

The Distance Between Us



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF REYNA GRANDE

Reyna Grande grew up in poverty in Iguala for the first eight years of her life. Her parents went to the United States to pursue greater financial opportunities, leaving her and her siblings in the care of an abusive grandmother. When she was eight years old, her father brought her and her siblings Mago and Carlos to live with him in Los Angeles, subjecting them to a harrowing and illegal border crossing. In Los Angeles, Reyna and her siblings adjusted to life in America, all the while fearing their controlling, alcoholic father's punishments for the slightest transgression. Reyna found creative writing as an outlet both for self-expression and as a means of proving to her father that she was taking advantage of the precious opportunity of a life in America. Reyna went on to attain degrees from Pasadena City College, UC Santa Cruz, and Antioch College. The author of two novels and two memoirs, Grande is the winner of an American Book Award and an International Book Award, and she currently teaches creative writing at UCLA and several writing conferences around the country.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The events of *The Distance Between Us* span the entirety of Reyna's childhood and adolescence in Mexico and the United States, covering a period of about 20 years, from 1980—when Reyna was four—to 1999, when she graduated from college at UC Santa Cruz. Reyna's family's struggles with poverty, disease, and abuse are exacerbated by financial turmoil and recession in Mexico, combined with tense and tenuous border politics that prevent them from legally coming to the United States. After illegally crossing the border with their father, it takes Reyna and her siblings years to get their green cards—all the while, their mother and father face the same struggle, and are eventually beneficiaries of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which legalized undocumented immigrants who entered the United States before January 1st, 1982, but also required employers to know and attest to their employees' immigration status and made it illegal to knowingly hire illegal immigrants. The act granted amnesty to many immigrants, but also caused an increase in racial profiling and discrimination against workers across the United States. The debilitating, dangerous poverty in which Reyna and her siblings—not to mention their parents and grandparents—were raised persists throughout Mexico and South and Central America, and remains a catalyst for many immigrants' journeys to “El Otro Lado.” To this day, an increasingly violent, corrupt, and

insensitive atmosphere at the U.S.-Mexico border, fueled by racism and prejudice, keeps border reform as contentious an issue as ever.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Distance Between Us is a memoir, but it is as much a political text as it is a personal one, and many of the works Reyna reads on her journey to becoming a writer—and to understanding her place in the larger context of Latina authors—are a similar blend of the personal and political. Sandra Cisneros's [The House on Mango Street](#) is an important text in Reyna's development not just as a writer, but as a person struggling to understand the abuse, pain, and hardship that have defined much of her childhood. V.C. Andrews's *Flowers in the Attic*, a Gothic novel that tells the story of four children who are abused and locked up in a room by their grandmother, also resonates with Reyna as she recalls Abuela Evila's cruelty towards her, Mago, and Carlos. Other books that are not mentioned in *The Distance Between Us*, but which deal with both the political and personal aspects of the immigrant experience, include Cristina Henríquez's [The Book of Unknown Americans](#), Luis Alberto Urrea's [The Devil's Highway](#), and Daisy Hernández's memoir *A Cup of Water Under My Bed*. Reyna Grande is also the author of two autobiographical novels that fictionalize the experiences described in her memoir: *Dancing With Butterflies* and *Across A Hundred Mountains*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Distance Between Us*
- **When Written:** Early 2010s
- **When Published:** 2012
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir, coming-of-age tale
- **Setting:** Iguala, Guerrero, Mexico; Los Angeles, United States
- **Climax:** Book One's climax consists of Reyna, Mago, Carlos, and Papi's terrifying illegal border crossing with the help of a coyote. Book Two's climax takes place when Papi's emotionally and physically abusive behavior at last extends to his second wife, Mila, resulting in his arrest.
- **Antagonist:** Papi
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Less of a Distance. *The Distance Between Us* has proved such an impactful story—and such an unforgiving examination of both

the short- and long-term effects of the traumas of border politics—that it has been selected time and time again as a common or community read in cities and colleges across the country. These reading programs help students and communities to establish a common ground, come together to discuss important issues, and expand the horizons of their learning.



PLOT SUMMARY

In 1980, four-year-old Reyna Grande's mother is preparing to leave Mexico for the United States—"El Otro Lado," or "The Other Side," as it is known in their impoverished city of Iguala. Reyna and her older siblings Mago and Carlos beg Mami not to leave, but she insists she must leave to join their father, who has already been working in the US for years in order to make money for their family. Mami drops the children off at the home of Abuela Evila—their father's mother. Abuela Evila is not happy about looking after the children, and reminds Mami to send money every week.

Reyna, Mago, and Carlos suffer difficult and even abusive treatment at their Abuela Evila's house. They sleep squished together on a straw mattress, are forced to eat table scraps, and are neglected by their grandmother even as she dotes on her other grandchild, Élica, whose own mother María Félix left years ago for the US. Reyna and her siblings endure lice and roundworm infestations, scorpion bites, as well as taunts from Élica and all the neighborhood kids about being "orphans." When news arrives that Mami is going to have another baby, Reyna and her siblings grow even more despondent, convinced that their parents have forgotten all about them.

Nearly two years after leaving, Mami returns to Iguala—with her new daughter Betty in tow. She takes Reyna and her siblings to live with her at her own mother Abuelita Chinta's house, and all of the children are delighted to have their mother back. As the days and weeks go by, however, they realize that the woman who has returned is not the same as the woman who left. Mami reveals that Papi left her for another woman, and her bitterness seeps into her relationship with her children. Mami soon takes up with a new boyfriend, and announces that she is moving away again, this time to Acapulco. In Mami's absence, several tragedies befall their family. Reyna's cousin **Catalina** is drowned in a horrible flood, and Betty is burned terribly when Abuelita Chinta spills boiling water on her face. One day, a neighbor arrives with news that Mami has called: after a horrible car accident that killed her boyfriend, Mami is coming home at last. When she returns, Mami is manic and reckless and eventually announces that she is moving to the other side of town to live with her sister, Tia Güera.

One day, Reyna and her siblings excitedly head over to Abuela Evila's house to take what they think is a phone call from Papi. When they get there, though, they find their father—gone for

nearly four years—sitting on the sofa with his new girlfriend, Mila. The reunion is awkward, but soon Reyna and her siblings are overjoyed, thinking their father will stay. The next day, Papi announces that he is returning to El Otro Lado soon—and plans to take Mago with him. Reyna and Carlos protest, begging to be brought along as well. Mami agrees to let the children go—but demands that Betty stay behind in Iguala. After two unsuccessful and dangerous attempts to cross the border, Reyna, her siblings, and their Papi at last make it to the US on their third try.

In September of 1986, Reyna, Mago and Carlos are preparing to start school in Los Angeles. Papi tells them that his expectations are high—he has risked a lot to bring them to this country, and tells them that if they do not succeed in school and take advantage of every opportunity afforded to them, he will send them back to Mexico. Papi soon begins abusing the children—when Carlos wets the bed, he throws him into a freezing tub of water. When Reyna refuses to spaghetti because it reminds her of the roundworms she had back in Mexico, Papi dumps the plate over her head and screams at her. When Mago gets her period for the first time and misses school because of her cramps, Papi lashes her with a belt. Mila turns a blind eye and offers Reyna and her siblings little comfort.

One day, Papi takes a bus downtown and returns with shocking: Mami is living just on the other side of town. More than that, she has come here with her boyfriend, has left Betty behind in Mexico, and is pregnant. Reyna and her siblings are desperate to see their mother, but Papi is enraged that they'd want to see a woman who moved to the same city as them and didn't even contact them. Papi forbids them to see their mother until several months later, when Betty arrives in the US. When Reyna and her siblings take a bus to Mami's new neighborhood, they are struck by how dangerous and impoverished it is. Mami's new apartment is dirty and vermin-ridden, and yet Mami says that nothing can compare to the poverty she left behind in Mexico. Reyna and her siblings begin visiting Mami every weekend, but Reyna can't help but notice that even though the physical distance between them all has closed, there are still major gaps to cross.

Mago starts high school, and Papi is proud of her for being the first person in their family to do so. Reyna becomes jealous, knowing that even if she succeeds and lives up to all of Papi's expectations, she will never be the first to do so. She seeks out other ways to set herself apart from her sister, and takes up the **alto saxophone** both as a way of impressing Papi and as a method of expressing herself—English is still hard for her, but when it comes to the sax, there is only music. Papi decides to start taking English language classes himself, hopeful that once he gets a green card and learns English he'll be able to move his family out of their gang-ridden neighborhood. When Papi learns that his sister, Emperatriz, has moved into the property he owned back in Iguala, he returns to Mexico to get it back,

risking his green card process. When Papi returns, he still hasn't been able to get his property back, and Reyna notices that something within him seems to have broken—he stops going to English classes, and starts drinking heavily.

As Mago graduates from high school, Reyna and her siblings at last obtain their green cards. Reyna joins marching band while Mago heads off to college, but Papi's abuse is growing worse by the day. Mila tries to explain Papi's abusive nature, claiming that he grew up in an abusive household, but Reyna is conflicted and unsure of what to believe. Mago gets fed up with Papi's abuse, and looks for small ways to retaliate against his influence. She throws Reyna a quinceañera all by herself—though Reyna knows Mago is sliding into credit card debt, she is grateful for the party. Reyna is succeeding in school and band, but Papi hardly seems to notice all her accomplishments. Reyna leans on Mago as she struggles with boy problems and feelings of worthlessness, and in 1993, during Reyna's senior year of high school, the two of them, along with Mami and Betty, take a trip back to Mexico. Reyna is shocked to see how Iguala has deteriorated, and as she reconnects with her family and friends, struggles to believe that she, too, grew up in such poverty. Mago dismisses Reyna's attempts to reconnect with the past, and wants to go off to Acapulco to party. The two sisters get into their first big fight as they hash out feelings of obligation and disconnection to their Mexican heritage.

When Mago and Reyna return to Los Angeles, Mago begins looking for an apartment with some friends. She tells Reyna that she will be able to come live with them, too, and finally escape Papi's abuse. A few weeks later, though, when Mago secures an apartment, she revokes her offer to Reyna. When Mago tells Papi that she's moving out, he tells Mago she'll be dead to him if she goes through with it. Though things are stony and silent for a few days, Mago sticks around, and Reyna wonders if perhaps her sister won't go after all. Reyna is accepted to UC Irvine, and they all go out to celebrate—but the next day, Mago moves out without a word, and Papi tells Reyna she is forbidden from going to school. Papi's drinking worsens, and Reyna is subjected to frequent beatings. Reyna begins holing up in her room, refusing to come out while Papi is home. She engages in reckless behaviors, starting to have unprotected sex with her boyfriend Steve and getting into a dangerous situation with two men who offer her a modeling gig. At rock bottom, Reyna decides to turn herself around. She breaks up with Steve and announces to Papi that she's enrolling in community college. She is expecting a fight or even a beating, but Papi accepts her decision.

Reyna enrolls at Pasadena City College and meets her first mentor, a professor named Diana Savas, who introduces Reyna to many great books from the Latina literary canon. Even after Dr. Savas's class is over, Reyna continues going to see her professor to talk about books and literature. One night, Papi pushes Mila down the stairs and is arrested. Reyna goes to stay

with Mami, but realizes she cannot live in such cramped, dirty conditions. Reyna confesses the truth about her abusive home life to Dr. Savas, who invites Reyna to come and live with her. Reyna accepts. A year and a half later—after having returned to him for a while—Mila decides to leave Papi, taking money from their bank account and filing a restraining order. Papi is left with nothing, and both Mago and Carlos—who are busy with their own families and children—encourage Reyna to move home for the summer before she starts classes at UC Santa Cruz, to care for Papi. Reyna reluctantly agrees, and finds that Papi is more docile, friendly, and present than he has ever been. At the end of the summer, Papi makes an announcement: Mila has decided to move back in, on the condition Papi cuts off all contact with Reyna and her siblings. Stunned and hurt, Reyna packs her bags, and stays with Dr. Savas for the last few days of her summer vacation. Reyna's boyfriend Edwin drives her up to UC Santa Cruz several days later, and tries to remind her that Papi probably didn't want to hold Reyna back any more—he knew she'd be leaving anyway, and didn't want to be alone. After her boyfriend drops her off at school, Reyna decides to “let go” of her anger towards Papi and start fresh.

In an epilogue, Reyna reveals that she went on to become the first person in her family to graduate college. She worked as a teacher for many years before devoting herself to writing; her first two novels were highly acclaimed, and she soon began attending lectures, conferences, and parties with the Latina writers she'd once admired as a fan. She repaired her relationships with Mila, Papi, and her siblings over the years, and became a US citizen. In 2010, Papi was diagnosed with liver cancer. Though her siblings sometimes felt that Papi was finally getting what he deserved, Reyna stood by her father's side throughout his illness, pushing aside her feelings of anger and regret in order to be present for him in his final days. In the end, as Reyna and her siblings allow their father's doctor to take him off life support, Reyna holds her father's hand and realizes, for the first time, that it is the same shape as hers. She wonders to herself whether she would have come with him to El Otro Lado if she knew all she'd suffer here—as Papi takes his last breaths, she decides that the answer, despite it all, is “yes.”



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Reyna Grande Rodriguez – Reyna, the author and protagonist of the book, is a sensitive, imaginative, and introspective child whose harsh upbringing in poor and rural Iguala, Guerrero, Mexico forms a foundation of poverty, abuse, and abandonment that she spends her entire adolescence trying to rise above. After her parents both travel illegally to the United States for work, leaving Reyna and her siblings in the care of their cruel Abuela Evila, Reyna is subject to indignity upon indignity and a seemingly endless spiral of abuse and neglect.

When her father Natalio returns and offers to take her and her siblings back to America with him to live in “El Otro Lado”—on “the other side”—Reyna believes that all her dreams of happiness and comfort are about to come true. In Los Angeles, however, the grass is not necessarily greener; Reyna has escaped the rural poverty of her youth and the miserable household of her father’s mother, but now finds herself in close quarters with a father whose alcoholism, violence, and need for control have made him into a veritable stranger. As Reyna and her siblings Mago and Carlos navigate their adolescence, they struggle to heal the wounds of their past—wounds left by their parents’ abandonment, their grandmother’s cruelty, and the trauma of their dangerous childhoods—while making a future for themselves in the face of continued adversity. As she grows older, Reyna finds outlets for self-expression through **music** and creative writing, and, with the help of her community college mentor Diana Savas, at last discovers her voice and potential as an author. Reyna ultimately goes on to graduate college, becoming the first member of her family to do so. As the memoir ends on a hopeful note, Reyna expresses the resilient faith she has in her family—and all families like hers—to rise above their past and carve out a better future for themselves and one another.

Papi / Natalio Grande – Reyna, Mago, and Carlos’s father Natalio has been living in America since before most of them can remember. Wanting to make enough money to build a “dream house” for his family in Iguala, Papi long ago left for the United States so that he could make more money and secure a real home for their family. Since the children barely remember their father, they create images of him in their heads, and Reyna, relaying her inner fantasy life as a child, speaks loftily of “The Man Behind the Glass”—an image of her father as an upstanding, generous, loving family man, which she creates based on the few framed photographs their family has of Natalio. When Papi unexpectedly comes to visit during Reyna’s eighth year, he announces that he is taking Mago back to the United States in order to give her the opportunity for an education—Carlos and Reyna beg to come along, and he reluctantly agrees to allow them to undertake the dangerous, frightening border crossing. Once in Los Angeles, the three children find themselves face-to-face with a father who is very different from the doting Papi they’d always imagined. Natalio, who was subjected to abuse himself at an early age, is a violent alcoholic who beats his children when they fail to live up to the high expectations he’s placed upon them. In giving them the opportunity to pursue prosperity and education in America, he demands nothing short of perfection—and yet fails to provide his children with the emotional support they need to thrive. Papi’s contradictory nature—violent and drunk one moment, sober and wise and gentle the next—ties in with the novel’s themes of abuse, abandonment, inherited trauma, family, and forgiveness.

Mami / Juana Rodriguez – Reyna, Mago, and Carlos’s mother leaves them behind to go to America in the opening chapter of the memoir. The remainder of the book explores the distances—both physical and emotional—that her abandonment opens up in their lives. Even after Juana returns from America, having separated from her abusive husband Natalio, she continues leaving her children in smaller ways, constantly choosing boyfriends and her own interests over them and subjecting them to both emotional turmoil and physical danger. After the children move to Los Angeles with their father, their mother follows suit—but does not tell them that she’s living in the same city as them, under an hour away, for many months. The memoir’s thematic preoccupation with abandonment, distance, and the human capacity for forgiveness largely grows out of Reyna and her siblings’ struggles to understand their mother’s choices, which often leave them feeling lost, isolated, and unwanted.

Mago Grande Rodriguez – Mago is Reyna’s older sister, and a maternal figure who becomes Reyna and Carlos’s “little mother” after their real mother, Juana, leaves for America to join their father Natalio there. Mago is a “hot-blooded Scorpio,” fiery, fearless, and headstrong. She attempts to shield her siblings from pain while simultaneously trying to ensure that they’re prepared for the world and all its unfairness. As the eldest, Mago is forced to shoulder burdens far beyond her years during her and her siblings’ youths in Mexico; once in Los Angeles, though, Mago finds that all of the premature growing-up she’s done does not affect the way her father sees her. Mago feels constrained by her father’s strict rules, and her rebellious streak flares as she gets older. Eventually, unable to handle Papi’s abuse any longer, she moves out of his home and into a friend’s apartment. Though Reyna begs her “little mother” to stay and look after her, Mago can no longer place her own needs last, and as she continues to grow away from her siblings and her father, she exerts more and more of her independence, getting married and pregnant quickly after leaving home and learning to prioritize herself for the first time in her life, while still trying not to sever the delicate bonds between her and her siblings.

Carlos Grande Rodriguez – Reyna’s older brother Carlos is a quiet and shy boy whose crooked teeth are a source of embarrassment for him throughout his childhood and adolescence. Carlos is often in the background of the action, or otherwise caught in the middle of his sisters’ quarrels. He is committed to keeping the peace in his family and as such is often subject to harsher abuse and greater peril than his sisters. His gentle temperament and forgiving nature eventually give way to a rebellious streak, and at twenty years old, Carlos gets married in an attempt to get himself out of Papi’s abusive household.

Mila Grande – Papi’s second wife, Mila, is a stylish and modern woman who is a U.S. citizen. As such she enjoys special

privileges, and is able to travel freely between the United States and Mexico. She has three children of her own, but barely sees them—they were so angry at her for leaving her first husband for Natalio that they mostly refuse to have a relationship with her. Mila finds herself in charge of raising Reyna, Mago, and Carlos, though she reprimands them when they attempt to get too close to her emotionally or see her as a second mother. For most of the book, Mila avoids bearing the brunt of her husband's alcoholic rages and physical abuse, while he shunts all of that violence onto his own children. As Mago, Carlos, and Reyna grow older, however, and Mago and Carlos move out to begin lives of their own, Natalio turns his attentions towards Mila and begins abusing her, as well. In the end, Mila forgives Natalio, retracts her restraining orders against him, and moves back into his home—under the condition that he sever his relationship with his children. Throughout the memoir, Mila is a source of “distance” between Reyna, her siblings, and their father, constantly serving as a reminder that they are not his first priority—and that even once the physical distances that once separated their family have been traversed, the emotional distances between them still threaten to tear them apart.

Betty – Reyna, Mago, and Carlos's youngest full sibling, who was born in America while Mami was living there with Papi. Betty is separated from her three older siblings both by age and the fact that she was born in another country, and because Juana had to escape Natalio's abuse with Betty in tow, Betty often becomes a bargaining chip between her two parents. Betty eventually moves to the United States with Juana, Juana's second husband Rey, and their child Leonardo, but only sees Reyna, Mago, and Carlos occasionally. As she grows older, Betty gets involved in gangs and winds up a teen mother, whereas her other siblings, constantly pressured by their father, make more traditional choices.

Abuela Evila – Papi's mother and Reyna, Mago, and Carlos's grandmother. After Juana leaves to join Natalio in El Otro Lado, the three children are sent to live with their grandmother, who abuses them, treats them like second-class citizens, and denies them attention, comfort, and affection—all while doting upon her other grandchild, Élica.

Élica – Reyna, Mago, and Carlos's cousin. Because she is the child of one of Abuela Evila's own daughters, she receives preferential treatment, and often teases Reyna and her siblings about being orphans. Élica, however, is dealing privately with the same abandonment issues as Reyna and her siblings, having been left behind in Iguala while her mother makes her way in El Otro Lado.

Diana Savas – One of Reyna's teachers at Pasadena City College who becomes her friend and mentor, and takes her in when Natalio's abuse becomes unbearable. Diana believes in Reyna's talent as a writer and gives her many books by Latina writers to read. With Diana's love and care, Reyna begins to

understand her worth, and with Diana's encouragement, Reyna applies to prestigious schools, scholarship programs, and writing contests that allow her to see her own potential as a writer and scholar.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Rey – Mami's second husband.

Abuelo Augurio – Reyna, Mago, and Carlos's grandfather.

Tía Emperatriz – The youngest of Abuela Evila's children. Reyna, Mago, and Carlos come to see Emperatriz as something of a mother figure while they are living under Evila's roof, as she is young, maternal, and kind towards them in the face of Evila's abuse and cruelty.

Tía María Félix – Élica's mother.

Abuelita Chinta – Juana's mother, a kind old woman who is the village healer in Iguala and a figure of wisdom and comfort in the community.

Tío Crece – Reyna, Mago, and Carlos's uncle and Juana's brother. Tío Crece suffers from schizophrenia, and is subject to fits of madness. He is an odd man and his behavior around Reyna and her siblings is often inappropriate, yet they have a good relationship. Carlos especially grows close with Crece.

Tío Gary – Reyna, Mago, and Carlos's uncle and Juana's second brother.

Doña Caro – One of Reyna's neighbors in Iguala who lives in the “prettiest house” around.

Don Lino – Doña Caro's husband, a well-to-do welder.

Tía Güera – Juana's sister.

Lupita – Tía Güera's daughter.

Pepe – A classmate of Mago's, who she develops a crush on.

María – A classmate of Carlos's who he develops a crush on. When Mago defends Carlos from María's taunts, the two wind up fighting, and Mago beats María badly as a way of taking out her aggressions related to her own thwarted crush on Pepe.

Mrs. Anderson – Reyna's teacher in elementary school.

Mr. Lopez – Reyna's English teacher in elementary school.

Axel – A boy Reyna has feelings for in high school, Axel is embarrassed by Reyna and will only kiss her or pay attention to her in private.

Steve – Reyna's first real boyfriend in high school, and the boy to whom she loses her virginity.

Don Bartolo – A shopkeeper in Iguala.

Edwin – Reyna's college boyfriend.

Luis – A boy Reyna has a crush on. After sharing her first kiss with Luis, Reyna thinks they will become boyfriend and girlfriend, but after Luis witnesses Natalio pulling Reyna down the street by her hair, he begins avoiding her at school and even

making fun of her.

Phuong – Reyna’s best friend for a time in high school.



THEMES

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



PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL DISTANCES

One of the central themes in Reyna Grande’s memoir *The Distance Between Us* is that of the distances both physical and emotional that separate people. As Grande relays the story of her difficult and fractured youth in Mexico and then in Los Angeles, she ultimately argues that even once seemingly insurmountable physical differences are breached and crossed, the emotional distances that have cropped up in their wake can sometimes prove impossible to bridge.

During the first half of the memoir, Reyna and her siblings are separated from their parents—who have gone to the United States to pursue better work for more money—by a distance that is primarily physical. The children are emotionally isolated from their parents, too, due to the sporadic communication they are able to have with them, but the primary “distance” is geographical. As the story progresses, this changes—and the distance between Reyna, her siblings, and their parents becomes an emotional one even after they are physically reunited. Reyna and her siblings are reunited with their mother Juana (whom they call Mami) upon her return to Mexico after she leaves their father, due to his threatening her with a gun when she announced that she was leaving with their fourth child, Betty, born in the United States. Though Reyna tries to deny it, she can’t help but admit to herself, after a few interactions with her recently returned mother, that “the emptiness and the yearning” she felt during Mami’s absence “[are] still there.” The woman who has come back “[isn’t] the same woman who had left.” Though the physical distance between Juana and her children has been closed, the emotional distance between them (caused in part by her broken promise—that she’d only be gone for a year when in reality she stayed away for several) has only widened. Juana is “bitter, heartbroken, and weighted down” by her children—she, too, feels a distance from her children that is emotional and psychological rather than physical. Mami embarks on affairs with men and keeps her children at arm’s length, always abandoning them to run off with a boyfriend or forcing them to undertake tasks as dangerous and menial as those they suffered under their Abuela Evila, whom they’d lived with in

their parents’ absence. As the months go by, it becomes apparent to Reyna and her siblings that there is now an insurmountable distance between them and their mother. When the physical distance between Reyna, Mago, Carlos, and their mother is opened up once again, after they beg their father to take them with him to live in the United States, Mami once again closes the gap—by moving back to Los Angeles herself. Her relationship with her first three children, though, is never the same; she remarries, lives across town in a run-down, vermin-infested apartment, and makes a minimal effort to see Reyna, Carlos, and Mago. Though the physical distance between Mami and her children has been bridged time and time again, the scars of her abandonment remain, and the emotional distance between them is never truly overcome.

The Grande Rodriguez siblings’ separation from their Papi, too, is one first defined by physical distance and later defined by an intimidating and painful emotional distance borne of that separation. After Reyna, Carlos, and Mago arrive in the United States to live with their father in Los Angeles, the three of them are excited to finally live their dream of staying with their Papi in “El Otro Lado” (“The Other Side”)—but soon come to realize that their father is not the loving man they thought he was, but rather a remote, violent tyrant whose need to control his children prevents him from ever getting close to them. After closing the physical distance between him and his children—and rather reluctantly, only agreeing to take all three of them across the border after they begged and pleaded—Natalio Grande proceeds to treat his children hardly any better than their cruel Abuela treated them back in Iguala. He punishes Carlos physically for wetting the bed by throwing him in a cold bath; he repeatedly grabs Reyna and Mago by their hair and beats them when they defy him or bring home a bad grade; he drinks to the point of incoherence and neglects his children, holing up in his room for hours on end. All of this cruel behavior leaves Reyna and her siblings feeling as if the emotional distance between them and their father will never be surmounted. Even after Papi reveals to Reyna that the abuse he himself suffered in his youth—and the work he did as a cattle driver as a young boy, which forced him to whip cows the second they stepped out of line while dragging the blow—have contributed to his violent temperament and obsession with ensuring his children’s academic success while letting their emotional lives fall by the wayside, Reyna feels emotionally distant from her father and worries that she’ll never be able to get through to him. In the end, Reyna’s prediction is right—Mago, then Carlos, then Reyna herself one by one move out of their Papi’s household and sever their relationships with him. Though Reyna is able to extend to him a kind of unspoken forgiveness, it is clear that the physical distance that separated her and her siblings from their father for so many years exacerbated the emotional distances between their entire family. Had they known what their father was truly like, they would not have pinned their hopes on him, and had he been

physically present for his children's formative years, he might have been able to see them as full people rather than as conduits for his own failed dreams of achieving opportunity in "El Otro Lado."

The memoir's title, *The Distance Between Us*, ultimately refers not to the physical distances between Reyna, her siblings, and their parents, but the emotional distances that cleave their family into several broken and perhaps unfixable pieces. As Grande excavates her youth, it becomes clear that physical distance and emotional distance are inextricably intertwined, as during the times that families are separated physically, deep emotional rifts born out of resentment, confusion, and heartbreak often form. Once physically reconnected, it becomes difficult—sometimes even impossible—to leap these great chasms and repair the relationships that once were.



ABANDONMENT AND BETRAYAL

One of the most profound themes in Reyna Grande's memoir is that of abandonment and betrayal. In painstaking detail, Grande recounts the

feelings of isolation, betrayal, sadness, anger, and longing she and her siblings felt after their father—and, later, their mother—abandoned them for "El Otro Lado" as they pursued work in the United States. Over the course of the book, Grande focuses on the deep rifts sudden desertion or disappearance creates within families, ultimately arguing that the abandonments and betrayals children suffer in their youth can cause them to, as adults, linger in unhealthy or abusive familial or romantic situations far longer than they should—just because the idea of being left again is more traumatic than enduring the pain of proximity to a negative or harmful person.

The first abandonment and betrayal that Reyna and her sisters suffer in the timeline of the memoir is not the first they have suffered in their lives. In early 1980, when their Mami departs Iguala for the United States, their father has already been gone for years. As a result, Reyna and her siblings are clingy with their mother even when she goes out on short jaunts around the neighborhood, always fearful that she will leave them. Their fear is a consequence of their father's abandonment, which is, at the start of the book, a bygone event that has nonetheless left its indelible imprint on Reyna and her family. Grande reaches back in time to access the painful feelings of betrayal and abandonment she and her siblings felt when they realized that their mother was truly leaving them behind in Mexico. Though they miss their mother deeply after she leaves, the miserable conditions they are forced to endure at their Abuela Evila's house heighten their feelings of abandonment, and indeed their latent feelings of resentment towards their mother. The misery the children endure for years at the hands of the cruel Evila—a direct result of their mother's abandonment—has unseen repercussions throughout the rest of their lives. Just as the abuse Reyna and her siblings face in

the house of their father's mother Evila reaches a breaking point, their mother returns home to Mexico—but she comes back with a new child in tow, a little girl named Betty, and her reappearance is too little, too late. Reyna and her siblings no longer trust their mother, having seen how she has changed in the years she's been gone. When she continues to abandon them in small but hurtful ways—bringing new boyfriends home (or moving to other cities for boyfriends) and treating the men in her life better than she treats her own children, forcing Carlos to endure a miserable week outside, guarding a parcel of land that the government is rumored to be giving away to anyone who stakes their claim to it—the children's feelings of betrayal intensify, and when their Papi returns to Mexico and offers to take them back to the United States, they jump at the opportunity to at last be the ones doing the leaving.

Once in Los Angeles with their father and his second wife, Mila, Reyna and her siblings face a new kind of betrayal: the betrayal of realizing that their father is not the man they thought he was. Papi is not kind and gentle and understanding, but rather vicious and violent, making cruel demands of his children and holding them to unreasonably high expectations in exchange for his having given them the opportunity to live in the United States. The children, though—scarred by memories of their mother's abandonment and their grandmother's cruelty, and fearful of being abandoned yet again—choose to stick it out with their father, even after their mother moves just across town with her new husband and their younger sister Betty. Reyna and her siblings, so paralyzed by their learned fear of abandonment, remain in a miserable situation with Papi until they each, separately, reach their breaking points. It is only after enduring years of physical, emotional, and verbal abuse that Mago—the eldest—is able to muster both the courage and the resources to get out from under her father's thumb. Reyna, the last to leave, remains in her father's house until he tells her she's no longer welcome. This need to hang onto an abusive, traumatic relationship because the only alternative is feeling abandoned, discarded, and betrayed cements just how acutely Reyna and her siblings have learned to fear being left behind.

In *The Distance Between Us*, Reyna does more than catalog the numerous betrayals she and her siblings suffered throughout their childhoods—she galvanizes the pain and suffering they endured in order to show how children's experiences of betrayal and abandonment can shape (and mar forever) their adult lives. In examining the specific effects of betrayal and abandonment alongside larger issues of poverty, abuse, and trauma, Grande demonstrates the cycles of desertion and neglect engendered by many immigrants' attempts to flee the deep rural poverty and indigence south of the border.



POVERTY, ABUSE, AND TRAUMA

Cycles of poverty, abuse, and trauma permeate the narrative of *The Distance Between Us*. From Abuela

Evila's cruel disregard of her grandchildren's well-being to Mami's frequent abandonments to Papi's alcohol-fueled rages and beatings, Reyna and her siblings Mago and Carlos are subjected to an endless stream of neglect and abuse, the emotional and logistical aspects of which are defined by the extreme poverty they live in in Mexico and the urban whirlwind they find once they arrive in "El Otro Lado" (the United States). Over the course of the book, Grande argues that conditions of extreme poverty breed desperation and resentment, and that these feelings can lead to cycles of abuse and trauma that filter their way through families for generations.

Reyna, Mago, and Carlos's early years are marked by poverty, but little abuse or trauma; once their mother leaves for El Otro Lado, however, and the three siblings are forced to go live with their cruel paternal grandmother, Abuela Evila, the intersection of poverty, abuse, and trauma begins to rear its head. Because things are financially so difficult in the impoverished town of Iguala—which, in 1980, is at the center of a recession paralyzing most of Mexico—Abuela Evila demands payment for raising her own grandchildren. Though she is one of the better-off people in town—she owns a larger amount of property than most, and where many houses are made from cardboard and straw, hers is brick and mortar—Evila uses money as a way of leveraging control over her son and her grandchildren. Her many physical, emotional, verbal, and psychological abuses extend even to the financial when she refuses to use the wages being sent by Reyna's parents to buy the children clothes or food. Despite their parents' tithe, Reyna, Mago, and Carlos are still forced to eat scraps, endure roundworm and lice infections, and sleep in dangerous quarters that result in Reyna being bitten by scorpions and Carlos bearing witness to sex and violence taking place in the alleyway just outside. Evila could mitigate somewhat the suffering her grandchildren are forced to endure—indeed, she lavishes both attention and riches on her elder granddaughter Érida, Reyna and her siblings' cousin. Her decision to keep them entrapped in poverty, however, shows how poverty can be used as a tool of abuse, and a mechanism in an endless cycle of trauma and misery.

When Reyna, Mago, and Carlos finally travel with their father to El Otro Lado, they believe they are about to live a blessed life in a land of prosperity and opportunity. They receive a rude awakening, however, when they find themselves subject to a new kind of abuse at the hands of their father—an alcoholic who tries to leverage a different kind of blackmail (in this case his willingness to bring his children to the U.S. to provide them with education and opportunity) against Reyna and her siblings in order to control them. Papi, having been raised himself by Abuela Evila, has no doubt been subjected to his mother's tactics of abuse and manipulation. Though the narrative does not go into extreme detail—since the story is told from Reyna's perspective, she does not delve into much family history other than what her relatives directly tell her—it becomes clear, once

Reyna is a little bit older, that Papi himself has been a victim of the kind of trauma borne of a life lived in poverty. Forced to work on a farm at an early age and tasked with whipping cattle viciously if they strayed from their plows' paths, Papi now uses the physical abuse (as well as the financial hardship and hard labor) he endured as a child to justify his violent, cruel treatment of his own children. As Reyna listens to her father's story, she feels deep sadness—she realizes that she, her father, and her siblings are trapped in a cycle of abuse related to poverty, and trauma related to abuse, that must stop. At the end of the memoir, Reyna chooses to forgive her father for all the pain and suffering he has caused her, signaling that she—the first in her family to graduate college and the first to pursue a career as a writer—may be the one to break the chain.

Reyna Grande intimately understands human nature and the inherited cycles of trauma that motivate good people to do terrible things. In charting her own escape from rural poverty, she demonstrates how her parents' escape came too late—the effects of the abuses and horrors they witnessed as young people shaped their violent and irresponsible instincts over the entirety of their lives. As Grande examines the lineage of abuse and trauma that has impacted her own life path, she doesn't blame the hardships she's faced on any one person; rather, she acknowledges the difficult circumstances under which she came into the world, the difficult circumstances under which her parents, grandparents, and ancestors came into the world, and argues implicitly that to change these dark inheritances, the very fabric of global society must change, to eradicate the dangerous and traumatizing conditions that allow abuse and violence to thrive as a means of control or coping.



FORGIVENESS AND RECOGNITION

Though Reyna's narration throughout *The Distance Between Us* is rife with pain, confusion, and indeed resentment, it ultimately ends on a note of forgiveness. When Reyna finally forgives her dying Papi for all the pain he has inflicted on her and her siblings, it is because she recognizes that without him, she would not be who she is; as she holds his hand in hers and sees that they are the same shape, she recognizes herself in her father (and vice versa) and thus is able to make the emotional leap that allows her to offer forgiveness at last. The theme of forgiveness through recognition resounds several times throughout the book in different ways, and each time Reyna encounters the need to bestow her forgiveness on another, it comes through recognizing that she is not so different from those who would torment her. Grande ultimately argues that even when it seems like forgiveness is impossible, it can be found—and shared—through the simple act of recognizing oneself in another, and extending to that individual the same grace and patience one allots to oneself.

The story of Reyna's youth in the United States is framed by a

vignette that shows Reyna, Mago, and Carlos visiting their dying father in the hospital. As the narrative progresses and comes to its climax, Grande shows how all of the abuse, trauma, abandonment, and neglect she and her siblings suffered at their father's hands ultimately gives way to forgiveness—a forgiveness reluctantly given but ultimately rooted in Reyna's recognition that her struggles have been his struggles, and that their shared trauma and the bonds it created, however unhealthy, have made her into the person she is today. When Reyna first goes to live in Los Angeles with her father, he is not the man she'd imagined him to be all her life. The friendly, loving, passionate "Man Behind the Glass"—so named because the only image Reyna had of her father back in Mexico was a photo in a glass picture frame—did not exist. Reyna's father is someone unrecognizable to her: a violent alcoholic whose desperate need for control over his children and his second wife, Mila, subsumes all else. As Papi's alcoholism worsens and his attacks on all three children intensify, Reyna and her siblings' resentment of the man grows. Mago and Carlos, the oldest, move out of the house, desperate to escape their father's influence. Reyna stays behind out of a combination of obligation and lack of anywhere else to go, but as the beatings and slights against her pile up, her hatred of her father reaches a boiling point when he tells her that Mila has agreed to stay with him as long as he cuts off contact with his children. At this point in the narrative, it seems as if Reyna will never forgive her father for choosing Mila over her, after all he put her through. However, through the encouragement of her college boyfriend and the much-needed distance provided by her own journey to Santa Cruz, Reyna decides to gather her courage and "let go" of all the anger she's been harboring towards her father for so long. During a walk along her new college campus, she conjures an image of herself holding her father's hand, and then imagines herself literally letting go of his hand—his hand that is the same shape as hers. Reyna's forgiveness of her father in this scene, as in the hospital scene, stems from realizing that as horrible as their relationship has been, she and her father are bound by a certain sameness: they come from the same place, have endured the same hardships, and are part of the same family. This recognition allows Reyna to see her father's flaws in a new light, and at least partially forgive him.

The second major instance of forgiveness through recognition concerns Reyna's cousin Élida, who is also under Abuela Evila's care during the time Reyna, Mago, and Carlos live with her. Élida is pampered, spoiled, and given preferential treatment by their grandmother. Élida gets to serve herself the first and largest portion at each meal, while Reyna and her siblings are forced to eat table scraps. Evila brushes and conditions Élida's long, beautiful hair, while forcing Reyna and her siblings to shave their heads in order to combat the recurring lice infestations they suffer from. Élida gets to sleep in Abuela Evila's room on a soft bed, while Reyna, Mago, and Carlos sleep on the floor on a pile of hay and are frequently bitten by

scorpions and kept up all hours of the night by noises from the window which looks down on the alleyway below. Reyna and her siblings come to resent Élida, who cruelly taunts them for being "orphans" whose parents will never return to them every chance she gets. The plump, healthy, long-haired Élida seems like she couldn't be more different from her skeletal, lice-ridden cousins—but when Élida's mother, who herself has gone to the United States for work, returns to Mexico for a visit, Élida is suddenly humanized in the eyes of Reyna and her siblings. When they see that Élida's mother, Tía María Félix, has (like their own mother) had a child during her stay in the United States whom she prefers over Élida, they begin to recognize themselves in her, even as they're forced to cook and clean in preparation for Élida's upcoming quinceañera. After Élida's mother leaves again for the United States, Reyna, Mago, and Carlos look at their distraught cousin and see that she has become "a weeping, lonely, heartbroken girl." They see their own pain reflected, for the first time, in their cousin; through this recognition, they are able to begin to forgive Élida for her cruelty and even start wishing that things will improve for her, and that others—including, when he comes to visit, their own Papi—will show her the kindness they themselves have been denied for years.

Through these turns of recognition, both sudden and long-coming, Reyna and her siblings learn that though forgiveness often seems difficult—or, in some cases, impossible—all people are, deep down, just doing their best with the hand they've been dealt. In understanding that trauma, abuse, pain, and neglect are things that even those who've wronged her have faced, Reyna—and, to some degree, her siblings—begin to recognize their own struggles in the actions of their tormentors. They witness Élida's loneliness, and are reminded of their own; they see their father's weakness, and understand that it is a trait they all share. In recognizing themselves in others, Reyna and her siblings find a way, at last, towards forgiveness and understanding.



SYMBOLS

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



CATALINA

Catalina is Reyna's Tío Gary's five-year-old daughter. When the river near their family home in Iguala floods, Catalina is swept up in the deluge and washed away. By the time her family finds her, she is dead, and her father hangs her by her feet from a tree branch so that "the river [can] drain out of her." Reyna shudders at the sight of her cousin's "bloated body," and begins to worry, as a result of Catalina's death, that she and her siblings will suffer a similar

fate before the time their father comes back for them. Catalina, then, becomes a symbol of Reyna's recognition of the extreme poverty and danger that have characterized her childhood. Reyna, Mago, and Carlos have all suffered from worms, lice, and scorpion bites; rarely has there ever been enough food to go around, and they have had to bathe and wash their clothes in dirty water all their lives. These hardships are just part of normal life in their Iguala village, and yet as Reyna witnesses death for the first time, she comes to fear that she will not survive her childhood and make it to El Otro Lado—the promised land where her Papi has gone—or even simply to a better set of circumstances in Mexico. This fear catalyzes many of Reyna's decisions in the latter portion of the novel, most importantly her choice to risk everything by following her father on an illegal and dangerous border crossing to join him in Los Angeles.



REYNA'S ALTO SAX

In junior high, Reyna finds herself slightly adrift at her big new school. Though she's been living in the United States for a while, her English is still imperfect and accented, and she is shy, withdrawn, and quiet at school because of her insecurities concerning her language skills. When she's placed in band as her elective class, her teacher takes her to an instrument storage closet on the first day of class and offers her the chance to pick out an instrument. Reyna is shocked that she can borrow an instrument, free of charge, from the school, and delighted to have her pick of flutes, clarinets, and saxophones. She selects for herself an alto saxophone. Though it's a large and heavy instrument that dwarfs Reyna, she is thrilled by the chance to have an outlet of self-expression that doesn't require language. Over the years, Reyna's skill and attachment to the sax grow; it becomes one of her "favorite ways of expressing [her]self," and a comfort in the midst of her painful life in her father's abusive household.

The saxophone is a symbol of Reyna's ongoing struggle to find a way of expressing herself and carving out an identity in her new life in America. Reyna both longs to comfort herself and to impress her Papi, and assure him she's taking advantage of the opportunity he's given her by bringing her to the United States. The alto sax, which Reyna shoulders proudly even though its straps dig into her neck and its weight tests her strength, symbolizes her commitment to growing, learning, and coming into her own despite all the challenges and setbacks she has faced over the course of her adolescence.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Washington Square Press edition of *The Distance Between Us* published in 2012.

Book One: Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ "What did you see?" I asked her. "Who was that in the alley?"

"It was a man, a man on a horse," Mago whispered. The clapping of the hooves grew fainter and fainter.

"So?" Carlos said.

"But he was dragging something behind him in a sack!"

"You're lying," Carlos said.

"I'm not, I swear I'm not," Mago insisted. "I swear I saw him drag a person away."

"We don't believe you," Carlos said again. "Right, Reyna?" I nodded, but none of us could fall back to sleep.

"That's the devil making his rounds," Abuela Evila said the next morning when we told her what Mago had seen. "He's looking for all the naughty children to take back to Hell with him. So you three better behave, or the devil is going to take you away."

Mago told us not to believe anything Abuela Evila said. But at night, we huddled together even closer when we heard a horse pass by our window the sound of its hooves sending chills up our spines. *Who would protect us if the devil came to steal us and take us far away where we would never see our parents again?* I wondered. Every night, I would bury my face in my pillow and hold on tight to my sister.

Related Characters: Reyna Grande Rodriguez , Mago Grande Rodriguez , Carlos Grande Rodriguez , Abuela Evila (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Reyna reflects on the first night she and her siblings Mago and Carlos spent in their Abuela Evila's house after their mother departed for the United States. This passage demonstrates the tools of abuse and manipulation Evila will come to use on her grandchildren over the course of their year-long stay with her. Evila makes her grandchildren sleep on a straw bed on the floor, directly below a window without panes, which looks down on the street below. When the children complain that terrible things are happening in the alleyway at night, Evila shows no concern for her grandchildren's safety or peace of mind. She simply twists the situation to her own advantage, using the children's fear to subjugate them even further. Alone, abandoned, and distraught, Reyna begins to believe Evila's lies, setting a foundation for a lifetime of fear, confusion, and inability to

place trust in those charged with caring for her.

☛ Mago and I sat on the dirt floor, and she told me about the day I was born exactly the way Mami used to tell it. She pointed to the circle of rocks and a pile of ash and told me that during my birth, a fire had been on while Mami had squatted on the ground, over a straw mat, grabbing the rope hanging from the ceiling. When I was born, the midwife put me into my mother's arms. She turned to face the fire so that the heat would keep me warm. As I listened to Mago, I closed my eyes and felt the heat of the flames, and I heard Mami's heart beating against my ear.

Mago pointed to a spot on the dirt floor and reminded me that my umbilical cord was buried there. *That way*, Mami told the midwife, *no matter where life takes her, she won't ever forget where she came from.*

But then Mago touched my belly button and added something to the story my mother had never told me. She said that my umbilical cord was like a ribbon that connected me to Mami. She said, "It doesn't matter that there's a distance between us now. That cord is there forever." I touched my belly button and thought about what my sister had said. I had Papi's photo to keep me connected to him. I had no photo of my mother, but now my sister had given me something to remember her by.

Related Characters: Reyna Grande Rodriguez , Mago Grande Rodriguez (speaker), Papi / Natalio Grande, Mami / Juana Rodriguez

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 21-22

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mago takes her younger sister Reyna—distressed by neighborhood children's taunts of "huerfanita," or "orphan"—to see the place where she was born, and to soothe her with the story of her birth. Mago's story does indeed comfort Reyna, who finds solace in hearing about an instance when her mother cared for her, looked out for her, and wanted to ensure that she was both safe and grounded. Mago also points out that Reyna and her mother are always connected. Though this claim is, at the moment, rather tenuous, Reyna latches on to even the slightest chance to remain connected to her faraway mother, who has abandoned her for *El Otro Lado*. As the novel progresses, Mago, Reyna, and Carlos will find themselves torn between running back to their mother

despite her repeated abandonments, and ridding themselves of her forever—this passage sets up the emotional core of this dilemma by showing just how badly Reyna wants to believe that she and her mother are connected even though they are far apart.

☛ Don Bartolo took my grandmother's coin from his pocket and handed it to me. "Don't ever think that your parents don't love you," he said. "It is because they love you very much that they have left."

As I walked home with the needle for my grandmother, I told myself that maybe Don Bartolo was right. I had to keep on believing my parents left me because they loved me too much and not because they didn't love me enough.

Related Characters: Reyna Grande Rodriguez , Mago Grande Rodriguez (speaker), Papi / Natalio Grande, Mami / Juana Rodriguez

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

In this brief passage, Don Bartolo, a neighborhood shopkeeper whose children Reyna has recently tormented after they teased her for being an orphan, extends grace, kindness, and understanding to the angry, confused little girl. Rather than chastising Reyna for stepping out of line or behaving poorly, he both assures her that he understands where her anger comes from and attempts to impress upon her the knowledge that she need not be so angry—things are not exactly as they seem. Reyna and her siblings have been feeling unloved and abandoned, and their abusive grandparents and cruel cousin have not done anything to make them feel as if their parents still love them. Don Bartolo is the first person to tell Reyna that her parents still care about her—and that their love is so powerful that they have sacrificed being with her in order to pursue something more.

Book One: Chapter 5 Quotes

☛☛ [Tía María Félix] left in the afternoon with little Javier. She promised Élida that one day soon she would send for her, and although she did eventually keep her promise, Élida had to stay behind for now and watch a taxicab take her mother away. Abuela Evila put her arm around Elida and held her while she cried. Elida buried her face in Abuela Evila's arms. It was so strange to see her crying. The ever-present mocking gaze was gone. The Élida that made fun of us, that laughed at us, that called us Los Huerfanitos, had been replaced by a weeping, lonely, heartbroken girl.

Mago grabbed our hands and took us to the backyard to give Élida privacy. "Los quiero mucho," she said, pulling us close to her. Then I realized how lucky Mago, Carlos, and I were. We at least had each other. Élida was on her own.

Related Characters: Reyna Grande Rodriguez , Mago Grande Rodriguez (speaker), Carlos Grande Rodriguez , Abuela Evila, Tía María Félix, Élida

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, one of the novel's major scenes of forgiveness through recognition, shows how the pampered and pompous Élida reacts when it is her turn to be left by the person she loves most. Though Élida's parents, too, live in El Otro Lado and have left her with her grandmother, she torments Reyna, Mago, and Carlos for being orphans, cruelly telling them that their parents have left for good. In this moment, however, Reyna sees for the first time that Élida, too, is suffering a private pain, and harbors fears of being left behind forever. Reyna's heart goes out to Élida, and if she doesn't immediately forgive her, she at least has an understanding of what Élida's really going through—and finally realizes that it is Élida who is more than likely jealous of Reyna, Mago, and Carlos for having one another to rely on.

Book One: Chapter 7 Quotes

☛☛ Part of me was desperate to wear those shoes. They were new. They had been sent to us by our parents. They were from El Otro Lado! But then I thought about my parents, and the fact that they didn't even know what size shoe I wore made me want to throw them in the trash.

If they don't even know something as basic as the size of our shoes and clothes, what else don't they know about us? And what don't we know about them?

The question was there, but neither Carlos, Mago, nor I was courageous enough to ponder on it for long. As the oldest, it was clearer to Mago, more than to Carlos and me, that the distance between us and our parents was destroying our relationship more than any of us could have imagined.

Related Characters: Reyna Grande Rodriguez (speaker), Papi / Natalio Grande, Mami / Juana Rodriguez , Mago Grande Rodriguez , Carlos Grande Rodriguez

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 56-57

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Reyna, Mago, and Carlos have just received a package from their parents in El Otro Lado. After hurriedly opening it, they find that it contains shoes and clothing—all of which are several sizes too small. As they contemplate the disappointing gift, they realize that perhaps their worst fear—being forgotten by their parents—has an even darker side to it. Their parents have not forgotten them, as the care package plainly shows—rather, their parents no longer know small, intimate things about them, and thus the emotional distance between them is shown to have grown considerably. Their parents no longer know what they like, want, or need, and in this way have failed to parent them well. The idea that their parents could forget who they are—even if they don't forget the fact of them—fills Reyna and her siblings with a dark new fear.

Book One: Chapter 10 Quotes

☝ "Do you miss her?" I asked.

Mago glanced at the mountain one more time and then jumped off the track-changer. "Who, Mami? But she's back," she said. "And why were you crying?"

I started crying again. I didn't know why I still felt that familiar emptiness inside when I looked at the Mountain That Has a Headache even though my mother was back.

Carlos came over to us, smiling and pointing toward the house. "Can you believe she's here?" He took a deep breath and said, "Finally, everything is going to go back to how it was before she left."

Mami stood at the door and told us to come inside. As I looked at her in the doorway, beckoning us to come in, I knew why the emptiness and the yearning were still there. Carlos was wrong.

The woman standing there wasn't the same woman who had left.

Related Characters: Reyna Grande Rodriguez , Mago Grande Rodriguez , Carlos Grande Rodriguez (speaker), Mami / Juana Rodriguez

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Mami has just returned to Mexico from El Otro Lado. Though at first, Reyna was delighted to have her mother back, she quickly realizes that her mother has changed during her time in El Otro Lado. She's frustrated by the fact that neither Mago nor Carlos seem to notice the change that has taken place in their mother. Reyna is frightened, too, by the fact that she still feels an "emptiness" inside. This passage sets up one of the memoir's major themes—the fact that distances between people, once close physically, are not always emotionally fixed. Often, the emotional rifts that crop up between people who have been separated physically for a long time prove daunting or even painful to cross. Reyna is feeling the first pangs of this sensation, but has no way of sharing her pain with anyone around her—and might not even be able to articulate it if she did.

Book One: Chapter 11 Quotes

☝ Out of all of us, Mago was the only one who harbored any hope that Papi would not forsake us. My mother's broken promise—that she'd be gone only a year—had caused a rift between them, so Mago's loyalty to my father remained strong. He had been gone for so long that in his absence he had become bigger than life in Mago's eyes. But regardless of how much she had changed, I was too happy to have my mother back to cling to the hope of seeing my father again. And I was angry at him. I didn't have a single memory of him and Mami together—of all of us together—and I felt cheated out of the family I yearned to have. Why did he have to go and fall in love with someone else? I wanted to know. Hadn't Mami always done what he had asked of her? Hadn't it been enough that she had followed him to El Otro Lado and left us behind?

Related Characters: Reyna Grande Rodriguez (speaker), Papi / Natalio Grande, Mami / Juana Rodriguez , Mago Grande Rodriguez

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mago holds onto some residual anger and pain despite Mami's return. Though the physical distance between her and her mother has been closed, a large emotional distance remains. Mago is angry at her mother for having abandoned them, and even though the fact remains that Papi left before Mami and has stayed later than her, this distance has allowed for a reversal of the pain that accompanied Mami's departure. Unable to really know her father, Mago puts him on a pedestal and reveres him. He has been gone so long, and grown so foreign to her, that she does not know enough about him to see his flaws—he can do no wrong in her eyes by virtue of his absence, whereas Mami's absence has made it so that everything she does is, to Mago, wrong or insufficient.

Book One: Chapter 14 Quotes

☝ They hung Catalina by her feet so that the river would drain out of her. We all kneeled and prayed, and not once did I take my eyes off my cousin's bloated body, and I shuddered at seeing her like that, hanging by her feet, like the chickens at the meat section in el mercado, just as cold and lifeless. I was gripped with a fear so great, it made my stomach churn. *What if something happened to me, Mago, Carlos, or Betty? What if, by the time Papi finishes his dream house, there's no one left for him to keep safe? Or what if he never finishes it, what if he never returns, and we are left here to face the wolf all on our own?*

Related Characters: Reyna Grande Rodriguez (speaker), Mago Grande Rodriguez, Carlos Grande Rodriguez, Betty

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 110-111

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, a horrible flood has ravaged Iguala. The rising and rushing river waters have swept away one of Reyna's little cousins, and as a group of local men retrieve her lifeless body from the water and debris, Reyna is seized with a terrible fear. She has been longing for her father to come home for many years, and the longing has dulled through its length and repetition. Now, though, being confronted with a fatal, traumatic accident, Reyna's longing takes on a new sense of urgency. She doesn't want for her father to stay away so long that the poverty and desolation that have devastated her family and hometown claims her or one of her siblings, preventing them from ever really knowing their Papi.

Book One: Chapter 19 Quotes

☝☝ "Go say hello to your father." Tía Emperatriz came up from behind us and pushed us toward him. I didn't want to go. All I wanted was to run away, run back to Abuelita Chinta's house, far away from him. I didn't want to see that look on his face. All those years staring at his photo, wishing that his eyes were not looking to the left but instead were looking at me. All those years wishing to be *seen* by him. And here he was, looking at me, but not really seeing me. He couldn't see past the tangled hair, the dirt on my face, my tattered clothes. He couldn't see the girl who had longed so much for this moment, to finally meet her father.

Related Characters: Reyna Grande Rodriguez, Tía Emperatriz (speaker), Papi / Natalio Grande, Abuelita Chinta

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Reyna and her siblings have run from their Abuelita Chinta's house to their Abuela Evila's house, having been told that Papi is going to call them up on the phone there. When they arrive, however, they find their father

sitting in the living room. What should have been a nice surprise becomes a moment of profound embarrassment, anxiety, and awkwardness as Reyna reflects on her and her father's expectations for one another. Reyna has been waiting so long to see her father, and knows that he has been waiting to see her, too—because she was just a toddler when he left, they have never really known one another. Now, standing in front of him, Reyna curses herself for wanting her Papi to “see” her for all those years—she feels that what he sees is a disappointment to him, and worries that he will look down on her, judge her, or, worst of all, leave her once again.

Book Two: Chapter 1 Quotes

☝☝ I wanted to make my father proud. It still bothered me—as it would for many years—that my father had not wanted to bring me at first, and because of that I had a desperate desire for him to one day say, “Chata, you've made me a proud father. I'm so glad I didn't leave you in Mexico and instead brought you here.”

I felt as if I owed him something, as if there was a debt that needed to be repaid. The way I could pay it back was to make him proud of my accomplishments, because they would be his accomplishments, too. Even now there are times when I think back on that moment when I begged my father to bring me to this country and the knowledge that he could have said no still haunts me. What would my life have been like then? I know the answer all too well.

Related Characters: Reyna Grande Rodriguez (speaker), Papi / Natalio Grande

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

As Reyna starts school in El Otro Lado, she feels an immense amount of pressure, though she's only in the first grade. She knows how high Papi's expectations are—additionally, she feels that she needs to prove her worth to him in order to repay the “debt” she has incurred by asking him to bring her over to El Otro Lado. She knows, as an adult—and knew on some level as a child—that to stay in Iguala would be to live a life of poverty and misery, and that in coming to the United States she has been freed of that burden. This makes her feel that she owes her Papi her life. As the book progresses, Reyna will go above and beyond to make her Papi proud—even if he fails to see how hard she's working, or how much of her accomplishments

are achieved just to please him.

Book Two: Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ Papi went back into his room with his beer, and while Mago helped me clean up in the bathroom, Mila made me scrambled eggs, even though I told her I wasn't hungry. Now I would have to eat the eggs because Papi would beat me for sure if I didn't eat Mila's food for the second time that night. As I showered, I cried and thought about my sweet grandmother. She would never have dumped a plate of food on my head. And I wouldn't have had to tell her why I couldn't eat the spaghetti. She would have known why right away. I thought about the Man Behind the Glass. He, too, wouldn't have dumped the spaghetti on my head because he was with me all those years, and he had listened to me tell him about my fears and my dreams. But the father in this house didn't know me. He didn't know me at all.

And I didn't know him.

Related Characters: Reyna Grande Rodriguez (speaker), Papi / Natalio Grande, Mago Grande Rodriguez, Abuelita Chinta

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Papi has just dumped a plate of spaghetti on Reyna's head when she refused to eat it because it reminded her of the roundworms she and her siblings suffered from back in Iguala. As Mago helps Reyna clean up, she cries and cries as she realizes that her father cannot—or simply will not—empathize with the profound struggles she has faced, or try to understand who she is. Papi has no room for nuance: when Reyna refuses to eat, he sees an ungrateful, stubborn child rather than a survivor of crushing poverty and trauma. Reyna weeps for the fact that not only does her father not know her, he doesn't seem to want to. Moreover, she is afraid of the fact that he is as much a stranger to her as she is to him—and that he perhaps always will be.

Book Two: Chapter 8 Quotes

☝☝ Back then we hadn't known where in Los Angeles Tía María Félix lived, and even if we had known, we probably wouldn't have gone to visit Élida. We just didn't have that kind of relationship with our cousin. My father wasn't close to his sister, either, and he never talked about visiting Tía María Félix, and for years we knew nothing about her. It wasn't until he was in stage four of his cancer that he and Tía María Félix were finally reunited. My aunt would visit him daily, and they would spend hours reminiscing about times gone by and lamenting their broken relationships with their children. While my siblings and I had been struggling to overcome the gap that was created between us and our father when he'd left us behind, Élida had been doing the same thing with her mother. And like us, they had also failed to repair their relationship.

Immigration took a toll on us all.

Related Characters: Reyna Grande Rodriguez (speaker), Papi / Natalio Grande, Élida, Tía María Félix

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

In this flash-forward, Reyna demonstrates how her little branch of the family was not the only nuclear unit affected by their larger family's cycles of poverty, abuse, and trauma. Reyna's spoiled cousin Élida, too, has been wrestling with horrible betrayals and feelings of abandonment—and her mother, María Félix, must reckon with the ways in which she has failed her daughter, and perpetuated the “distance” between them even after closing the physical gaps that separated them for so long. Every character in the book is forced, at some point, to come to terms with the tension between physical and emotional distance; closing a physical chasm between two people doesn't necessarily heal the emotional one between them, and can even exacerbate it. Here, Reyna shows how her Papi would, until his very last days, keep struggling to come to terms with the “toll” immigration had taken on him and his family, and the ways in which his pursuit of the American Dream—for himself and for his children—would actually perpetuate the cycles of abuse and trauma within their family tree.

Book Two: Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ Tía Güera had decided to leave her no-good husband and try her luck in this country. Mami was taking that as an opportunity to bring Betty here. So Tia Güera and Betty would both be making the long journey north together. The only thing was, Tia Güera said, that she would have to leave her own daughter behind with Abuelita Chinta. It made me sad to think of my cousin Lupita, of how now she was the one being abandoned, and I hoped that one day the cycle of leaving children behind would end.

Related Characters: Reyna Grande Rodriguez (speaker), Mami / Juana Rodriguez , Lupita , Abuelita Chinta, Betty, Tía Güera

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 222

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mami bring her daughter Betty to America, and Reyna's own family grows one step closer to being reunited in full. The moment is bittersweet, though, as Reyna realizes that her cousin Lupita will have to be left behind. Just as trauma and abuse are cyclical and can tear families apart, as are abandonment and the feelings of betrayal it engenders. Reyna is saddened to think that the cycle of abandonment, pain, and misery has no end in her family—or in her home country—but can do little other than hope in the face of such a daunting realization.

Book Two: Chapter 11 Quotes

☝☝ Papi was amazed. He asked me to play something. Mago rolled her eyes at me and left us alone. I took the sax from him and played the scale Mr. Adams had taught me, except I didn't remember it that well. But Papi didn't criticize me for messing up. Instead he said, "You know, when I was in third grade, my teacher brought some drums to class and started to teach us how to play them. We couldn't take them home, but still, it was nice coming to school and having the chance to learn to play an instrument. I hoped to join the color guard when I got to sixth grade. But a few weeks later, when I turned nine, your grandfather said I was old enough to join him at the fields, and he pulled me out of school! I never got to play the drum again. And I've been working ever since."

Papi got up and headed to the refrigerator where he took out a Budweiser. Then he went into his room. I sat in the living room to practice my sax, but Mago and Carlos complained about the noise and sent me outside. I went to the yard and continued to practice, and I played with all my heart, for myself and for my papi, who never got another chance to play anything.

Related Characters: Reyna Grande Rodriguez (speaker), Papi / Natalio Grande, Mago Grande Rodriguez , Carlos Grande Rodriguez

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 233

Explanation and Analysis

Since coming to America, Reyna has been desperate to find two things: both a way to make her father proud of her, and a way to express herself in the face of an embarrassing and difficult language barrier. When she picks up an alto sax on her first day of junior high, she realizes, to her delight, that she has found both of the things she has been searching for. The sax fills Papi with happy memories—and sad ones—and shows him that Reyna can do something that he was never given the chance to, which is the whole reason that he brought her to El Otro Lado in the first place. In addition to impressing her father, Reyna gets the chance to express herself through music—a balm in the face of the insecurity, both self-motivated and peer-fueled, she has in regards to her grasp on the English language.

Book Two: Chapter 15 Quotes

☝☝ When my father beat me, and in his drunken stupor called me a pendeja and an hija de la chingada, I held on to the vision of the future he had given me during his sober moments. I thought about that vision when the blows came, because the father who beat me, the one who preferred to stay home and drink rather than to attend my band concerts or parent-teacher conferences, wasn't the same father who told me that one day I would be somebody in this country. That much I knew.

Related Characters: Reyna Grande Rodriguez (speaker), Papi / Natalio Grande

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 250

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Papi's abuse of Reyna and her siblings escalates. This passage, taken from the beginning of the chapter, features Reyna reflecting on the coping mechanisms she used in order to get through Papi's beatings. She told herself that the father who was beating

her wasn't her "real" father, reverting to her childish idea of her true father as the unimpeachable Man Behind the Glass—a man who sacrificed all for his children and who understood them better than anyone despite the distances between them. This idea of Papi is of course a falsehood, but Reyna is so traumatized that she has no other way of coping with the horrible treatment and pain she must endure. Instead of focusing on the true horror and inescapability of her situation, she disassociates and tries to comfort herself with the idea that her father knows what is best for her—and that his abuse is just a small price to pay for the gift of opportunity he has given her and her siblings.

through generations and remains a central part of many families' ways of relating to one another. Reyna and her siblings make excuses for their father, even as his inexcusable behavior intensifies—they are traumatized, and yet understand that their father must have been similarly traumatized in his youth, and so begin to believe that such feelings are if not normal than at least justified. This allows Papi to continue his cyclical abuse, and to get away with his horrible treatment of his children as they frantically spin the wheels in their brains looking for ways to justify his cruelty and explain away his violence.

☝ We understood what Papi must have gone through because we knew what Abuela Evila and Abuelo Augurio were like. But that didn't make us feel better. If Papi knew what it felt like to be abused by his parents, then shouldn't he understand how we felt? Shouldn't he try to be a better father? Also, it wasn't our fault that his own family had turned their backs on him, even going as far as stealing the house he worked so hard to build. So why take it out on us? Why take out all his frustrations and disappointments on us?

"I came back for you, didn't I?" he said to us sometimes when we would speak up.

Then we would shut up and lower our heads, and we would continue to take his beatings. Even the time he punched me in the nose so hard it broke, as I watched the drops of blood landing on my tennis shoe, I told myself that maybe he was right. We shouldn't expect anything better from him. He didn't forget us, after all. We were here because of him. I was in this country because of him. I begged him to bring me. I got what I wanted, after all. How could I complain now, simply because things weren't all that we had hoped for?

Related Characters: Reyna Grande Rodriguez (speaker), Papi / Natalio Grande, Abuelo Augurio, Abuela Evila

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 256

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Reyna reflects on how she and her siblings handled—or failed to handle—their father's abuse throughout their childhoods. They both understood why their father was the way he was and failed to understand how he could perpetuate the cruel treatment his own parents inflicted upon him. This passage explores the nature of cyclical abuse, and the ways in which trauma proliferates

Book Two: Chapter 19 Quotes

☝ I didn't know why I was so angry at my sister. *How could she just sever the ties that bind us to this place, to these childhood friends of ours who weren't able to escape this poverty like we did?* I was so angry at her for quitting college and ruining her chances for a successful life. Now I realized that we owed it to them, our cousins, our friends, to do something with our lives. If not for us, then for them, because they would never be able to. I understood so clearly now why Papi said there were so many people who would die to have the opportunities we had, who would kill to get their hands on a green card. Mago's and Carlos's refusal to see that angered me more than anything.

Related Characters: Reyna Grande Rodriguez (speaker), Papi / Natalio Grande, Mago Grande Rodriguez, Carlos Grande Rodriguez

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 282

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mago and Reyna are on a trip to Mexico—their first since leaving nearly ten years earlier. While Reyna looks forward to using the trip to reconnect with her family members and childhood friends, Mago wants to travel to Acapulco to party—she is disgusted by their hometown of Iguala, and chastises Reyna for associating with the "trash" from their past. Reyna becomes hurt, angry, and sad, and she and Mago begin physically fighting one another—the first fight they've ever had. Reyna has, despite all of the abuse and cruelty, internalized a lot of Papi's logic. She understands that she was brought to the United States for a reason, and that she does indeed owe everyone back in Mexico her hard work and obedience. She is angry with her sister because though Mago is able to see how lucky they are to have gotten out of Iguala, she wants to permanently erase her memories of the place and her

ties to it, negating them as “trash.” In contrast, Reyna feels they all owe it to those they have left behind to honor their memories and work hard in their name.

Book Two: Chapter 21 Quotes

☝☝ When [Papi] came home, I didn't hide in my bedroom. Instead, I went out to the kitchen and said, "Tomorrow I'm going to Pasadena City College to enroll." I waited for him to say no. I was ready for a fight. But my father looked at me, and whatever he saw in my eyes made him keep quiet. I turned around, and as I headed back to my room, he started to talk. "You know, Chata, when my father took me to the fields to work, my job was to guide the oxen in a straight line. My father gave me a rod and said that if the oxen didn't listen to me, to hit them as hard as I could. I was nine years old, Chata. Do you understand?"

I took a deep breath, unable to say anything. I wanted to say something. I was still too angry to forgive all that he had done to me, but I wanted to understand what he was trying to tell me. But too soon, he had turned away from me. Too soon, he was opening the refrigerator door, taking out a Budweiser, and I knew that the father who had spoken just a minute ago was gone.

Related Characters: Reyna Grande Rodriguez , Papi / Natalio Grande (speaker), Abuelo Augurio

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 298

Explanation and Analysis

After enduring years of abuse—and several months of particularly intense beatings and psychological manipulations—Reyna stops hiding from her father and at last announces that she is going against his will; she is planning on enrolling in college. Reyna expects a fight, but is surprised when her father actually opens up to her. In a rare sober and transparent moment, Papi reflects on his painful childhood. In addition to being abused by his own parents, Papi was forced to take on a controlling, physically cruel role at an early age. He does not explain everything to Reyna, but leaves her to fill in the blanks. Reyna sees that the logic her father was forced to apply to his job herding cattle has also been applied to his relationship with his children. Though it's an explanation, it's not an excuse, and in the time Reyna takes to fully absorb her father's words, he abandons her—once again, as he always does—for the oblivion of alcohol.

Book Two: Chapter 23 Quotes

☝☝ Carlos and Mago were furious about what our father had done.

Carlos said, "I spent all that time helping him with the lawyer, defending him from Mila and her restraining orders, for what? So that he could just betray us like this?"

"I'm never speaking to him again," Mago said. "He used us. He just wanted us around because he was lonely and depressed, and now that he has her back he doesn't need us!" Once again, we were orphans.

I thought about the border that separates the United States and Mexico. I wondered if during their crossing, both my father and mother had lost themselves in that no-man's-land. I wondered if my real parents were still there, caught between two worlds. I imagined them trying to make their way back to us. I truly hoped that one day they would.

Related Characters: Reyna Grande Rodriguez , Mago Grande Rodriguez , Carlos Grande Rodriguez (speaker), Papi / Natalio Grande, Mila Grande, Mami / Juana Rodriguez

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 315

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Papi has just told Reyna that he is planning on getting back together with Mila, whom he has abused, humiliated, and nearly divorced. Her condition for taking him back, Papi says, is that he cut off all contact with Reyna, Mago, and Carlos. Reyna, who has been living with her father all summer and taking care of him, is shocked and hurt by the news, and when she tells her siblings, they are similarly angry. Reyna, however, having had time to absorb the blow, is more thoughtful about her and her siblings' being “orphans” again. She understands now, having grown up, that physical distances are not the only distances that separate people—sometimes, emotional distances prevent them from connecting just as intensely as being separated physically would. She reflects on the hard, difficult relationships she's had with both her parents, and rather than growing angry, at last realizes that the hardships they all have faced as a family have left them “caught between two worlds”—her parents most of all. She is uncertain of whether her family will ever be able to repair the hurt they've caused one another or bridge the distances that remain between them, but is hopeful that things can still get better.



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.

BOOK ONE: PROLOGUE

When Reyna Grande was small, her father's mother, Abuela Evila, liked to scare her and her siblings, Mago and Carlos, with stories of La Llorona—a weeping woman who steals children away. When the children were misbehaving, their abuela warned them that if they didn't straighten up, La Llorona would take them far away, to a place where they would never see their parents again. Their other grandmother, Abuelita Chinta, would tell the children not to be afraid of La Llorona, because God, La Virgen, and the saints would always protect them from the lady-ghost. Neither grandmother, however, told the children about a power more fierce and fearsome than La Llorona—a power that takes away parents, not children. That power, Reyna writes now, is called the United States.

The book's prologue establishes the fact that the real-life challenges Reyna and her siblings will face are infinitely more grave and frightening than the little stories they were scared of as children. It also shows Abuela Evila's mean streak contrasted against Abuelita Chinta's conciliatory kindness—an important dichotomy the first half of the book will explore carefully.



BOOK ONE: CHAPTER 1

It is January of 1980, and Reyna's mother is preparing to leave on a trip to El Otro Lado. Mami, an Avon saleslady, often leaves Reyna alone or with her mother, whom Reyna calls Abuelita Chinta, when she goes out on the town. This time, though, Reyna can sense that her mother is going on a longer trip and will not be back for a long time—Reyna has no idea, though, that after her mother leaves, she will never “really” get her back.

“El Otro Lado” (Spanish for “the other side,” meaning the other side of the border) refers to the United States. Reyna Grande, narrating from the future, wastes no time in informing her readers that Mami's departure will calibrate the entire emotional tenor of the book—and Reyna's life—and will have repercussions no one can yet foresee.



Reyna's Mami ushers Reyna, Mago, and Carlos out of the house they've been renting—the children are going to stay with their paternal grandmother, Abuela Evila. As the children round up their belongings, Reyna takes from a box a framed picture of her papi, insisting on taking it with her to her grandmother's house, despite the fact that there are many photos of her father there already.

Reyna's attachment to the idea of her father that she has gleaned through studying his picture is intense. Though there are other pictures of her father in her grandmother's house, this specific picture is important to Reyna—and one of her few belongings.



Reyna, now four, was only two years old when her father left for the United States during the “worst recession Mexico had seen in fifty years.” He went to “El Otro Lado” to make money so that he could build his family a dream house—as a bricklayer, he spent most of his life building homes for other people, and he now longs to build his own house for himself and his family. Having fared poorly in the United States, Papi has now sent for Mami to join him and hopefully double their income to fund the dream house.

Papi believed that he would be able to quickly earn the money he needed to supply his family with a good life, but things have not turned out the way he planned. Now, Reyna's mother too will have to abandon all she knows and venture to El Otro Lado in hopes of securing her husband's dreams.



Mami and the children arrive at Abuela Evila's large house. Mago and Carlos beg not to have to stay with the "angry" Evila and instead ask to stay with Mami's mother, Abuelita Chinta, but Reyna doesn't want to stay with either grandmother—she only wants her mother, and begins asking to be taken along to El Otro Lado, too.

Mami tells Reyna to stop whining and calls out from the gate for Abuela Evila. As Evila emerges from the house, Reyna looks at her grandmother, an old woman with silver hair whose body is shriveled and wasted from a childhood bout of measles. Evila greets Mami and the children brusquely, asking how long they'll be staying and reminding Mami of her promise to send money weekly for their upkeep.

Evila assures Mami that soon she and Papi will raise enough money to build their dream house, and she points out her daughter María Félix's house nearby. Though it was finished long ago and is one of the biggest on the block, María Félix remains in El Otro Lado, and has left her own daughter Élica in Evila's care.

Reyna, Mago, and Carlos beg their mother one last time to stay behind, insisting that they don't need a dream house—they just need their parents. Mami insists she must go, and promises to return. She urges the children to head inside, and Evila opens the gate for them. Mami kisses Reyna goodbye one final time, leaving a lipstick print on her cheek. The three of them watch, crying, as a taxi takes their mother away.

BOOK ONE: CHAPTER 2

Mago, Carlos, and Reyna endure difficult treatment at their Abuela Evila's. They are made to sleep on a straw bed on the floor in the corner of their grandfather Abuelo Augurio's smelly room, where the constant threat of scorpions biting them and noise from the alleyway downstairs keeps them awake all night. One night, they hear a clatter in the alley and look out the window to see a man on a horse dragging a sack with what looks like a body in it behind him. In the morning, they tell Evila, who replies that the figure they saw was "the devil making his rounds... looking for all the naughty children to take back to Hell with him." Mago tells Reyna not to believe Evila, but Reyna is scared.

Even though Evila is, by the poor town of Iguala's standards, well-off, Reyna and her siblings do not want to leave their mother's side—they don't care about the spoils of a better life, and only want their parents.



Evila is clearly not excited about having her grandchildren come to stay—and despite her relative wealth, she is not shy about letting Mami know that she expects prompt and frequent compensation.



The fact that Papi's sister has built her "dream house" and still chose to stay in the United States foreshadows the ways in which Mami and Papi will soon find their own dreams insufficient compared to the allure of El Otro Lado.



Reyna, Mago, and Carlos's entreaties to their mother fall on deaf ears. Her abandonment feels like an immense betrayal—but as the story progresses, Reyna will outline how Mami's motivations for leaving are complicated.



From their very first night in Abuela Evila's house, Reyna and her siblings realize that they are in for a difficult time. Though Evila is their grandmother, she seems to care very little for their safety, well-being, and least of all their comfort. She seems to actually want to scare them and make them uncomfortable as a means of exerting control over them—a pattern that the children will encounter again later in their lives, after they leave Evila's care.



Mago adopts the role of “little mother” to her younger siblings. When walking through the streets, all three of them endure taunts and stares—everyone in town calls them “pobrecitas huerfanitas,” or “poor little orphans.” Their cousin, Élica—the apple of their grandmother’s eye, and the “privileged” granddaughter—is their primary tormentor, even though she herself is “technically [...] a little orphan too.”

At mealtimes, the children are forced to eat scraps and leftovers. When Evila prepares porkchops, rice, and beans, Reyna and her siblings eat burnt beans drizzled in leftover oil while Élica gets to pick the first chop. The only member of the household who shows them any kindness is their father’s youngest sister, Tía Emperatriz, who often gives them coins to go buy sodas.

One afternoon, when Evila sends Reyna out to go buy a needle, two little girls (the daughter of the storekeeper Don Bartolo) make a snide remark about Reyna being a little orphan. Reyna throws the coin her grandmother gave her to purchase the needle at one of the little girls, striking her in the face. Reyna goes home emptyhanded, and when she tells Evila the truth, Evila makes Mago take Reyna back to the shop to apologize.

On the way back out, Mago takes Reyna back to their old house instead of to the shop, urging her to hold onto her pleasant memories there. On the way back to Evila’s, Mago pulls Reyna into the bamboo shack near the patio and begins telling Reyna the story of the day she was born—right there, on the dirt floor of the shack. Mago points to a spot on the floor and reminds Reyna that her umbilical cord is buried there. She explains that though there is a distance now between Reyna and their mother, the cord keeps them connected. No matter what their neighbors say, they aren’t orphans.

Mago takes Reyna back up to the house, but Reyna is afraid that Evila will beat her if she returns without a needle for the second time. She runs down the street as fast as she can, towards the shop, and apologizes to the shopkeeper’s daughter. Don Bartolo comes outside, takes a coin from his pocket, and gives it back to Reyna, explaining that her parents only left “because they love [her] very much.” Reyna purchases the needle and walks home, willing herself to believe the shopkeeper’s words.

Even though Élica’s mother has left for El Otro Lado, too, she joins in with the neighborhood kids in teasing Reyna and her siblings for their bad luck—perhaps as a way of making herself feel better.



Reyna and her siblings are treated like second-class citizens in their grandmother’s home, and though Emperatriz tries to make things nice for them when she can, it’s clear that she has little control or agency within her own mother’s household, either.



Reyna’s hot temper and sensitive nature get her in trouble with Evila when she goes against her grandmother’s wishes. From this incident, Reyna learns that sticking up for herself when faced with meanness or cruelty will only end in more work and humiliation.



Mago sees her sister’s suffering and, as her “little mother,” tries to implement a grand gesture that will soothe Reyna and put her mind at ease. Mago attempts to give Reyna a way to feel immune to the neighborhood children’s taunts by empowering through her own story.



Don Bartolo’s words to Reyna are perhaps even more soothing than Mago’s, as Mago herself has harbored doubts about why their parents would have left them. Don Bartolo is the first person to reassure Reyna that she is loved and worthy.



BOOK ONE: CHAPTER 3

Mago, Carlos, and Reyna grow jealous and resentful of their cousin Élica, who is their grandmother's favorite. Evila washes Élica's long, shiny hair twice a week with lemon juice, then combs it out and lets it dry in the sun. Reyna and her siblings, meanwhile, are "louse-ridden" and infected with roundworms, to boot. Explaining why she doesn't take good care of Reyna, Mago, and Carlos, Evila says that the three of them are the children of her daughter-in-law. With her own daughters, she can be sure that the children are theirs, but a daughter-in-law could have done anything "when no one was looking."

One day, Élica is lying in the sun and letting her hair dry while, nearby, Mago and Reyna scrub their dirty clothes in the wash basin. She looks over and tells the girls that their mother will never come back for them now that she's making money in El Otro Lado. Mami has already been there for two and a half months, and every time they talk to her on the phone, they remind her of her promise to return within a year. Mago tells Élica that it's Élica's mother—who has had another child in El Otro Lado—who is never coming back, and Élica grows sullen and quiet.

A little while later, Élica starts her taunts up again, bragging that her own mother writes her letters while Reyna and Mago's mother writes them none. Mago sweeps a cloud of dust towards Élica, and threatens to infect her perfect hair with lice. Élica runs inside to tell Abuela Evila, and Reyna chastises Mago for getting them in trouble—they're sure to get a beating.

That evening, Evila decides to take care of the children's lice once and for all. Emperatriz doesn't want to help her mother, but Evila forces her to pour kerosene on the children's heads one by one. After combing kerosene through Reyna, Mago, and Carlos's hair, she sends them off to bed, where they lie awake all night scratching their burning scalps.

The following day, the lice remain, and Evila enlists Augurio to shave the children's heads. Reyna weeps as her grandfather cuts off her beautiful curls. Once the haircut is over, Reyna runs to her aunt's room to inspect herself in the mirror—she is horrified to find she looks like a boy. She stares at a picture of her father and reminisces about happier times with her parents. When Mago calls her down to dinner, Emperatriz is horrified to see what has become of Reyna, but Élica is delighted to have one more thing to tease her cousin about.

Evila's excuse for treating Reyna, Carlos, and Mago is so flimsy and mean that it makes obvious the fact that Evila is simply a cruel person. She uses that excuse, though, to elevate Élica at every turn and shower her with affection, even as her other three grandchildren are diseased, starving, and miserable.



In a town where so many children's parents have fled for the United States, emotions are high—and calling into question one's parents' intention to return is the ultimate power move. Even the haughty Élica is rendered silent by Mago's dig about her mother's abandonment.



Though Mago can fight with Élica, it is Élica who really wields the power in the house—and how she uses it in this chapter shows just how ruthless she really is.



Evila's choice to douse her grandchildren's heads in kerosene seems to be direct retribution for Mago's squabbling with Élica earlier. Evila's torments are growing more cruel and unusual and escalating in terms of how much danger she's placing her grandchildren in.



Both Evila and Élica delight in having a way of subjugating and humiliating Reyna and her siblings, exerting control over them and cruelly playing not just with their feelings but with their fates.



That night, Reyna dreams wistfully of her mother washing her own hair with lemon water. In the middle of the night, she wakes up to find that Carlos has wet the bed.

Carlos's bed-wetting seems to a symptom directly related both to his mother's abandonment and his grandmother's cruelty and abuse.



BOOK ONE: CHAPTER 4

By June of 1980, Reyna and her siblings have been living at Abuela Evila's house for six months. They have stayed mostly on their grandmother's property, only venturing outside on Saturday mornings once Evila and Élida have gone to the market. These weekend mornings, they play in a nearby abandoned car, pretending that they are driving to El Otro Lado. In their imagination, it is just on the other side of the mountains that encircle the town of Iguala.

Reyna and her siblings play at escape when their grandmother isn't around—they long to get away from her cruelty and join their parents from whom they have been separated. The children don't yet know they'll be separated from their parents for much, much longer.



Every other week, Mami's mother, Abuelita Chinta, comes to visit them, and every two weeks their parents call them on the phone and they are each allowed to talk for two minutes. One night on the phone, Mami tells Reyna and her siblings some news: she is going to have a baby. That night, Mago worries aloud that Mami and Papi are replacing them with a new child. Already, the three of them have been living at Abuela Evila's house for eight months, and now that Mami is pregnant, she surely won't return to have her baby in Mexico—not when she could give birth to it in El Otro Lado and give it the gift of American citizenship. That night, Mago cries herself to sleep, and Carlos wets the bed while Reyna tries to tell herself that her parents won't forget her.

The news that their parents are having another baby together and bringing another sibling into their lives does not fill Reyna, Carlos, and Mago with joy—rather, it fills them with dread as they begin to worry that their parents are trying to replace them so that they can stay in El Otro Lado forever.



The next day, Mago is despondent. She pulls out a world map and shows Reyna the distance between them and their parents on it. When Reyna reminds Mago of what Mago told her in the shack about always being connected to their parents, Mago admits that she “just made that up to make [Reyna] feel better.” Reyna grows angry and leaves the house, hiding out in the shack and tracing a circle around the spot where her umbilical cord is buried.

Mago is angry at their parents' perceived betrayal, and wants Reyna, too, to feel as bad as she does. Reyna, in turn, feels betrayed by Mago, and lashes out in anger.



A woman from town named Doña Paula arrives with water—every few days, she brings water from the community well. She has her sons with her, and dotes on them as she goes about her errands. Mago and Reyna become jealous of the boys, and when Paula suggests all the children play together, Mago tells Reyna to go into the kitchen and get two tortillas. Reyna does so, and when she returns with them, Mago fills the flour shells with horse feces from the nearby corral. She then bullies Paula's sons into eating the tacos, insisting they're bean tacos.

Mago and Reyna are so angry and so hurt that they begin taking their fear and pain out on any child with a mother, angry at what they view as ostentatious displays of affection.



When the boys run back to their mother smelling of feces, Paula chastises Mago and Reyna, but they have already started running away. They climb up into a tree and hide to avoid Evila's wrath. No one can get them down, and when Carlos arrives home from school, he climbs up into the tree with his sisters. Together, the three of them worry aloud that their parents will never come home. El Otro Lado is a magical place, and anything that comes from there, Reyna knows, is coveted. Now that her parents have tasted life in America—and are having a baby there—she fears they'll never return.

Carlos tries to distract his sisters from their sadness by telling jokes, and they laugh together until Tía Emperatriz comes out and forces them down. That evening, Abuela Evila makes each of the children cut a switch from the tree, and then beats them with the branches one by one.

BOOK ONE: CHAPTER 5

A month later, on September 7th, Reyna turns five, but because Mago's birthday is a month and a half later, Reyna is forced to wait weeks and weeks to celebrate so that their birthdays can be combined into one. On the day of the celebration, Emperatriz goes to the store and buys a beautiful birthday cake, and for once, the atmosphere in the house is one of joy and peace. Emperatriz takes pictures of the children cutting the cake, and urges them to smile so that she can send the photos to their parents. Mago decides to frown and look miserable in the picture, in hopes that her parents will see how unhappy she is and return to her. This tactic does not work, and the months continue to go by with no sign that Mami and Papi will ever come back.

The one who does come back is Élica's mother, María Félix. Reyna and her siblings have been at Abuela Evila's house for over a year when Élica turns fifteen and officially becomes a señorita. Her mother returns to Iguala to throw Élica a big quinceañera. María Félix, too, has had a child in El Otro Lado, and though Reyna and Mago long to tease Élica about having been replaced, they are stunned and devastated when María Félix announces that their own mother has given birth to a baby girl named Elizabeth.

The next day, the entire family—including all of Reyna's cousins—shows up at the house to receive gifts María Félix has brought from El Otro Lado. Out of everything in all her suitcases, she claims to have nothing for Reyna and her siblings, and explains that though their parents sent them some things, the suitcase which held them was lost at the airport. Mago accuses her aunt of having given away their presents, and runs away to be alone.

Mago, Carlos, and Reyna seek solace in one another's company and openly air their fears to one another for the first time. Their bad behavior is sure to get them in trouble, but that's not what they're focused on right now: they're trying to be good and supportive of one another in the face of so much misery and uncertainty.



Evila's abuse continues, and even escalates as she forces the children to become participants in their own beatings.



There is little joy and even littler luxury in Reyna, Mago, and Carlos's lives—Mago, most of all, wants their parents to know the truth of what is going on, and so she frowns in the picture of her happy, lavish party. Her attempts to get her parents' attention fail, though, and as a result her and her siblings anxieties about being left behind forever start to worsen.



Reyna, Mago, and Carlos are forever connected to Élica through their shared trauma—the shared pain of having been abandoned by their mothers. The fact that both their mothers have also had children in El Otro Lado cements the bond between them, but also heightens their reluctance to ever share their pain with one another.



Mago is pained by the idea that Mami and Papi did not send her and her siblings any gifts. Though this is probably the truth—and it explains María Félix's lie—it is too painful for Mago to confront, and she accuses her aunt of cruelty and deprivation instead.



Preparations for Élida's quinceañera begin, and Reyna and her siblings are put to work making decorations for the party. Evila reluctantly makes Mago and Reyna new dresses to wear, but does so half-heartedly. Reyna's dress is made improperly and sewn inside-out, but Evila refuses to rework the dress and forces Reyna to wear the ugly garment as it is. While everyone goes to church for the first part of Élida's ceremony, Reyna, Mago, and Carlos are made to stay home and pluck chickens for the banquet later. Once the arduous job is done they all bathe themselves for the party, but no matter how hard they scrub, they cannot get the smell of dirty chicken feathers off of themselves.

That night at the party, Reyna watches Élida dance the waltz meant to be danced with one's father with a butcher from town, a distant relative. Reyna becomes emotional and longs for her Papi's return more than ever—when it is her turn to become a señorita, she wants to be able to dance the waltz with her father.

The next day, María Félix leaves with her son, promising Élida that one day she will send for her. Abuela Evila comforts Élida as she cries, and Reyna observes how strange it is to see her cousin so emotional. For once, Élida's "ever-present mocking gaze" is gone, and it is Élida who is the "weeping, lonely, heartbroken" huerfanita. Mago pulls Reyna and Carlos close and tells them she loves them, and all three take solace in the fact that though their parents are gone, they at least have each other.

BOOK ONE: CHAPTER 6

Soon, it is Reyna's first day of first grade. She is excited to finally be in school with her older siblings, and happy to have a special uniform and shiny new shoes to wear. On her first morning of school, she gathers with Mago and Carlos in the courtyard to salute the flag and watch the color guard perform a march. Mago stares longingly at the team, dreaming of the day when she will get to join the color guard, too. As Reyna watches the march, she feels full of hometown pride and excitement for her future.

In class, Reyna learns to write her name. When she uses her left hand to write, though, she is beaten by her teacher. Abuela Evila, too, has beaten her for using her left hand to do tasks around the house, calling it "the side of evil" and warning her that if she continues using it, it will shrivel up and die. Reyna looks at the letters of her name and begins to hate it.

As usual, Reyna and her siblings are forced to perform menial tasks and live as second-class citizens in their own home while attention and affection are lavished upon Élida. This particular form of abuse wears down their self-worth and increases their feelings of animosity towards anyone who has more than they do.



Reyna pities Élida for not being able to dance with her father at her quinceañera, and she dreams that when her own time comes, she will get to have that honor and joy—though this moment foreshadows that Reyna's quince, too, will be marked by disappointment.



As Mago, Reyna, and Carlos see their cousin Élida reduced to pitiful tears for the first time, they recognize their own pain in hers, and they understand finally that they are better off than her, because at least in spite of it all they are not totally alone.



Reyna, the youngest of her siblings, sees school as the one place where she, Mago, and Carlos can just be normal kids and dream normal dreams. At school, no one is there to abuse or degrade them, and they can feel free to imagine what their futures will hold.



Reyna is given a nasty shock, however, when she realizes that there is pain and suffering even at school—she begins to wonder if perhaps she is the problem, and whether she is deserving of all the abuse and pain that come her way.



At lunchtime, Reyna meets up with Mago and Carlos. They watch as their classmates buy food from women selling enchiladas and taquitos at the school entrance, but they don't have enough money to buy food themselves. Mago, Carlos, and Reyna see one of their classmates drop his mango on the ground. Mago urges Carlos to go over and pick it up so that they can share it. When he refuses, she asks Reyna to do it, but Reyna, too, refuses. After the bell rings, and everyone goes back to their classrooms, Reyna lingers in the courtyard. Once it's empty, she goes over and picks up the mango, brushes the dirt off of it, and bites into it.

Reyna and her siblings are so poor—and so uncared for by their grandmother—that they cannot even afford lunch at school and are reduced to eating scraps. Reyna doesn't want to stoop to such a level, but as soon as no one is looking, she knows that she cannot control her hunger. This passage shows just how malnourished and desperate Reyna really is.



BOOK ONE: CHAPTER 7

Every afternoon, Mago and Élica stand at the gate, waiting for the mail carrier, hoping that there will be letters from El Otro Lado. One day, the mailman brings a large box, and Élica assumes it is for her. When the mailman hands Mago the box, Élica is surprised and disgruntled. Christmas is only two days away, and Élica is expecting presents.

Despite the fact that Élica was not so long ago humbled in front of her cousins, she still has a hard time coping when they receive something and she does not—it is such an extraordinary event that she can barely get her head around it.



Mago brings the box inside and she, Carlos, and Reyna tear it open. It is filled with clothes and shoes for all three of them, and they hurry to put the pretty garments on. All three are saddened when they realize that the clothes and shoes are several sizes too small—their parents don't realize how much they've grown. Reyna wonders, if her parents don't know "something as basic" as the size of their clothes and shoes, what else they don't know about their children—and, more frighteningly, what they don't know about their parents.

Mago, Carlos, and Reyna's joy and excitement when they realize they've received gifts from their parents is quickly tempered when they try the clothes on and see that everything is too small for them. This painful moment shows that their parents no longer truly know much about them—every day they spend apart from their parents, the physical distance remains the same, but distances of other kinds grow.



Mago, Carlos, and Reyna decide to wear the ill-fitting clothes and shoes anyway, and they set off to run through the town and show them off. Their neighbors admire their clothes, and no one calls them "orphans" anymore. As the children run through town, however, their new shoes give them horrible blisters.

Reyna and her siblings cast their worries aside quickly and parade their gifts through town. To the others, they appear lucky and loved; on the inside, though, they are growing pained, worried, and blistered.



BOOK ONE: CHAPTER 8

Four years after Reyna's Papi left for the United States—and two years after her Mami left, too—construction at last begins on their family's "dream house." Evila gives Papi a piece of her property, and workers begin building the house right next to Evila's. Though Reyna doesn't want to live next to Evila, she knows it is her parents' only option. The workers tear down both the outhouse and the shack where Reyna was born, and though Reyna is sad, Mago urges her to imagine the beautiful home that will take its place.

As ground breaks on the dream house, Mago and her siblings begin, for the first time, to see the place's potential. Before their parents left, they were so desperate to keep them that they insisted none of them needed the dream house—now that it is about to become a reality, though, the children are getting excited about the idea of having a real home of their own.



As construction continues, Reyna and her siblings pitch in and help the bricklayers. They are tired and sore at the end of each day, but the thought of living together with their parents again gives them strength. Soon, though, the workers stop coming—the money has run out, and the house will have to wait. Mago becomes angry, and tells her siblings that the house will never be finished—and neither will their parents return to them.

Just as the children begin to get into the spirit and even lend their efforts towards the dream house's completion, the project is stopped in its tracks—the children's high spirits are dashed as they begin to worry that their dreams will never come true, and that their parents will work forever for nothing.



BOOK ONE: CHAPTER 9

One night, Reyna wakes up screaming and in pain—she recognizes the feeling as a scorpion bite. Mago runs to get help, but their grandfather continues dozing. Tía Emperatriz comes into the room and brushes the scorpion off of Reyna, then sends Mago to go slice an onion and get some rubbing alcohol. Evila comes to the door and asks what all the fuss is about as Emperatriz tends to Reyna's bites with homeopathic remedies. Mago insists that Reyna needs to go to the doctor, but Evila replies that there's no money for a doctor.

As a terrible malady befalls Reyna in the form of a dangerous scorpion bite, her grandparents are completely unfazed, and uninterested in helping her recover. Only Emperatriz seems to care about Reyna's bites—Evila is unmotivated to help Reyna even though she knows that Reyna could die.



In the morning, Reyna is worse. She is dizzy and nauseous, and Emperatriz begs Evila to take Reyna to the doctor. Evila insists that Reyna isn't her responsibility—she never asked to be caretaker to her son's children. Emperatriz takes Reyna to the hospital, and after receiving a shot, Reyna feels better. That evening, Emperatriz insists Reyna sleep with her, just in case she falls ill again. As she falls asleep beside her aunt, Reyna thinks of Mami. Over the next few weeks, Reyna notices that Mago treats Emperatriz much like a mother, and looks at her with love and admiration. When Emperatriz gets a boyfriend, Mago worries that she will leave them.

The denial of medical care in times of need will become a circular motif throughout the book. Medical care is denied to Reyna and her siblings throughout the years both out of desperation and out of spite, or a desire for control. This instance is certainly the latter, as Abuela Evila attempts to exert control over Reyna by denying her medical attention. Only Emperatriz breaks the cycle, her genuine empathy winning out over her mother's cruelty.



On mother's day, Reyna's class makes arts and crafts to give as gifts to their mothers. On the walk home from school, Carlos, Reyna, and Mago compare the crafts they made in each of their classes, and Mago suggests they give them all to Emperatriz. That evening, Mago, Carlos, and Reyna present Emperatriz with their projects. Reyna is reluctant to give over her present, but nonetheless, Emperatriz is touched.

Because Emperatriz is the only kind person in Reyna and her siblings' lives, their feelings for her are enormously outsized. Mago is ready to make Emperatriz their de facto mother, so grateful is she for Emperatriz's kindness. Reyna, on the other hand, is not so sure—she is wary of trying to replace Mami.



BOOK ONE: CHAPTER 10

One afternoon, Mago, Carlos, and Reyna hurry to carry water home from the town well—Emperatriz has promised to take them to the movies later once all their chores are finished. As they arrive back at Evila's house, they see a woman on the patio holding a chubby baby girl in her arms. They approach her, and she smiles at them, asking if they are ever going to say hello to their mother. Reyna and her siblings are frozen, though, unable to believe that the woman standing in front of them is truly their mother.

Evila urges the children to get their things right away—they are leaving her house. Mami hugs each of them first, and as they reluctantly greet her and the baby, Betty, Evila loudly gives thanks that she has three fewer mouths to feed at last. The children gather their things and say goodbye to Emperatriz—Reyna almost forgets her framed photo of Papi, and runs inside to retrieve “the Man Behind the Glass.”

Reyna, Mago, and Carlos travel by taxi with their mother to Abuelita Chinta's house, a bamboo shack covered with tar-soaked cardboard and a corrugated metal roof. As they approach the house, Chinta's neighbor, the wealthy Doña Caro, greets Mami excitedly. Once inside, Reyna, Mago, and Carlos begin asking their mother questions about the United States, and about Papi. She brushes them off, though, and tells them to run and play. Only Carlos follows her orders, and when Reyna and Mago stay behind, she asks them to look after Betty. Mago refuses to hold the baby, though, and runs out of the house.

Reyna cares for her little sister while she watches her mother and Abuelita make dinner. She looks forward to the idea of eating real meals again every night rather than scraps and bland bean tortillas. As the women cook, Reyna overhears their conversation: her mother is telling Abuelita Chinta something about Papi and another woman. Mami proclaims that she hates her husband, and will never see him again. When Reyna asks Mami what's going on, Mami orders Reyna out of the house and chastises her for eavesdropping.

Reyna brings Betty outside and sits down with Mago. She begins crying, unsure of why she still feels empty inside when her mother has returned. Carlos comes over and expresses excitement that everything will soon go back to normal, but Reyna knows that Carlos is wrong: the woman inside Abuelita Chinta's house is not the same woman who had left.

Reyna, Magos, and Carlos are shocked to find that their mother has returned. This event is one of the novel's major plot points, and the heart of its major themes. Now that the physical distance between Reyna and her siblings and their mother has closed, it remains to be seen whether the emotional distance which has opened up between them can be traversed as well.



It is hard to say who is happier about the fact that Reyna, Magos, and Carlos are leaving Evila's house: Evila herself, or the children. They are all ready to be rid of one another—the children see Evila as their tormentor, and Evila sees them as her life's great burden.



As the family reunites, there are many unresolved tensions between them. Reyna and Carlos are delighted and want to hear all about El Otro Lado—Mago, however, still harbors deep resentments, and takes her feelings out on her new younger sister, whom no one really seems to know what to do with.



As Reyna overhears something she shouldn't have, her happiness is thrown into a tailspin. She realizes that whatever reasons Mami had for coming back, they are not rooted in her having missed her children: they are tied to a rift between her and Papi. This news is more than the already-overwhelmed Reyna can handle.



Carlos seems to be the only one of his three siblings who is genuinely excited and optimistic about his mother's return. Reyna and Mago, for different reasons, remain skeptical, and know that something about their beloved Mami has changed.



BOOK ONE: CHAPTER 11

As Reyna and her siblings struggle to understand why their mother has come back, they learn of their father's infidelity. Mami tells the children that Papi is "washing his hands of [them]" while he tends his "new woman." Mago continues harboring hope that Papi will not forsake them—she is still angry at Mami for leaving and breaking her promise to return soon, whereas Papi, in his absence, has become "bigger than life" in Mago's eyes. Reyna, meanwhile, harbors bad feelings towards Papi—she is angry with him for having betrayed Mami and sent back a "bitter, heartbroken" version of their mother.

Mami, unable to find a job and unwilling to return to her job as an Avon lady, begins selling things at a resort called La Quinta Castrejón, the only place in town "immune to the recession." Mago, Carlos, and Reyna accompany their mother there most nights, waiting outside in the cold with cigarettes, gum, and snacks while lavish parties rage inside. No matter the weather, Mami drags the children with her each and every night, desperate to earn some money. One night, Mami points out the beautiful, lavish pool, and remarks that Papi helped to build it. She recalls swimming in the pool once it was done, on a day when the owner allowed the workers to come and bring their families. She didn't know how to swim, but Papi helped her and never let her go.

Once the party is over that night, Mami announces that she never wants to come back to La Quinta Castrejón again. Reyna knows that her mother is fleeing from the glittering pool and the memories associated with it. Though Papi had held onto her there, he had let her go "in a place just as beautiful and frightening"—El Otro Lado.

BOOK ONE: CHAPTER 12

Reyna fills in the blanks as to what happened between her Mami and Papi in El Otro Lado. Two and a half years after arriving there, Papi told Mami he didn't love her anymore and no longer wanted to live with her. Mami was devastated that not only was her husband leaving her for another woman—but was leaving her for another woman from Mexico. This woman, however, was a U.S. citizen who spoke English.

The happiness and excitement surrounding Mami's return is quickly replaced with resentment, confusion, and fear as Mami tells her children that their father is abandoning them forever. The children's conflicting feelings about their father are inextricably entwined with their already-complicated feelings about Mami—to Reyna, Papi is the villain, but to Mago, Mami is the one who has done the most damage to their family.



Mami forces her children to help her make money, even though they have already been subjected to enough hardship at Abuela Evila's. Her memories of Papi teaching her how to swim are too much to handle in the wake of his betrayal, and she unfairly burdens her children, too, with the symbolic anecdote.



Reyna's recognition that her mother has actually learned the tactic of abandonment from Papi is shocking and disturbing. Papi broke his promise, and then years later Mami broke hers to her children—Reyna wonders what other broken promises lie in store.



The older Reyna provides some context as to the truth of what happened between her parents in El Otro Lado in order to foreshadow the events that are still to come. Papi's infidelity and abandonment, and the feelings of betrayal they inspire in Mami, mirror the feelings of betrayal she engendered in her own children when she left Mexico.



When Papi tossed Mami out of the apartment, he did not allow her to take Betty, and refused to let her see the child any longer. Every day, though, Mami would go to Betty's babysitter's house and wheedle the woman into letting her visit with her daughter. One day, Mami convinced the babysitter to let her take Betty out for ice cream. Rather than returning with the baby, Mami took Betty home with her. That evening, Papi came looking for Mami with a gun, threatening both her and the baby while Betty cried. A bystander tried to break up the altercation, and Papi shot him. Papi was arrested, but allowed voluntary deportation. Within a week after being deported, Papi snuck back across the border, resuming his life in El Otro Lado.

By November, Mami has obtained a job at a record shop. She works late, and often comes home after dark. Since there are no streetlights on the way to Abuelita Chinta's from the bus stop, her brother, Tío Crece, usually meets her there and walks her home. One night, there is no sign of Crece, and Abuelita Chinta sends Carlos to go retrieve Mami and walk her home. A while later, though, Mami comes home alone, insisting that Carlos wasn't waiting for her at the bus stop. They all go out to look for him, and soon find him walking towards them. When Mago asks where Carlos was, he replies "nowhere." Back at the house, he demands to be left alone, and goes straight to bed.

In the morning, Carlos is still in a bad mood. That evening, Abuelita Chinta sends the three children out to buy sodas before dinner. On the way home from the store, Mago asks Carlos what's wrong, and he reluctantly reveals that last night he saw Mami kissing a man at the bus stop. Carlos, wanting to avoid Mami, hid in a tree while she made her way home.

At dinner, Mago is sullen and silent. When Mami asks her what's wrong, Mago reveals that they all know about Mami's boyfriend. Mami explains that the man is a car insurance salesman who works as a wrestler on the weekends, and that she's soon going to go away with him to Acapulco. Mago begs Mami not to go, but Mami insists she won't be gone for long. Even Abuelita Chinta urges Mami not to leave, but Mami insists that she has made her decision. The next day, when Reyna and her siblings get home from school, they find that their mother has gone. The children weep, miserable and angered that their mother didn't even have the courage to say goodbye to them.

The violent tale of Papi's cruel, threatening behavior towards Mami throws into question just how great a man the Man Behind the Glass truly is, and also raises suspicions as to which, if either of them, is telling the truth. With so much anger and bad blood swirling, both Mami and Papi have become even less reliable in their children's eyes.



Something is going on with Mami—and Carlos alone knows what it is. His sullen behavior after returning from the train station indicates that he has seen something he was not supposed to—and Mami's newly-single status combined with her volatility seems to point to the presence of a new man in her life.



Carlos confirms that Mami has taken up with a man, setting in motion his siblings' fears that their mother will soon abandon them again in her search for love.



When Mago calls Mami out for having a secret boyfriend, Mami doesn't try to deny it or even take her children's feelings into account—she simply announces that she is leaving, and then departs in the most cowardly way possible, abandoning and re-traumatizing her children so soon after she'd returned to them.



BOOK ONE: CHAPTER 13

Shortly after Mami leaves, Carlos falls terribly ill. He has a high fever and terrible headaches, and vomits often. He loses a good deal of weight and takes on a skeletal appearance. Mago and Reyna are furious with their mother, and believe Carlos's illness is directly related to her abandonment. They would later discover that he was suffering from hepatitis, but at the time blamed it on his sorrow.

Carlos misses over a month of school, and his grades plummet. Once he is well enough to return again, he insists he's not going to go, unable to see the point in trying to salvage his marks. The children's Tío Crece, overhearing an argument about school between Carlos and Abuelita Chinta, urges Carlos to come with him to find work. Reyna is nervous about Carlos hanging out with their "crazy uncle," but she admits that there is no one else around to teach her brother how to be a man.

Tío Crece suffers from schizophrenia, but hardly anyone realizes that this is his diagnosis—many neighbors and family members believe he went mad years ago when one of his girlfriends slipped him a love potion, sickening him with hallucinations and madness that would chase him his whole life. At just thirty years old, Crece is skeletally thin, with oily hair and rotten teeth. He often tries to get Reyna to kiss him, and even masturbates in front of her in the main room of Abuelita Chinta's shack.

Later that evening, Crece and Carlos return home dirty and sweaty, but happy. They have brought home a bounty of food. As Abuelita Chinta and Crece prepare dinner, Carlos tells his sisters exciting tales of his day with Crece. From that day on, Carlos and Crece are inseparable. Mago urges Carlos to remember that Crece isn't his father. Reyna realizes that, in the wake of their mother's second abandonment, Carlos is growing up and needs a male role model in his life—not his "little mother" Mago.

A few weeks later, another of the children's Tíos come for a visit. Crece is in a bad mood the whole time, and even takes his rage out on Carlos. When Tío Mario and Tío Crece go out drinking one night, Crece's madness is exacerbated by the alcohol, and he gets into a violent fight with Mario. Chinta and Carlos attempt to break up the fight, and Crece nearly turns on them before suddenly coming out of his drunken hallucination. After this incident, Carlos is no longer allowed to spend his days with Crece, and Abuelita Chinta forces him to return to school.

The last time Mami left, the effect was so profound that when she departed, Carlos's illness was mistaken for a physiological reaction to his own feelings of despair.



Though Carlos was suffering from a real disease and not simply heartache, it does become evident that Mami's abandonments have had an effect on him—he longs for an adult presence and influence in his life, and turns to Tío Crece to fill the void left by the repeated abandonments he's been forced to endure.



Tío Crece is lewd at best and dangerous at worst, but his family makes excuses for him because of his affliction. Reyna fears the man, and yet when Carlos begins growing close to him, others encourage the attachment in hopes that it will be good for both Carlos and Crece.



Reyna and Mago have been so focused on their mother's absence and what it means for them that they never stopped to consider what the lack of a positive male role model might do to their little brother. Now, as they see Carlos enjoying his time with Crece, they realize what he has been missing.



At the end of the day, though, Crece is unstable and even dangerous, and is not the role model Carlos needs. As Carlos is forced to go back to school, he and Crece are separated from one another—though this small abandonment is perhaps for the best.



BOOK ONE: CHAPTER 14

One afternoon in June of 1983, Abuelita Chinta makes hot chocolate for Reyna, Mago, and Carlos before going out in the rain to visit her daughter, Tía Güera, whose baby daughter Lupita is ill. While their Abuelita is out, the three of them sit around drinking their cocoa, and Mago regales her younger siblings with stories of Papi—stories that only she, the eldest, can remember. When Abuelita Chinta arrives home, Reyna asks her to tell them some stories about Mami as a young girl, and she tells them one about a time their mother tried to tame and ride a donkey, but failed. Chinta explains that now Mami thinks she has failed again, just as she failed with the donkey—and is afraid that everyone else thinks so, too.

The rainy season descends, bringing with it floods and destruction. Abuelita Chinta's shack floods, and later in the week, the river behind the train tracks floods. The neighborhood adjacent to Reyna's is completely underwater. One morning, a neighbor knocks on the door frantically, asking for Abuela Chinta—he has bad news about Reyna's cousin **Catalina**.

Abuelita Chinta, Reyna, and her siblings make their way to Tío Gary's house—**Catalina** is his five-year-old daughter. When they arrive, the river just thirty feet away from Gary's shack is raging. Though Catalina has fallen in, her mother expresses hope that someone downriver has pulled her out and saved her. That evening, Abuelita Chinta stays at Gary's house to pray while Reyna, Mago, and Carlos go home. Reyna cannot sleep, and asks Mago to tell her a story. Mago tells her about the three little pigs, and Reyna imagines Papi's dream house as the brick-and-mortar house of the third little pig, standing sturdy amongst all the stick and straw houses in their village.

The next day, Reyna and her siblings return to Tío Gary's house—**Catalina**'s body has been found. Gary and his neighbors hang Catalina from a tree by her feet so that the water can drain out of her bloated corpse. As Reyna stares horrified at the spectacle, she is paralyzed by fear—she worries that by the time Papi finishes his dream house, there may be no one left to keep safe. She worries that a “wolf” will come for her and her siblings, just as the flood came for Catalina.

As Reyna asks her Abuelita for stories about Mami, Abuelita zeroes in on one story in particular which explains, at least in part, Mami's reckless and insensitive behavior. Chinta reveals that Mami is afraid to fail, and to fail in front of others. In running off with men, she is hoping to disguise the fact that her marriage has failed and that she has been plunged into disgrace and unhappiness.



The extreme poverty that Reyna's family and their neighbors live in makes them more susceptible to natural disasters such as floods, which debilitate entire communities in this part of the world.



When confronted with the reality of a terrible natural disaster, Reyna longs for a reliable kind of safety. She equates Papi's dream house with the safety of the third pig's house in the fairy tale of the three little pigs, and longs for a place where she will feel totally, unassailably safe all the time.



The discovery of Catalina's body floods Reyna with fear. She realizes that there's the possibility that, because Papi has been gone for so long, he will miss out on his chance to be there for his family when it matters most—and might even lose them along the way to circumstances beyond anyone's control.



BOOK ONE: CHAPTER 15

As the new school year starts, Mago is chosen to be a flag-bearer. There is not enough money, though, to buy the special uniform she needs. Abuela Chinta does her best looking after the children, but does not make much money as a healer. Unlike Abuela Evila, though, Chinta is never stingy about food or money, and often goes without eating so that Reyna, Mago, and Carlos can be fed.

Behind La Quinta Castrejón, there is a mango grove. Carlos and his friends begin stealing mangoes from the grove so that he and his sisters will have enough to eat. When Carlos suggests that Mago come, too, and take some mangoes to sell at the train station, Mago and Reyna start accompanying Carlos to keep watch for the owner of the hotel, El Cuervo. One afternoon, they're nearly caught by the man, and, after they escape, Mago urges Carlos never to return, even though it will mean she can't sell mangoes anymore.

When the three of them return home, they find that Betty is hysterically sobbing; Abuela Chinta has spilled boiled water on her, and is frantically trying to make an aloe paste to soothe the burns. Mago, knowing that Betty needs a proper doctor, goes next door and borrows money from Doña Caro, then takes Betty to the hospital. Mago, who has scars on her own face from an accident incurred during a hide-and-seek game many years ago, doesn't want Betty to feel ugly, the way she herself does.

The next day, Mago leaves the house early and returns with news that she has secured a job selling quesadillas at the train station. She will work there each day after school, to make money to help pay for the expenses she and her siblings are incurring. The next day, Carlos pays a visit to Tía Emperatriz, and enlists her help in sewing a special uniform for Mago.

Abuelita Chinta sends Carlos and Reyna to the train station towards the end of Mago's shift to collect her and tell her the good news. When they get there, they watch as Mago boards the train to sell quesadillas to passengers; when the train takes off again, though, they don't see her on the platform. Reyna fears that Mago, too, has taken off and abandoned them, but soon they see her jumping off the train just as it speeds out of the station. Mago, seeing Reyna's distress, promises her siblings she will never leave them.

Mago is prevented from enjoying normal things at school because of how poor her family is. Despite the hardships they face, with Abuelita Chinta, things seem more bearable because there is love and kindness in the house—but when something like this comes up, it becomes impossible to ignore the ways in which their situation is insufficient and potentially harmful.



The children are desperate to come up with ways to make more money—though they're not suffering as badly as they were at Evila's house, their financial situation is still dire, and they don't want their frail and gentle Abuelita to suffer in their place.



Whereas Abuela Evila withheld proper medical treatment as a means of control and abuse, Abuela Chinta both truly doesn't have the money and believes that as a healer she can fix the burns herself. Mago, though, wants better for her sister, and insists on getting her proper care—Mago, as always, is everyone's "little mother."



Mago should be focusing on school, but things are so dire that she is forced to go to work. The cycles of poverty that reign over Iguala have come for Mago, too, and yet she enters the workforce with a sense of agency and pride.



Reyna and Carlos are so used to abandonments—and so fearful of being subjected to more—that they believe Mago has left them when they see her board the train as part of her job. Her affirmation that she will never leave them foreshadows a moment, far in the future, when this promise will, unfortunately, be put to the test.



BOOK ONE: CHAPTER 16

One afternoon, Doña Caro comes to the door and tells Abuelita Chinta and the children that they have missed a call from Mami—she often calls Doña Caro’s house, as she has one of the only phones around. Caro tells Abuelita, Reyna, Mago, and Carlos that Mami and her boyfriend have been in a car accident—Mami only has some cuts and bruises, but her wrestler boyfriend is dead. Soon thereafter, Mami returns to Iguala, though she is even more despondent than she was when she first returned from El Otro Lado. She keeps Reyna and her siblings up many nights with her sobbing, and becomes irate when the young Betty doesn’t seem to recognize her. Privately, Reyna wonders if her mother would have returned if the wrestler hadn’t died.

Abuelita Chinta performs a ritual cleansing on Mami to help heal her sorrow, and the next day Mami begins taking good care of herself again, bathing, putting on makeup, and heading out to find a job. She returns just a little while later and announces that she’s gotten her old job at the record store back. To celebrate, they all head into the town center along with Tía Güera and Lupita, and as Reyna plays with her siblings and cousins, she is filled with happiness and hope that things will at last return to normal.

Things are great for a while—Mami takes Reyna and her siblings out to movies with the money she makes at her job, and Reyna connects deeply with a movie about a poor orphan boy whose rich father lives in El Otro Lado. Reyna feels closer to Mami than ever, and is on board when Mami comes home one afternoon and announces that the government is giving away parcels of land nearby to anyone who occupies it. Mami, Mago, Carlos, Betty, and Reyna all set off for a meadow on the other side of a river, and quickly stake out their land. Mami brags that soon, she will build her own dream house on their new property.

Mami and the children wait together for a representative from the government to come with a deed, and Mami urges everyone to think of things as an adventure. They dream aloud about their house for a while, but when everyone starts complaining about feeling hungry and tired, Mami takes everyone but Carlos back to Abuelita Chinta’s. She urges Carlos not to move from their spot, lest they lose their claim to the land.

Mami is coming home, but only because her boyfriend has been killed. The circumstances of her return call into question whether Mami would have ever come back had her boyfriend lived—her instability is palpable as she finds herself largely unable to cope with the loss she has recently faced, incapable of holding herself together even in front of her young, vulnerable, impressionable children.



As things slowly return to normal, Reyna and her siblings wonder whether their Mami—their true Mami—has at last come back for good. After so long without her, it seems possible that the worst is over, and all of their patience and pain is at last going to be rewarded.



Due to the unstable nature of Mami’s behavior, and her relationship with her children, it stands to reason that right after things swing high, they will soon swing low. Reyna and her siblings enjoy their happy times with their mother—but Reyna’s readers know enough at this point to realize that these times won’t last for long.



Mami’s slightly harebrained plan actually proves a source of happiness and inspiration for the children as they dream freely and wildly about their futures. Things are about to take a turn for the worse, however, as Mami’s devotion to the dream subsumes her devotion to the things right in front of her in her real life.



For days, Carlos remains on the staked-out land with the other squatters while Mami brings him scraps of food. Carlos cannot even leave to go to the bathroom, and is miserable all day every day. Mami assures him that the government officials will come deed the land soon, and begs him to hold on just a while longer. After two weeks, though, no one has shown up. Mami insists that Carlos must stand his ground, even when he develops a cough from sleeping outside each night. At home, Mami joins Mago and Reyna in drawing pictures of their dream house and hanging them up around the shack.

One day, Carlos's cough has become so bad that the other squatters complain to Mami when she comes to visit. She gives Carlos cough syrup and VapoRub, but makes him stay put. As the days go by, Carlos worsens; the next time Abuelita Chinta goes to check on him, he is burning up with fever and has wet himself. Abuelita Chinta picks Carlos up and brings him home, even as he protests that he wants to stay and help Mami get her dream house. When Mami gets home that evening and hears what has happened, she rushes over to the meadow, but it is too late—someone else has taken their land. She comes home and pulls the drawing of her dream house off the wall, tearing it to shreds as Carlos apologizes profusely for letting her down.

BOOK ONE: CHAPTER 17

One afternoon, Reyna and Carlos pick Mago up from the train station. Mago marvels at how many people are travelling on trains to El Otro Lado, and she dreams of saving up enough money to take Carlos and Reyna and board a train bound for the United States. Reyna asks if they'd really leave Mami behind, and Mago angrily insists that Mami is always leaving them. Mami has moved away again—she is living with Tía Güera, closer to her job at the record shop. Though the children begged her not to move out yet again, she insisted that it made more sense for her to live closer to work.

At Mago's sixth-grade graduation ceremony, Mami's record-store boss acts as Mago's "godfather" during the ceremony. He and his wife bring her huge bouquets of flowers, and she is the envy of all her classmates. There is a large party afterwards at Tía Güera's apartment, and Mami lavishes gifts and food on Mago. For the first time in years, Mago has a day where she doesn't have to work or be responsible for anyone else—she can simply enjoy her success.

Mami's fanaticism about securing the land begins putting Carlos at risk. She refuses to let go of her dream even as it starts to threaten her family, almost manically doubling down on her belief that soon her dream house will be hers.



Mami puts Carlos's health directly in jeopardy as she blindly pursues her own dream. This cruelty mirrors Papi's abandonment of the family in order to raise funds for his own dream house—but Mami's version of her pursuit of a dream house more directly and more dangerously affects her children. Her disappointment reads as anger, causing Carlos to feel he has to apologize, when he was in fact the one who was wronged.



After so many instances of being abandoned, Mago is beginning to develop ideas about how to stave off further disappointment. She wants to be the one to do the leaving, for once, and thinks that if she has her siblings with her, she can perhaps triple the impact of her departure.



Though Mago has fantasized about leaving, as she graduates from junior high, she finds herself the beloved center of attention. For once, she is allowed to be the little girl that she is—even if just for a day.



Reyna writes that thirteen years later, she would return to Iguala from El Otro Lado during her junior year of college. Her Mami's record-store boss would invite her to a party at his house—where her cousin Lupita, Tía Güera's daughter, would be working as their maid.

Reyna uses this brief aside to point out how generational cycles of poverty will keep many members of her family trapped for years—her and her siblings' dreams of escape will come to fruition, but many of their relatives' will not.



BOOK ONE: CHAPTER 18

After Mago's party, Reyna and her siblings' relationship with Mami improves. Their weekly visits with her become less awkward, and Mami often treats them to trips to the town center and crushed ice and churros. On these trips, though, Reyna notices her mother looking longingly at all the couples around, and fears that her mother will once again leave them for a man.

Reyna has been so destabilized by her mother's frequent abandonments that she no longer has any faith in Mami, and is constantly waiting for the other shoe to drop.



A few months later, during celebrations in the days leading up to Christmas, Reyna, Mago, and Carlos travel to the wealthy part of town and receive gifts from their far-away neighbors there. On Christmas day, Crece brings in a tree branch to use as a makeshift Christmas tree, and the children decorate the branch with eggshells. They sweep the floors and dust the furniture, anticipating Mami's arrival and hoping that this Christmas will be special. They all secretly want to convince her to return to Abuelita Chinta's house and live with them again.

Things have been so good with Mami that Mago, Reyna, Carlos, and their Abuelita and Tío believe that together, they can bring Mami home again for good. They don't share Reyna's fear and skepticism—and this leap of faith will come back to bite them very soon.



That evening, though, Mami shows up to Abuelita Chinta's house with a guest: a man named Rey. He is fourteen years younger than her, and Reyna hates him at first sight. Suddenly, she feels that all their Christmas decorations look pathetic. As they all sit down to dinner, Mago throws a fit, screaming and throwing herself around the house. She kicks and screams as if possessed, and eventually faints. Abuelita Chinta chastises Mami for inspiring such madness in her daughter by bringing Rey over when the children just wanted to celebrate Christmas with their mother. Mami apologizes to her mother, then walks out the door and leaves. Mago wakes up, goes to the door, and slams it shut.

When Mami once again disappoints her children—and the rest of her family—by prioritizing a man over the rest of them, Mago experiences a complete breakdown. She is unable to cope with the traumatic threat of being abandoned yet again, and this time she makes sure that she is the one to get Mami out of the house before she can open herself up to being left once more.



The next day, Mago writes a sorrowful letter to Papi, using lyrics from a popular song to express how badly she longs for his return. That evening, Reyna sits at Abuelita Chinta's altar and prays that her father will come back soon.

Mago feels she and her siblings are out of options—they are miserable in Mexico, and she hopes that their Papi will be the one to rescue them.



BOOK ONE: CHAPTER 19

One sunny day in May of 1985, when Reyna is four months away from turning ten, her cousin comes to pay her and her siblings a visit, informing them that Papi is going to call on the phone at Abuela Evila's in an hour. Reyna and her siblings dance around in a circle, overjoyed. They set off immediately for their other grandmother's house, anticipating what Papi could possibly be calling about with overzealous excitement. As they arrive at Abuela Evila's house, Élida stands at the gate to greet them, and chastises them for dressing in rags and looking like beggars. Mago points out that they're just having a phone call with their father—he won't be able to see how they're dressed. When they step into the house, however, they see their father sitting right there on Abuela Evila's couch.

Tía Emperatriz urges Reyna and her siblings to go and say hello to their father, but Reyna is paralyzed. For so many years she has been studying her father's photograph, wishing that he could truly be looking at her rather than just gazing out from a picture frame. Now that he is here, though, she is terrified to face him—she knows that he must be ashamed of the poor, dirty girl dressed in beggars' clothing in front of him.

Papi hugs Mago and Carlos and then beckons Reyna to him, too. He hugs her briefly and then introduces them all to a woman sitting beside him on the couch—her name is Mila, and she is his new girlfriend. Mila is fashionable and pretty, but Reyna feels bad for thinking so, knowing she should hate the woman on principle. While Emperatriz goes out to pick up some food for lunch, Papi unloads a suitcase full of dolls, toys, and clothes for Reyna, Carlos, and Mago. As the evening goes by and the three of them play, eat, and enjoy their father's company, Reyna finds herself wishing that Papi had brought something for Élida, too, and also wondering in the back of her mind what the true purpose of Papi's visit is.

Reyna, Carlos, and Mago spend the night at Evila's house. In the morning, Papi shaves Carlos's hair to get rid of his lice, and takes Mago and Reyna to the hair salon to have their hair deloused and cut short. On the way back, they stop at the "dream house," and are surprised to see that it is nearly finished. Mago asks Papi which room is going to be his room, but he does not answer her.

Reyna, Mago, and Carlos are pranked by one of their cousins in this passage, and greeted with the biggest surprise of their lives—their Papi, the Man Behind the Glass, has returned home at last. This scene mirrors the scene in which Mami first returned home—unlike with Mami, though, the children have hardly any basis of comparison for their father, having known him so little before they left. They don't know the man sitting in front of them—and don't know whether or not the years have changed him.



Reyna has been waiting for her father to see her all her life, but now that her dream has become a reality, she is ashamed and embarrassed. She wanted to be better for her father and feels that he will not love her if she is not the person she's always wanted to be for him.



For once in their lives, Reyna, Carlos, and Mago are the loved and lucky ones. Being in the spotlight this way after so many years of being neglected, however, leaves at least Reyna feeling bad—despite all of Élida's cruelty over the years, she still feels bad for her cousin and wants her to be included in the fun and festivities.



Papi can clearly see that his children aren't being taken care of, and he takes it upon himself to tend to them, all the while stoking their dreams of what life will be like when they all live together in their dream house.



That evening, when Papi reaches into his suitcase, a bunch of scorpions come out and nearly bite him. Frightened, Mila asks when the two of them are going “home.” At this, Mago is surprised—she points out that the dream house is basically finished, and there’s no need to return to El Otro Lado. Papi insists they can discuss everything later, but Mila urges him to tell his children the truth. Papi announces that he cannot stay in Mexico—though the house is finished, there are no jobs, and if he returns they’ll never escape the “miserable poverty” they live in. Mago accuses Papi of making excuses and she runs out of the room weeping.

The next day, Papi sits Reyna, Carlos, and Mago down and announces that though he’s leaving in a few days, he has decided to take one of them with him. He sees that their mother is not taking care of them, and that things are only getting worse in Iguala. He announces that he is bringing Mago, the eldest, along with him. Reyna protests, insisting that Mago is all she has. If Mago leaves, she thinks, she won’t be able to survive. Carlos and Reyna beg to be taken along. When Papi promises to come back for them soon, Reyna points out that the last time he left, he was gone for eight years.

The next day at school, Reyna’s classmates, having heard that her father is in town, ask her if she’s at last going to El Otro Lado. Reyna lies and says that she is, bragging about the fancy new life she is going to have in the United States. After school, at Abuela Evila’s house, Reyna begs Papi to take her, saying she’ll die of shame if her classmates find out she lied. Mago speaks up and says that she won’t go with Papi unless Reyna goes, too. Carlos adds his voice and begs to go along as well. Papi relents, and promises that he will take all of his children with him. When Reyna asks if the crossing will be dangerous, Papi assures her it’ll be fine—but shares a nervous look with Mila.

The next day, Mago and Reyna go to tell Mami the news. Though they anticipate having to beg, plead, and convince her to let them go, she quickly says it’s fine if they go—though they need to tell their father that he can’t have Betty. When Mago delivers Mami’s message, Papi is furious, claiming that Mami has robbed him of his youngest child. Mago volunteers to go talk to Mami one last time, and try to convince her to let Betty go.

Though Papi’s dream house is finished, it is, unfortunately, no longer his dream. The allures of El Otro Lado are too strong to resist, and what is a dream in Mexico perhaps seems dim and unappealing when seen through eyes that have glimpsed “The Other Side.”



Papi only has enough money—and perhaps only enough patience—to bring one child with him, but he has not accounted for the ways in which being abandoned together has bonded his three eldest children.



Carlos and Reyna refuse to be left behind. Their reasons for wanting to travel to El Otro Lado are a combination of a desire for escape and a desire not to be left behind yet again, and as they beg Papi to take them with him, they are unaware of how swiftly and totally their lives will change when he agrees to bring them over the border.



Reyna and Mago are shocked—and perhaps a little hurt—by the ease with which their mother accepts their departure. When Mami attempts to turn their departure into another way to battle with Papi, they are truly confused about what their mother’s true motivations and feelings are.



As Mago and Reyna arrive back at the record shop, they see their mother smiling and dancing while dusting the counter. They startle her from her daydream and beg to take Betty with them, asking how she could bear to separate her children. Mami is resolute, though—Betty will stay in Iguala with her. Mago, realizing they've reached an impasse, turns to leave. Reyna hesitates, but eventually follows her sister out the door and into the street. As they walk away from the shop, Reyna resolves to try to remember her mother as the woman dancing in the record shop, rather than as the woman who left them behind again and again and again.

Reyna and Mago come upon their mother in a moment of total happiness. Though once they startle out of it they are forced to confront their stubborn and selfish mother once again, Reyna wants to hold onto an idea of her mother—just as she hung onto an idea of Papi for so many years—to get her through the painful separation ahead of them.



BOOK ONE: CHAPTER 20

Reyna's first two attempts to cross the border are failures. The first time, she is waylaid by a toothache, and as Papi carries her through the desert, they are stopped by the border patrol and sent back to Tijuana. The second time, Reyna has trouble keeping up, and they're caught again. The third time, Papi tells his children that this is their last chance to make it across—he threatens them, telling them that if they don't make it, he will send them back to live with Abuela Evila.

The border crossing is a perilous endeavor, and to do so with such young children is even more dangerous. Reyna tries hard to keep up, but she is very little and struggles. Papi has no time for nonsense, though—crossings are expensive, and the threat of being imprisoned or killed is not worth it to him. He would rather leave his children behind.



That night, at sunset, Papi wakes the children up from their naps and they take a bus to meet the smuggler who will guide them across the border. As they set off, Papi urges them all to remember that it is their last chance. They walk through the night without incident for a while, until the sound of a helicopter overhead scatters them all and frightens them. After the helicopter's searchlights move away, they resume their trek, and make it across the border.

The third and final border crossing is at last a success, though still a harrowing and traumatizing experience. Reyna and her siblings are beginning to understand just how much her father—and countless others—have sacrificed to make it to El Otro Lado.



From Chula Vista, right on the other side of the border, Papi, Reyna, Carlos, and Mago pile into a truck that will take them to Los Angeles. The children are simultaneously carsick and hungry, and Reyna eats sunflower seeds as she crouches on the floor of the truck. When Reyna asks how far they have travelled, the smuggler driving them tells them that they've come two thousand miles from Iguala. Reyna is stunned by this figure, and makes a silent promise to never forget her mother—or the place she comes from—now that she is in her new home.

As she arrives in El Otro Lado, the young Reyna is beset by conflicting emotions. She is happy to be in this exciting new land, but at the same time, is determined not to forget where it is she really comes from.



BOOK TWO: PROLOGUE

In 2010, twenty-five years after Reyna's new life in the United States began, Papi is diagnosed with liver cancer. Reyna and her siblings have little communication with him, but the diagnosis pulls them back together again, and Reyna begins a journey of finding her way back to her father.

On a day in early September of 2011, Papi's doctor tells Mago, Reyna, and Carlos that it is time to let their father go. Reyna is reluctant to do so—the doctor doesn't know about “all the times [she has] already lost him.” As Reyna looks at her father, though, and sees how ill and unresponsive he is, she understands that his mind has already gone—his body is fighting a losing battle. Mago, Carlos, and Reyna look at one another and know what must be done. They tell the doctor to take their father off of the machines keeping him alive, and wait for twenty minutes as Papi's heart slowly stops beating. As his body shuts down, Reyna holds her father's hand, and notices that it is the exact same shape as her own.

BOOK TWO: CHAPTER 1

In September of 1985, Reyna and her siblings have been in the United States for three months. Reyna is about to start the fifth grade, while Carlos will be in seventh and Mago will be in eighth. They do not speak a word of English, and are worried about how they will navigate school, but Papi is less concerned about the language barrier than he is about the children disclosing that they are in the U.S. illegally. He urges them not to tell anyone—friend, student, or teacher—about their status. He also warns them that if they don't all do well in school, he will send them back to Mexico himself and force them to live with Abuela Evila again. They each promise to do well.

At bedtime, Mago, Reyna, and Carlos pull out the sofa bed in the living room where they have been sleeping (as Papi and Mila's apartment has only one bedroom) and they huddle together, listening to the sounds of sirens, helicopters, and cars out on the street. Reyna, nervous about starting school the next day, reflects on the long summer she and her siblings spent staying home all day every day at Papi's apartment, watching TV, and slowly adjusting to life in America. Her favorite memory of the last few months is visiting the ocean for the first time. Though she was reluctant to swim, Papi assured her he'd help her and wouldn't let go. Sure enough, Papi helped her into the water, and didn't let go of her once as she played in the waves.

Reyna Grande begins book two of her memoir with a flash-forward to the end of her father's life. This tactic foreshadows both the plot elements that will make up the second half of the book (how Papi “managed to chase [...] away” his children) and the thematic tilt it will take: exploring the journeys and distances, both physical and emotional, that she and her family must go on to find their way back to one another in the face of pain and confusion.



In this scene, Reyna achieves a measure of forgiveness for her father by recognizing a major similarity between them. In seeing herself in him, she is able to forgive him for some of his past mistakes—as this half of the book goes on, Reyna's readers will come to see just what an amazing feat her grace truly is.



Papi has very high expectations for his children, and is not shy about letting them know that if they step a toe out of line he will not hesitate to send them back to where they came from. He wants them to prosper and do well, but he also insists on total control over them, creating a high-pressure environment in which there is no room for failure.



In this passage, Reyna's memory of her father helping her to swim—by holding her tight and refusing to let go—mirrors her mother's own story of Papi teaching her to swim in the pool at the hotel in Iguala. This foreshadows the fact that just as Mami was later abandoned by Papi in El Otro Lado, Papi is soon to abandon Reyna—if not physically, emotionally.



In the morning, Reyna begs her siblings to walk her to her elementary school four blocks away, but they are afraid to miss their bus. They point her in the right direction and then head off without her, leaving Reyna to enter the enormous, intimidating building alone. Reyna has no idea where to go or what to do, and as the halls empty, she stands alone crying. A woman approaches her and asks her, in Spanish, if she's lost, then helps her to the office, where an assistant leads her to her classroom.

Once in class, Reyna introduces herself to her teacher Mrs. Anderson, but then realizes that she'll be learning from the teacher's assistant, a man named Mr. López, along with a small group of other Spanish-language students. Reyna sets to work learning the English alphabet, but is nervous at the end of the day when she has not memorized it to perfection. She doesn't want to disappoint Papi—she feels a desperate desire to please him, and to prove to him that he was right in bringing her to El Otro Lado.

After school, Reyna goes to a neighbor's house. The kindly Mrs. Giuliano makes Reyna some soup, and though they speak two different languages—Italian and Spanish—they have a nice afternoon together. As Reyna helps Mrs. Giuliano clean out her backyard chicken coop, she is reminded of Mexico, and briefly grows homesick. She feels torn, and unsure of where it is she truly belongs.

BOOK TWO: CHAPTER 2

The day before Reyna's first Halloween in the United States, Mila comes home with a Rainbow Brite costume for her. Reyna doesn't know who Rainbow Brite is—or even what Halloween is—but once she hears that she'll get free candy, she is on board. The morning of Halloween, Reyna is awakened by the sound of Papi yelling. He is standing over their sofa bed, screaming at Carlos for having had an accident in the night. Papi picks Carlos up and drags him to the bathroom, where he throws him violently into the tub. Papi leaves for work, and Mago and Reyna hurry the crying Carlos out of the freezing tub. The three of them get ready for school, but Reyna does not put on her costume. She feels the excitement of Halloween has vanished.

On her first day in school, Reyna is forced to navigate things on her own. Because of her trauma related to her feelings of abandonment and betrayal—not to mention the language barrier—this is harder for Reyna than it is for other children.



It is Reyna's very first day in school, and yet she can hardly enjoy herself because she is so focused on listening well, learning quickly, and proving to Papi that she has worth, value, and potential in El Otro Lado.



Reyna's first day has been overwhelming for her, and as she encounters a space which reminds her of her home in Mexico, feelings of homesickness are stirred up, creating an even greater tension within the young Reyna.



The excitement of Halloween is ruined by Papi's angry, abusive ways. Though it should be a happy day, and one on which his children are able to see a fun part of life in El Otro Lado, it brings only misery.



That evening Mila hurries Reyna to get ready for trick-or-treating. Reyna insists she doesn't want to go. Mila tells Reyna that though what Papi did earlier that morning was wrong, he simply needs some time to readjust to being a full-time father. Mila makes Carlos a ghost costume out of a sheet and allows Mago to wear her old wedding dress from her first marriage. Together, the three hurry out to go trick-or-treating, and as they scurry around the neighborhood, Reyna enjoys herself. She is reminded of Christmas celebrations in Mexico. When she and her siblings get home, they sit and comb through their candy with Papi and Mila, and everything feels warm, happy, and normal.

By the end of the day, the morning's traumas are mostly forgotten, and Papi seems to have settled down. Mila begins making excuses for Papi, foreshadowing the ways in which she will enable his cycles of abusive behavior to continue as the book goes on.



BOOK TWO: CHAPTER 3

One afternoon, Mila picks Reyna up from school early to take her to the dentist. Reyna has been suffering toothaches for months, and though their lack of money and insurance has prevented Reyna from going to the dentist, Mila has at last decided to use her own biological daughter's insurance, and pass Reyna off as her daughter Cindy, who is just ten months younger than Reyna.

Though she is now in El Otro Lado, Reyna is still suffering from health problems which result from the extreme poverty and neglect she faced back in Mexico.



At the office, Reyna has one of her baby molars pulled after a large cavity is discovered inside of it. Groggy from the anesthesia on the way home, Reyna addresses Mila as "Mamá Mila," and Mila swiftly and cruelly reprimands her. Reyna apologizes with tears in her eyes.

Reyna is in a vulnerable state and surely longing for her mother on the way home from the dentist—she attempts to find comfort in seeing Mila as a mother figure, but Mila rejects Reyna's attempts to grow closer to her.



Back at home, Reyna relays the story to Mago, who replies that Reyna got what she deserved for being a "traitor" to their own mother. Reyna feels ashamed—and even more so for thinking of all the ways in which Mila has "advantages" that their own mother does not. When Papi gets home, Reyna hears Mila, in the next room, tell him that she's not going to take his children to any more doctor's appointments in the future.

Mila makes it clear to Papi that she does not see herself as his children's mother, and does not want to put herself out there for them. Just as Evila rejected her own grandchildren, Mila now rejects what are essentially her stepchildren—and Mago's words make Reyna feel as if Mila is justified in doing so.



BOOK TWO: CHAPTER 4

One evening, Mila makes spaghetti for dinner. Reyna hates spaghetti—it reminds her of the roundworms she, Mago, and Carlos had to get out of their systems when they became infested with the parasites back in Iguala. Reyna refuses to eat Mila's spaghetti, insisting she isn't hungry. When Papi calls her ungrateful, Mago tries to explain that the spaghetti reminds Reyna of the worms—Papi responds by calling Reyna "ridiculous." She begs one last time to eat something else, but Papi picks up the plate of spaghetti and dumps it over Reyna's head. She screams and screams as her siblings just look at her with pity.

Papi is insensitive to the unique but deep-seated traumas from which his children are suffering. He is so desperate for control over them that he rejects any attempts at autonomy they make, even when those attempts are based in fear or self-preservation.



Papi retreats to his room with his beer, and while Mago helps Reyna clean up in the bathroom, Mila makes Reyna some scrambled eggs to eat. Reyna cries in the shower, wishing she could go home to Mexico and her sweet grandmother. Reyna cries hardest of all when she thinks of how the Man Behind the Glass—the Papi in the picture frame—would never throw spaghetti on top of her head. The father in this house, Reyna thinks, doesn't know her—and she doesn't know him.

Reyna is miserable to realize that she and her father, despite having closed the physical gap between them after so many years apart, are essentially strangers. Even worse, Papi doesn't seem interested in getting to know what Reyna likes, wants, or needs at all.



BOOK TWO: CHAPTER 5

Never having had a TV in Mexico, in El Otro Lado, Reyna, Carlos, and Mago become obsessed with television. One day, near Christmastime, they are watching cartoons when Santa Claus appears on television during a commercial break. The siblings are concerned because they have no money to buy Papi a present, and Mago decides to call the number on the screen and ask Santa Claus for some presents. When Carlos says that Santa Claus doesn't exist, Mago argues that they are in the United States—"everything exists here." Mago's English is still pretty poor, and she has a hard time hearing what is happening on the other end of the phone. She leaves a message and asks for a Barbie and a bike before passing the phone to Carlos and Reyna, who ask for a Nintendo and a pair of skates.

Mago's childish and comedic belief that "everything exists" in El Otro Lado—even fantasies like Santa Claus—actually reveals just how much she has built up life in America in her head over the years. She and her siblings do truly believe that anything is possible here—and this naïve belief will soon get them into trouble.



Two weeks later, none of their presents from "Santa Claus" have arrived, and Mago, Carlos, and Reyna are still nervous about finding something for Papi. They decide to shoplift from the corner store—Mago volunteers to distract the clerk while Reyna and Carlos hunt for something Papi might like. In the store, though "nothing seem[s] good enough," and Carlos and Reyna panic. They walk out with a can of hair spray and a bottle of hair polish.

Reyna is not the only one desperate to please her father—Mago and Carlos, too, want to find a way to impress him, thank him, and, in a way, pay the debt they feel they owe to him.



The next day, on Christmas morning, the children present Papi and Mila with their "gifts," and Mila and Papi present them with theirs. Reyna gets a pair of tennis shoes, Mago gets a pretty dress, and Carlos gets a Tonka truck. The gifts from Santa Claus never arrive, and Reyna lies awake at night, wondering why.

Christmas is a joyous occasion, and the children enjoy their gifts from Papi and Mila—but Reyna still wonders in the back of her mind whether Santa Claus really exists in El Otro Lado.



Two weeks later, Papi calls the children into the kitchen one evening as he and Mila are going through the mail. He points out an exorbitant bill and asks who the children called. Mago confesses that a few weeks ago, they called Santa—she didn't know they'd get charged for the call. She apologizes, and Papi and Mila reprimand her. Papi leaves the apartment in a rage. A half an hour later, he returns, and puts a lock on the rotary phone so that the children can't call anybody.

Papi is desperate to control his children, but he can't account for the small ways in which they're adjusting to life in America and figuring things out. The lock on the phone—an extreme measure—shows just how little patience he has for their slip-ups, and how far he will go to make sure his children do not go against him.



BOOK TWO: CHAPTER 6

One day, the girls in Reyna's fifth-grade class are taken into the auditorium and shown a video about puberty. Many of Reyna's classmates are uncomfortable or confused, but Reyna knows all about puberty and menstruation. After the assembly, Reyna is given a pamphlet and a sanitary napkin wrapped in cellophane. That afternoon, Reyna shows Mago the sanitary napkin as soon as Mago gets home from school, and excitedly tells her sister that she will soon be a real *señorita*. Reyna places the napkin in her drawer for safekeeping.

The following week, Carlos—not Mago—comes to pick Reyna up from Mrs. Giuliano's after school. He explains that Mago isn't feeling well, and didn't go to school. When she gets home, Reyna goes to her drawer and—as she does every afternoon—looks for her sanitary napkin so that she can hold it and look at it. Today, though, it isn't there. Mago comes out of the bathroom looking pale, and Reyna asks her what's wrong. Mago explains that she has a fever and cramps. Reyna asks Mago if she's seen the sanitary napkin, and Mago apologizes—she explains that she took it, because she got her period for the first time earlier that morning. Reyna is angry, and runs out into the yard to cry.

When Papi gets home, he is furious with Mago for missing school. He takes his belt off and gives her a horrible lashing. Carlos tries to intervene, but Papi won't stop. It's only when Reyna explains that Mago is menstruating that Papi puts his belt down. Stunned, he goes into his room, closes the door, and does not come back out. Mila comes home a little while later, and when the children tell her what Papi did to Mago, she makes some excuses for him quickly, explaining that he was "raised" that way, and then heads out to the store to buy Mago some more napkins. When Mila returns with them, Mago takes one out of the pack and gives it to Reyna. Reyna puts her new sanitary napkin back in her drawer, hoping that her "rite of passage" won't be as painful as her sister's.

BOOK TWO: CHAPTER 7

One day, the school nurse comes into Reyna's classroom to do a lice check. When the nurse is done inspecting Reyna, she writes a note on a slip of paper and explains that Reyna is not to come to school until her lice are gone. Reyna is absolutely shocked that even in El Otro Lado, there are lice. Reyna walks home, unsure of what to tell Papi. She spends the afternoon crying, afraid that Papi is going to send her back to Mexico.

Though some of Reyna's classmates are grossed out or frightened by the idea of menstruation, Reyna is almost deliriously excited about it—she wants to be a "real señorita" as soon as possible, and escape her girlhood which has held so much pain and frustration.



This passage marks the start of the young Reyna's constant jealousy of Mago. Though Reyna loves and admires Mago, she must come to terms with the fact that her older sister will always be one step ahead of her—and the fact that Mago becomes a "señorita" first is almost more than Reyna can bear.



Papi's abuse reaches new heights as he mercilessly, violently lashes his miserable, menstruating daughter with his belt. Mila continues to enable Papi's behavior, leaving Reyna, Mago, and Carlos to fend for themselves as best they can against their tempestuous Papi's unpredictable rages.



Reyna is so traumatized by the abuse she has both suffered and witnessed that she fears Papi will beat her for something that is totally out of her control, just as he did with Mago very recently.



When Papi gets home and Reyna shows him the note, though, he is calm and understanding. He tells Reyna that the lice aren't her fault—she probably picked it up from another kid at school. He warns her to be careful who she plays with, and then spends the rest of the afternoon combing through Reyna's hair and picking out the lice. Reyna feels bliss as her papi spends a whole two hours devoted only to her.

Reyna is not only surprised, but delighted when Papi actually shows her some understanding and gentleness, and spends time tending to her rather than holing up in his room or attacking her.



BOOK TWO: CHAPTER 8

Mago has been writing frequent letters to Mami, Betty, and Abuelita Chinta, always enclosing happy photographs meant to show Mami how well they're all faring in America. Mami never writes back, but every once in a while, they get a letter from Emperatriz. They have learned that Élica is now living in Los Angeles, too, but they don't make any plans to seek out their cousin. The older Reyna writes that Papi wouldn't even reconnect with María Félix, his sister, until he was diagnosed with cancer, at which point they'd both reflect on their fractured relationships with their children, and the ways in which immigration had taken a toll on their families.

Though Reyna and her siblings' problems are serious, this passage goes to show that their whole family has been affected by immigration, abuse, estrangement, and betrayal in many different ways. The cyclical nature of this strife and trauma is one of the memoir's central themes, and one of its many unsolvable problems.



Mago has started getting crushes on boys, but Papi has made his rules very clear: no boyfriends are allowed. Mago sublimates her frustration into lewd Barbie doll games, and even tries to get Reyna to kiss her during a game of "Mama y Papa." When Reyna asks what's wrong with Mago, Mago admits that she has fallen in love with a boy named Pepe who doesn't even know she exists.

Mago, newly a "señorita," longs to find ways of expressing her new and confusing feelings, but because of Papi's strict rules, she is frightened to actually act on her crush in a real way.



Mago decides to go to church one Sunday and pray for Pepe to notice her. She and Reyna go to a nearby Catholic church, braving the forty-minute walk for the sake of making their prayers official. The next day, after school, Reyna asks Mago whether her prayer was answered. Mago reveals that she almost spoke to Pepe at the bus stop, but couldn't keep up with his English and became too flustered to even try and reply. Reyna tells Mago she'll surely get another chance to make a good impression. A few days later, though, Mago tells Reyna that Pepe and his friends called her and Carlos "wetbacks" as they were walking home from school, and her crush ends as quickly as it started.

Mago's first foray into love ends badly when she realizes that the boy she has feelings for is cruel, judgmental, and racist. Through the games Papi plays withholding his own affection, Mago has learned to do anything to win a boy's affections—and she is heartbroken when her repeated attempts at getting noticed end only in more cruelty and abuse.



Carlos, too, is in love with a girl named María. Carlos is extremely shy and self-conscious about his crooked teeth, though, and can only manage to stare at his crush. One day, while Carlos is staring at her on the bus, María nastily asks what he's looking at. Mago answers for him, retorting that María should feel lucky at all that anyone's looking at her, considering how ugly she is. That afternoon, María comes to the apartment to confront Mago. The two go downstairs to the parking lot to fight, despite Carlos's protestations. Mago beats María badly, and urges her to "be happy about it" the next time Carlos looks at her. Mago goes back inside, and Carlos follows her, but not before apologizing to María. Horrified by her siblings' first experiences with love, Reyna worries about what her own first love will hold.

Though Mago doesn't instigate the fight with María, she certainly knows how to handle herself—and is proficient, too, in delivering a beating followed by an ultimatum. Mago is learning tactics of violence and control from Papi, whether she knows it or not—Reyna, meanwhile, is horrified to see what young love is actually like, and how intimately entwined it is with violence, cruelty, and confusion.



BOOK TWO: CHAPTER 9

One week, Reyna's teachers inform her that there is going to be a schoolwide competition: every student will be writing their own books, and teachers will select the best ones to be one of three lucky winners. Reyna is excited to finally have the chance to make Papi proud. Though Reyna was a proficient reader in Mexico, she is behind in her reading here. Nevertheless, she decides to enter the competition, and writes as her book the story of her birth. After she corrects her spelling and draws in pictures, Mrs. Anderson shows the class how to bind their books, and by week's end, all the projects are done.

Reyna, desperate for a way to impress Papi and prove her worth once and for all, decides to throw her heart and soul into the bookmaking contests. Little does she know that writing will become something she comes to love just for herself—not because it is a way to impress others or win favor.



While Mrs. Anderson judges the books, she puts on a movie for the class, but Reyna can't focus—she watches closely as Mrs. Anderson reads all the books, and is heartbroken when she sees her book go into a large pile—the pile she knows is full of the reject books. Reyna is overcome with sadness, and then fear that Papi will be disappointed in her. One day, she promises herself, she will write a book that won't be rejected—a book that will make her father proud.

Reyna's childhood dream of writing a book that will make her father proud will, of course, come true over the course of her life. This passage shows how Reyna's lifelong love of writing grew out of an impulse to please—but grew into so much more.



BOOK TWO: CHAPTER 10

In May of 1986, a year after Reyna and her siblings first arrived in the U.S., Papi falls off a ladder at work and injures himself. He has to take several days off from work to heal, but as he's not the type to sit around and do nothing, he takes the bus downtown to walk around a little bit. When he gets back home, he cracks open a beer and announces that Mami is in Los Angeles—she has been here for months now, and hasn't contacted any of them. Papi says that he ran into her downtown—she lives there, on a street called San Pedro. Mago asks if Betty is here, too, and Papi drains his beer before replying that Mami left Betty in Mexico to come here with her boyfriend Rey.

Papi's accident leads to a coincidental and fortuitous meeting with Mami. As Papi relays the news that Mami is living in Los Angeles, he is enraged by her failure to contact her own children, and attempts to use her betrayal to gain even more favor with, and thus control over, Reyna, Mago, and Carlos.



Carlos wants to go see Mami, but Papi is outraged that he would want to see a woman who has been here for months without trying to get in touch with them. He urges his children to “have some pride.” Before heading to bed, he informs them all that their mother has a new child—a boy, who is not even three months old. Reyna is dizzied and sickened by the news—but still, despite it all, yearns to see Mami again.

As the horrible secrets about Mami continue to come out, Reyna finds herself feeling abandoned and betrayed all over again. And yet, just as in Mexico, she feels the undeniable impulse to keep returning to her mother time and time again.



As the weeks go by, Reyna and Carlos continue begging Papi to let them see Mami. The more they ask, though, the more he withdraws from them, locking himself up in his room after railing against Mami for using Betty to get back at him. Mago is on Papi’s side—she doesn’t see why they should go see Mami after all the times she abandoned them.

Mago is the only one who seems to have had enough of Mami’s repeated abandonments and failures. Back in Mexico, she was quick to disparage Mami and idolize Papi, and in the U.S.—despite Papi’s abuse—she is the same.



Mago writes to Abuelita Chinta to ask about Betty, and a month later, Tía Güera writes back. She explains that come summer, Mami is returning to Mexico to bring both Betty and Güera back to the States. Lupita, however, will have to be left behind with Abuelita Chinta. Reyna is saddened to hear this news, and hopes that “one day the cycle of leaving children behind [will] end.”

Even as good news arrives for Reyna and her family, sadness and longing remain part of the landscape of her relatives’ lives. Reyna longs for the end of these cycles of abandonment, poverty, and trauma, but knows they will continue to go on.



Once Tía Güera and Betty arrive in the U.S., Reyna and Carlos at last convince Papi to let them go see Mami. They tell him that it’s not Mami they want to visit, but their sister—even though this is a lie. Together they all take the bus downtown, and when they arrive in Mami’s neighborhood, are shocked to see that the trash-laden street is full of bums, beggars, and prostitutes. Mami’s apartment is almost worse—it is a tiny room full of vermin, with a dirty carpet and filthy walls. Nevertheless, she is happy to see them. Reyna and Carlos rush to greet Betty, but the five-year-old girl barely remembers them.

Even in El Otro Lado, the land of plenty, Mami is living in squalor. The children are nonetheless excited to see her and Betty—even as they realize that though the physical distance between them all has lessened, there are greater distances still to reckon with.



Mami introduces the children to Leonardo, the new baby, and then tells them all about her miserable job at a garment factory. Still, Mami says, the poverty here cannot compare to the poverty back in Mexico. Mago asks why Mami never contacted them once she arrived in the U.S., and Mami explains that she wanted to give the children a chance to get to know their father without her interference. Reyna understands, but knows this can’t be the only reason. She sees, at last, the kind of person her mother has become—and how little space there is in her life for Reyna, Carlos, and Mago.

Though Mami insists that her intentions were actually pure when she chose not to tell her children she was living in the same city as them, Reyna sees clearly that Mami has other priorities. Mami is as desperate for a chance to be loved and feel worthy as her children are—and as she pursues those feelings with Rey, she neglects her own children.



Reyna and her siblings visit Mami every Sunday, though this displeases Papi. He only allows them to go because of Betty. Mami frequently takes the children out to parks and shopping malls, but everywhere they go, she brings along huge plastic bags and collects cans and bottles off of the street to sell at the recycling center.

Mago, Reyna, and Carlos slowly get used to their new “double lives.” Papi and Mami refuse to be in the same room together, and won’t even reconcile to attend Reyna’s fifth-grade graduation. Reyna is happy that the “distance between [her and her mother]” is no longer two thousand miles, but can’t help noticing that there is still a sizable gap.

BOOK TWO: CHAPTER 11

Papi constantly tries to impress upon Reyna, Mago, and Carlos how important an education is. He tells them that without one, they won’t be able to secure good jobs with benefits and start saving for retirement. At only eleven, Reyna doesn’t understand why she already needs to start thinking about retirement—but Papi assures her that life only gets harder. Reyna worries that without papers she won’t be able to get a job at all, but Papi assures her that soon they are all going to change their immigration statuses. He and Mila have been officially married, and she is going to use her privileges as a citizen to help everybody apply for green cards under President Reagan’s amnesty program. Papi looks forward to the day when they can all, together, “stop living in the shadows.”

In September of 1987, Mago becomes the first person in the family to go to high school. When Papi takes her to buy new clothes to celebrate, Reyna becomes jealous and upset that Mago will always get to do everything first. Reyna decides to step out of the shadow of her older sister.

Reyna starts junior high at a place even bigger than her elementary school. When her teachers all recognize her as Mago’s younger sister, she fears she will never escape her sister’s shadow, but when she walks into her last class of the day—a band elective—she finally has the chance to set herself apart. Her music teacher tells her that she can borrow any instrument she wants from school for free, and Reyna selects an **alto saxophone**. Though it is heavy and the neck strap digs into her skin, Reyna loves playing an instrument—for once, it doesn’t matter whether she speaks perfect or poor English. She doesn’t need to speak at all—she just needs to play.

Mami is not doing very well in El Otro Lado, and is struggling to get by. Having their family back together again is a balm of sorts for the children, but they are forced to see, every Sunday, just how much their mother is struggling.



In this passage, Reyna articulates for the first time what she has been feeling for so much of the book: that closing the physical distance between two people does not erase the emotional distances, too.



Despite his cruelty and abuse, Papi does truly have dreams for himself and his children. More than anything, he wants them to truly be able to participate fully in American society, and has taken several steps to ensure that his children understand the pressures of life in the U.S.—and will one day rise to meet them.



Reyna’s jealousies again rear their head as she privately laments that she will always have to compete with Mago, her best friend and ally, for Papi’s approval and praise.



Upon entering junior high, Reyna fears she’ll never be able to carve out a place for herself—but discovering the alto sax, and a way of expressing herself that isn’t based in language, opens up a world of possibilities. Reyna looks forward not just to her own personal edification, but for the chance to at last stand apart from Mago and be the first in her family to do something.



When Reyna brings the **saxophone** home and shows Papi, he is amazed and asks her to play. She squeaks out a few meager notes, and Papi reminisces about playing drums in elementary school before he was forced to quit school to work. Reyna goes into the yard and practices, playing with all her heart for herself and for Papi, who never got the chance to experience the delight of playing an instrument.

Reyna is delighted when Papi shows genuine interest in her saxophone, and because of this, she devotes herself to it more passionately than she perhaps would have if she were only pursuing it for her own enjoyment.



BOOK TWO: CHAPTER 12

Papi doesn't allow Reyna and her siblings to go out and play in the neighborhood—there is a lot of gang activity, and he doesn't want them to get involved with a bad crowd. Many nights, Reyna and her siblings hear gunshots in the street, and one night, someone is shot right on their doorstep. Though the man begs for help, Papi will not call the police or otherwise assist the man, because he knows that getting involved will just lead to trouble for him, too.

Just as the children don't know how to ask for help in the face of Papi's abuse for fear of worsening the situation, Papi is helpless to defend himself and his family from the violence all around them.



The day after the shooting, Papi decides to go to adult school and take English language classes. He vows that once he learns English and changes his green card status, he will move his family out of their dangerous neighborhood. Watching her father head off for school, Reyna feels that her father's desire for a better life and passion for education is "contagious."

Not able to sit back and do nothing, Papi devotes himself to bettering himself so that he can achieve more for his children. Reyna is proud to see her father taking such an initiative, and feels cheered and bolstered by his dedication.



A few weeks after he starts going to school, though, Papi gets some terrible news. He learns that Tía Emperatriz has stolen his dream house after a failed marriage. Papi announces that he is going to go home and get his house back. Mila warns him that if he goes home and is caught crossing the border on the way back, he'll ruin his chances at having his green card application approved. Papi doesn't listen, though, and leaves the next day for Mexico. The whole time Papi is gone, Reyna has trouble focusing in school and finds herself distracted at home. She worries nonstop about him—and what will become of his dreams, and hers, if he is caught.

Papi's desperate need for control subsumes all else when he finds out that Emperatriz has moved into his dream house. Though Papi has come so far and is so dedicated to attaining citizenship the right way, he risks it all when he flies into a blind rage and decides he needs to go to Mexico to wrest control of his property back from his sister.



Two weeks later, Reyna and her siblings come home from school to find Papi sitting at the kitchen table. He looks pale, and his eyes are puffy and red. He announces that he is never returning to Mexico again. When Mago, Reyna, and Carlos ask him what happened, he says that Abuela Evila is ill and frail—Emperatriz basically swindled Evila into giving her the property, and refused to give Papi the house back. Neither Evila nor Augurio backed Papi up, and he tells his children that he had "never felt so alone" in his entire life. Reyna wishes she could comfort Papi, but she has nothing to say. Papi stops going to school, and spends more and more time shut up in his room. Reyna realizes that his dream house is not the only thing Papi has lost.

Papi's trip is unsuccessful, and he himself experiences intense feelings of betrayal and abandonment at the hands of his family. Reyna feels terrible for her Papi, but knows that his feelings of having been duped and discarded—just like her feelings every time Mami left—will have to heal on their own. Unfortunately, Papi doesn't have a healthy way to cope with his disappointment, and he distances himself from his family as a way of hiding his shame.



BOOK TWO: CHAPTER 13

When Reyna starts eighth grade, she has officially become a señorita, and has also placed out of ESL classes—she is allowed to start regular eighth-grade English. She has become obsessed with reading, and finds solace particularly in the books of V.C. Andrews—one book, *Flowers in the Attic*, is about four siblings who are locked away by their cruel grandparents after their father's death. Over the months, the children's mother starts visiting them less and less frequently as she begins dating other men. V.C. Andrews's stories make Reyna feel better about her own life, and grateful that things for her were never as bad as they could have been.

Halfway through the school year, Reyna enters a short-story competition. Just as with her book competition in elementary school, Reyna enters hoping that, if she wins, she'll finally make Papi proud. She writes a short story about identical twins who are separated as young girls after their parents divorce. Through her writing, Reyna is able to explore stories about broken families, absent parents, and separated siblings. Writing, alongside the **alto sax**, becomes one of Reyna's favorite ways of expressing herself.

Several weeks later, Reyna is announced as the winner of the writing competition. Her English teacher gives her the competition prize—a blue ribbon and two tickets to go on the *Queen Mary*. Reyna is confused, and thinks she's just won two tickets to a cruise. When her teacher explains that the *Queen Mary* is docked in Long Beach and doesn't actually go anywhere, Reyna is vaguely disappointed, but still proud of herself. She brings her prize home to Papi, but when she shows him what she's won, he is unenthusiastic. He doesn't see the point of traveling all the way to Long Beach to go on a ship that doesn't sail. Reyna is sad, but doesn't allow herself to be discouraged. She puts her prize in a memory box, sits down at her desk, and begins writing another story.

BOOK TWO: CHAPTER 14

In the middle of eighth grade, Reyna falls in love. The boy she develops a crush on is named Luis. Though Reyna's friend Phuong has a crush on Luis, too, and asks Reyna to act as a "messenger" between her and Luis, it is Reyna whom Luis starts flirting with. One afternoon, after school, Luis runs into Reyna on the street and asks her to go for a walk. Though Reyna knows she should go straight home, she accepts his invitation, and during their walk Luis kisses her.

Reyna is truly stunned by the similarities between her own life and the stories of V.C. Andrews's put-upon characters. These stories both allow Reyna to process her feelings of betrayal, abandonment, and anger, while allowing her to see that things could always be worse.



Reyna's never-ending quest to prove herself to Papi is given new life when the writing competition is announced. Though Reyna's primary goal is to win the competition "for" Papi, there's no denying that writing has become a cathartic and healing process for her which allows her to confront her own traumas, learn more about herself, and explore what it would mean to forgive those who have wronged her.



Reyna is so proud of herself for winning the competition that Papi's disenchantment barely fazes her. She wants to prove her worth to her Papi, and has spent her whole adolescence trying to do so. Along the way, she has proved something about her own value and her own potential to herself, as well.



Reyna begins testing the boundaries of her father's influence as she experiments with her first romantic attraction. Even though she saw how bad things were for Carlos and Mago when they developed crushes, she pushes ahead with Luis, even betraying an important friendship to do so.



When Reyna gets home, Papi is angry at her for being out late. Reyna lies and says she needed to go to two different stores to do an errand Papi sent her out on, but he sees through her lie. Reyna does not want to tell Papi the truth, knowing he'll beat her. Reyna says that she doesn't have to live with Papi, and is going to live with her mother. She walks out the door and starts down the street, where Luis and his friends are sitting on a low wall on the corner. Luis says something to Reyna that she can't hear, and the next thing she knows, someone—Papi—is grabbing her by her hair and dragging her back down the road. She hears Luis and her friends laughing as Papi pulls her back to the house and starts beating her.

As Reyna continues pushing boundaries, she soon comes up against their limit—and pushes even further. Papi's abuse escalates as he attempts to exert control over Reyna. Papi's embarrassing Reyna in front of her schoolmates doesn't inspire their pity—rather, the boys laugh, demonstrating that they, too, are immune to the seriousness of the abuse she's suffering and incapable of helping or even feeling pity.



On Monday, Reyna tries to find Luis at lunch to talk to him, but when she spots him, he looks right through her, as if she doesn't exist. Phuong, feeling betrayed, won't let Reyna sit with her, either. Reyna sits on the steps of the band room, takes out a V.C. Andrews book, and retreats into a world where words are her friends.

Unable to connect with others at her school, Reyna retreats into the world of books, finding solace in stories that allow her to explore her feelings deeply and inhabit other identities.



BOOK TWO: CHAPTER 15

In June of 1990, Mago becomes the first person on either side of her family to earn a high school diploma. At the same time, Reyna is graduating from junior high. She is the third person to do so, and so her accomplishment is not as special. Still, she holds onto her dreams of the future—dreams given to her by Papi—even in her worst moments, like when Papi beats her in a drunken stupor. Despite all the abuse and badness, Reyna and her siblings' green cards arrive, and Papi tells them that their futures are in their own hands. Papi even takes out a loan to help Mago pay for college so that she can study to become a lawyer.

Reyna's old feelings of resentment and inadequacy surface again as Mago graduates from high school. To make things worse, she worries that she will never, ever be able to do enough to make Papi stop abusing her—let alone to make him proud of her.



Reyna attends band camp at the high school that summer, and the months fly by. Soon, Reyna will be turning fifteen. Though she knows she won't be having a quinceañera, part of her is looking forward to the milestone. One afternoon, a few days before Reyna's birthday, Carlos doesn't come home on time from the park where he's gone to play with his friends. Hours later, two men bring Carlos through the front door—he is pale, covered in sweat, and has a broken leg.

Even as the tenor of things seems to soften over the summer, there is darkness lurking on the horizon—Papi's rules are now being tested by Carlos.



Papi yells at Carlos for going to the park in the first place, and then cracks a beer and retreats to his bedroom. Mago asks if Papi is going to take Carlos to the hospital, but he refuses. Carlos begs Mago to take him to the hospital, but no matter how hard she tries to get Papi to come out of his room, he stays put. Reyna wishes she had the courage to call 911, or go find a neighbor. Neither her nor Mago, though, is brave enough to defy their terrifying father. They nurse Carlos through the night, and all the while, Reyna muses at how the Man Behind the Glass was a better father than the one they live with now.

In the morning, Papi still refuses to take Carlos to the hospital. Reyna and Mago beg Mila to take him, but she won't defy Papi, either. Mago goes off to work, and when she tells her coworkers what's going on, they volunteer to come help her take Carlos to get some help. Just as they arrive and begin loading Carlos into the car, Papi pulls into the driveway and insists on being the one to take Carlos to the hospital.

Carlos comes home later that evening with his leg in a cast, having broken two major bones. After Papi goes to bed, Mila tells the children that because their father grew up in an abusive household, he doesn't know any other way to behave. Reyna and her siblings understand what life with Augurio and Evila must have been like, but they no longer feel this is an excuse for Papi's behavior. Still, Reyna feels guilty for expecting more from her father—after all, he brought them to El Otro Lado, and to complain now seems, to her, ungrateful.

BOOK TWO: CHAPTER 16

After Carlos's accident, things change between Mago and Papi. Where Mago once brought home her checks at the end of the week and proudly gave him to Papi to help cover the family's expenses, Reyna can now see her sister hesitating. She loses interest in her classes at college, and takes a full-time job so that she can pay for a car and clothing. She begins partying on the weekends, and though Reyna warns her that Papi wouldn't approve of her behavior, Mago insists she no longer cares what Papi thinks of her.

One afternoon, walking down the street, Mago and Reyna pass by a dress boutique and see a mannequin in the window wearing a gorgeous quinceañera dress. Mago announces that she is going to throw Reyna a proper quinceañera. Reyna tells Mago that the party is too big an extravagance, but Mago insists that she will do anything it takes to make the party happen. When Mago tells Mami about the party, she, too, gets on board with the plan, and offers to help get some godparents for the occasion—people who will help to arrange and pay for certain aspects of the party.

Upon seeing his injured, miserable son, Papi's first instinct is to continue to punish Carlos further (seemingly to teach him a lesson) rather than doing the sensible thing and helping him. As Reyna realizes just how bad the abuse has gotten, she chides herself for not being able to take action against Papi, while privately mourning the man she thought he was.



Papi does not agree to take Carlos to the hospital until other people—outsiders to their family—witness the abuse and mistreatment going on inside their house.



Though Papi's behavior put Carlos in danger and possibly even worsened his condition, Mila continues to assert that Papi's behavior is beyond his control and that he is blameless for the many cruelties he inflicts upon his children. Reyna finds herself giving into this rhetoric, believing that even abusive treatment from Papi in the U.S. is better than poverty in Mexico.



As Mago begins to realize that Papi's behavior is never going to get better—and is probably only going to get worse—she looks for ways to distance herself from her father's influence, even going so far as to openly defy him and test the boundaries of his rage.



Mago's decision to throw Reyna an elaborate party for her fifteenth birthday seems to be related to the desires she's wrestling with privately: the need to strike out on her own, to take responsibility for her and her siblings' welfare, since it's become clear that Papi won't, and to feel that she can spend her own money according to her own wants and needs.



Mago hires a dressmaker to make Reyna's dress, and soon the day of the event arrives. Reyna is nervous, as she and Mago have lied to the church about Reyna having completed her first communion back in Mexico. All through the church service, and even after, Reyna worries that she has transgressed against God, but when she confesses her feelings to Mago during a photo session before the party, Mago laughs and tells her not to worry—Hell and the devil, she says, aren't even real.

The party that night is beautiful and emotional for Reyna—both her parents are there in the same room, even though they are at opposite ends of the banquet hall. Reyna is excited to live her dream of dancing the traditional waltz with Papi—but during the dance, he is visibly drunk and smells of beer. Reyna is filled with regret, wishing she had chosen to dance the waltz with Mago, who made the entire evening a reality.

BOOK TWO: CHAPTER 17

In November of her junior year of high school, Reyna is accepted into the All City Honor Marching Band. To get in, though, she has to switch from the sax to the bells—a change she's very sad about. Despite her big accomplishment, Papi has offered Reyna no praise or congratulations—even though she'll soon be performing in the 1992 Rose Parade.

Reyna begins a flirtation with another member of the band named Axel. Though they like each other, Axel wants to keep their romance a secret. Reyna knows why Axel is ashamed to be with her—ever since her freshman year, she has been “cursed” with a bad reputation because of her aloofness and her rebellious streak. No girls at school will be friends with Reyna, and the only real relationships she has with any of her classmates are with boys who want to make out with her and then blow her off. Reyna hasn't yet realized just how deeply her abusive relationship with Papi has affected her relationships with boys at school.

When the day of the Rose Parade arrives, Mago is the only member of Reyna's family who attends her performance. In the weeks after the parade, Reyna notices that Axel will only hang out with her in places they can't be seen. One day, she overhears people talking about how Axel has asked another girl to the prom. Reyna runs home and cries to Mago about it, but Mago tells her to move on—Axel isn't worth it. Reyna wants to say that it's she who is worthless. Why else, she wonders, would Papi and the guys at school all treat her so badly?

Though Mago is excited about the quinceañera, Reyna is a little bit more nervous. She has wanted for so long to be a real señorita and have a real quinceañera, but she feels unprepared and fraudulent as the event descends upon her. Reyna is wrestling with her own identity issues, and her own feelings of worthlessness and uncertainty.



Reyna dreamed her whole life of dancing with Papi at her quinceañera. Now that the moment is here, however, she realizes that her father is not—and perhaps never was—worthy of sharing this moment with her. Mago is the one who has looked after her, loved her, and raised her—not The Man Behind the Glass.



Papi continues to look right past Reyna's accomplishment, even as she calibrates her whole life around making choices that will impress him and pay the debt she feels she owes to him.



Though readers have mostly seen Reyna in the home sphere, she now reveals that her strange, miserable home life has made things at school very difficult for her. The ways in which she's been denied a normal social life stem from how bad things are at home, but Reyna can't understand the truth behind her suffering yet.



Reyna has had to deal with being abandoned by women and abused by men all of her life. She feels that her self-worth is shattered, and her complicated perception of herself as someone unworthy of love, attention, or good treatment has only grown worse as the abuse she's suffered has intensified.



The day of the prom, Mago takes Reyna out dancing to distract her. They drive across town in Mago's new car, dressed up in fancy clothes. Reyna knows that Mago is incurring a lot of credit card debt, and speculates that her sister wants to make up for the years she spent in poverty, dressed in rags. Mago has dropped out of college to work full-time in order to stave off her debt, and though she tries not to judge her sister, Reyna wonders why Mago has abandoned her dreams. Once they arrive at the club, Mago sneaks Reyna in, and they dance the night away. Reyna can't stop thinking, though, of what Axel and his new girlfriend must be doing. All she knows for sure is that he must not be ashamed of being seen with whoever the new girl is.

Even though Mago attempts to take Reyna out on the town and show her a good time in order to distract her from her worries, Reyna's fixation on winning the attention and love of a boy—perhaps to fill the void left by Papi's indifference—interferes with even fun, mundane activities.



BOOK TWO: CHAPTER 18

A month after prom, Papi comes home one day with an old yellow Datsun he has purchased for Carlos. Carlos is elated, and the two of them immediately head out for a drive. Mago dismisses the car as a piece of junk, but Reyna secretly hopes that when she starts college, Papi will buy her a car too. Even if it is old and rickety, if it comes from her Papi, she knows she will cherish it.

Papi's gifts of junk elate and delight his children. They receive so little from him that anything he gives them takes on a sheen of near-holiness, blinding them to the ways in which he is a totally insufficient parent.



Carlos has a girlfriend whose name is Griselda, and he is crazy about her. One day, Carlos announces that he no longer wants to pursue a college education and a degree in criminal justice—he wants to settle down with Griselda and marry her. Carlos asks Papi to come with him to Griselda's family's house to ask for her hand in marriage, but Papi refuses, insisting that Carlos go to school. Papi tries to remind Carlos of how many people would die—and literally have died—to be in Carlos's shoes, with a world of opportunity in front of him. Carlos, however, says he doesn't care—he is going to get married.

Carlos, too, is looking for love to fill the void left by his painful and abusive home life. Love is so important to him that he abandons his dreams—and Papi's—of pursuing an education. This enrages Papi, who is unable to see the ways in which his abuse, disinterest, and cruelty is affecting his children and their choices.



Mago and Reyna, too, try to talk Carlos out of the marriage, but he won't listen to his sisters, either. Eventually, Carlos enlists Mami to go with him to Griselda's house to ask for her hand, and just a month after his twentieth birthday, Carlos becomes a married man. Eighteen months—and one son—later, Reyna writes, Carlos will get divorced, but he will never finish college.

Though Reyna doesn't delve into detail, it seems clear that Carlos's relationship with his new wife fails so quickly as a result of Carlos's difficult home life, and perhaps his inability to handle adult relationships.



BOOK TWO: CHAPTER 19

In 1993, during Reyna's senior year of high school, Mago decides to go with Mami on a trip to Mexico. As a legal resident of the U.S. under the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1976, Mami can travel back and forth between the two countries as she pleases. Mami is back to selling Avon—though she remains on welfare and without benefits, she isn't motivated to learn English and try to get a better job. She frequently pulls Leonardo and Betty out of elementary school to take them on trips to Mexico—she doesn't care much about their getting an education. Reyna writes that, later, it would come as no surprise to anyone when Betty and Leonardo dropped out of high school, or when Betty got involved with gangs and became a teenage mother.

The real reason Mago wants to go to Mexico is to visit Acapulco with one of her work friends. Reyna accompanies Mago to the travel agent's office, and Mago offers to buy Reyna a ticket to Mexico, as well. Reyna reluctantly accepts, not wanting to take Mago's money but feeling suddenly homesick.

A few weeks later, Reyna joins Mago, Mami, Leonardo, and Betty on their trip. Papi is furious that she is missing a week in school, and Reyna too feels awful about the missed time, but arranges to get her homework in advance so that she can stay on-task while she's away.

In Mexico, Reyna is shocked by how things in Iguala have deteriorated. The river behind Abuelita Chinta's house is now nothing more than a "dumping ground for trash," and the once-lively train station has been permanently shut down. Despite the changes to the town, Reyna can tell when their taxi is approaching Abuelita Chinta's house, and her heart begins beating faster as they pull up in front of the little shack.

Seeing for the first time through new eyes the poverty in which she grew up, Reyna realizes how her father must have felt when he came back to Mexico to retrieve her and her siblings. As she reunites with her cousins, her aunts and uncles, and her Abuelita, Reyna is struck by how malnourished and dirty everyone is. Over the next several days, Reyna reconnects with some of her childhood friends—the boys all want to marry her so that they can go back to El Otro Lado with her, and the girls, many of whom are married young mothers, refuse to let her into the houses, shamed by their poverty. Reyna is surprised how poor her Spanish has become, and begins to realize that to the people she grew up with, she is no longer "Mexican enough."

Whereas Papi's house is a place of strict control and high expectations, Mami seems to have no expectations for herself or for her children. Somewhere in the middle is the sensible way of parenting, but Reyna's parents have gone to such extremes that their children are winding up confused and incapable of making healthy decisions.



Even though it seems like Mago has different reasons for going to Mexico than Reyna does, Reyna accepts her offer and begins looking forward to returning to the place where she was born.



Reyna, constantly torn between her parents, accompanies Mami on a journey—but makes sure to please Papi, too, as she prepares to leave.



Though Iguala was already a poor town when Reyna left, the changes that have befallen it in the years she's been in El Otro Lado stun and shock her. Though she has closed the physical gap between her and her hometown, there is a new kind of distance she feels as she drives down its roads.



As Reyna's visit to Mexico unfolds, she is surprised by the ways in which she has become distant from the people, places, and customs she once knew so well. She has changed, which makes her return to Iguala different than what she thought it would be—she is no longer the girl who left, as she has changed in irreversible and profound ways since she's been living in El Otro Lado.



When Reyna returns to Abuelita Chinta's house from visiting her friends, Mago is cross with her for spending her time with "trash." Reyna, furious, reminds Mago that she, too, comes from Iguala, before pushing her. Mago and Reyna get into a physical fight, and though Mami begs for them to stop, Reyna is too furious to let up. She is angry at Mago for severing the ties that bind them to this place, and angrier still at Mago for squandering her chances at an education and still acting superior. Reyna feels the two of them owe it to their cousins, friends, and all the others living in poverty here in Iguala to make the most of their opportunities in El Otro Lado.

As Reyna runs crying into the house, she realizes that while she herself still speaks English with an accent, Mago no longer does—she has done everything she can to erase all her ties to Mexico. Reyna, on the other hand, knows deep down that she will never be able to do so—nor will she ever want to.

BOOK TWO: CHAPTER 20

A couple weeks after returning from Mexico, Mago tells Reyna that she's planning on looking for an apartment with her friend. Reyna gets worried that Mago is leaving her, but Mago invites Reyna to come live in the new place, too—they can finally be in a place where they'll be safe and happy, she says. Reyna secretly longs to leave her father's house—he is never proud of her, and he notices none of the accomplishments he has demanded of her.

Reyna has joined track and field and gotten a boyfriend named Steve. Steve is desperate to sleep with Reyna, but she insists she's waiting for marriage. As another excuse, she tells Steve that she might be transferring schools soon anyway—even if moving in with Mago means transferring midway through her senior year, she knows she would follow her sister to the ends of the earth.

A week later, Mago tells Reyna that she and her friend have found an apartment—but won't be able to take Reyna to live with them. Reyna is devastated, and begs to share a room with Mago, but Mago says the apartment is at capacity, and the landlord will be angry if he discovers an extra person living there. Mago points out that Reyna only has two months of school left, and it wouldn't be right to pull her out of school with so little time left. Reyna begs Mago to stay, but Mago insists she can't stand it in Papi's house any longer.

While Reyna feels conflicted about having left Mexico—and the part of her identity connected to it—behind, Mago is all too ready to sever her ties to Iguala. This hurts Reyna, who sees it as her duty both to nurture the Mexican part of herself and also to do as well as she can, knowing that so many people stuck in cyclical, generational poverty in Mexico cannot achieve the things she and her sister can.



Reyna decides that she does not want to give up the part of herself connected to Mexico, even if Mago does. This is the first major rift in their relationship, and it creates a small but profound distance between them.



With the exception of their fight in Mexico, Mago has, in the last few years, really stepped up to take care of Reyna not just emotionally but financially, too. Now, she offers Reyna the chance at some independence—and freedom from the abuse which has made them both so miserable.



Reyna makes some strides in her personal life, but even in her new relationship, her commitment to her family comes first.



Reyna is terrified of being abandoned by Mago. She has already had to deal with so many betrayals and disappointments in her life, and always saw Mago as her protector and "little mother." Mago, though, has to save herself—plus, Reyna is still a child, and has to complete her obligations at school lest she stoke even more of Papi's rage.



When Mago tells Papi that she's planning on moving out, he threatens her with the proclamation that he will never speak to her again if she does so; she will be "dead" to him. Mago doesn't say anything, and Reyna begs her once more to stay.

Every day, Reyna comes home from school, praying that Mago hasn't already left. Mago comes home every evening, though, and though she and Papi don't speak for a couple weeks, soon even things between them have gone back to normal. There are even things to celebrate—Reyna is accepted to UC Irvine, and the whole family goes out to dinner.

Two days after the celebration dinner, however, Reyna comes home to an empty bedroom—Mago has left without telling anybody, even Reyna. Reyna starts her chores, crying, and when Papi comes home and she tells him that Mago has gone, he flies into a rage. He forbids Reyna from ever seeing Mago again, and looks at Reyna as if she, too, has disappointed him. He then tells Reyna that she can forget about going to college—he predicts that she is going to be a failure, just like Mago and Carlos, and doesn't want to "even bother" sending her to school. Reyna begs her father to reconsider, but he shuts himself in his bedroom and will not speak to her anymore.

Reyna graduates from school, but Papi will not allow her to send in her paperwork to UC Irvine. Because she's underage, there is nothing she can do. Over the summer, both Carlos and Mago announce that they are soon going to have children. Mago calls Reyna and tells her that she wants to see her—she says she'll pick her up from the house on Sunday. All week, Reyna tries to muster the courage to tell Papi that she's going out with Mago on the weekend, but can't bring herself to do it.

Papi's drinking worsens and worsens over the summer, and Reyna begins selling his beer cans at the recycling center. He argues with Mila nonstop, but never hits her—he takes out his rage physically on Reyna instead, beating her frequently.

That Sunday, Mago comes to pick Reyna up. Reyna calls through her father's bedroom door that she's going out with Mago, but Papi forbids her from going. Reyna says that she's going anyway, and starts heading out of the apartment. When she is almost at Mago's car, though, Papi comes downstairs and, just as he did in front of Luis years ago, drags her back upstairs by the hair while Mago looks on in horror. Once upstairs, Papi begins beating Reyna, hitting her in the face and drawing blood. She calls for Mago, but her sister does not come for her. Suddenly, the beating stops—Mila has intervened.

Papi tries to assert his control over Mago by lashing out threateningly when she attempts to exert her independence.



Reyna knows deep down that things at Papi's house are unsustainable, but she still harbors the secret hope that her sister will stay and they will be able to have some joy and normalcy in their lives.



Reyna is miserable to have been abandoned yet again, and by the one person she thought would never leave her. Whereas Reyna's reaction to Mago's departure is sadness, Papi's is pure rage, and the consequences for Mago's perceived misbehavior unfortunately fall to Reyna—in Mago's absence, he punishes her, frustrated because he feels like his children are amounting to nothing.



As everyone else's lives are moving forward—beyond the bounds of Papi's control—Reyna remains firmly under her father's thumb and stuck in limbo.



Papi only beats his children, perhaps because he knows that due to Mila's power over him—as relates to his green card and citizenship status—he cannot afford to anger or alienate her.



Papi's second instance of dragging Reyna back into the house demonstrates his need to control his children's actions, words, and behaviors no matter the cost. He feels free to do with their bodies what he pleases and sees beating them senseless as the only hope he has of bending them to his will.



Reyna asks Mila why Mago didn't come to help her. Papi insists that Mago doesn't care about Reyna and stomps off to his room. Mila helps Reyna up and tries to explain to her that Mago, now pregnant, has to look out for her baby, and can't put herself in harm's way—Reyna, devastated, goes to her room and locks herself inside.

Reyna is devastated that Mago—who has always been her protector, her ally, and her little mother—did not come for her in her moment of need. Mago is about to become an actual mother, though, and her priorities have shifted—she has her child to think of.



BOOK TWO: CHAPTER 21

In the aftermath of Mago's departure, Reyna's bedroom becomes both her prison and her haven. In order to avoid her father and Mila, Reyna retreats entirely in her bedroom, ignoring her hunger pangs and urinating into a bucket she keeps in the corner of the room. Her father has "pecked away" at her for so long that she is afraid if she comes out of her room, he will swoop down on her like a vulture.

Reyna has often felt, over the years, like she is walking on eggshells in Papi's home. Now, though, she is outright terrified of him, and tries to put a distance between herself and her father order to avoid a confrontation with him—and preserve her own physical and mental health.



One afternoon, Reyna calls her boyfriend Steve and asks him to come over. They lay down on her bed and have sex—Reyna loses her virginity to him more as an act of defiance against her father than out of any real desire or love for Steve.

Reyna retaliates against her father in secret ways—ways that seem connected to her desire to prove her worth, even if Papi doesn't know about them.



Reyna begins engaging in other reckless behaviors. She tries to get a job as a movie extra, but is unprepared for the audition and isn't picked. On her way down Wilshire Boulevard in Beverly Hills, two men call out to her from a car, asking if she wants a modeling job. Though Reyna knows in her gut she shouldn't go with them, she gets into the car. They take her to an office building and order her to strip for photographs, at which point Reyna flees, running down the street until her lungs hurt.

Reyna continues trying to find ways to prove her worth to herself. Papi has given her less than nothing, and she puts herself in potentially dangerous situations in order to hopefully find ways to feel good about herself.



Several weeks later, Reyna breaks up with Steve. She knows that in having unprotected premarital sex with him, she is running the risk of enraging Papi—and she wants a favor from him. One night, when Papi gets home, Reyna doesn't hide in her room. She goes out to the kitchen and tells him that the next day she is going to Pasadena City College to enroll. Rather than starting a fight, Papi looks at her and begins speaking to her.

Reyna is smart enough to know that the tactics she's using to try to make herself feel better are actually damaging her, and she decides to stop wasting time and face down her biggest fear: her father.



Papi explains that when his father took him out of school and put him in the fields to work, his job was to guide the oxen in a straight line. His father gave him a rod and instructed him to beat them as hard as he could if the cows didn't listen. Papi was only nine years old. After telling Reyna this story, he asks if she "understand[s]." Reyna doesn't say anything—she is still too angry to forgive all he has done to her, though she longs to find a way to understand. As Reyna thinks of something to say, her father opens the fridge to get a beer, and Reyna knows that soon, her real father will disappear.

Papi attempts to give Reyna an explanation for his controlling, abusive ways. As a child, he was taught that control was more important than anything, and that if control only came through physical violence, it didn't matter. Reyna doesn't know what to do with this information—but before she can decide, her father retreats into his old ways, and Reyna knows that his opening up to her was merely a fluke.



BOOK TWO: CHAPTER 22

In 1994, Reyna enrolls in an English class at Pasadena City College that is part of the requirements for transfer to a four-year college. Her instructor is Diana Savas, a Greek-American woman who speaks Spanish. The first assignment Savas gives to the class is an essay about the groups to which the students in the class belong—racial, economic, religious, et cetera. Reyna has trouble with her essay, and doesn't feel she belongs anywhere outside of her family, so she begins writing about that. A few days after Reyna turns in the essay, Dr. Savas asks Reyna to her office. She explains that though Reyna didn't exactly complete the assignment correctly, her writing is wonderful. Reyna feels seen for the very first time.

Reyna has been seeking praise from Papi—mainly through music and writing—for many, many years, but it has never come. Now, in the early days of her new college program, she is singled out and recognized as a talent by her instructor, and the feeling fills Reyna with pride and joy. Writing about her family becomes a way for Reyna to exorcise her own demons and communicate who she is to the world.



The following semester, even though Reyna isn't taking one of Dr. Savas's class, she stops by the professor's office to say hello. Dr. Savas gives Reyna a book by a Latina writer as a birthday present, and when Reyna takes it home and reads it, she is shocked. For the first time, she is reading about characters who live in a world similar to her own.

Reyna begins to realize, through her relationship with Dr. Savas, that reading and writing can be a way of finding a community—and one's place in the world.



Reyna visits Dr. Savas more and more frequently. They never talk about personal matters—just about books and writing. Sometimes Reyna longs to tell Dr. Savas the truth about what's going on at home: that Papi is having an affair, and that he and Mila are fighting more—and that the fights have turned physical.

Though Reyna is carving out a place for herself in the world, she remains terrified to the point of paralysis when it comes to asking for help where Papi and his abuse are concerned.



After one such horrible fight, Mila goes to the hospital because Papi pushed her down the stairs and onto some gardening tools. Reyna takes Betty, who is visiting, to her room to avoid Papi. Some time later, Reyna is awakened by a police officer who informs her that Papi is being arrested. Reyna feels a confusing mix of emotions: she is happy that Papi is getting what he deserves, but simultaneously doesn't want him to go to jail.

Reyna has been longing for Papi's abuse to stop—but when someone finally puts a stop to it, she is overcome with conflicting emotions. At the end of the day, Papi is still the Man Behind the Glass to her in many ways, and she is quick to excuse his errors when things get tough.



That night, when Reyna takes Betty home to Mami's, Mami offers Reyna the chance to come stay with her. For the first time, the two women discuss frankly the beatings they have both suffered at Papi's hands. Reyna goes back over to Papi's the next day and collects her belongings. After just one night spent at Mami's cramped and dirty apartment, though, Reyna knows she can't stay—the neighborhood is too dangerous, and the commute to school can take up to three hours.

Unsure of what to do and desperate for help, Reyna goes to Dr. Savas's office and at last confesses the truth about her home life. Diana listens carefully, and then offers Reyna the chance to come live with her in her college-owned housing. Reyna doesn't want to be a burden, but she also knows she can't stay in her current situation. She gladly accepts Diana's offer, and moves in with her professor. Though at first it is awkward for her to be in Diana's house, and she is uncertain of how to behave, Diana soothes her anxieties and makes Reyna feel welcome. Reyna hears word that Mila has dropped all charges against Papi and has moved back into the apartment, but Reyna knows she can't return—things will only get worse between them.

As Reyna explores Diana's extensive library of books, she finds solace in stories and novels by Latina authors, such as Sandra Cisneros and Isabel Allende. Reyna can't believe she's never read their books before, as they are a "revelation." They allow her to see that there are other people who have experienced the things she has experienced—abuse, alienation, familial struggles. Diana takes Reyna to Greek restaurants and foreign films, and she encourages Reyna to apply for writing scholarships. Reyna's worldview begins to broaden. Years later, Reyna writes, she will visit the offices and living rooms of the writers she learned to admire through Diana, and she owes the fact that so many of her dreams came true to Diana's belief in her.

BOOK TWO: CHAPTER 23

A year and a half later, Mila finally decides to leave Papi. Reyna is surprised. Even more shocking is the fact that Mila withdraws a large sum of money from their savings account and files a restraining order against him. Carlos begs Reyna to return home and help Papi, but Reyna refuses. A few days later, Carlos calls again to tell Reyna that Papi has attempted suicide—Carlos walked into the apartment to find Papi holding a gun, and saw a bullet hole in the wall just above Papi's head. Papi insisted he had simply been cleaning the gun when it went off, but Carlos knows better. He begs Reyna to move back in and keep an eye on Papi—neither Carlos nor Mago, who are busy with their own children, can do it.

Though Reyna and Mami begin bridging part of the emotional distance between them while sharing stories of the abuse they've both suffered, Reyna realizes that she does not belong in Mami's house—there is still not enough space in Mami's life for her. However, as she recognizes Mami's suffering in her own, she begins to forgive her mother in a new, deeper way.



Reyna is afraid of being an imposition—she has been taught all throughout her life that relying on others for help is a burden, especially after her experiences with Abuela Evila and Mila.



As Reyna's world expands, she leaves behind the crushing weight of her pain, trauma, and suffering, and finds new ways of encountering herself and indeed forgiving herself for allowing herself to be treated so badly. Reyna sees all that life has to offer and comes to understand her full potential—not as someone in debt to her father, abandoned by her mother, or abused by her grandparents, but as someone firmly in charge of her own path.



As Papi's situation worsens, it becomes evident that he has alienated everyone in the family—no one wants to, or will make time to, take care of him. The duty falls to Reyna, who in many ways, as the youngest, has borne the brunt of her father's violence.



Out of obligation, Reyna returns home to her father's side. She has graduated from PCC and, in the fall, will be heading off to study at UC Santa Cruz. She wants to be able to go up north with a free conscience and decides that spending the summer taking care of Papi will allow her to have a fresh start in the fall. When Reyna arrives at the apartment for the first time in months, she finds Papi sitting alone and seemingly disoriented at the kitchen table. She nervously suggests they go out to dinner, and to her surprise, Papi agrees—he even lets her drive there, giving her advice and guidance along the way.

As Reyna passes the summer with Papi, she finds he has changed. She often brings her newest boyfriend Edwin over to help cook dinner and watch television with Papi. Surprisingly, Papi likes Edwin, and often the two stay up talking long after Reyna has gone to bed. Slowly, Mago begins reconciling with Papi as well, and even Betty starts coming over to the apartment again. Reyna and her siblings notice that Papi talks about Mila all the time, and though they urge him to forget about her, Papi remains fixated on their relationship.

Papi attends a court hearing to resolve his legal troubles with Mila. When an argument erupts between Mila, Mago, and Carlos, Mila calls the children “leeches” and says they’d still be “wetbacks” if it weren’t for her. Reyna feels torn—she knows she owes Mila a lot, but can’t explain to her how she and her siblings, despite it all, love their father more than anything.

As the weeks go by, Reyna is surprised by the continuing changes in Papi. He never criticizes or yells at Reyna, and he no longer hits her. He actually seems to like having her around, and they spend time together going to parks and restaurants. Papi is, for the first time ever, interested in Reyna’s accomplishments, and she tells him proudly about the many scholarships she has won to attend UC Santa Cruz. She speaks loftily of the beautiful campus and the rigorous curriculum there, confiding all her dreams for her education and her future in Papi at last.

One night, however, while eating dinner, Papi announces that he has been talking with Mila, and the two of them are going to hold off on the divorce. Mila is coming back home—but there is a condition to her return. She doesn’t want Reyna, Mago, or Carlos around. Reyna is sickened to learn that her father has agreed to this condition, and gravely disappointed when he will not look at her or speak to her further. Reyna goes to her room and packs her bags.

In spite of all she has suffered, Reyna can't help but feel a sense of duty and loyalty to Papi. Just as she and her siblings went back to Mami time and time again over the years, Reyna returns now to Papi, but for a slightly different reason—she wants to clear her conscience and repay her debt to him once and for all before opening a new chapter in her life.



Though Reyna was preparing for the worst, she and her siblings are surprised to find that Papi is, more or less, a changed man. He seems to have let go of a lot of his anger and violence—though from his fixation with Mila, it seems clear that his need for control is as strong as ever.



Mila's anger towards the children raises their hackles and causes them to defend Papi even more staunchly. Even after all he's put them through, in some ways, he is still The Man Behind the Glass to them.



Reyna has been waiting her whole life to impress her Papi, and to get him interested in the things that interest her. Now, after all she's been through, Reyna finally gets her wish, and she is excited for the chance to show herself—her true self—to her Papi at last.



Considering how well things have been going with Papi all summer, and how much Reyna has sacrificed for him, this newest betrayal comes as a particularly painful blow as Reyna is forced to realize that she's still not the most important thing in Papi's life.



Reyna stays at Diana's house for the last few days before her trip up to UC Santa Cruz. Carlos and Mago are furious, and proclaim that they will never speak to their father again. Reyna is mostly just depressed—once again, she and her siblings are orphans. She wonders what happened to her “real parents”—perhaps, she thinks, they were “caught between two worlds” when they first crossed the border. Reyna wonders if they will ever find their way back to her.

Even with Papi's latest betrayal piled on top of all his other betrayals, Reyna continues to see her parents for what they truly are—two flawed people who did their best in the face of tremendous challenges brought on by poverty, cycles of abuse, and the desire to do right by their children. Reyna laments that her parents seem to still be stuck or lost somewhere, but she remains hopeful that things can still change.



BOOK TWO: CHAPTER 24

Reyna's boyfriend Edwin picks her up from Diana's to drive her up to UC Santa Cruz. On the drive, Edwin tells her how proud Papi is of her, but Reyna doesn't say anything. Edwin encourages Reyna to try to understand that her father knew she would be leaving at the end of the summer and didn't want to be alone—that is why he agreed to Mila's condition. He suggests that perhaps, in the end, Papi just didn't want to hold Reyna back any longer.

Edwin's words of encouragement do little to make Reyna feel better—but hearing from someone who grew to know her father that he was, in the end, proud of her is perhaps just what she needs to hear as she heads off to at last begin college.



Edwin helps Reyna move into her student apartment. She wishes that her mother and father and siblings were here with her today, but knows that this time, she is the one who has left them—she has chosen to be alone. Once Reyna is all moved in, Edwin departs and promises to visit each weekend—he is attending another school nearby. Truly alone for the first time in her life, Reyna takes a walk and explores her new campus. She is enchanted by the blue skies, fresh air, and tall redwood trees, but overwhelmed at the same time.

Reyna's whole life has been about her family—now, she is embarking on a chapter of her life that is just about her. The feeling is foreign and exciting at the same time: she gets to live her own life just for herself after years of trying to prove her worth to Papi, to make herself manageable for Mago, and to make herself loved by Mami.



As Reyna makes her way to a cliff looking over the ocean, she realizes she has nothing to fear. All she has to do is focus on her dreams. She closes her eyes, remembering her first trip to the beach with Papi, and how tightly he held her hand as they walked into the ocean together. In Reyna's mind, she at last lets his callused hand go.

As Reyna mentally releases herself from Papi's grasp, she also releases him—or the image of him she always wanted him to be—from hers.



BOOK TWO: EPILOGUE

In June of 1999, Reyna becomes the first person in her family to graduate from college—with honors to boot. Her whole family comes up to Santa Cruz to celebrate. As part of a school tradition, Reyna writes an essay about the teacher who has most inspired her—Diana. Reyna's essay is chosen to be read aloud at graduation, and Diana flies up for the ceremony.

In the end, it is Reyna's accomplishments, after all, that bring her family together, surmounting—even just for a day—the distances that remain between them all.



In 2000 Reyna becomes an ESL teacher for the Los Angeles Unified School District. She hopes to be an inspirational teacher, like Diana. She teaches immigrant children and finds that, like her, all of the children she teaches have spent time away from their parents. In 2003, when she begins teaching adult school, she encounters many parents who have been forced to leave their children behind. In them, she sees her own parents, and wonders when the cycle of leaving children behind will end—or if it ever will.

In 2002, Reyna becomes a United States citizen, though she continues to consider herself Mexican-American. Both countries are within her, and her writing becomes her way of bridging both identities. In 2006, Reyna publishes her first novel, and the following year it wins an American Book Award; in 2009, her second novel follows. She repairs her relationship with Mila and her father. When Reyna has children, they call Mila “Grandma Mila.”

After Papi is diagnosed with liver cancer in 2010, Reyna finds herself having to once again reframe her idea of who her father truly is. The sick man lying in a hospital bed is not the same father she came to live with over twenty-five years ago, and Reyna must force herself to leave her complex emotions about Papi—anger, bitterness, and resentment—at the door of his hospital room. Often, she and her siblings become overwhelmed by their emotions and find themselves talking about how their father has at last gotten what he deserved. Reyna tries to remind herself, though, of her “other father”—the one who wanted, above all, a better life for his children.

Towards the end of Papi’s struggle, Reyna knows that what he truly needs is her forgiveness. The day before her thirty-sixth birthday, she stands over his hospital bed with Carlos and Mago as his life-support machines are turned off. She holds her father’s hand, and finds herself wondering whether she would still have followed him to El Otro Lado if she had known what life with him would be like. As Papi takes his last breath, Reyna decides that the answer, against all odds, is yes—her father has made her who she is.

Reyna teaches both abandoned children and the parents who did the abandoning. She sees the cycle of children left behind from both sides—she understands how painful it is to be left, but knows how high most parents’ hopes are when they come to El Otro Lado seeking a better life.



Reyna’s writing her allows her to bridge the distances between her many selves, and the strength she draws from her success—not to mention the cathartic use of her own experiences to tell a story—allows her to repair the fractured relationships in her life.



Even at the end of Papi’s life, as he is sick in bed, Reyna and her siblings struggle with how they see the man. They have been betrayed, abandoned, abused, and let down by their father, and yet in his hour of need, they cannot deny him a brief reprieve from their judgement. Reyna’s past experiences combine to allow her to see her father as a flawed being, but one who ultimately wanted to give his children something he never had.



Though it’s difficult to do, Reyna puts aside her pain, judgement, and anger and has a moment of recognition, reflection, and forgiveness with her father. It has all been worth it—all the sorrow, all the abuse—to arrive at the place where she is now, and to have achieved so much.





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