipate—neither of them, though, has once told her they're proud of her for going off to college. As Lizet holds the envelope from her father in her hands, she realizes at last what it means: he is, in spite of everything, truly proud of her.



Lizet could badly use the extra money, but doesn't want to seem like an opportunist or a mooch. The paltry nature of her father's gifts makes her sad; there is so much in her life, in Leidy's, and in Lourdes's that needs fixing, and sadly Ricky's contribution is just not enough.



Though Lizet's family is large and boisterous, she worries that her mother has been hiding certain things from them and ignoring Lizet's success.



When Lizet, Lourdes, Leidy, and Dante arrive at Zoila's house, Zoila is already half-drunk and greets them all loudly and effusively. Though Zoila and Lourdes are technically cousins, they refer to one another as sisters; Lourdes lived with Zoila and Zoila's mother when she first arrived from Cuba, and the two have been close ever since. They talk to one another in obscenity-laden speech and call one another insulting names, yet their love for one another is evident.

The girls make their way out to the backyard, where a pig is roasting. They greet the rest of their family, and Leidy passes Dante off to a cousin so that she can have a drink and enjoy herself. As Leidy and Lizet begin gulping sangria together, Lizet feels "normal" for the first time since she's been home. It almost feels like she and Leidy are "on the same team," the way they were years ago before Leidy got pregnant and before Lizet had ever even heard of Rawlings.

One of Lizet's cousins asks her where Omar is, and Leidy interjects, revealing that Lizet has broken up with Omar. Lizet feels ill, and realizes she shouldn't drink any more of her sangria. Against her will, she misses Omar; though she hasn't called him since she's been home, she's upset that he hasn't called her, either.

Over the course of the night, Lizet fends off her increasingly drunk relatives, who comment on her changed appearance and ask her if she is engaged yet. When it's time to sit down for dinner, Lizet notices that there is a place card at her table with Omar's name on it. Lizet wonders whether her mother went behind her back and told Zoila to put Omar's place card out despite knowing Lizet had expressed ambivalence about their relationship—or whether she didn't say a word about Omar, and by proxy Lizet, to Zoila at all.

Lizet rushes outside to confront her mother—she walks out to see that Zoila is teasing Lourdes about her involvement with **Ariel Hernandez**. Most people in Miami believe that Ariel is sure to get the political asylum his family has recently requested, and Zoila now tells Lourdes that she looks foolish campaigning so hard on Ariel's behalf when his asylum is already a done deal. Zoila then turns to her much-younger boyfriend, Tony, and tells him that Lourdes is obsessed with Ariel because she's lonely and has nothing better to do.

Zoila and Lourdes, though not technically sisters, have been bound since youth by the specific and overwhelming experience of being there for each other during a crucial moment in Lourdes's life—her immigration to the United States.



Lizet is so desperate to revert back to the person she once was, that even a hint of normalcy and nostalgia makes her feel immense relief. She longs for things to be less complicated, and for her family to feel a sense of togetherness as they once did.



Though Lizet's feelings about Omar are ambivalent at best, she still gets upset when he doesn't pay enough attention to her—just like when he hung up on her at the airport over Thanksgiving, she feels miffed at the realization that he hasn't been in touch with her since she's been home.



When Lizet sees Omar's place card at the dinner table, she is struck by the terrible realization that her mother only cares about the aspects of her life that relate to Miami. Lourdes has no interest in Lizet's activities at school—all she wants is for Lizet to come home and resume a "normal" life.



Lizet picks a bad moment to confront her mother—Lourdes is in the process of fending off drunk relatives herself and defending her commitment to the Ariel case in the face of people who want to shame her and make her feel ridiculous and pathetic.



Lizet tries to get her mother's attention, but Lourdes is riled up and distracted by her own confrontation with Zoila. Lizet firmly tells her mother that they need to talk immediately. Zoila urges Lourdes to pay attention to Lizet and see what "the profesora" has to say; Lizet knows that the nickname is meant as a dig, but also realizes that it at least knows that her family is aware of the fact that she's in college somewhere special.

Lourdes drags Lizet back into the house and reprimands her for talking to her so disrespectfully in front of the rest of the family. Lourdes pushes Lizet against a wall and tells her remember her place—"Maybe," she says, "you forgot that up there."

Lizet shows Lourdes the place card and asks what it was doing on the table—she wants to know if Zoila forgot to take Omar out, or if Lourdes told Zoila to leave it there. Lourdes suggests that Lizet needs the "reminder" of the place card to show her what's "really important"—she thinks Lizet believes she is too good for Omar now.

Lizet and her mother continue to argue—about Omar, about Lourdes's disinterest in Lizet's experiences at school, about the sacrifices each is making. When Lizet pulls out her trump card and accuses Lourdes of only caring about **Ariel** because she has nothing else going on, Lourdes pushes Lizet hard, and Lizet falls to the ground. Lourdes tells Lizet that no matter what college she goes to, she will always be "fucking stupid" about some things. She turns her back and walks out of the room, still screaming about how selfish Lizet and Leidy are—they have invented their own problems, whereas Ariel and Caridaylis are going through something real.

Lizet, sitting on the ground as the room spins around her, believes her mother is the selfish one for volunteering all her time on **Ariel's** behalf when her own daughters need her. Eventually, Lizet stands up and heads back to the dinner table. Her mother takes a seat at the opposite end from Lizet and Leidy; Lizet spends the whole meal telling anyone who will listen that Omar is busy at work and will be present for the meal next year.

Lizet is so desperate for attention and recognition from her family that she's willing to accept even their teasing about her intelligence and haughtiness as confirmation that they at least know she's working hard.



Lourdes makes it clear that she doesn't think that Rawlings is making Lizet any smarter—in fact, it's making her forget who she is and what her duties to her family are.



Lourdes confirms that she wants Lizet to realize that Omar and her life in Miami are what is important—not academics or her adventures up at school.



Lizet and Lourdes's horrible, physically intense fight reflects the deep-rooted frustrations both women have with one another. They see things completely differently, and have opposing ideas about what's important. Lourdes doesn't want Lizet to act superior to the rest of her family or forget her place or her duties, and attempts to couch her jealousy and feelings of abandonment in arguments about how good their family has it compared to Ariel—her obsession.



Lizet ultimately decides it's easier to play her family's games than to try and assert that she is different, destined for bigger and better things.



CHAPTER 21

That night, once Lourdes and Leidy fall asleep, Lizet calls Omar on the kitchen phone. She is surprised at how good it feels to hear his voice. He is not angry with her, as she expected he would be; instead, he is sweet and flirty, and asks Lizet how her last week of school went—they have not talked in a while. He asks if he can come over tomorrow, on Christmas, and Lizet says he can—if he has a present for her. He says that he does; he got one a while ago.

Lizet tells Omar about the disastrous Noche Buena party. She lets him know that her entire family was asking about him—and that there was a place set for him at the table. Omar assures Lizet that everything between them is “cool,” and Lizet enthusiastically asks Omar to come by tomorrow as early as he can. They laugh and joke together a little more, the easy banter between them rekindled. As Lizet talks with Omar, she remembers how attracted she is to him—after hanging up, though, Lizet vows that she will not have sex with him. Sex with Omar means too much to her emotionally, and until she gets her grades for the semester back—and subsequently learns what her future at Rawlings will hold—she does not want to put herself in that situation.

Over the rest of the break, though, Omar and Lizet have sex frequently. After the two drive out to the beach on Christmas day, Omar pulls out a box containing a simple diamond ring. Omar explains that though he isn’t asking Lizet to marry him right away, he wants to make their commitment to each other plain, so that “those nerds” up at Rawlings don’t get any ideas about coming onto Lizet. Lizet accepts the ring, and the two have sex on the beach—afterwards, Lizet finds that she cannot stop looking at her new ring; it is a ring that says, “You’re a good investment.”

CHAPTER 22

Every day starting the day after Christmas, Lizet runs downstairs to the mailboxes on the ground floor of her mother’s apartment complex to see if her grades have arrived. She is anxious to get them and learn her fate—whether she will take “normal” classes the following semester, or be forced to take remedial lessons and forfeit part of her financial aid. Lizet is so stressed that she can’t even get excited about celebrating New Year’s Eve with Omar.

It seems as if the fight with Lourdes actually did cause Lizet to think about what’s important to her—she seeks comfort in Omar, hoping that in reaching out to him she can satisfy her craving for company and recognition and maybe even smooth things over with Lourdes in the process.



Lizet wants comfort from Omar, but is unwilling to rekindle their sexual relationship as it requires too much of her emotionally. She is looking for comfort and stability, and yet knows that even if Omar is able to give her a modicum of those feelings, she will still feel anxious about her future—she knows those feelings will be compounded if they start having sex, and wants to avoid creating more problems for herself during an already strange and fraught trip home.



Lizet is searching everywhere for someone to be proud of her and congratulate her for working so hard. Though the promise ring from Omar is hardly a reflection of or a reward for how hard she’s been working in school, it is still a token of recognition, and because of this it means a lot to Lizet.



In spite of the major development in her relationship with Omar, Lizet is focused primarily on school, and on what her next semester at Rawlings will look like when—and if—she returns.



On New Year's Eve, Lizet's grades show up. Both Lourdes and Leidy are working, and Lizet is grateful to be alone so that she can open the envelope in peace. After opening it carefully and removing the paper inside, Lizet sees that although the only A she earned was in PE, all of her other grades are B-minuses. Lizet feels intense relief—nothing about her position at Rawlings will change. She knows her elevated grades mean that she did so well on her final papers and exams that she pulled herself up out of danger. Lizet begins to sob with relief, but in the back of her mind wonders if the school has gone easy on her so that they can “keep their Cuban above water for another semester.” This thought upsets Lizet until she remembers that all of her exams were graded blindly—her scores were all authentic.

When Omar comes over with coffee and breakfast in hand, Lizet tells him the good news about her grades. She exaggerates, though, telling him she earned all As and one B, as “a kind of translation” of how her Rawlings grades compare to “normal” grades. Omar declares the two need to celebrate, and arranges for the two of them to go out to a club.

Later that evening, Leidy lends Lizet some outrageous club clothes. As Lizet gets ready, feeling as if she is at last her old self again, Lourdes sits in the other room, watching **Ariel** on the news and preparing for the large New Year's Day rally in his honor the following morning.

Omar comes to pick Lizet up, and Lourdes warns them both to be careful out on the streets of Miami. Lourdes asks Lizet to be quiet when she comes home—Lourdes has to be up early for the **Ariel** rally. She confesses to Lizet that the upcoming months will be difficult, as more people have started listening to and empathizing with Ariel's father; she is already so tired from worrying so much about the boy. Lizet offers to accompany Lourdes to the rally, but Lourdes wags her finger in Lizet's face and warns Lizet not to do her any favors. Lizet should only go to the rally, Lourdes says, if she really wants to dedicate herself to the cause.

Lizet is struggling with intense imposter syndrome in this passage. She has spent so long worrying she is not good enough for Rawlings that she feels undeserving of her success even in the face of good news. Her sense of isolation at school coupled with her feelings of having “betrayed” her family in Miami make it difficult for her to ever get real joy from her academic success. She must talk through every win with herself in order to convince herself that it is real, and that it belongs entirely to her.



Omar is excited for Lizet, but Lizet is still burdened by the job of having to translate her experience into terms he can understand. Omar is not a part of her life at Rawlings and never will be, and this fact remains at the back of Lizet's mind despite all his good intentions.



Lizet is happy to at last feel like the girl she left behind all those months ago; she can't yet see, though, that just by dressing up in club clothes, she cannot regain the person she was before she left for school.



Once again, Lizet is trying to make everyone around her happy—she is going out to the club with Omar, and she also wants to make her mother feel loved and supported by volunteering to attend the rally with her the following morning. Lourdes's warning to Lizet reflects her intense dedication to the cause—she does not want anyone there who is not there purely out of love for Ariel and support for his family.



Omar and Lizet drive to a nearby liquor store to pick up some alcohol. Lizet takes a couple sips, and then Omar locks the bottle in the trunk. As they get back on the road, Omar says that he'd wanted to swing back by his house so that Lizet could say hi to his mother, but since she's already started drinking—and is dressed provocatively for the club—that might not be such a good idea. Omar says, though, that Lizet should probably come by his house and visit with his mother before she goes back to school—otherwise, his mother will think something is wrong with Lizet “too.”

It takes a very long time for the words to sink in—Lizet and Omar are already at the club before she really thinks about them—but soon Lizet wonders what Omar meant by “you too.” Thirty minutes before midnight, she asks Omar who the “too” is, and when Omar refuses to answer her, she becomes aggressive and angry. Omar at last admits that he was talking about Lourdes and her strange fixation with **Ariel Hernandez**.

Lizet, angry and hurt, heads through the crowd towards what she thinks is the bathroom. The club is unfamiliar, though, and Lizet gets lost. Omar comes up to her and tells her to be careful taking off on her own, but Lizet wants nothing to do with Omar. She says her mother isn't crazy—everyone else is watching the **Ariel** news nonstop, too. Omar admits that this is true—but Lourdes has said “some weird shit” during her TV interviews that has upset Omar.

Lizet becomes hysterical, explaining that the whole world is watching Miami, and that she, her mother, and all the other Cubans are “supposed to be [...] these angry exiles.” Omar is confused by what Lizet is saying—when she looks up at him, she is reminded of looking up at Ethan at the dance party at Rawlings. Whereas the colorful beams at the Rawlings party illuminated Ethan, the lights at this club only turn Omar into a “black hole.” Lizet realizes that she is too different from the girl she used to be—she hoped that by dressing up in Leidy's club clothes, she could turn back into her old self, but she is “separate” now from the girl Omar thinks she is.

Lizet begins screaming that she wants to go—Omar tries to calm her down and restrain her. Lizet notices that other people in the club are watching them, and Lizet hysterically begins asking everyone what they're looking at. Omar steers Lizet off the dance floor, begging her to calm down—he paid a hundred dollars for them to get in, and if they're not careful, they'll get kicked out. Lizet, though, doesn't care. All she wants is to go home. Lizet kisses Omar fiercely—realizing that “that” is what she wants, he pulls her towards the door.

What seems to be a casual conversation on the way to the club contains a kernel of strangeness—a remark that Lizet doesn't immediately pick up on, but that Omar will soon come to regret as the larger implications of it sink in.



Lizet—perhaps due to intoxication and excitement, or perhaps due to denial—doesn't realize right away what Omar was implying back in the car. As he reveals the truth of his words, Lizet is shocked and hurt.



Lizet is desperate not to believe the assertion that her mother is some kind of crazy person. She has sought comfort in Omar this week, and now he is bringing it all crashing down by revealing to Lizet a truth that she does not want to hear.



Lizet is trying everything she can to deflect attention away from Lourdes and place it on the larger Cuban community. She is doing so, however, through eyes tainted by the “double vision” being at school has given her—she wishes she could see things the way she used to, but sadly realizes that she is stuck in a liminal space, neither the girl she once was nor the girl she longs to be.



Lizet's intentions in kissing Omar are not clear—she either wants to end the argument they are having, or is overcome with an intense surge of emotion as a result of her rage. Either way, she wants to lose herself in him, and forget the strain of her familial problems for a little while.



In the backseat of Omar’s car, though, Lizet cannot get into the zone. The sex is passionless and Lizet frets that she is not performing well enough for Omar. She is distracted, and decides that in the morning she will go with her mother to the rally to see for herself what it is about Lourdes that scares everybody so much.

Lizet is too distracted by her family matters to focus on her relationship with Omar—she knows that she has to find out the truth for herself if she is to have any peace in any arena of her life.



CHAPTER 23

The next morning, Lizet takes a shower—she is preparing to leave for the rally with her mother, and she feels “wrecked” despite having felt sober when Omar dropped her off last night. She steps out of the shower and goes into Leidy’s room to get dressed—Leidy, who is bummed about having had to stay home with Dante on New Year’s Eve, wants to know all about how the club was last night so that she can live vicariously through Lizet. Lizet, though, explains that she needs to get ready so she can leave for the rally; Leidy tells Lizet she shouldn’t go, as it’s for sure going to get out of hand.

Lizet seems to be dreading the rally as much as Leidy is dreading Lizet’s going. Lizet knows, though, that she won’t be able to feel calm again until she sees for herself what really goes on at Ariel’s and what Lourdes is really like when she’s a member of the frenzied crowd.



Lizet ignores Leidy’s warning, although she remembers how their mother was already exaggerating for the cameras at Thanksgiving, telling news people that she had two little girls “just like Ariel” back at home. Leidy knows that Lizet is not really going in support of Ariel—she’s just going to see how Lourdes acts. Leidy admits that she did the same thing not that long ago and watched as Lourdes cried and approached anyone who would listen to tell them stories what would make “those people” like her. Leidy also tells Lizet that Lourdes told Caridaylis she was a single mom—she “straight up stole” Leidy’s life story and pretended it happened in Cuba twenty years ago. Lourdes has been telling people that on the raft over to Miami, Lizet was a baby, breastfeeding “until [Lourdes’s] milk turned to dust.” Leidy has privately nicknamed Lourdes “Miss Dusty Tits.”

When Leidy reveals to Lizet the extent of how badly Lourdes is warping the truth about her past—and Lizet and Leidy’s lives, as well—it becomes clear that whatever Lourdes is doing at the rallies, it is beyond the bounds of normal passion and activism. This is clearly a personal matter for Lourdes, who feels for some reason that she must establish legitimacy to the other protestors and news organizations alike by lying about her past and making her experience align with Ariel’s.



Lizet is shocked to hear things are so out of hand. She sits down on the bed and asks Leidy why no one has called Lourdes out on her lies—Leidy thinks, though, that because they are new to the neighborhood, none of their neighbors know any better. Lizet wonders if Lourdes has, in the last few weeks, convinced herself of her own lies. She continues getting dressed, and chastises Leidy for not having told her all of this earlier. Leidy begs Lizet to stay home, but Lizet privately feels that Lourdes’s version of events makes Lizet a “more authentic Cuban”—and she wants to hear how her mother “pull[s] it off.”

Lizet is clearly disturbed by her mother’s lies. However, she is also tempted by the idea of reinventing herself, confused as she’s been by the way her classmates have focused on her Cuban-ness, or lack thereof, all semester long.



Outside, the air is chilly for Miami. As Lourdes and Lizet walk the two blocks over to **Ariel**'s family's home, Lizet notices more and more posters, flowers, and flags hanging along fences and put out on the sidewalk. Lizet becomes entranced by the posters and banners, almost all of which are homemade, and is only snapped out of her focus when she hears a voice calling her mother's name. Lizet looks up to see Lourdes embracing a strange woman clad in a homemade Ariel t-shirt. The woman wishes Lizet a happy new year and greets her warmly, but Lourdes does not introduce Lizet as her daughter. Lizet assumes her mother has told the woman about her—she is waiting for something to happen that will prove Leidy wrong.

As the rally gets underway, Lizet sees why Lourdes told her to come only if she was interested in really helping **Ariel**; here, Lourdes is not her mother. Lourdes is someone else—she is friends with everyone, and respected as an active community organizer. As more and more people arrive and greet Lourdes, she does not introduce any of them to Lizet. Despite the oddity of the situation, Lizet doesn't find the rally itself off-putting—it is calm, communal, and joyful rather than hysterical, angry, or violent, as many news outlets have made these gatherings out to be.

After a while, someone in front of the crowd shouts that the door to **Ariel**'s house is opening, and the crowd falls quiet. Lizet waits excitedly and indeed a bit nervously to see Ariel for the first time. When he finally emerges from the house, sitting on one of his uncles' shoulders and wearing a Santa hat, smiling and waving to the crowd, Lizet sees at last how this boy has captured the attention of so many people. For many people Lizet thinks, Ariel is a "mirror, some version or idea of [themselves,] fresh off a boat or a plane and alone but still hopeful."

Lizet feels as if she has fallen into a trance. She realizes now that she would have stayed wrapped up in it if someone hadn't knocked into her and pushed her forward, causing one of her mother's friends to step on her toe. She realizes that people all around her are shouting questions at **Ariel**'s uncle, asking if there has been any news from the government, and how Caridaylis is holding up. The uncle answers quickly that he will have more answers on Tuesday, and then asks Ariel if there's anything he wants to say. Ariel shyly wishes the crowd a happy new year.

Lizet is walking into the rally with an open mind, ready to give her mother the benefit of the doubt. Lizet is secretly hoping that she will find enjoyment in the rally; she wants to find out that her mother has been secretly bragging about her to all her friends there, and will perhaps even help Lizet to feel more "authentically Cuban" by making her a part of the story she's been spinning.



Lizet's hopes are sidelined, however, when she realizes that Lourdes is here only for Ariel. She has little time or patience for Lizet, and Lizet feels sidelined, isolated, and betrayed as her mother practically ignores her. Still, the rally is not as bad as Lizet thought it would be, and this at least allows her to feel some relief.



Lizet at last understands Ariel's mass appeal, and why he has become such a beacon of hope for the community. She is shocked by how deeply just the sight of him affects her, but grateful for the chance to at last understand her mother's behavior.



The mood in the crowd is blithe and happy, but the way Lizet is bumped and pushed foreshadows the potential for danger, mob mentality, and true chaos.



Lizet looks towards the front of the crowd and sees that Caridaylis has joined **Ariel** at the door of the house. Lizet thinks Cari looks “painfully generic”—she could be any Miami girl. Cari takes Ariel in her arms and waves to the crowd, who shout messages of love and support. Lizet notices that Cari waves directly at Lourdes and even mouths “Hi, Lourdes” to her. Lizet wonders why Cari knows her mother’s name.

As Lourdes begins gushing about how special Caridaylis is, Lizet feels an intense anger take over. She has worked so hard to get into Rawlings and thrive there, and her mother has never once told her she is special. Lizet speaks up and says there’s nothing special about Cari—she is a “glorified babysitter.” Lourdes demands Lizet take back what she said—she grabs Lizet’s face and tells her she doesn’t recognize her anymore. She lets go of Lizet and tells her she is a bad person.

Lizet is so upset that she can barely speak. She wants her mother to give her the same attention she gives to Caridaylis—someone she hardly knows. Lizet realizes in this instant that this means she wants **Ariel** gone. Lizet apologizes and begins crying; Lourdes begins crying too, and comforts her daughter. “None of this should be happening,” she says. They hold each other and cry as, out on the lawn in front of the building, Ariel drives one of his new Christmas presents—a miniature beach buggy—around the lawn.

Lizet is surprised to find that she actually empathizes with her mother. She is disappointed in Omar and Leidy for writing Lourdes off as crazy when it seems as if Lourdes is just trying to become her own person through a newfound passion. Lizet is even willing to excuse the crazy stories her mother has made up about their family—she, of all people, cannot fault her mother “for having the wherewithal to adapt her behavior” and doing what it takes to survive in a new environment. Lizet writes, though, that she would later be forced to admit that this assessment of the situation was wrong.

CHAPTER 24

On Tuesday, there is another rally in anticipation of the court releasing its decision on **Ariel**’s asylum status. Lizet again goes along with Lourdes, mainly out of a desire to support her mother. They stand at the front of the crowd, and when Ariel’s uncle and Caridaylis come out, they both look exhausted and bereaved. The crowd immediately intuits that whatever news they have to share will be bad.

Lizet is surprised to see that her mother is popular not just with the other activists, but is indeed on a first-name basis with actual members of Ariel’s family. This is Lizet’s first feeling the whole time she’s been at the rally that maybe there actually is something deeper and more dangerous going on.



Lizet is fiercely jealous of her mother’s feelings about Caridaylis, and attempts to bash the girl whom her mother clearly loves and on some level idolizes. This elicits cruelty and anger from Lourdes, shocking Lizet back into sadness, fear, and isolation.



Lourdes is willing to overlook Lizet’s cruel words, however, admitting that the situation is emotionally fraught for everyone. Lizet has many conflicting feelings, and does seem genuinely moved by Ariel’s predicament and the way the community has rallied around him.



Lizet leaves the rally feeling reassured and relieved. She is on her mother’s side, though she was not expecting to be—she sees the parallels between how her mother is adapting to her new neighborhood (and to life without both Lizet and Ricky) and her own experience of trying to fit in at Rawlings.



This rally is not like the joyful New Year’s Day one; from the outset, there is a somber tone. Because of the foreshadowing in the last chapter, it is easy to see that things are about to take a turn for the worse.



The uncle states that their worst fears have come true, but as he continues his speech, Lizet stops listening. She looks at Lourdes, who seems to be “melting”; Lourdes turns her face toward the sky and lets out a long, horrible scream. The rest of the crowd begins wailing too. Lourdes screams that **Ariel**’s mother “died in vain,” and as the news outlets push through the crowd to get a closer shot of Lourdes’s breakdown, other demonstrators try to calm her down. The crowd rushes forward towards the house, but Lourdes falls to her knees, screaming that Ariel cannot go back.

Lizet is confused about what has just happened, and a friend of Lourdes’s explains that the INS has granted **Ariel**’s father back in Cuba custody of the boy; in two weeks, he will be deported. Lizet looks up at the front of the house, where Caridaylis is being harassed by reporters. Lizet, feeling a sudden rush of empathy, hurries forward and places her hand on the lens of a reporter’s camera, but is quickly pushed aside. Caridaylis covers her face with her hands and rushes back inside the house.

Lizet hears someone shouting her mother’s name; she turns around and realizes that Lourdes has collapsed in the middle of the crowd and is in danger of being trampled. Lizet pushes through the mass of bodies, sustaining a blow to the ear on her way to her mother. Lizet reaches Lourdes and tries to pull her to her feet; when this is unsuccessful, she grabs her mother’s face and begins shouting “Mami” to wake her up. One of Lourdes’s friends chastises Lizet for calling Lourdes “Mami,” and tells her Lourdes’s name. Lizet realizes in that instant that no one at the protest knows she is Lourdes’s daughter. Lourdes’s friends pull her body away from the crowd—and away from Lizet—as she screams after them, in English and in Spanish, the truth of who she is. The women push forward and do not turn around.

CHAPTER 25

During Lizet’s last few days in Miami before returning to Rawlings, **Ariel**’s uncle sues for temporary custody in hopes of becoming Ariel’s legal guardian. On the day of her flight back to school, Lizet wakes up to a note from Lourdes stating that someone else will have to take Lizet to the airport while Lourdes attends another rally. Lizet lands back in New York to the news that Ariel’s uncle’s petition has been approved while the courts sort the legalities of the case out.

As the sad news breaks, Lizet is frightened and alarmed by her mother’s intense emotional reaction to the news—not to mention that of the rest of the people in the crowd. As the mob grows uneasy, Lourdes escalates the emotion by acting out dramatically—whether her reaction is real or feigned, even Lizet cannot tell.



Though Lizet is taken aback and unsettled by the intense emotional reactions taking place all around her, she finds herself—against all odds—swept up in the drama of the situation and overtaken by an intense sadness on behalf of Ariel and his family.



As the situation begins getting out of control, Lizet is horrified to realize that all this time her mother has never admitted to anyone that Lizet is her daughter. This is not just cruel or petty, but actually dangerous, as Lizet is barred from helping her mother in a moment of intense crisis. Lizet realizes that she—and Lourdes—are both in over their heads.



Once again, Lourdes drops everything—even her family—to run off and participate in rallies on Ariel’s behalf. This betrayal is hardly newsworthy anymore though, and Lizet seems to barely even care that her mother has once again abandoned her for Ariel and his family.



As Lizet readjusts to life at Rawlings, she hears snippets on the news all over campus about the **Ariel Hernandez** case. Lizet doesn't pay much attention to the reports; she senses that the legal battle ahead of Ariel's family is a long one, and she doesn't even want to know the truth of what's happening. The first week back on campus, though, Lizet finds that many of her friends and dormmates want to know her opinion on the case—she answers them all by shrugging off their questions, much to their dismay. An RA even comes to Lizet and Jillian's door to offer Lizet "support"; Lizet angrily insists that nothing's going on with her, and that her family has not been affected by Ariel's case in the least. Lizet keeps feigning disinterest, as she does not want her peers' assumptions about her proven right.

Meanwhile, Lizet is excited to begin classes again; her schedule, packed with biology, calculus, Spanish, and a laboratory class, piques her interest. On the first day of classes, Lizet arrives at the laboratory where her practical lab class will take place. The class is small—only twelve students—and is led by a professor named Dr. Kaufmann, a German biophysicist who is world-renowned for her work in population ecology.

Dr. Kaufmann teaches her students how to keep a lab notebook. Meticulously writing in pen and never erasing or obscuring any old work is essential, she says—the mistakes must all be on the page, as mistakes are "vital to every scientist's process." Lizet writes this sentence down and thinks hard about it. She finds herself touched by the forgiveness "built into" research philosophy; she feels her first semester, and all the struggles she faced during it, have been validated.

Dr. Kaufmann spends the second part of class teaching her students the correct technique for sterile handling of lab equipment and specimens. Towards the end of class, she surprises the class with their very first exam: each student must demonstrate their sterile technique. Lizet, whose name is towards the end of the alphabet, nervously watches as her classmates struggle and make errors in their technique. When Lizet is up, though, she passes the test with flying colors, and Dr. Kaufmann compliments her on her extraordinary technique and attention to detail. Lizet feels proud of herself, and energized by both her success in class and the exciting prospect of doing real laboratory work all semester.

Lizet is caught up in a slew of competing feelings. She doesn't want to be inundated with information about the Ariel case, as the truth is that it does affect her; however, when others assume that she is more affected than others simply because she's Cuban or because she's from Miami, she grows defensive, and tries to downplay her feelings and involvement so as not to be stereotyped.



Liz sees her new semester at Rawlings as a chance to start over and forget the mistakes of last semester; she is relieved for the chance to begin anew and is happy not to have to take remedial classes.



Lizet is profoundly touched by the metaphor the lab notebooks represent: she should not overlook or avoid her past mistakes, but rather accept those mistakes as a part of the larger "experiment" and learning experience of her life.



Lizet, who became used to struggling all by herself and having to work overtime just to stay afloat last semester, is pleasantly surprised by how at home she feels in the lab, and how kind Professor Kaufmann is. She has found something at Rawlings that she is truly good at, and this knowledge fills her with a familiar but elusive sense of pride and accomplishment.



After visiting the library to pick up her work-study schedule, Lizet runs into Ethan, who admits he's been looking for her everywhere. They decide to get lunch and catch up at a bar off-campus. When they sit down, Ethan asks how Lizet's time in Miami was. Thinking that he's trying to find a way to bring up the **Ariel Hernandez** case, Lizet responds with suspicion, and Ethan mocks her for being so guarded. The two banter back and forth, and soon Ethan notices Lizet's pre-engagement ring.

Lizet, wanting to "protect" both Ethan and herself, decides to rework the truth. She moves her ring over to her other hand and states that her mother bought her the ring for Christmas—Ethan seems relieved, at the very least, to learn that Lizet was just "joking" about her engagement. When Ethan comments on the extravagance of receiving a diamond ring for Christmas, Lizet realizes that Ethan still has the wrong idea about her—first from Jillian's fancy mittens, and now from the ring.

As they eat their lunch, Ethan tells Lizet about a program he runs on campus—a standing study group called Happy Hours, which functions around the premise that for each hour of work a student puts in, they are allowed to order one beer at the bar after the study portion of the evening is over. Ethan invites Lizet to join the group, even though she's underage and won't be able to participate in the bar portion of the hangout. As the meal wraps up, Lizet asks if it's nerdy for her to go to Professor Kaufmann's office hours on the first day of classes, but Ethan excitedly encourages her to go talk to Kaufmann right away—and to attend Happy Hours later that week.

At Professor Kaufmann's office, Lizet bonds with her new teacher over their shared love of the ocean. Though Kaufmann begins talking excitedly and rapidly about her own research and Lizet is barely able to keep up, she finds herself comforted by her teacher's enthusiasm and kindness, and she is excited for the semester to come.

CHAPTER 26

Lizet is surprised when, only a few days into the new semester, Jillian asks her what she's planning on doing for the summer. When Lizet answers that she'll probably hang out around Miami and go to the beach with Omar, Jillian insists that Lizet needs to start applying for a job or an internship: "What you do the summer between your freshman and sophomore years pretty much goes on to determine your entire career," she says. Lizet is panicked as she realizes she doesn't know enough about college—or careers—to decide if this is true or not.

Every time Lizet assumes the worst about Ethan, he proves her wrong—he is always genuinely interested in what she has to say, and never acts predatorily or cruelly towards her. Lizet has been treated poorly by many of her peers here, and has gotten used to being defensive, suspicious, and thus isolated from others.



Lizet finds herself mirroring her mother's questionable behavior by lying to create a more convenient truth. Doing so backfires, though—she realizes that she is continuing to give Ethan the idea that she is wealthy and supported, when really she is neither.



Just as he did last semester, Ethan continues encouraging Lizet to take advantage of everything she can on campus—study hard, make friends, explore all of the available resources, and meet with her teachers. He seems genuinely invested in Lizet's well-being, and his belief in her bolsters her own confidence in her ability to succeed at Rawlings after all.



Lizet, who was nervous about the start of this semester after how dicey things got last semester, feels a little less lonely when she realizes that she has found a kindred spirit in Dr. Kaufmann—or at least someone who is kind and open.



As a first-generation college student from an "underserved" high school, Lizet has not had any guidance so far about what is expected of her in college—and the realization that there is more to succeeding than just attending classes and doing well academically frightens her deeply. She has no idea how serious Jillian's claims are, and begins panicking that she will be left behind.



Jillian changes the subject—she asks Lizet why Lizet switched her fancy new ring from her left hand to her right hand. Jillian has noticed that the switch happened after Lizet went to lunch with Ethan. Jillian explains that she was just out at an a cappella event on campus where Ethan also was, and noticed how cute he was. Lizet insists she’s not interested in Ethan, and even offers to hook Jillian up with him, but Jillian says she’s interested in someone else. Lizet is surprised when she feels a surge of relief.

During the second week of classes, Lizet decides to go to Ethan’s Happy Hours study session. When she arrives, though, she is the only one who has showed up other than Ethan. Ethan greets Lizet excitedly, though he’s embarrassed by the turnout. Ethan insists he wasn’t trying to get Lizet alone by inviting her to the group; he doesn’t want her to get the wrong idea about him. Lizet seizes the moment to confess to Ethan that it’s maybe him who has the wrong idea about her; she tells him that her fancy mittens belong to her roommate, and admits to being Jillian’s “charity case.” Ethan asks if that means that Lizet’s ring isn’t really from her mom, and she admits that it is, in fact, from Omar. There is an awkward moment, but it passes, and Lizet feels she have “saved” their friendship by being honest.

As the semester goes on, Lizet keeps wearing Omar’s ring on her right hand instead of her left. She thrives in Dr. Kaufmann’s class, and develops a friendly relationship with the professor. She continues attending Ethan’s Happy Hours, and meets some new people as more students start to attend. Meanwhile, Lizet has trouble getting a hold of Leidy—they keep playing phone tag, and Leidy accuses Lizet of “scheduling shit like a white girl” when Lizet suggests a standing phone appointment each week so they have time to catch up.

Meanwhile, Lizet calls Omar late almost every night. She’s been asking him to check in on Lourdes and Leidy and make sure Lourdes isn’t getting out of hand with the **Ariel Hernandez** business anymore—Omar has assured her that Lourdes has calmed down. As Lizet’s first set of exams approach, she is grateful for Omar—and for the chance to “scratch [Lourdes] off the list” of concerns and focus on her own studies.

In this passage, Jillian forces Lizet to confront an uncomfortable truth: there is a possibility she has feelings for Ethan, or at least a lack of feelings for Omar. Lizet hasn’t been wearing her ring like an engagement ring, and feels jealous when Jillian asks about Ethan—it’s unclear whether Jillian does so in order to help Lizet realize her feelings.



Lizet is nervous to tell Ethan the truth about herself, but once she does she’s grateful to have it off her chest. She sees that honesty is the key to goodwill, openness, and trust; as the narrative goes on, though, Lizet will be tempted by how much easier it is to lie and remain isolated than to tell the truth and risk rejection in order to grow closer to someone.



Lizet is blossoming at school, but the more adjusted she becomes at Rawlings, the further she grows from her friends and family in Miami. She is still incurring taunts from Leidy about assimilating and becoming “white,” while she privately harbors feelings of ambivalence about her relationship with Omar in the face of all the new people she’s meeting and new experiences she’s enjoying.



Though Lizet cares deeply about what’s going on at home, she has a lot on her plate at Rawlings—the idea that she no longer has to worry so much about her family allows her to focus on her own studies. Though her family may see this as a betrayal, Lizet sees it as freedom.



CHAPTER 27

Lizet receives an email from Dr. Kaufmann, stating that the professor wants to meet with Lizet outside of class to discuss something “one-on-one.” Lizet is immediately nervous that she has done something wrong—and that whatever it was will count as “strike two” during her time at Rawlings. Lizet writes back that she’d be happy to meet with Professor Kaufmann after class on Monday, and spends the whole weekend—and the whole class period before their meeting—racking her brain for things she could have done wrong.

After class, Professor Kaufmann excitedly calls Lizet over to her desk and asks her to sit down. Dr. Kaufmann asks Lizet if she’s interested in being a research scientist, and though Lizet has told herself—and her parents—that she is at Rawlings to study to become a doctor, she admits to Kaufmann and to herself that she wants to work in a laboratory. Kaufmann slides a brochure across the table—she wants Lizet to apply to a program in Santa Barbara, California, connected to her own research group. The program would allow Lizet to work in a field laboratory for the summer, and Kaufmann expresses a desire to nominate Lizet for the position. Because Kaufmann technically runs the lab, there is a very strong chance that the internship is a done deal for Lizet.

As Lizet heads back to her dorm room, she wonders how she will find a way to bring this new opportunity up to her parents. She knows she can’t afford a flight home for Easter, but also doesn’t feel like it’s something she can really talk to them about over the phone. Back at her dorm, Lizet shows the brochure to Jillian, who congratulates her on securing such an exciting opportunity. As Jillian heads off to her afternoon class and Lizet stares down the phone in their room, Lizet wishes she could call Jillian’s parents and give them the news instead—surely, if she had parents like Jillian’s, they would be nothing but excited for her.

Lizet decides to hold her good news inside for just one night, and keep the excitement all to herself. She knows that as soon as she tells either her mother or her father about the internship, the news will be scrutinized and questioned, and she won’t be able to feel such pure joy about it. In retrospect, though, Lizet realizes now that she should have picked up the phone and called someone—that night was the last night the internship offer stood even a chance of being received as good news, as things were about to get “much, much harder” for Lizet and her family.

Lizet is still so traumatized from her run-in with the Academic Integrity Committee last semester that she worries she has unwittingly slipped up again. This fear isolates her, and she worries that she has not blended in enough at Rawlings despite all her best efforts.



Whereas last semester she was being singled out for her ignorance and her failures, Lizet is now being recognized as a smart, capable, and even gifted student. Moreover, Professor Kaufmann’s internship will solve her anxiety about falling behind her peers in that department—Lizet is excited by the news, and happy to finally be thriving at Rawlings.



With every new good thing that happens to Lizet at college, she must face the realization that she is very different from her peers—and now she must begin coming to terms with the idea that she has also become very different from her own family. The things that are important to her are confusing or irrelevant to them; carrying this knowledge hurts her, and she wishes she did not have to feel so alone.



Lizet knows her mother will never be proud of the things that Lizet thinks she should be proud of. Knowing disappointment is inevitable, Lizet wants to hold on her own pride in her achievements a little longer, unaware of the larger issues that are unfolding within her family even as she remains ignorant and absorbed in her own life.



CHAPTER 28

Lizet writes that she didn't realize at the time that her reluctance to call home about such important things had a flip side—her family back in Miami, as it turns out, was just as reluctant to talk to her, and the next afternoon, as Lizet walked home from her Spanish class, she would understand the reason why.

As Lizet heads into her dormitory and passes the TV lounge on the way to her room, she is shocked to see her mother's face on the television screen. She runs into the room and, out loud, asks "What are you doing here!" to the TV screen. Four other girls—white girls, two of whom are Caroline and Tracy, Jillian's friends—turn around and look quizzically at Lizet. As Lizet gets closer to the TV, blocking the girls' view, she sees that there is a title on the screen beneath her mother's face: "Lourdes Ramirez," it says, "Madres Para Justicia (Mothers for Justice.)"

Lizet is shocked to see her mother on the screen, as neither Leidy nor Omar have indicated in their phone calls that Lourdes was still involved with the **Ariel** protests. Lizet barely recognizes her mother's heavily made-up face and professional demeanor as she speaks on a national news program about her involvement in Ariel's case. One of the girls in the room asks Lizet to move out of the way, but Lizet shushes her. Lizet hears Tracy whisper to one of the other girls that Lizet is Jillian's Cuban roommate. As Liz wonders what Madres Para Justicia is—and again, why no one told her Lourdes was involved with it—Caroline sweetly asks if "Liz" is okay.

Lizet asks what is happening on the news—one of the girls answers that **Ariel Hernandez's** father is on his way to Miami to retrieve Ariel. Lizet is shocked, and turns up the volume on the television, hoping to hear more. She hears her mother talking about a twenty-four-hour prayer vigil their group is organizing. The vigil, which started two nights ago, will continue through Easter. Lizet is shocked even further—her mother never prays. As Lizet tries to listen to what's happening on TV, she hears the girls on the lounge chairs behind her whispering to one another about who the woman on TV could be.

Lizet whips around and tells the other girls that the woman on television is her mother, and asks aggressively if any of them have anything to say about it. One girl leaves the room, and Caroline tells Lizet to calm down. This sets Lizet off—she is confused by her mother's appearance, shocked by the new developments in the case, and sick of her white classmates treating her alternately like a spectacle and like a nobody.

Here, Cruet uses the retrospective voice to point out Lizet's ignorance and foreshadow a series of unfortunate events.



Lizet's total shock at seeing her mother on TV trumps her desire to fit in with the other girls in her dorm. Whereas before she has downplayed her involvement in the Ariel Hernandez case—and her ties to Miami—she doesn't hold back now, putting the truth of her and her mother's association with Ariel on display at last.



In this passage, Lizet is privately reckoning with an implosion of all she thought she knew. Her mother has, for an indeterminate amount of time, been involved with—or even founding—a radical protest group, and everyone in Lizet's inner circle back home has been keeping this fact from her. While she is attempting to process this traumatic news, she also has to deal with the sounds of her gossipy peers at Rawlings talking about her literally behind her back.



Lizet is shocked to realize that Lourdes's hypocrisy is reaching new heights—Lourdes, who never prays, is organizing an intense prayer circle. Lizet barely recognizes her mother anymore, and is overwhelmed by the betrayal of everyone back home who kept the changes in Lourdes from her.



Everything that's happening is too much for Lizet. Her problems from Miami and her problems at Rawlings have finally converged in a terrible intersection, and Lizet must confront everything she has been avoiding all year at once.



Lizet tells Caroline and Tracy that **Ariel**'s father's attempt to get his son back is just Cuban government propaganda, and dares them to challenge her, advancing on them as if to start a fight. Caroline tries to act conciliatory and agrees with Lizet, but the third girl Lizet has never met alleges that Ariel needs to get back to a normal life in Cuba. Lizet points out that after being exposed to life in America, Ariel will be a liability in the oppressive Cuba. Tracy counters that Ariel doesn't "belong" in America, and Caroline quickly silences her. As the girls argue back and forth, Lizet is frustrated that none of them will listen to the points she's making about Cuba; as her anger reaches a fever pitch, Lizet blurts out that she is from Cuba, and thus knows more than any of the other girls.

When the girls question Lizet, she embellishes her ties to Cuba, describing coming over to America as a baby and frequently talking to her family members who are still there. As she spits vitriol at her classmates, Lizet realizes that she is "the True Daughter of Dusty Tits."

Tracy tries to tell the others that Lizet is not really from Cuba—just at that moment, though, on the television, Lourdes's voice can be heard saying that she came to America with her daughters in tow. Lizet calls Tracy a "fucking idiot," and asks if Tracy understands that **Ariel**'s mother died getting him to America. Tracy asks, in response, what Lizet's mother sacrificed for them to get here. Just as Lizet is about to strike Tracy, Caroline comes up behind her and grabs her arms. Tracy continues talking smack, saying that "none of this would be happening" if "she'd" just stayed put. Though Lizet knows that Tracy is talking about Ariel's mother, the implication about Lizet's mother is too much for her to bear, and she begins shrieking threats as Tracy and the third girl leave the room.

Once they are gone, Caroline lets go of Lizet and apologizes for having touched her. Lizet is suddenly embarrassed for having acted out, worried that her behavior will affect how Caroline thinks "of any Cuban she'd ever meet from here on out." Lizet leaves the lounge hurriedly, ignoring Caroline's calls for her to wait up, and goes back to her room.

Lizet picks up the phone and calls her mother's home phone, but no one answers. She miserably realizes that it is too late to ask about the internship now—she never should have left home, and she must undo the "mistake" of leaving as best she can. She chides herself for being so selfish and focusing only on her own problems—she tells herself that she is only Professor Kaufmann's "pity case" anyway. With shaking hands, Lizet goes to her computer and books a flight home for Easter.

When Lizet is confronted with racism, ignorance, and unfairness even greater than Jillian's, she finds herself in an infuriating situation. In response, she reacts just the same as Lourdes does, by spinning lies to make herself seem more credible. She is following in her mother's footsteps and repeating Lourdes's own shady tactics, and perhaps finally understands her mother's actions in doing so.



Lizet realizes she has become just like her mother. She hates spinning these lies, but knows it is the only way she can get her white peers to listen to her, unfortunate as that fact may be.



The tense and passive-aggressive debate the girls have been having turns cruel and violent in this passage as Lizet faces outright cruelty and racism—not just uninformed nonsense—from girls she'd thought were at least tangentially her friends.



Lizet recognizes the unfairness of her situation; in speaking up and defending herself, she has done something that reflects badly on her entire culture. This is too heavy a burden to bear, but the unfortunate truth in places like Rawlings where uninformed white students might see one student of one race or culture as emblematic of that entire group.



In a move that is deeply unfair to herself and all she has accomplished, Lizet berates herself for having "abandoned" her family to pursue her own dreams. She feels she never should have left, and in an attempt to justify a trip back home to mend what she believes she has broken, she tells herself that her life and career at Rawlings is not worth anything in the first place.



CHAPTER 29

The Madres Para Justicia are on the news almost every day. They act as human speed bumps in the road in front of **Ariel's** house and join hands in prayer night and day dressed in head-to-toe black in mourning for Ariel's mother. One day, Lizet calls home and speaks to Leidy. When she asks how Lourdes is, Leidy replies that she's "doing real good."

Lizet considers talking to Ethan about the problems she's having at home, but doesn't want him to talk to her as if he's her RA. She has, so far, kept everything about her mother and **Ariel** from him; Ethan is the only one of her Rawlings friends who has never asked for her opinion on the Ariel case just because she's Cuban. Though Ethan has seemed unusually stressed lately and Lizet doesn't want to further burden him, she feels she is at a breaking point, and needs someone to talk to.

Lizet arrives at Happy Hours to find that Ethan isn't there yet. He comes bounding through the front door soon enough, though, with a letter in his hand. He instructs Lizet to read it, but before Lizet can even take a look at the paper he tells her the news: he has gotten into Berkeley for graduate school. Lizet is shocked—she didn't even know he was applying to grad school. Ethan says he didn't tell anyone, as he only applied to a few schools and doubted he'd get in anywhere. Ethan is clearly excited, but all Lizet can ask is why he didn't tell her earlier.

Ethan is upset that Lizet isn't happy for him and won't congratulate him. Lizet's eyes fill with tears as she realizes that the way she's feeling now must be how her parents felt when she told them she was going to Rawlings. Lizet still wants to tell Ethan about her own problems and ask what to do about the internship, but in a way she already knows what he'll say: he'll tell her to live her life only for herself. This, she thinks, is why Ethan is going to Berkeley while she herself is "going nowhere."

Lizet insists she's happy for Ethan, but confused as to why he wouldn't have told her about his plans earlier. Ethan is disappointed that Lizet isn't "one hundred percent happy" on his behalf, and accuses her of making his success about her misery. Secretly Lizet resents Ethan for having a future that is all about his own success; out loud, she accuses Ethan of getting angry that Lizet didn't want to "suck [his] dick" immediately upon hearing the news.

Leidy continues misinforming and thus isolating and betraying Lizet by lying to her about Lourdes's involvement with the Madres Para Justicia.



Ethan is the one person at Rawlings who hasn't judged Lizet or treated her a certain way because of her hometown or her heritage; this has made her feel less lonely all semester. Now, though, at the height of her emotional stress and isolation, she decides she needs to really talk to Ethan, and to express who she is and what she's going through to someone who will actually listen to her.



Ethan's joy is met with skepticism and shock on Lizet's part. In this passage, Cruet is turning the tables on Lizet—less than a year ago, Lizet was Ethan, bringing the exciting news of her Rawlings acceptance to people who were shocked by her secrecy and cared for her too much to be happy that she was leaving to follow her dreams.



Lizet is sad that Ethan is leaving—and envious of his ambitious but not selfish demeanor, which allows him to pursue what he wants without shame or fear. Ethan has been a good friend to Lizet, and in many ways an inspiration; now, he is leaving, and she is stuck at Rawlings with a slew of problems and no one to help her through them.



Feeling sad, trapped, and cornered, Lizet decides to lash out crudely at Ethan and accuse him of manipulating her when really it's she who's hurting and manipulating him. Just like in the TV lounge, Lizet is lashing out madly, trying to get someone to see her point of view.



Ethan, confused and hurt as to why Lizet is reacting so badly to his news, tells her that he's not going to let her stop him from celebrating. Ethan gathers up his things and starts to leave. Lizet tries to stop him and assure him that she is truly happy for him, but something has broken; Ethan is cold and distant, and simply tells her to enjoy her spring break.

Ethan has valued Lizet's friendship just as much as she has his over the course of the school year; now, he feels betrayed by her reaction. Just as Lizet shut herself off from her family when this situation happened to her, Ethan begins shutting Lizet out, too.



Lizet is alone in the dorms all of spring break—Jillian and Ethan are both away, so Lizet spends her days in the library, studying and writing (and then deleting) apology letters to Ethan. Lizet is worried she will run into Professor Kaufmann—she lied to her about going home for spring break in order to put off talking about the internship. Once classes start again, Lizet notices that Professor Kaufmann is distant. Lizet doesn't receive any of the paperwork Professor Kaufmann told her she'd be sending her way, and Lizet realizes sadly that Professor Kaufman has given up on her.

Lizet is left alone on campus for spring break, her external situation symbolizing the intense internal isolation she feels. Lizet's lies are piling up, and as a result she is feeling like a traitor not just to Ethan, but to herself—and her dreams—as well.



CHAPTER 30

Lizet has asked Omar to pick her up from the airport—she hasn't told him the true reason for her visit, and has instead lied and claimed to have found a cheap Easter flight home. When Omar asked why Lizet was coming home for Easter, she challengingly asked him if there was any reason she shouldn't—he replied that there wasn't.

As Lizet prepares to come home, everyone around her is still trying to keep her in the dark about what's going on with Lourdes—even as she tries to provoke Omar into telling her the truth.



Now, as Omar greets Lizet at the airport terminal, he asks where her ring is. She tells him she left it at school so that it wouldn't get lost or snagged on the plane. Omar seems to not really believe her, and Lizet herself knows she's lying—she hasn't worn the ring for weeks.

Lizet continues lying, isolating herself from those around her in a web of lies that allows her to manipulate others. She has been so overburdened all year that she is desperately trying to take control of her life and her surroundings any way she can.



Omar starts driving Lizet towards Little Havana, and she tells him she's not going to her mother's house—she wants to be dropped off at her father's apartment in Hialeah. Lizet has realized that she needs her father's help. When they pull up to the apartment complex, it seems as if no one's home, but Lizet insists Omar help her get her bags out of the trunk anyway. Omar refuses, not wanting to leave Lizet in a such a seedy place so late at night. Lizet gets out of the car, goes around to the trunk, and begins banging on it; Omar eventually relents. Lizet takes her bags, thanks Omar for the ride, and starts heading up to her father's building; Omar tries to stop Lizet by yelling at her, but soon another voice calls Lizet's name.

Lizet is using Omar for a ride and nothing more. Omar, though, still cares about Lizet, and wants to make sure she is safe. Lizet is so upset that she lashes out at Omar. He has not yet caught on, though, the reason for her anger: the fact that she knows everyone in Miami has been lying to her about Lourdes for months.



Ricky has come out of his apartment building at the noise; he is shocked to see Lizet home, and Lizet can tell he is more than a little angry. When Lizet tells him that she's home for Easter, he immediately realizes what she's really saying. Omar tries to speak up and tell Ricky he had nothing to do with Lizet's trip, but Ricky just tells Omar to leave. Before he does, Omar tells Lizet there's no reason for the way she's treating him—he's only ever been good to her.

Lizet brings up what she's seen on the news, but Omar insists he didn't want to tell her the truth because there was nothing she could do from all the way up at Rawlings. Lizet says that's what she's here to do—to stop Lourdes, since obviously no one else will. As he throws the car into gear, Omar yells for Lizet to think about “whose fault it is” that she isn't in Miami anymore in the first place.

Lizet goes into her father's apartment and sits with him in his bedroom. She and her father instantly begin bickering about Lizet's abandonment, Ricky's choice to sell the house, and their respective disappointments in one another. They both get tired and sad, though, and quiet falls over the room. Ricky gets Lizet a snack and asks if Lourdes purchased her flight for her; Lizet replies that she bought the ticket with her own money, and that Lourdes doesn't know she's coming.

Lizet tells Ricky that she needs to get her mother away from the **Ariel** situation. She tells her father that she has been watching the news up at school—“we look like a bunch of crazy people,” she says, referring to how the reports frame Miamians. When Ricky asks what Lizet means by “we,” she clarifies that she means Cubans; Ricky laughs and tells Lizet she isn't Cuban. Lizet is deeply hurt, and her face reflects it, because Ricky attempts to backtrack, telling her she's American. Lizet replies she must be “Latina at least.” Ricky argues that Latinos are Mexicans and Central Americans. Lizet, frustrated, says that “other people” think she's Cuban—her father, equally upset, gives the argument up.

As Lizet eats her snack, Ricky asks if she needs a ride to her mother's apartment—she can't stay with him. She says she'll sleep on the couch, and asks if he can take her over on Saturday or Sunday. As they continue arguing, Ricky threatens to call Lourdes, but Lizet begs him not to—in fact, she says, when she does go to her mother's, she will need him to come with her. She tells her father that she believes he is at least a small part of why Lourdes has thrown herself into all the **Ariel** stuff. Lizet will not be able to pull her away from it by herself.

So much of what's happening in this passage is below the surface. Lizet knows that Ricky knows what she's talking about and why she's home, but Omar still doesn't have a clue. No one is communicating openly with one another—they are all existing in states of withdrawal and isolation.



When Omar realizes what's going on, he attempts to shunt the blame away from himself and accuse Lizet of abandoning her family, implying that things have devolved into chaos because she left to pursue an education.



Lizet has wanted to confront her father for months about his betrayals, but as she finally gets her moment, she is too exhausted to really get to the bottom of everything.



This passage is one of the novel's most striking—Lizet, who has been told for months and months by everyone around her that she is “the Cuban girl,” realizes that in her father's eyes, she is not truly Cuban—she is an American, raised in America. Lizet feels erased and stuck in an in-between state; in a place like Rawlings, where her otherness has been shoved in her face again and again, she has begun to feel like everything hinges on her Cuban identity. Realizing now that perhaps it was never hers to begin with, she is confused and upset.



Lizet knows that tearing her mother away from Ariel and his family will be no easy task; she wants her father to step up and get involved, but this effort, too, seems like a lost cause. Lizet is on her own in her quest to bring her mother back from the brink of danger.



Ricky points out that Lizet has gone to college by herself and has paid for all her own trips home herself; she doesn't need his help. He tells her that she can stay the night, but says he's dropping her at her mother's first thing in the morning—he does not want to get involved with “whoever [Lourdes] thinks she is now.”

Lizet has proved her independence—Ricky points out that Lizet has no problem striking out on her own, and should be able to handle this herself. Ricky is accusing Lizet of selfishness while being selfish himself.



In the morning, Ricky drives Lizet to Lourdes's apartment. Leidy answers the door for her; Leidy seems both surprised and unsurprised to see Lizet. The two sisters almost immediately begin fighting, as Lizet accuses Leidy of pushing her out of the family and lying to her while Leidy calls Lizet a selfish snob and a traitor for staying at their father's house. The argument flares up and winds down again and again until both sisters are exhausted. They go to the living room window together and look down at the street at the procession of people heading towards **Ariel's** house. Quietly, Leidy admits she is happy to see Lizet; Lizet knows Leidy must think that all their fighting is over, but Lizet knows—with a sense of dread—that only the “opening act” is out of the way for now.

Lizet calls Leidy out on her dishonestly and manipulation of Lizet, while Leidy points out that Lizet has only been concerned with herself for months—and is now so desperate to avoid her own family that she is spending time with the man who committed the greatest betrayal of all in leaving them. Once all this is out of the way, though, things seem to settle; Lizet does not relax, though, as she knows that more terrible confrontations must be had before she goes back to school.



CHAPTER 31

Leidy tells Lizet that Lourdes has been spending all over her time over at **Ariel's** house—she has only been coming home “to shower and to shit.” It turns out that the day Lizet saw Lourdes on national news was the last night she slept in her own bed—since then, she has been staying up all night for the vigil or sleeping over at one of the houses of her fellow Madres—or even at Ariel's, which has been made available to the Madres. The house is now host to a “perpetual sleepover,” and women sleep at the house at all hours.

As Leidy fills Lizet in on what she's missed, Lizet realizes just how all-consuming the Ariel affair has become not just in Lourdes's life, but in Leidy's too. Lizet now understands the magnitude of the job she has undertaken in coming home to pull Lourdes away from the constant protests and vigils.



Leidy also explains that Lourdes has been using up all of her sick and vacation days at work, and is putting her job in jeopardy. Hearing this, Lizet feels hurt that her mother is using her vacation days for **Ariel**, but wouldn't use them to spend more time with Lizet when she was home for Christmas. Lizet knows Lourdes's behavior has to hurt Leidy, too, who is spending over half her paychecks from the hair salon on daycare for Dante.

Lourdes is so involved in the protests that she is betraying and actively endangering both of her daughters and her grandson.



Leidy hands Lizet a piece of mail that came for her recently—it is a large manila envelope from UC Santa Barbara, postmarked three days before the start of spring break. Inside are all the application materials for Professor Kaufmann's interest—Lizet now understands why Professor Kaufmann has been distant. Lizet lied about going home for spring break; Kaufmann must have thought she'd gotten the forms, but of course, Lizet hadn't.

The letter from UC Santa Barbara is a symbolic reminder of all Lizet has left behind and sacrificed in order to come here—and all she stands to lose if she allows herself to be sucked into her family's madness forever.



When Leidy asks what the envelope is for and Lizet explains it's for a summer internship, Leidy grows irate. She has been counting on Lizet to be around during the summer to help out with Dante. Lizet reassures her that she will be home after all—she is not taking the internship. Leidy makes Lizet swear she'll come home, and Lizet promises. Lizet asks if they can go out and look for their mother, and Leidy agrees that they should.

Leidy, Lizet, and Dante head down the street towards **Ariel's**. As they approach the house, they see a group of women gathered on the lawn, praying in Spanish. It takes Lizet a minute to spot Lourdes's face—when she does, her first thought is that Lourdes looks like a stranger. When Lizet approaches Lourdes, though, Lourdes embraces her happily, and at last introduces her to all the other women as her youngest daughter. When Lourdes asks Lizet what she's doing in Miami, Lizet explains that she came down to “get” Lourdes. Lourdes hugs Lizet tight, squeezing her hand just a touch too hard, as if she is perhaps “really mad.”

Lizet asks Lourdes if she'll come home just for a little while so they can spend some time together, but Lourdes insists she can't leave the prayer circle. The group is praying all weekend and then marching to the courthouse on Monday in support of the mayor of Miami, who has declared that no matter what the federal government says, **Ariel** will stay. Lizet tells her mother she doesn't think this is possible, and she sees a current of anger sweep across her mother's face. Lizet hurriedly says that Lourdes should stay and continue praying; Lourdes promises to visit later, when the group rotates.

Lizet rejoins Leidy away from the group; Leidy is crying. She tells Lizet that she has come down here many times over the last few months to ask Lourdes for a favor, and Lourdes has never even acknowledged Leidy when she is with the Madres. Leidy begins hurrying back down the street towards the apartment, and Lizet runs behind her, trying to catch up. Back home, Leidy goes straight into the shower and then plays with Dante, ignoring Lizet all afternoon.

As evening is about to fall, Lourdes comes home to the apartment. She greets Lizet warmly, but tells her she doesn't have much time—she doesn't feel right not being at the vigil if she can be there. Lourdes tries to impress upon Lizet how important the work she and the Madres are doing. Lizet sees how hard her mother is trying to convince her that this is true, and so she relents; she tells Lourdes she understands.

Lizet has seen how adversely her leaving home has affected her family this year—so when Leidy asks her to promise to stay home for the summer, she does so seemingly in earnest, wanting to be around to keep Leidy, Dante, and Lourdes safe and out of trouble.



Just like when she came home for Thanksgiving and Christmas, Lizet is surprised and hurt to find that her mother does not seem very genuinely excited to see her—she is more concerned with her new friends and her new cause than hearing about Lizet's life or spending time with her.



Lizet realizes how deeply devoted Lourdes is to the cause when Lourdes gets angry at even the suggestion that the group's mission is faulty or flawed. Lizet quickly tries to defuse her mother's anger, perhaps remembering their fight at Christmas and how volatile Lourdes is when it comes to matters concerning Ariel.



Lizet is jealous of Ariel, and Leidy is jealous of Lizet—they are both vying for Lourdes's attention, and when Lizet gets even a sliver of it, it becomes clear from Leidy's reaction just how hard things have been for Leidy and Dante the last few months.



Though Lizet is concerned about her mother's well-being, she tries to give her the benefit of the doubt in this passage when she realizes how much the cause truly means to her.



Lourdes asks if Lizet will come back to the vigil; Lizet is taken off guard, but Lourdes insists Lizet come. She urges Lizet to hurry and get her things while she takes a shower and changes. As Lizet watches her mother hurry through the apartment, she realizes Leidy has overheard everything. Lizet wants to try to explain, but Leidy shuts her bedroom door angrily. Once Lourdes is in the shower, Leidy comes out of her room. She urges Lizet not to “play around” with the Madres. Lizet asks Leidy not to be mad at her, but Leidy gathers up her things—and Dante’s—and leaves the apartment. Lizet watches from the window as Leidy packs Dante up into the car and drives away.

Lizet goes back into Leidy’s room and packs for the “sleepover” part of the vigil. She knows that this is what she has come to Miami for—to face the Madres head-on, and drag her own mother away from them. Lourdes comes to the door and asks if Leidy left—Lizet says that she did. Lourdes doesn’t seem angry, and rather than mentioning Leidy again, asks if Lizet is ready to go. Lizet shoulders her bag, and the two of them head out into the night as the moon rises in the sky above them.

CHAPTER 32

There are so many questions Lizet wants to ask her mother about her involvement with the Madres on the walk over to **Ariel’s**, but she doesn’t even know where to begin. When they arrive, Lourdes ushers Lizet inside the house directly across the street from Ariel’s—she points out that Lizet is not wearing black, and cannot be out on the lawn with the praying women. Lizet offers to go home and change, but Lourdes hurries her into the house.

Inside, the house is dim and packed with people. Bedsheets are duct taped to the windows for privacy, and a long table in the dining room is loaded with food. As Lourdes makes a plate for Lizet, a young man about Lizet’s age begins talking to Lourdes. Lizet recognizes him from high school. When he walks away, Lizet asks Lourdes how she knows him; Lourdes answers that she knows everybody.

Lourdes leaves Lizet alone while she goes off to attend to some business. Lizet makes herself comfortable on the back porch and begins eating, but soon grows aware that the boy from the food table—Victor—is staring at her. After a minute, he tells Lizet that he knows her from Hialeah Lakes—he remembers that she is the “smart girl” who used to go out with Omar.

In this scene, Leidy feels betrayed even further when Lizet agrees to go to the vigil. She perhaps believes that Lizet is trying to get into Lourdes’s good graces by pandering to her interests rather than actually working to remove Lourdes from danger.



It turns out that Lizet has an ulterior motive for going to the vigil—she wants to see what she is up against, and understand what the Madres really are so that she can better plan how to extricate Lourdes from them. Lourdes is so wrapped up in the mania of the vigil that she barely cares that her other daughter and grandson are suddenly gone—she only wants to get back to Ariel and the Madres.



Lizet wants to be on the front lines of the action—not hidden away in a stranger’s house—but Lourdes is intent on keeping Lizet apart from the vigil for some reason.



There is a structure and an order to things at the Ariel “encampment”; there is food for everybody and mechanisms in place to protect privacy. Lourdes’s pride in “knowing everybody” means that she is an important part of this community, and excited to be making a difference.



Lizet thought she was only going to know her mother at the vigil, but is surprised that she is not as isolated as she thought she would be—her community is tight-knit, and as such, she cannot escape people from her past.



Lizet asks Victor more about how he knows her mother, but Victor tells her not to change the subject—he wants to hear about how she goes to college in New York. He asks her, point-blank, if she has cheated on Omar in college; he says he can see guilt all over her face. Lizet tries to ignore him, unsure of how to get out of the conversation. Victor asks Lizet why he’s never seen her here before, and she says she’s just visiting. Victor cruelly states that she looks like a “fucking ghost,” and should “visit” the beach while she’s in Miami as well. He then asks if Lizet thinks **Ariel** should go back to Cuba or stay in America.

At this point, Lizet tries to walk away, but Victor demands to know why she’s here. She’s already a sellout, he says, and he wants to know if she thinks she can just come crawling back to Miami with “no consequences.” Lizet says she’s not a sellout, and Victor accuses her of being a “baby reporter,” spying on the **Ariel** operation so she can write about it for school. Lizet, truly uncomfortable, says she’s going to find her mother. As she walks away, Victor shouts some more obscenities at her; she pretends not to hear him, and quickly ducks into a bathroom, where she sits down on the toilet and cries, wondering if she really is a sellout.

As the hours go by, the crowd in the house begins to thin out noticeably; Lizet feels self-conscious as the crowd dwindles, and it becomes clear that she has no place or purpose here. Around midnight, Lourdes approaches Lizet to tell her that she should go to sleep on the couch, and then helps her set up a bed. The couch is uncomfortable, but as Lourdes gives Lizet a goodnight kiss, Lizet feels closer to her mother than she has in years.

As she falls asleep, Lizet tries to rewrite the conversation with Victor in her head, and rearrange the things he said to try and make it seem as if he had been flirting with her. For years after this night, Lizet writes, the memory of the true conversation will make her flinch and wince. The conversation—in addition to being uncomfortable and downright cruel—made Lizet aware of the “double vision” she has now, as someone who has left Miami and her community behind for other things. The bigger reason, the older Lizet says, that the conversation with Victor has stuck in her head, is that it is easier to think about that than to think about what would happen to **Ariel** just a few hours later.

The conversation turns disturbing and even violent very quickly, increasing Lizet’s sense of isolation and danger. Victor confirms all the worst things Lizet has feared about herself, and heard others criticize her for; like Leidy, he points out how pale she’s become, and like her mother, he accuses her of not being good enough to Omar.



It seems as if Victor is probing the depths of Lizet’s subconscious and pointing out all the things she fears—his accusation that she is a sellout reflects her own anxieties about having left Miami and thus allowed her mother to be swept up in such chaos.



Though Lizet has been feeling frightened, upset, and self-deprecating ever since the confrontation with Victor, this brief moment of closeness with Lourdes almost eclipses all the fear surrounding it; Lizet feels like herself again, and like restoring balance in her family is possible.



Again, Crucet uses the retrospective voice to point out that though things seem bad for Lizet and her family now, they are about to get a whole lot worse. The older Lizet feels isolated from her younger self, and at the same time pities the young Lizet for being so ignorant and unaware.



CHAPTER 33

Lizet is awoken by a strange woman who shakes her out of sleep by grabbing her shoulder and yelling at her in Spanish to get outside. Lizet wakes up disoriented and dazed—she grabs her bag, slips on her shoes, and joins the others outside. She will later learn that the raid on **Ariel**'s house lasted less than four minutes.

By the time Lizet gets to the front gate of the house, **Ariel** has already been removed from his uncle's home. Lizet does not know that, inside the house, her mother has been pepper-sprayed; all she can see is Ariel, in the arms of a strange woman, being loaded tearfully into a van. Lizet locks eyes with the child, and as she realizes that Ariel will remember this night for the rest of his life, she understands that she will be an inextricable part of his memory of it.

Lizet runs after the van as it speeds away, but soon stops in the middle of the street, unsure of exactly what she is trying to do. Behind her, dozens of people continue running past her, chasing the van. Lizet senses that her mother must be inside **Ariel**'s house, and she rushes through the madness to try to find a way inside.

The inside of the house is chaos. Lizet steps over toys, blankets, and trails of pepper spray as people scream all around her in Spanish and in English. She asks what is going on, but nobody answers her. She calls again and again for Lourdes, and eventually finds her in a room which holds a racecar bed—**Ariel**'s room. There is a crowd of people in the room, and from the center of it come pained howls. Lizet pushes through the crowd and finds her mother on the racecar bed with her arms wrapped around a wailing Caridaylis.

Lizet watches as Lourdes comforts Caridaylis. Lourdes begs the other people in the room to leave and give them some privacy, but nobody moves. Lizet stares at her mother's tear-streaked face, puffy from pepper spray, and sees that Caridaylis's face looks much the same. Cari, Lizet thinks, could be Lourdes's daughter.

Lourdes looks up at Lizet and hisses at her to leave the room, clutching Caridaylis tighter to her chest. Someone grabs Lizet and pulls her towards the door. Lizet does not move, and the hand holding her elbow pulls her harder. A voice tells her, in Spanish, to have some respect. Whoever has been pulling at Lizet now pulls at her hand, and she feels a searing pain. She looks at her palm, and sees that she has torn part of it away in the chaos. She sucks on the wound to ease the pain.

It is clear that something has gone terribly wrong, but Lizet does not yet know what's happening. The older Lizet interjects to reveal a fact about the raid which throws into relief how fast—and yet how traumatic—the raid really was.



In this moment, readers understand why Ariel and Lizet's narratives have been swirling around each other all this time. As Lizet and Ariel lock eyes, Crucet makes a point about the interconnectedness of all stories and the ways in which humans affect one another's lives without realizing it.



Lizet doesn't linger too long on her moment with Ariel—her only thought is of finding her mother, the whole reason she came to the vigil, whom she fears is in danger as a result of the raid.



As Lizet stumbles through the house, she is more or less a ghost—no one pays attention to her. There are certainly more important things going on, but Lizet's isolation is heightened in this moment as she calls upon others for help only to be ignored.



As Lizet watches her mother with Caridaylis, she feels betrayed and replaced—she realizes that Caridaylis is the daughter her mother has always wanted.



Lizet has been so entranced by the spectacle of her own mother cradling Caridaylis like her own daughter that she hasn't even realized she's been injured—her sense of betrayal is so profound that it has blocked out everything else.



As Lizet walks out of the room, grabs her bag, and leaves the house, she realizes that her leaving for college allowed Caridaylis to take her place. Caridaylis is someone whose decisions Lourdes understands and is proud of. Lizet writes, from the future, that she would keep leaving again and again, year after year, until Miami was no longer home; until home “meant only as much as [her] memory of that morning would betray.”

Leidy is furious with Lizet for leaving Lourdes at Ariel’s. Lourdes does not come home later the next day or even the next night, and Leidy fears Lourdes has been arrested. She chastises Lizet for not “saving” their mother when she had the chance, but Lizet insisted there was never a chance in the first place. Lizet refuses to go back to Ariel’s to look for Lourdes, using the excuse of having an early flight out the next day; the truth, though, is that Lizet wants to spare Leidy the knowledge that Caridaylis has replaced them.

The morning of Lizet’s flight, Leidy is still too mad at her to drive her to the airport, and Lourdes has chained herself to the front of Ariel’s house. Ricky offers to drive Lizet, but Lizet is embarrassed to need his help again, and declines. Lizet calls upon Omar to take her back to the airport—when she opens the door, it is clear that he has been crying, and Lizet correctly intuits that he is upset over Ariel’s deportation. As Omar drops Lizet at the airport, he asks her if they are “over,” and Lizet confirms that they are. He hugs her like he’ll never see her again, and then lets her go.

When Lizet returns to campus, she has nobody to call and tell she got home safely. When she walks into her dorm room, Jillian asks how her weekend was, and asks some questions about the Ariel raid—Lizet knows she will never be willing to give Jillian the answers she wants to hear. Spotting the bandage on Lizet’s hand, she becomes nervous, and asks if Lizet is okay; Lizet, exhausted, flops down onto her own bed and tells Jillian how happy she is to see her.

CHAPTER 34

Though Lizet is dazed and physically and emotionally exhausted on her first day back at Rawlings, she still has a shift to work at the library. She sits behind the desk most of her shift, and simply waves through anybody who sets off the security sensor. After one very long set of beeps, Lizet looks up to see Ethan standing right in front of her, waving a special-collections text through the sensors to get her attention. Lizet hasn’t seen Ethan since their fight; since then, he’s gotten a haircut and acquired a Berkeley sweatshirt, both of which make him seem like he is already “on his way to being gone.”

Lizet is saddened and hurt to realize that the things she has been hoping will make her mother proud will never be enough for her; Lizet is on her own, and she and her mother are effectively strangers to one another.



Lizet is too upset and overwhelmed by the truth of what she witnessed at Ariel’s to go back for her mother. She knows, even if Leidy doesn’t, that they may have permanently lost the woman their mother used to be.



Omar has been cruel to Lizet lately—not to mention isolated and standoffish. Now, though, he reveals the true depths of his emotions, and the internal suffering he’s going through as a result of the emotional Ariel situation and his own estrangement from Lizet—which he must know is partially his responsibility.



Though Lizet knows that Jillian will surely want to know too much about the raid—and will most likely negate Lizet’s opinions and observations the moment she gives them—she is so happy to be away from her family that even dealing with Jillian is a relief.



Lizet has faced some seriously heavy things in the last several days, and returning to her old routine has a strange, uncanny feel. When she sees Ethan again, despite the sharp words they exchanged the last time they saw one another, Lizet feels hardly anything except the vague realization that he is on his way out of her life. She has clearly been traumatized to by what she experienced in Miami—or at last shaken up enough that she feels her own problems are insignificant by comparison.



Lizet tells Ethan that he looks like a different person—she is having trouble keeping the emotion out of her voice. They point out that they've been avoiding each other, but Lizet is listless and disengaged whereas Ethan is his old, jokey self. When Ethan asks Lizet to focus and talk to him, Lizet tells him she's exhausted as she's just returned from a trip to Miami. Ethan points out that she isn't wearing her ring, and asks if something happened back home. Lizet tells Ethan to go away.

Instead of leaving, though, Ethan leans over Lizet's desk and accuses her of being cruel to him. He has been trying to be respectful of her desire for space and kind to her all year, and all she's done is try to make him feel like an "asshole." When Lizet deflects and asks if Berkeley sent Ethan his sweatshirt, he clams up and tells her they are "done." Lizet wishes she could tell Ethan everything—about **Ariel**, about her family, about Santa Barbara—but knows it is too late, and too much has happened between them.

As Ethan hovers on the other side of the desk, Lizet thinks about the first day they met, right here in this spot. Ethan drums once on the table before announcing that he's going to go. Lizet is seized by a desire to grab his hand, but instead tells him he should indeed leave. As Ethan walks out through the door, Lizet tells him to "have a nice life," but he does not turn around and answer her.

In her next lab class, Lizet is surprised when Professor Kaufmann approaches her and asks her to stay after class. Lizet gets nervous, and struggles with handling her lab equipment properly all through class. After the session is over, Professor Kaufmann asks Lizet if she has her forms for the internship ready—she asks why she never mailed them in. Lizet confesses that she doesn't have it, and asks Professor Kaufmann if she's been watching the news and seen what's happening in Miami. Kaufmann says that she has, and Lizet explains that she needs to be home in Miami this summer, as her mother is involved in the protests, and the whole thing has been tough on her family.

Professor Kaufmann blinks, and says she doesn't understand—she wants to know what Lizet will be doing in Miami all summer. Lizet says she'll be supporting her family. Kaufmann misinterprets this to mean that Lizet has found another lab opportunity with better funding, but Lizet explains she'll be offering them "other kinds of support." Kaufmann says it's a shame that Lizet's family won't let her participate. Lizet says it's nothing like that, she just feels obligated to be with her family—Kaufmann suggests Lizet explain the situation to them and see if they will support her going to Santa Barbara.

Still, as the truth of Ethan's immanent departure sneaks in, Lizet finds herself growing emotional. She doesn't get too engaged, though, and instead remains aloof—perhaps as deliberate attempt to protect her own emotions, or perhaps as a consequence of the isolating sadness and trauma she encountered in Miami.



Ethan and Lizet have had a serious breakdown in communication over the semester. Their flirty but anticlimactic relationship created an illusion of closeness, but in this passage, Lizet realizes that Ethan doesn't know that much about her at all,—and probably never will—because of her own actions.



Lizet is suddenly nostalgic for the past. The first semester seemed so difficult in so many ways, but now, after having gone through so much more pain and strife, Lizet longs to return to the start of her time and Rawlings and do things the right way.



As Lizet readjusts to university life, she must face more people than just Ethan. Professor Kaufmann, too, is confused by Lizet's cold behavior, and wants an explanation. Lizet tries to explain things to her—but as their conversation goes on, it becomes clear that Lizet's world is just as foreign to Kaufmann as Kaufmann's is to Lizet.



Professor Kaufmann has seen how gifted and committed Lizet is, and wants to reward her for her hard work. She doesn't think that Lizet should have to put her own dreams on hold in order to attend to her family. Lizet admits that it's more than external obligation—after what she's witnessed, she herself feels internally motivated to help repair her family.



Lizet tries once and for all to get out of the internship, but Kaufmann insists Lizet keep an open mind, and continue to consider the offer. Lizet does not blame Kaufmann for her failure to understand Lizet's situation—Kaufmann is living a “bigger life” than Lizet ever will. Lizet is sad that she deluded herself into thinking she could live that kind of life, too.

Lizet is awash in pity for herself, determined to pay what she sees as penance to her family to the detriment of her own interests, desires, and needs. She tells herself that she was never destined for the greatness she once desired, and will spend her whole life missing out on things.



Lizet hears from Ethan only once more that semester, towards the end, when he writes her an email to ask if she's “OK.” Lizet does not reply, knowing she doesn't deserve whatever goodbye Ethan wants to give to her. She feels “proud” of herself for releasing Ethan from his obligation to say farewell to her. In the last few weeks of the term, school feels like a job, a distraction Lizet must dispense with before she can return to Miami, where she is really needed. Lizet feels a sense of calm and relief in “recogniz[ing her] place,” and admitting that there is only so far she can rise above where she comes from.

As the semester winds down, Lizet continues isolating herself not just from the people around her but from the very idea that she can have a fulfilling life of her own. She has spent all year fighting so hard to prioritize school, but now, feeling entirely defeated, she feels it's easier—or safer, perhaps—to tell herself that she will never be able to achieve the things she thought she would.



CHAPTER 35

Lizet has been living at home in the “cold war” of her mother's apartment for three weeks when **Ariel Hernandez** is deported on a Wednesday in June. She and Leidy have been civil to one another in the time she's been home—Leidy is dating someone new, a cop named David, and seems happy. Lourdes, meanwhile, has been fired from her job, and spends her days fluctuating between rage and distress. Lourdes has been watching Dante more often, lessening the need for daycare, but Leidy has come home more than once to find that Lourdes has left Dante playing alone in his crib and stepped out to join yet another protest.

As Lizet readjusts to life in Miami for a longer period of time, she finds that she has become the primary adult in her family. Her sister is catching up on lost experiences—experiences that Lizet has already had, such as dating—and Lourdes is running around wild like a rebellious teen, shirking her own duties to the family and expecting Lizet to pick up the slack.



Lizet dutifully shoulders the joint responsibilities of looking after Dante and Lourdes. She helps Lourdes look for jobs, and takes them both on outings to the local library, where she checks her university email for correspondence from her Rawlings friends. Jillian writes her to talk about her summer in New York, but she has had no more messages from Ethan. Professor Kaufmann has accidentally copied her on an email meant for the participants of the Santa Barbara program, and reading the message makes Lizet feel sad.

As Lizet tries hard to be the beacon of strength and responsibility her family needs her to be, she is tempted by missives from the world of Rawlings. In these emails, Lizet's friends describe their exploits and the opportunities she has given up in order to do the “right thing.”



Lourdes is still attending protests and political meetings, and Lizet has agreed to drive her to them—as long as they are not too radical or dangerous. One day, a rowdy group of white people waving confederate flags comes down the street—they are holding a banner which reads, “1 DOWN, 800,000 TO GO.” Lizet is angry and frightened, but part of her realizes that though she can’t admit it to anyone, she wants to be the one to go, and prays silently that she’ll be able to get out of Miami soon.

The next morning, Lizet sneaks out while everyone else in the apartment is still asleep and goes to the library. She calls a number she saw in the email she mistakenly received from Professor Kaufmann and gets a hold of the program coordinator; she asks if her spot is still available, and begs to be added back to the program list. The coordinator tells Lizet to call Kaufmann herself; she does, and Kaufmann is thrilled to hear that Lizet still wants her spot. She promises to fill out all the paperwork and book her flight right away, and, on the library computer, she does just that. It is such a last-minute arrangement that the airfare is over 600 dollars, but Lizet books herself a ticket anyway.

When Lizet gets back to the apartment, Leidy is coming out of the shower; Lizet spooks her, and she laughs. Seeing Lizet’s grim face, though, she asks what’s wrong. When Lizet tells her, Leidy begins screaming that Lizet is a “fucking traitor,” waking their mother up from sleep. Lourdes stumbles into the living room and finds the girls physically fighting one another; she pulls Leidy off of Lizet. Leidy tells Lizet that she’s no better than their father, and Lizet recognizes this as the “ultimate insult.” Leidy deepens the affront when she tells Lizet that Lizet is actually worse than Ricky, who at least had the audacity to “go away and stay away.”

Lourdes demands to know what’s going on, and Lizet tries desperately to explain to her mother that she’s not leaving for any old job—she’s taking an opportunity that is a part of her education. Lourdes asks Lizet a ton of questions, not seeming to understand what the purpose of an internship in a lab is. The conversation is even more confused by Leidy’s constant screams that Lizet is just lying to get out of watching Dante all summer, as she feels she’s “too good” for the job. Lizet, enraged, says that at least one of them is.

Lizet has been feeling stifled and lonely, but the racist group of marchers Lizet sees are her breaking point. She realizes that though the deck will always be stacked against her, it is useless to sink into obscurity, and she must finally rise above her circumstances.



Lizet books her fourth—and final—plane ticket of the story. As with each plane ticket before it (save for Christmas, which was pre-arranged), booking the plane ticket is an act both of desperation and longing. Lizet knows that no matter the financial burden, the opportunity is worth it. She has seen, from her few weeks in Miami, what her life will turn into if she does not pursue her own best interests, and wants to avoid the fate she has glimpsed while home.



As Leidy’s frustrations at Lizet explode more violently than ever before, Lizet realizes that her family will see any action she ever takes on her own behalf as a betrayal. Lizet knows how tough things are for Leidy—but she doesn’t want her whole life to become about helping Leidy navigate the poor choices she’s made in her own life. If this is selfish, so be it—Lizet has changed course, and is not planning on putting anyone else’s needs before her own again.



Lizet wants so badly for her family to understand her—not even to declare that they’re proud of her at this point, but simply to see the value and merit in what she’s trying to do. The fact that her mother can’t—and that her sister wants to undermine her attempts to get her to—sends Lizet over the edge.



Lourdes tells Leidy that she needs to let Lizet go. She passive-aggressively states that if Lizet wants to go “spend her summer with some woman professor she doesn’t even know,” they shouldn’t try and get in her way. Leidy tells Lourdes it’s her job to get in Lizet’s way, but Lourdes says it isn’t anymore. Lizet pleads with her mother and sister, asking them to understand that her choice has nothing to do with them, but Lourdes continues berating Lizet for choosing to make her life “all about her from now on.”

Lourdes asks Lizet when she’s planning on leaving, and Lizet says that her flight is in two days. Lourdes firmly suggests Lizet leave now, and then turns and walks down the hallway; she goes into her room and locks the door. Leidy shakes Lizet by the shoulders and begs Lizet not to leave her alone with Lourdes again, but Lizet wrenches herself away from her sister, goes to their shared bedroom, and begins packing her things. Leidy and Lizet are both equally shocked when they hear, from Lourdes’s room, the sound of her on the phone—she is talking to Ricky, and she tells him that he needs to come and get Lizet now, because Lourdes wants her gone.

Lizet waits downstairs for Ricky to come get her. When he arrives, she explains that she’s taking an internship in California for the summer; without asking any more questions, Ricky helps her into the car and takes her back to his apartment. Over dinner with Ricky and Rafael, Lizet tells them some more about the internship, and they seem interested in hearing about her life at Rawlings.

Two days later, Ricky takes Lizet to the airport, where the lines are chaotic due to upped security in the wake of the **Ariel** fiasco. Ricky and Lizet sit in the terminal, waiting for her flight to board and talking about the logistics of air travel. Ricky has a lot of questions; he has only been on one plane in his life, on the flight from Cuba to Miami, and the flight was so brief he has very little memory of it.

When the plane starts boarding, Lizet and Ricky say their goodbyes. He urges her to call Lourdes when she lands and gets settled in Santa Barbara—Lizet protests, but Ricky insists she trust him, and do what he’s telling her. He tells Lizet it’s good that she’s going. As more and more people board, Ricky hurriedly slips a 50-dollar bill into Lizet’s hands. When she starts to cry, he urges her not to; she has chosen, he reminds her, to do the harder thing, and that choice is taking her places.

Lourdes takes a different approach than Leidy in reacting to Lizet’s news. She is calm, but clearly enraged. She seems to want to guilt Lizet into staying by judging harshly Lizet’s choice to pursue her academic career—a choice that Lourdes doesn’t understand and sees as a purposeful betrayal of their family.



Lourdes kicking Lizet out of the house seems unnecessarily cruel, and a last-ditch effort at trying to shame Lizet into staying. Lourdes is erasing Lizet’s chance at being part of a stable home environment, perhaps because she thinks the idea of home doesn’t matter to Lizet anymore. She doesn’t see how difficult a time Lizet has had negotiating the tension between home and school this year, and all she has had to sacrifice to make everyone around her happy.



Things at Ricky and Rafael’s are more pleasant for Lizet. Ironically, after all she’s been through and all the times she’s been desperate for her mother to care about her achievements, she finds her father and his roommate lending her an ear and asking about her life at last.



Ricky doesn’t appear to see Lizet’s departure as a betrayal—he is actually excited for her, as evidenced by his questions about everything she’s undertaking.



When Ricky verbalizes that he understands that Lizet has chosen to take a harder path in life and reach for more, Lizet feels someone in her family finally understands her. Ricky has been the more supportive parent the whole time, though throughout the narrative Lizet has often assigned him a cruelty and aloofness that ultimately wound up being Lourdes’s domain.



Ricky points out a leak in the ceiling, but when Lizet looks where his finger is pointing, she can't see anything. She thinks he must be getting emotional, and trying to deflect. She hugs him goodbye one last time, and then he shoos her towards the gate. As she lines up to board, Lizet turns around to look at her father one last time. After she takes her seat on the plane, she can still see him through the large glass window on the side of the airport terminal—she waves and waves, noticing that he is craning his own neck towards the plane's little windows; though she can see him, he can't see her, and there is a great distance between them.

This scene is a metaphor for how Ricky and Lizet are a little bit like ships in the night. They don't quite understand one another, but they love one another deeply. Both Ricky and Lizet long to see the other person—and in turn be seen—even if this doesn't always work out the way they'd planned.



CHAPTER 36

Lizet, writing as an adult, explains that the island of Cuba is surrounded by some of the most pristine coral reefs in existence. Industrialization never came to Cuba the way it did to the rest of the world, and so the thing Lizet has spent her entire adult life “studying and working to understand” has been preserved.

Lizet's career has, against all odds, taken her back to the place her family comes from—she is studying its isolated ecosystem in an unlikely reversal of circumstances.



Lizet knows that the lab she works for will soon require her to take a trip to Cuba; if the reefs were anywhere else in the world other than the island from which her parents fled, the island that is at the root of her family's biggest heartaches, she would have traveled there much earlier.

Lizet is reluctant to travel to Cuba, despite the marvelous coincidence; she does not want to return to a place that is, in her family's history and cultural imagination, so fraught.



Leidy and David live in Hialeah now, and Lourdes shares their duplex; Dante and their younger daughter Angelica are both thriving in school, and Omar and his wife are their neighbors. Lizet was not the maid of honor at Leidy's wedding—Lourdes was. Ricky did not attend the event, and Lizet is not even sure if Leidy invited him, though he sent, through Lizet, an expensive set of copper pots as a wedding present. The event took place the summer before Lizet's third year at Berkeley, where she “inadvertently” followed Ethan to grad school; he was gone, though, by the time she began her studies. She emailed him when she got in to tell him the news, but the message bounced back, and she later learned he'd left before finishing his program.

As Lizet reveals what happened to her family and friends in the years since her time at Rawlings, it becomes clear that things are better than they once were—though tensions still abound. Lizet's attempts to make peace with her family and friends have not all been successful—some bridges were forever burned as a result of her actions during that fateful first year.



Lizet attended graduate school for a time but ultimately dropped to take a position at a laboratory. Her parents are proud of her, but she worries that will change if her work takes her to Cuba. She knows how unfair it would look to them for her to travel to a country they cannot enter. More than that, part of Lizet doesn't want the burden of having them tell her to visit certain sentimental spots or look up family members; she wants to be able to focus on her work without her parents shaming her into familial obligations.

Lizet is still independent as ever. She and her parents are enjoying a relatively peaceful time in the relationship, but Lizet recognizes that she still has the power to undermine that peace by taking actions that would dig up old wounds or remind her parents of past perceived betrayals. She does not want to live her life for her parents, though, and has nursed her sense of autonomy over the years.



Lizet doesn't know if she would tell her parents if she got the opportunity to go to Cuba; most likely, she writes, she'd just tell them she was traveling, though to keep Cuba from them would make her sad. She would want them to know that she was bringing some part of them back to where they started, and returning some part of them home—even if they wouldn't see things that way.

After the summer internship in Santa Barbara, Lizet moved her things into a single dorm and used the days before classes began to write letters to her mother and Leidy—something she'd never done before. She had written an apology to Ethan over the summer, and though his response was short and vague, she felt inspired to try even harder in her apologies to Lourdes and Leidy. A week after Lizet mailed the letters, Leidy called her on the phone to tell her how “weird” it was to send a letter. They talked and caught up as if nothing had happened, discussing the **Ariel Hernandez** case and their respective summers.

Leidy told Lizet about that a rumor was going around that Al Gore had been the one to order the raid on **Ariel's** house; Lizet doubted that it was true. Leidy told Lizet that Lourdes had forgiven her—but Lizet reveals that Lourdes, after all these years, has still never told her so.

The November after the **Ariel** debacle was the first election in which Lizet was old enough to vote. She followed the directions on her absentee ballot, nearly throwing the whole thing out when she grew frustrated. She wished she were in Miami, where she could have simply driven to her polling place and voted in person—to do so would have been so much less of a burden.

Lizet writes that she is sure, now, that her ballot, so painstakingly filled out, was never even counted. She wishes now that she could have known this as she filled it out, punching holes in the designated places. She wished she'd known, as she made her choice that day, how little it would ultimately matter which side she ended up betraying, and how much it would hurt either way.

Lizet has learned how to create boundaries in her life—boundaries meant to preserve her well-being and independence—and yet she still feels wistful about having to construct these boundaries in the first place. She knows things with her family are complicated, and has had to settle for a complex way of navigating their many issues.



Lizet reveals that her family rather quickly recovered from all the pain and drama that marked the end of her fateful first year—but it is clear that the events of that time have impacted the way they relate to one another through to the present day.



The ramifications of that fateful summer are wider in scope that just Lizet and her family—the election that fall, too, would be impacted by the fallout of the Ariel case. Again, Ariel and Lizet are shown as parallels, whose stories reverberate throughout one another.



Though Lizet fought hard for her independence, as her schooling went on, she still found herself encountering situations in which she was forced to admit that she had, after all, taken the hardest path, just as her father said.



The voting scandal that rocked the 2000 election left many ballots uncounted. Lizet doesn't reveal who she voted for in the election, but implies that voting for either candidate was so painful that the experience mirrored for her the “lesser of two evils” situation of choosing between her family and her own independence.





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