

# The Poet X



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ELIZABETH ACEVEDO

Elizabeth Acevedo was born in New York to Dominican parents. She's the youngest child and only girl in her family. At age 14, Acevedo participated in one of her first slam poetry events at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe and went on to perform at a number of open mic events around the city. She later earned a BA in performing arts from George Washington University and an MFA from the University of Maryland. Since graduating, she's taught poetry to teens in a variety of settings, as well as eighth grade English. *The Poet X* is her first novel, and part of her inspiration for writing it was spending time with teen girls who didn't see themselves reflected in classic literature or in novels commonly taught in schools. All of her published works have won numerous awards and she's also been recognized for her spoken word poetry. She lives in Washington, DC with her partner.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Poetry has contained a performance element since ancient times because, until the advent of the printing press, hearing poetry was often the only way to experience it. The slam and spoken word poetry scene that Xiomara discovers, however, is its own distinct movement that has historically been extremely diverse. In the early 1970s, the New York City-based Nuyorican Poets Cafe gave playwrights, poets, and musicians of color who weren't accepted by the mainstream a platform to promote their work and, specifically, popularized performance poetry. In the 1990s, alongside a resurgence in popularity of the 1950s and '60s Beat poets, this began to grow into modern spoken word poetry. MTV helped this along by scouting for talent at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, which brought poets such as Maggie Estep to the show *MTV Unplugged*. Poetry slams, or spoken word competitions, began in the 1980s. The first National Poetry Slam took place in 1990. Today, spoken word poets—including Elizabeth Acevedo herself—can reach wider audiences than ever thanks to social media and video streaming sites like YouTube.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Acevedo cites the Dominican author Junot Díaz ([The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao](#)) as a major influence on her writing, as well as Jacqueline Woodson's 2014 verse novel [Brown Girl Dreaming](#). *The Poet X* joins the growing genre of verse novels for young adults including [The Crossover](#) by Kwame Alexander and [Love That Dog](#) by Sharon Creech. Though verse narratives and

epic poems like the *Odyssey* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* have existed for millennia, the verse novel is distinctly modern and traces its roots to the early 1800s. A famous early example is *Eugene Onegin* by Alexander Pushkin, which was published initially in serial form between 1825 and 1832.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Poet X
- **When Written:** 2012-2018
- **Where Written:** Washington, DC
- **When Published:** 2018
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult Verse Novel; Bildungsroman
- **Setting:** Harlem
- **Climax:** Mami burns Xiomara's journal
- **Antagonist:** Mami is arguably the primary antagonist. More broadly, Xiomara also fights against sexism and Catholicism.
- **Point of View:** First-person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**A Long Writing Process.** Acevedo originally wrote some of the poems in *The Poet X* as a teenager in her journal.

**Popular.** In 2018, *The Poet X* was one of the most-ordered books at the New York Public Library and it also won several awards, including the National Book Award for Young People's Literature.



## PLOT SUMMARY

15-year-old Xiomara sits on the stoop of her building in Harlem in the last week before school starts. Even the drug dealers seem more pleasant as they catcall her. Xiomara sneaks back upstairs before Mami gets home from work. Xiomara explains that she's tall, curvy, and gets a lot of attention on the street—but Mami tells her that it's her responsibility to not let men catcall her. She explains that her name means "one who is ready for war," and she's lived up to it spectacularly. Her twin brother, whom she calls Twin, was born first with no complications, but Xiomara's birth was difficult and she hasn't lived up to her parents' expectations since then.

This year, Xiomara is taking confirmation class with her best friend Caridad. Xiomara doesn't want to be confirmed: she's not sure she wants to worship God, since God doesn't seem to care about her. Mami refuses to consider allowing Xiomara to put off

confirmation and threatens to send her to the Dominican Republic, where the nuns beat Mami. Because Mami and Papi were old when Xiomara and Twin were born, Xiomara and Twin are considered miracles. Papi stopped drinking, listening to music, and flirting after the twins were born, but Xiomara nonetheless feels like a burden. Mami wanted to be a nun as a young person, but her parents forced her to marry Papi so she could move to the United States. Confirmation class is horrible from the start, especially when Father Sean says that the students need to devote themselves of their own volition—something that Xiomara has never been able to do. During class, Xiomara whispers to her friend Caridad about kissing boys.

The next day, Xiomara starts tenth grade. Twin attends a fancy “genius school,” but Xiomara attends her local school. This year, Xiomara has Ms. Galiano for English, who has a reputation for being tough. Ms. Galiano pronounces Xiomara’s name right on the first try, and then seems genuinely interested to see her class’s answers to what the most impactful day of their life was. As a rough draft, Xiomara writes about starting her period. Mami slapped her when she tried to use tampons, even though Xiomara had no idea what her period even was. Mami spat that tampons were for *cueros* (whores). Xiomara’s final draft is about receiving a **poetry notebook** from Twin for her birthday.

Every day, Xiomara does chores after school. Twin doesn’t help because Mami doesn’t make him, but Mami still likes him better—he’s devout and very smart. Xiomara writes about how lonely she feels and how guys at school catcall her, making her want to disappear. One weekend, Xiomara has to stand up to a guy at the basketball park when he aggressively taunts her and Twin for staring, and Twin in particular for not being manly. Xiomara writes poems about what she wishes she’d said and thinks about how she’s taunted no matter what she does or wears. She’s upset that Twin never stands up for her.

That Sunday, Xiomara doesn’t take communion. She thinks it’s not worth thanking God for giving her life when she can’t live. Mami tries to force Xiomara, but Xiomara refuses. For the next week, Xiomara attends Mass with Mami, but she spits her communion wafer out. At school, Xiomara finds a poster for a spoken word poetry club that Ms. Galiano runs. She wants to go, but she has confirmation class on Tuesday too. Xiomara’s biology class begins doing labs and her lab partner is a handsome boy named Aman. She develops a crush on him immediately. Xiomara also asks Ms. Galiano about the poetry club and learns what spoken word is when Ms. Galiano shows a clip of a black female poet. It’s moving, but Xiomara declares she could never perform. Aman and Xiomara agree to listen to a Kendrick Lamar album one Friday afternoon. Even though Xiomara isn’t allowed to date, she goes and sits close to him. Xiomara explains that she’s decided she’ll only ever love Twin, even though he’s terrible—he has no twin intuition and isn’t cool, and he seldom acknowledges Xiomara. When he does,

though, it’s usually profound. After her date, Twin comments that Xiomara looks different. Xiomara writes secret poems about Aman and whispers to Caridad about him in confirmation class.

Ms. Galiano returns Xiomara’s assignment with a note suggesting that Xiomara is poetic and should join the club. Xiomara wants to, but thinks she can’t. She continues to spend time with Aman and, when he asks, reads him a poem. As the weeks pass, Xiomara continues to hide her communion wafers and spend time with Aman. One day in confirmation class, Father Sean talks about how Eve should’ve resisted the **apple**. Xiomara thinks this is nonsense. She asks if the Bible is a metaphor and why people have curiosity if they can’t use it. She knows she’s in trouble and after class, Father Sean doesn’t answer Xiomara’s questions—but he encourages her to speak to Mami.

As Xiomara spends more time with Aman, she masturbates at night. It feels good, but it makes her feel ashamed. Xiomara notices that Twin is texting someone too and seems unusually giggly. One afternoon at school, the fire alarm goes off. Xiomara and Aman go to the park and they kiss. She doesn’t answer when he invites her to a Halloween party and feels as though everyone at confirmation class later can see that she’s been kissing. Father Sean tries to check in with Xiomara and mentions that his mother died. Later, Xiomara mentions this to Twin and asks who he’s texting. Twin points out that they’re both messing around and they’ll get in trouble if Mami and Papi find out. Xiomara thinks that Mami and Papi would be fine if Twin brought home a girl, but she’s not sure what they’d do if he brought home a boy. Twin comes home with a black eye the next day and won’t explain where he got it.

Rather than go to the movies with Caridad and Twin the Saturday before Halloween, Xiomara sneaks out to the Halloween party with Aman. They dance, but Xiomara asks him to stop before it gets too intense. On Monday after school, Xiomara goes to Twin’s school to beat up whoever punched him. Instead, Xiomara sees Twin with a redheaded boy. Twin tells Xiomara to leave it alone. Xiomara understands that she can’t protect Twin forever, but she didn’t expect this. He explains that the boy’s name is Cody, and Xiomara wonders if she made things worse by never voicing support for gay people. Ms. Galiano’s next assignment asks students to talk about someone who’s misunderstood. Xiomara writes in her rough draft how Mami used to be her hero but now, Mami treats her differently. She turns in a piece about Nicki Minaj. Later, Chris, a boy from the poetry club, performs a poem for Xiomara’s class and Ms. Galiano invites everyone to attend a poetry slam in February. Xiomara wants to be there.

Aman invites Xiomara to go ice-skating, something she used to do but hasn’t done in a while. Aman is a great skater. He loves winter sports, but his dad refused to put him in lessons. On the train home, Xiomara and Aman kiss. When Xiomara gets home,

she hears Mami shouting—Mami was on the train and saw her. Twin tries to help Xiomara leave, but Mami drags Xiomara to her alter of the Virgin Mary and forces her to kneel on rice. Mami calls Xiomara a *cuero*, and Xiomara explains that any girl can be a *cuero*. The next day, she goes to school and guys grab her in front of Aman. Aman doesn't stand up for her, so Xiomara threatens both her attacker and Aman.

As required by Mami, Xiomara asks to meet Father Sean for confession. He pulls her into the rectory, where Xiomara explains that she lusted and disobeyed—but she's not sorry. Father Sean encourages her to ask for God's forgiveness, but tells Mami later that Xiomara shouldn't be confirmed yet, as she should have time to answer her questions. Mami hisses at Xiomara that she must be confirmed. Xiomara writes poems about breaking free from Mami and ignores Aman. She writes in her notebook and scoffs at Twin's suggestion that she write a nice poem for herself, and she refuses to give a real answer to Ms. Galiano's next assignment. When Ms. Galiano asks to speak to Xiomara, she suggests that Xiomara attend poetry club. Because Xiomara is no longer expected at confirmation, she agrees.

Xiomara meets Isabelle, Chris, and Stephan and recites a poem. She feels heard and respected by them and by Ms. Galiano. Later, she runs to church to pretend that she was in class. When Caridad hears where Xiomara was, she talks Mami into letting Xiomara and Twin come with her to an open mic at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. Xiomara feels hopeful, especially when Isabelle catches her eating lunch in the bathroom and invites her to eat lunch in the art room. After school, Xiomara finds Twin crying—Cody broke up with him. Despite this, Twin agrees to go to the open mic and Xiomara discovers that Caridad signed her up to perform. Xiomara is terrified, but she loves performing and both she and Twin feel validated. Xiomara realizes that by performing, she can make others feel the same way.

Xiomara feels like poetry club is her version of a prayer circle. She writes, helps her friends with their poetry, and recites poems for Ms. Galiano. She spends all of winter break writing and receives an odd gift from Mami on Christmas Eve. It's Xiomara's **baby bracelet**, which reads *Mi Hija* on one side and Xiomara's name on the other. School starts and a week later, Twin and Xiomara exchange gifts for their birthday: a new notebook for Xiomara and a comic about a gay superhero for Twin. Xiomara feels amazing until she realizes in poetry club that she left her old notebook at home—and then receives a voicemail from Mami. Xiomara gets home to find Mami holding her journal. Mami feels betrayed and is incensed by what's in it, so she lights it on fire and starts to pray. Xiomara begins to shout her poems as Papi takes the notebook from Mami. Twin holds Mami back while Xiomara escapes.

Xiomara calls Caridad and then Aman. Xiomara goes to Aman's house. She tells him what happened and he comforts her. They

kiss and begin to remove clothing, but Xiomara stops him before they have sex. She's ready for Aman to turn her out, but instead, he dries her tears. The next day, Ms. Galiano takes Xiomara into the hall and explains that she knows something is wrong and called home last night—Papi had no idea where Xiomara was. Xiomara tells Ms. Galiano everything and agrees to talk to Mami. After school, Aman, Caridad, and Twin help Xiomara ask Father Sean for help before heading home. Mami sobs and hugs Xiomara. Xiomara and Mami begin counseling with Father Sean and after a few weeks, Father Sean asks if they can all come to the poetry slam. Ms. Galiano coaches Xiomara and Xiomara even practices at home. All of Xiomara's family and friends come to the slam and then to Xiomara's house afterwards, where Papi teaches her to dance and he and Mami assure her that they won't go back to being the way they were before. As her final assignment, she writes about her favorite Bible verse and suggests that poetry is like church, since words bring people together.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Xiomara Batista** – Xiomara is the novel's protagonist. Xiomara is a 15-year-old Dominican American teenager living in Harlem. She is also a twin, and, until she begins to find her voice, a secret poet. In her **poetry notebook**, Xiomara writes poetry about everything from her pressing questions about Catholicism to kissing boys and the fact that she constantly has to defend herself against stereotyping and sexual harassment. Xiomara is very tall and curvy, and she's often subjected to catcalls and groping from boys at school as well as grown men on the street. While Xiomara hates this, her discomfort and confusion is heightened by her upbringing in the Catholic Church. Xiomara has never had a choice about whether to attend church—and their church makes a point to note that it's a woman's responsibility to *not* be sexual or attract men's attention. For Xiomara, this is extremely confusing, as she's very interested in boys and, a few weeks into the school year, begins a relationship with a classmate named Aman. Because of the intense shame and guilt that Xiomara feels, she sometimes struggles to enjoy her time with Aman, even as she wants to kiss and, at times, do more. Around the same time, Xiomara begins taking classes with Father Sean so that she can be confirmed in the church. Given what Xiomara sees about the church's priorities when it comes to women, as well as the fact that, as a twin born to parents who had given up on having children, she's considered a miracle who needs to earn her right to life daily, Xiomara isn't ready to be confirmed—not least because she's not sure if she wants to worship God. Her questions result in Father Sean excusing her from confirmation, which gives Xiomara the opportunity to secretly attend poetry club meetings. Her introduction to spoken word poetry gives

Xiomara the confidence to begin performing and writing more intentionally, and she also begins to make more friends. After Mami burns Xiomara's poetry notebook, Xiomara asserts her independence by running away for a night and, with the help of Ms. Galiano and Father Sean, agrees to begin a dialogue with Mami about their fraught relationship.

**Twin** – Twin is Xiomara's twin brother. His real name is Xavier after a saint, but Xiomara only ever calls him Twin and sees the nickname as proof that they'll always be a pair. Twin is the exact opposite of Xiomara. He's short, scrawny, doesn't care about fashion, and wears glasses. Twin is, according to Xiomara, a genius, so he skipped a grade and regularly earns scholarships to space camp. He currently attends a "genius school" and spends his time watching anime and doing online science tutorials. He's also extremely devoted to Catholicism and was confirmed last year, and Xiomara notes that he's better at leading Bible study than Father Sean is. Though Xiomara loves Twin, he often hurts her feelings. She doesn't believe that he has "twin intuition," so he never knows when she's hurting or has had a bad day, and he's never stood up for her—Xiomara was always the one who stood up for Twin against bullies. Being male, he's also Mami's favorite and is able to get away with slacking or breaking the rules in a way that Xiomara can't. However, Twin is secretly gay, something that Xiomara has long suspected but confirms when she goes to Twin's school and sees him with Cody, who's obviously in love with Twin. Mami and Papi are not accepting of homosexuality, so both Xiomara and Twin understand that they must keep this a secret, and Twin is still not out by the end of the novel. Xiomara is shocked when she learns that, like her, Twin is counting down the days until they can escape the house for college. Twin tries to stand up for Xiomara for the first time when Mami burns Xiomara's **poetry notebook** and Twin tries to snatch it away. He also holds Mami back so that Xiomara can escape. In the weeks after, he occasionally attends the family counseling sessions. Throughout the novel, Twin is supportive of Xiomara's writing and he gave her the poetry notebook for their birthday years ago. He believes that her thoughts are valid, and hearing the poetry of Xiomara and others makes Twin feel seen.

**Mami** – Mami is Xiomara and Twin's mother; she works as a custodian. As a young teen in the Dominican Republic, Mami wanted to be a nun and devote her life to Jesus. However, her parents forced her to marry Papi so that she could come to the U.S., depriving Mami of the future she wanted. Though Xiomara doesn't question Mami's devotion, she also notices the scars on Mami's knuckles and knows that Mami was taught how to be devout in an abusive way. When Xiomara is little, Mami adores her and insists that Xiomara is her prize for being devout, but as Xiomara grows, Mami grows increasingly abusive and controlling. She makes a particular point to control Xiomara's sexuality; her dating rules are that Xiomara can't date until after college. Mami also bitterly insists that all men are terrible,

neglectful, and abusive, so she believes that Xiomara has no reason to date anyway. Following Xiomara and Twin's birth, Mami's devotion increased dramatically and in the present, she attends Mass nightly and often takes Xiomara along when Xiomara is being punished. Mami's conception of devotion, at least when it comes to Xiomara, is abusive and rooted in pain. She refuses to care for heathens, so Xiomara has no choice but to attend church and be confirmed—and when she does step out of line, Mami forces her to kneel on rice and pray to the Virgin Mary. Mami is entirely unmoored when she discovers and reads Xiomara's **poetry notebook**. Xiomara's poetry about boys, her questions about church, and her conflicted emotions about Mami offend Mami deeply—in part because she sees that Xiomara isn't ashamed of what she writes. Mami burns the notebook but, when Xiomara runs away for a night, she finally agrees to open a dialogue with the help of Father Sean. Xiomara comes to the conclusion that while she and Mami may never agree or be great friends, they can still love each other, and Mami becomes significantly more supportive of Xiomara after starting counseling.

**Papi** – Papi is Twin and Xiomara's father. The Papi that Xiomara knows is silent and although he's around in a literally sense, he seems mostly absent. He barely acknowledges his children and only speaks to Mami if it's about Xiomara, Twin, or meals. Before Xiomara and Twin were born, however, Papi was a womanizer. Xiomara has heard that Mami was forced to marry Papi in order to immigrate to the U.S. and that once in the States, Papi began hanging out at bodegas and propositioning pretty women. There are other rumors that Papi had so much casual sex in his youth because he was infertile and not concerned about consequences. Despite the fact that Mami doesn't believe in divorce, everything that Xiomara has heard suggests that Mami and Papi's marriage was on the brink of collapse when Xiomara and Twin were born. The children supposedly made Papi into a good and upstanding man, though he seems unhappy and never plays music. Despite his own sexual history, Papi calls Xiomara a *cuero* (a whore) when he finds out that she kissed Aman in public. He also goes along with Mami's cruel and abusive punishments and never advocates for his children. The first time he steps in is when Mami burns Xiomara's **poetry notebook**, though he seems more concerned about the fire than the emotional trauma it causes Xiomara. Later, when the family begins attending counseling with Father Sean, Xiomara discovers that Papi loves to talk and is actually very funny. He also shows that he's a good listener and seems to take it to heart when Xiomara tells him how he's hurt her in the past. At her poetry slam, he publicly claims Xiomara as his daughter and does so proudly.

**Aman** – Aman is Xiomara's lab partner in biology class and eventually, her boyfriend. He's not quite as tall as Xiomara, but he's lean and handsome. Their relationship begins when Xiomara and Aman start brushing arms as lab partners, but

they soon connect over rappers and hip-hop artists and start listening to music together in the park. Aman is consistently kind and respectful of Xiomara. Though he does ask her to do things and go places with him that sometimes make Xiomara uncomfortable, he never pressures her when she says no. Most importantly for Xiomara, Aman asks to hear her poetry and makes her feel like her words are important. As their relationship deepens, Aman shares that he lives with his dad. He was born in Trinidad but when his dad sent for Aman and Aman's mom to come to the U.S., Aman's mom chose to stay and still hasn't come. As a child in Trinidad, Aman watched the Winter Olympics and fell in love with winter sports. He taught himself to ice skate, since his dad believed that skating was too soft for a boy and wouldn't put him in lessons. Xiomara breaks things off with Aman when Aman doesn't stand up for her against boys who grope and taunt her, but she reaches out to him a month later after Mami burns her **poetry notebook**. Aman rushes to her without even putting a coat on and then allows Xiomara to spend the night. Most shocking for Xiomara is that when she refuses to have sex, Aman doesn't kick her out—he dries her tears and comforts her. In the weeks that follow, Aman affirms several times that he'll always have Xiomara's back, even though he knows she can look out for herself.

**Father Sean** – Father Sean is the head priest at Xiomara's church. He's Jamaican and speaks Spanish with an accent that makes everyone laugh and smile. As a young man he wanted to be a professional boxer, but he joined the Catholic Church instead. Xiomara used to think that Father Sean was fun and lax, but in confirmation class and as she grows, she begins to take issue with what he preaches. Specifically, she hates how he talks about a woman's worth coming from her devotion and her virginity, not her thoughts or her intelligence. He also doesn't answer Xiomara's questions when Xiomara asks about Eve, original sin, and suggests that the Bible is just a metaphor. Despite these valid critiques, Father Sean does begin to position himself as an ally to Xiomara in other ways. He doesn't believe that people should be forced into devotion, so he refuses to go along with Mami and punish Xiomara for kissing Aman and even suggests that Xiomara shouldn't be confirmed this year. He also insists that Xiomara's questions aren't bad or wrong, but says she does need to think about them. Xiomara begins to see Father Sean as more of a person and not just an authority figure when he tells her that when his mother died, he wasn't able to go home to see her. Because of this, Father Sean's openness, and his good relationship with Mami, Xiomara feels comfortable asking Father Sean for help when she speaks to Mami after Mami burns her **poetry notebook**. Father Sean begins leading weekly counseling sessions with Xiomara's family and encourages them all to talk. He also attends Xiomara's poetry slam to cheer her on.

**Ms. Galiano** – Ms. Galiano is a young English teacher at

Xiomara's school with a reputation for being strict and giving lots of homework. Though these things both turn out to be true, Ms. Galiano is nothing like what Xiomara expected—she's a tiny Latina woman who wears bright clothes and her hair naturally curly. Ms. Galiano seems genuinely interested in her students and often leaves personal notes on Xiomara's assignments. In them, she mostly encourages Xiomara to join the poetry club that she runs after school. Even though Xiomara refuses to join for months, Ms. Galiano is still able to make Xiomara feel seen and heard by introducing her to spoken word poetry and encouraging her to write. When Xiomara finally attends poetry club, Ms. Galiano shows herself to be calm and encouraging for everyone. Xiomara begins to see Ms. Galiano as a real person and not just a teacher when, after Xiomara leaves home after Mami burns her **poetry notebook**, she learns that Ms. Galiano was worried about her and called Mami and Papi to check in. Ms. Galiano is the first person to tell Xiomara that she doesn't have to do things she doesn't want to do, and that she can make things stop just by asking. She also encourages Xiomara to speak openly with Mami. Following this, Ms. Galiano helps Xiomara develop her poem for the citywide youth slam and doesn't let Xiomara chicken out. In many ways, Ms. Galiano functions as a role model for Xiomara, who notes that she hadn't before seen someone Spanish-speaking and female who loves books and poetry so much.

**Caridad** – Caridad is Xiomara's best friend. Caridad is kind, generous, and extremely devout. She's been friends with Xiomara and Twin since they were babies, so Caridad is a sort of honorary family member. She knows her Bible inside and out and doesn't have questions like Xiomara does. In this sense, Caridad is the opposite of Xiomara—she wants to wait until marriage to have sex and genuinely respects her parents' authority. Xiomara doesn't think that she and Caridad should be friends because of their many differences, but Caridad isn't offended and doesn't feel personally attacked by Xiomara's questions and shaky beliefs—she makes a point to be there for Xiomara, no matter what. In this way, Caridad acts as Xiomara's sometimes unwelcome voice of reason, as when she suggests that Xiomara should stop breaking rules and needs to make sure she doesn't get pregnant. She demonstrates her love for Xiomara by sending cat memes and, on Xiomara's birthday, calling and leaving voicemails of her singing "Happy Birthday." Caridad is one of the earliest supporters of Xiomara's poetry and even arranges for Xiomara's first public performance at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. She later attends Xiomara's slam competition and even befriends Isabelle.

**Cody** – Cody is a white red-headed boy who attends school with Twin and becomes Twin's boyfriend. Xiomara only meets him once in passing, but she can see that he's very in love with Twin. Cody's parents are accepting of his sexuality and treat Twin warmly, but when Cody discovers that his family is moving away, he breaks things off with Twin.

**Isabelle** – Isabelle is the only other girl in poetry club. Isabelle has a huge blond Afro and constantly wears frilly skirts with Jordans. She's upfront and loud about everything, and Xiomara can tell that she likes Nicki Minaj. Her upfront nature appeals to Xiomara, so Xiomara accepts her invitation to eat lunch with her in the photography room.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Chris** – Chris is a boy in Xiomara's poetry club. He uses big words in his poetry, which makes Xiomara think that he's studying for the SAT.

**Stephan** – Stephan is a boy in Xiomara's poetry club.



## 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.



### SEXUALITY AND SHAME

*The Poet X* follows 15-year-old Xiomara, a second-generation Dominican American living in Harlem. In part because of Xiomara's upbringing in the

Catholic Church and in part because of her family's Dominican traditions, Xiomara's sexual coming of age is something that she, as a curious and questioning teen, can't ignore—but it's something that disturbs her mother, Mami, and that Mami tries her hardest to squash. As Xiomara begins a romantic relationship with her lab partner, Aman, she must therefore try to reconcile what she hears about sex at home with her own desire for a physical relationship. Her family's shame only makes Xiomara feel even more alone in the world; by comparing how she's expected to behave with how her father, Papi, is allowed to behave, Xiomara recognizes that as a young woman, she can't win. The novel thus makes it clear that shame, especially when it comes to one's sexuality, encourages double standards and causes people to feel needlessly anxious, guilty, and insecure.

Since beginning to develop physically at age 11, Xiomara has had a difficult relationship with her body. She writes that her body seemed to develop out of nowhere and now, at age 15, Xiomara is taller than lots of boys and very curvy. While this is something that plenty of young women go through during puberty, Xiomara isn't given any of the tools or the knowledge to understand her body—or, for that matter, to celebrate it. Instead, Xiomara wants to make herself small so that she can ignore the parts of her body that attract attention, and at home, Mami makes it very clear to Xiomara that with a woman's body, it is Xiomara's responsibility to minimize her body's

importance and protect herself from unwanted advances. The one major event that solidified Xiomara's belief that she needs to minimize her body came when she started menstruating. Xiomara knew that the "time of the month" was something that women experienced, but she had no idea what that meant and thus wasn't prepared to deal with her own period. Then, when Xiomara purchased tampons and asked Mami for help about how to insert them properly, Mami slapped her and accused her of being sexually promiscuous. This event made Xiomara feel extremely ashamed of her body, thanks to the combination of not knowing what was happening and then being completely blindsided by Mami's reaction when she did figure it out. This incident reflects Mami's belief that Xiomara's growing body, and later Xiomara's budding sexuality, is something to be controlled by Mami, not by Xiomara herself.

In addition to being made to feel as though she has no agency over her body or sexuality, Xiomara is told again and again that when men catcall her, it's her fault and she needs to stop it. However, Xiomara recognizes that men speak crudely to her regardless of what she's wearing, saying, or doing. Especially considering how Xiomara sees that men—especially her own father, Papi—are treated and spoken about in terms of their sexuality, Xiomara is reminded constantly that she and other women have little say over what happens to their bodies. In his younger years—that is, before Xiomara and Twin were born—Papi was a known philanderer who drank in bars, slept with many women, and inappropriately touched others. Yet Xiomara recognizes that Mami scolds and punishes her for not being able to deflect the advances of the next generation of men like Papi. In effect, Mami excuses the actions of men like Papi and the drug dealers who catcall Xiomara to instead pin the blame on these men's female targets.

Xiomara encapsulates her understanding of this double standard when she explains the word *cuero*, which is the Dominican slang term for a promiscuous woman. She notes that the term can be applied to quite literally any woman who, for any reason or no reason, seems inappropriately sexual. No such term exists for men, even if there's clear evidence of sexual activity or desire. Through this term, Xiomara is further conditioned to believe that female sexuality isn't okay under any circumstances, while male sexuality is something that's not only acceptable, but even celebrated.

All of this becomes extremely difficult for Xiomara to make sense of when she begins to spend time with her lab partner, Aman, and finds herself wanting to experiment sexually with him. Because of what Xiomara has been told at home about kissing and sex, she wonders if even being curious is a horrible crime, and this makes her feel even more conflicted about her relationship with Aman. Because of the shame that Xiomara feels about her body and her desire to experiment, she struggles to genuinely enjoy things with Aman, especially after the fact. With this, the novel shows clearly how shame can rob

individuals of pleasure. However, Xiomara also writes that Aman makes her body, which she usually feels is too big and too sexy no matter what she does, feel good and like something she should be proud of. This realization, combined with Xiomara's questioning of why kissing, masturbating, and other sexual contact is so bad if it feels good, ultimately leads her to begin rejecting Mami's teachings about sex and bodies. By questioning the shameful attitudes towards sex that she has been taught, Xiomara is able to begin putting together her own understanding of how to conduct herself in a sexual relationship.

Importantly, once Xiomara begins to shrug off some of the shame that she connects to her body and her sexuality (and after Mami burns her **poetry notebook**, which destroys Xiomara's trust in Mami and her beliefs), Xiomara begins to feel more confident in a number of other ways. She even agrees to open up a conversation with Mami about their relationship. Though the novel ties Xiomara's shame most clearly to sex, it also suggests that shame about anything can make a person less confident overall. On the other hand, developing confidence, self-respect, and the courage to make one's own decisions gives a person the tools to let go of their shame, and in turn lead a happier and less anxious life.



## RELIGION AND COMING OF AGE

Xiomara's family is extremely religious, and she grew up spending much of her free time at her local Catholic church. As Xiomara grows and begins to come of age, however, religion starts to look far less meaningful and fun. Instead, Xiomara recognizes that the ideas that Father Sean preaches about are meant to keep her, as a young woman, in line—and in many cases, discourage her from ever voicing the doubts that she has about God and Christianity in general. Importantly, *The Poet X* doesn't try to make the case that religion is unequivocally bad or oppressive, even though it often seems that way to Xiomara. Instead, the novel proposes that part of a young person's coming-of-age journey should necessarily include asking questions about the belief systems that they were raised with, and ultimately figuring out how to combine those teachings with their own personal beliefs.

Throughout her life, Xiomara has been told that she's a very special gift from God. Mami never wanted to marry and instead wanted to become a nun, but she had to marry Papi in order to move to the United States. It took years for them to conceive, during which time Mami saw herself as a failure. Being finally blessed with twins is, in Mami's eyes, proof of her own success and of God's goodness—though for Xiomara, it feels like she has to constantly strive to earn her right to exist and live up to being a blessing. Part of the reason that Xiomara feels she has to work so hard is because she is acutely aware of how, according to Catholic teachings, her worth comes from her continued devotion and from keeping her sexuality under tight

control. Xiomara doesn't feel that either of these practices are easy to maintain, given that she experiences sexual thoughts and desires that people tell her go against what it means to be a good Catholic. Because of this conflict, Xiomara has very real doubts about God and the role that she'd like religion to play in her life. For much of the novel, Xiomara sees religion as something designed to turn her into someone she doesn't want to be, all while oppressing the parts of her that she's interested in exploring. This includes her love of poetry (the school club for which meets on Tuesday afternoons at the same time as confirmation class) and her sexuality.

What's more, Xiomara is often not given a choice in whether or not to participate in religious activities—and her participation means that she is further expected to accept what others tell her without asking questions. Then, when Xiomara does ask questions about religion or otherwise rebels, Mami forces Xiomara to, for example, kneel on rice and pray. Devotion tends to be a punishment for Xiomara, not something that she is happy to be a part of or that helps her make sense of her questions.

This finally begins to change when, after Xiomara asks a series of questions about Genesis, original sin, and Eve, and then gets caught kissing Aman, Mami forces Xiomara to attend confession with Father Sean. Rather than going along with Mami's punishments or answering Xiomara's questions, Father Sean suggests to Mami that Xiomara put off confirmation. While not entirely a win for Xiomara, who would like to leave religion behind completely at this point, this turn of events does suggest that Father Sean is far more open to his congregation questioning their relationships with God than Xiomara gave him credit for. In other words, at least in Father Sean's eyes, religion's devotion shouldn't be as unthinking or as closely tied to punishment as Mami might want it to be for Xiomara. By giving Xiomara the space to ask questions and especially by not requiring her to be confirmed as Mami wants her to be, Father Sean encourages Xiomara to come to religion on her own terms. Importantly, as Father Sean engages with Xiomara in this way and stands up for her autonomy, he also situates himself as a trustworthy and nonjudgmental person to help her answer some of her questions. Later, he even helps her talk to Mami about how to handle the different ways in which she and Xiomara see religion.

Father Sean teaches Xiomara the importance of thinking critically about religion and, most importantly, models for Xiomara and Mami how a person's questions about faith don't mean that their relationships with other faithful people have to suffer as a consequence. In fact, his counseling sessions with Xiomara and Mami help Mami to come to terms with the daughter she has, not the idealized daughter she wants. In short, Father Sean makes the case to everyone that confirmation and other formal religious rites of passage aren't actually good markers of a mature adult or a devoted person.

Rather, maturity comes when a person is able to think critically about God and religious teachings, and then go on to choose to be faithful in a way that feels authentic and meaningful for them.



## THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

Because *The Poet X* is set up to read as Xiomara's private **poetry notebook**, language and its power rise to the forefront almost immediately. Xiomara notes early on that her notebook is the only place where she can write as her true self and actually express all of the confusing thoughts and emotions swirling around inside of her. As the novel progresses, Xiomara gains confidence as she begins to share her poems, first with her boyfriend Aman, and later at slam poetry events and the school poetry club. Through Xiomara's discovery of spoken word poetry, as well as through the novel's poems themselves, *The Poet X* positions language as an important tool available to young people as they come of age. Language, the novel suggests, allows people to make sense of their world and the people around them, while sharing language with others (especially through poetry) allows people to build communities and develop a sense of empathy and understanding for others.

When the reader first meets Xiomara, she is writing in her poetry notebook, but in every other sense she has been cut off from using language to make sense of her world. She's unable to ask questions of Mami or of her religion, and she can barely express to her best friend her desire to kiss a boy. She's learned throughout her life that her words won't stop people from hurting her brother, Twin, or sexually harassing her—only her fists can stop those things. Because of this, Xiomara feels alone, defensive, and afraid—there's no one and nothing else to validate her confusing thoughts, feelings, or experiences. This becomes a vicious cycle: as Xiomara feels increasingly alone and misunderstood, she's even less willing to accept friendly advances from boys or other girls at school, and she's unwilling to try to connect with any adults in her life who might be willing to speak frankly with her. However, it's important to note that Xiomara does feel as though writing in her notebook is a meaningful and positive experience for her, even if, at the beginning of the novel, what she writes is private. This begins to suggest that even communicating one's thoughts through writing in an exclusively private and solitary manner is a useful exercise—one that can, ideally, pave the way for a solitary writer like Xiomara to begin to share her inner monologue with others.

This kind of connection with others begins as Xiomara embarks on a romantic relationship with her lab partner, Aman. The two first connect over a shared love of the rappers J. Cole and Kendrick Lamar. Importantly, Xiomara tells the reader that she fell in love with rap and hip-hop as a kid because she felt like those artists could articulate her experiences as a young

Dominican woman in a way that nobody in her life could. When she agrees to listen to music with Aman, she's able to share some of that experience with him. In doing so, she begins to feel less alone.

Around the same time, Xiomara's English teacher, Ms. Galiano, introduces Xiomara to spoken word poetry and invites her to join the school poetry club. While it takes Xiomara months to actually join, seeing a video in class of a black female poet performing a poem about body image makes Xiomara feel seen and heard in a way that she's never experienced before. This experience not only gives Xiomara the courage to think more positively about her own body, but it also inspires her to begin memorizing her poems and performing them—first for herself in private, and later for Aman. As Xiomara transitions from thinking that performance isn't for her to performing for Aman, she becomes increasingly interested in using her voice in other venues—namely, in church and in her confirmation classes with Father Sean. This shift suggests that there's a direct link between becoming comfortable with one's own voice in a performance or creative setting and feeling more comfortable raising it in others.

Xiomara's life reaches rock bottom when Mami finds her poetry notebook, reads its contents, and burns it, insisting that Xiomara's poetry makes her ungrateful, promiscuous, and sinful. Xiomara is then forced to put into practice what she learned about the power of speaking and communicating with others. Because of what she learned through writing and performing her poems, Xiomara has the courage to leave her family's home, reach out to Aman, and then ask Father Sean for help in speaking with Mami. Importantly, thanks to Ms. Galiano's help, Xiomara understands that communicating with Mami is the most important thing she can do, as it's the only way she'll be able to move forward and repair their relationship.

Even though Mami's turnaround is arguably idealistic, it is telling that being forced to communicate openly and calmly with Xiomara by Father Sean gives Mami the ability to go on to accept Xiomara's poetry as valid and positive. In a sense, Mami begins to make the same connections about the value of communication that Xiomara did. Furthermore, Xiomara comes to the realization that while it's devastating to have lost her notebook, this loss doesn't mean that she has to stop writing and communicating. On the contrary, Xiomara realizes that she can use her experiences to do for other young people what the poet she saw on video in Ms. Galiano's class did for her: make it clear that they're not alone. With this, the novel positions communication and language as extremely powerful tools. By harnessing these skills, young people can connect to those around them and share their personal experiences, and through doing so, they can build community and help others discover the power of language as well.



## FAMILY, ABUSE, AND EXPECTATIONS

Xiomara's home life is wildly dysfunctional and, at times, extremely abusive—if Xiomara in particular doesn't follow Mami's rules to the letter, Mami hits her. Papi is around but, according to Xiomara, barely has a presence in their home. Meanwhile, both Xiomara and Twin feel compelled to hide their unhappiness in their repressive household. All of this stems from familial and cultural expectations that, for at least two generations, have made life difficult for everyone. In this way, *The Poet X* critiques parents' unfair or inappropriate expectations of their children and illustrates how, if those expectations go unchallenged, they create situations ripe for violence and unhappiness.

Though Xiomara knows that her sense of being repressed has a lot to do with Catholicism and Dominican culture more broadly, she understands that she's also being forced to atone for or remedy repressive situations from Mami's past specifically. As a young woman in the Dominican Republic, Mami wanted to be a nun and dedicate her life to Jesus. However, Mami's parents refused to allow her to take this path, and instead forced her to marry Papi so that she could move legally to the United States. Per Mami's religious beliefs, Papi caused her to compromise her relationship with Jesus, but it's also impossible per Catholic teachings for Mami to divorce Papi and recommit herself to a religious life. Because Mami was denied the opportunity to fully commit herself to the religious life, Mami makes it a priority for Xiomara to follow in her footsteps to the furthest extent possible. In other words, Xiomara doesn't have a choice of whether or not she'd like to go to church; she has to go because Mami wants to see Xiomara achieve a life of devotion that she herself never did.

However, Xiomara doesn't want to live the religious life her mother never got to live—Xiomara has far too many questions about God to be ready to commit herself to even confirmation, which often makes Xiomara the target of Mami's verbal wrath or physical violence. In this way, *The Poet X* shows clearly how enforcing expectations violently is something that people learn and ultimately pass on to future generations—even if previous generations recognize the pain this causes, as Mami understands that her parents' expectations for her meant that she didn't get to live the life she wanted.

While Xiomara is well aware of the disconnect between what she wants for herself and what Mami wants for her, it's shocking for her to discover that Twin—who, as far as Xiomara can tell, is perfect in that he's extremely smart, devout, and male—also struggles to deal with the expectations placed on him. Like Xiomara, Twin looks forward to going to college so that he can escape their household. Though in many respects Twin has it better than Xiomara does simply by virtue of being male, the fact that he's also counting down the days until he can leave makes it even clearer that the violence and dysfunction Xiomara experiences isn't an isolated case—even someone like

Twin, who appears to be following all the rules, still feels stifled. Twin feels this way in part because he hates seeing Mami abuse Xiomara, but his concerns are also unique to his situation: he's gay and not out to his parents—or, for much of the novel, even to Xiomara. While Xiomara includes none of Twin's feelings on the matter, she does explain to the reader that being male, Twin has different responsibilities according to Mami, and some of those responsibilities and expectations are tied to being attracted to girls, not boys.

Both Xiomara and Twin's reactions and choices regarding how they deal with Mami's expectations suggest that in addition to being violent and oppressive, it's also ultimately futile for parents to cling as tightly to their ideas about who their children should be as Mami does. Importantly, both Xiomara and Twin pursue what they know they want, even though they also know very well that Mami would lash out violently were she to know that they were defying her. Xiomara still writes poetry that she knows would anger Mami and spends time with Aman, while Twin has a secret relationship with a boy named Cody. For them, family means secrecy more than anything else, and their home isn't a safe space to be the people they truly are or want to be.

Mami's transformation at the end of the novel to become more understanding of Xiomara is an arguably far-fetched outcome—abusers generally don't stop abusing their victims or reevaluate their harmful ideas overnight. Nevertheless, it portrays a far healthier dynamic, and one that the novel suggests is worth striving for. By reevaluating her expectations of Xiomara, Mami is able to be happier herself and support Xiomara as well, and these more flexible expectations give Xiomara room to continue her process of self-discovery without fear of violent consequences.



## SYMBOLS

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



## APPLES

Apples are Xiomara's favorite fruit, and they symbolize her complicated relationship with the Catholic Church and its teachings. In Genesis, Eve picking the apple off of the Tree of Knowledge is what brings original sin, knowledge of good and evil, and shame to humanity. Given Xiomara's thirst for knowledge—both sexual and otherwise—that doesn't adhere strictly to church teachings, apples represent Xiomara's curiosity and the way that it often conflicts with her religion and culture. This symbol also suggests that Xiomara's curiosity isn't at all abnormal, given how common and unremarkable apples are as fruit in non-biblical contexts.



## THE BABY BRACELET

Xiomara's baby bracelet reads "*mi hija*"—"my daughter"—on one side and her name on the other, and it symbolizes the complex way that Xiomara's identity is both connected to and separate from her family, particularly Mami. Juxtaposing Xiomara's relationship to Mami (through the phrase *mi hija*) with Xiomara's individuality (her name), the bracelet is a literal form of the difficult place Xiomara is in in terms of figuring out her own individuality and breaking free from Mami's control. That it feels like a shackle to Xiomara encapsulates her sense of feeling alone and secretive about her true desires and thoughts, while the fact that Mami thoughtfully has it resized for her also points to the loving bond that underlies their painful relationship. Later, Mami ripping the bracelet off of Xiomara's wrist very literally removes the shackle—albeit in a devastating and hurtful way.



## XIOMARA'S POETRY NOTEBOOK

Xiomara's notebook, which is ostensibly the novel itself, is where she pours out all of her true and uncensored thoughts, feelings, and questions about her world and the people in it. Because of this, it begins to take on the role of functioning as Xiomara's true soul and the embodiment of who she really is inside. However, when Mami finds, reads, and burns the notebook, Xiomara begins to discover her own capacity for growth, resilience, and self-assuredness. She discovers that she doesn't necessarily need her notebook in order to feel like who she truly is, in part because she has many of her poems memorized and in part because having her notebook burned represents a turning point in which Xiomara begins to live her truth in her everyday life, not just in her notebook. In this sense, the notebook functions as more of a tool in Xiomara's growth than a direct representation of her soul. It teaches her that her soul and her true self live within her and don't have to exist in an external form to be valid and worthwhile.

**Related Characters:** Xiomara Batista (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 5

### Explanation and Analysis

Xiomara explains how people treat her at school and how this treatment has, over the years, translated to needing to defend herself physically. Importantly, Xiomara recognizes that the way others treat her stems from her body. Because she's tall, curvy, and according to Mami, too sexy for her age, girls condemn Xiomara for being overly sexual—even though this is far from the truth, given Xiomara's upbringing in the church. When Xiomara feels as though her body is metaphorically bigger than her voice, it shows how, when a person isn't encouraged to speak up and ask for what they need or want (and, in Xiomara's case, simply ask for this sort of thing to stop), they gradually learn to simply not use their voices to advocate for themselves. Instead, physical violence becomes the norm, something that the novel then suggests gets passed down through the generations and harms others down the line.

💬 I look at her scarred knuckles.  
I know exactly how she was taught  
faith.

**Related Characters:** Xiomara Batista (speaker), Mami

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 17

### Explanation and Analysis

As Mami mentions sending Xiomara to the Dominican Republic over the summer to learn devotion, Xiomara realizes that Mami, who grew up in the Dominican Republic, learned to be religious because she was violently forced to be. In this sense, Xiomara sees firsthand that violence is something that gets passed down through the generations if someone doesn't take the time to interrogate harmful beliefs and stop the cycle of violence.

While this does give Xiomara a way in which to humanize Mami—she recognizes that while Mami has always been more devout, this doesn't mean that Mami wasn't abused—Xiomara still doesn't have any power at this point to make the abuse stop. Because Mami is unwilling to consider that the way she was taught to be faithful is maybe



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the HarperCollins edition of *The Poet X* published in 2018.

### Part I Quotes

💬 The other girls call me conceited. Ho. That. Fast. When your body takes up more room than your voice you are always the target of well-aimed rumors, which is why I let my knuckles talk for me. Which is why I learned to shrug when my name was replaced by insults.

not the best way (and, as Father Sean later suggests, isn't even truly Catholic), she simply continues to violently force and threaten Xiomara to be devout in a way that doesn't give Xiomara a voice or a choice in how to be religious.

●● Their gazes and words  
are heavy with all the things  
they want you to be.

It is ungrateful to feel like a burden.  
It is ungrateful to resent my own birth.  
I know that Twin and I are miracles.

Aren't we reminded every single day?

**Related Characters:** Xiomara Batista (speaker), Twin, Papi, Mami

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 21

### Explanation and Analysis

Xiomara explains what it feels like to be the child of parents who never expected to have children. Because Mami and Papi were so thrilled to have children late in life after years of trying, Xiomara suggests that they channel their hopes, dreams, and expectations into Xiomara and Twin to a greater degree than other parents do. In this way, Xiomara is made to feel like, even more than other people, she has to earn her right to exist and live up to being the miracle that her parents believe she is.

However, Xiomara feels as though her parents' expectations are stifling, mostly because their expectations don't leave any room for what Xiomara wants to be. Her job, according to her parents, is to be exactly what they want her to be—that is, devout, desexualized, and good. This puts a great deal of pressure on Xiomara, who has questions about herself and the world that push back on the things her parents want her to be. Understanding this is one of the first steps in Xiomara's coming-of-age journey, in which she learns to reconcile her own beliefs and dreams with those of her parents and those of her church.

●● And I get all this attention from guys  
but it's like a sancocho of emotions.

This stew of mixed-up ingredients:  
partly flattered they think I'm attractive,  
partly scared they're only interested in my ass and boobs,  
and a good measure of Mami-will-kill-me fear sprinkled on top.

**Related Characters:** Xiomara Batista (speaker), Aman, Ms. Galiano, Mami

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 32

### Explanation and Analysis

When she tells the reader about how boys and men catcall her, Xiomara shares how the attention makes her feel. Her fear that boys are only interested in her body recalls her assertion that the church is also only interested in her body, though in the opposite way—the church wants Xiomara to be entirely desexualized, while the men who catcall Xiomara want her to only be sexual. In both cases, however, she suspects that they don't care about her thoughts, which is one of the major reasons Xiomara feels so trapped: until she begins to trust Ms. Galiano, begins seeing Aman, and learns about spoken word poetry, Xiomara feels as though nobody cares about anything but her body.

Further, it's important to note that in addition to Xiomara's mixed emotions about receiving attention, one of the worst things about the emotions is that she's afraid of Mami's reaction. This is because Mami has taught Xiomara that it's her fault when men give her attention, and that it's Xiomara's job to protect herself from unwanted (or wanted) advances. By shifting the blame and responsibility onto Xiomara, Mami makes Xiomara feel even more acutely that she can't win, since the catcalling always happens no matter what Xiomara does.

●● What if I like a boy too much  
and none of those things happen...  
they're the only scales I have.

How does a girl like me figure out the weight  
of what it means to love a boy?

**Related Characters:** Xiomara Batista (speaker), Papi, Mami

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 33

### Explanation and Analysis

Xiomara writes about the two options she sees for what will happen if she likes a boy: either he'll get her pregnant and abandon her, or he'll turn her into a bitter person like Mami. Xiomara feels like these are her only two possibilities in part because, at this point, she feels very alone and as though she doesn't have anyone in her life to relate to or look up to. She feels too big and too different from everyone else in her life, even those who do love her—even Caridad, who does respect Xiomara for her differences, wants to wait until marriage to have sex and expresses no interest in messing around with boys until then. Feeling so lonely also heightens Xiomara's sense of shame, as she is interested in experimenting with boys but has no conception of what a healthy romantic or sexual relationship looks like. This illustrates how not having a healthy example to look up to makes people, like Xiomara, feel as though they have few choices in life—and, in Xiomara's case, like she's playing with fire by embarking upon experiences (like experimenting with boys) that, because of what she's heard about love and sex, feel fraught and dangerous even when she wants them to happen.

“Good girls don't wear tampons.  
Are you still a virgin? Are you having relations?”

I didn't know how to answer her, I could only cry.  
She shook her head and told me to skip church that day.  
Threw away the box of tampons, saying they were for cueros.  
That she would buy me pads. Said eleven was too young.  
That she would pray on my behalf.

I didn't understand what she was saying.  
But I stopped crying. I licked at my split lip.  
I prayed for the bleeding to stop.

**Related Characters:** Mami, Xiomara Batista (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 40

### Explanation and Analysis

Xiomara recounts Mami's reaction when, after Xiomara started her period, she discovered that Xiomara had purchased tampons. First, Xiomara's reaction to Mami's questioning (and the fact that prior to this, she had to look up on the internet what menstruation even was) suggests that Xiomara wasn't prepared for her period at all. With no education about what was happening or an understanding

of what her options were, it's understandable that Xiomara came to the conclusion that tampons were fine. This makes it clear that because Mami doesn't speak frankly or honestly with Xiomara, especially about her body, Xiomara is doomed to fail—it's a toss up whether or not she'll make the “correct” decision about anything, since she doesn't know what the “correct” decision even is.

Mami's response, meanwhile, speaks to Mami's discomfort with sexuality in general and her desire to control Xiomara's sexuality specifically. Making the leap from using tampons to improper or deviant sexuality suggests that Mami believes that women shouldn't be comfortable or knowledgeable about their own bodies at all. By conveying this to Xiomara violently, Mami doesn't teach Xiomara anything new—except that, in this regard as in all others, she must obey Mami, no matter how little sense Mami's rules make.

“what's the point of God giving me life  
if I can't live it as my own?”

Why does listening to his commandments  
mean I need to shut down my own voice?

**Related Characters:** Xiomara Batista (speaker), Father Sean, Mami

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 57

### Explanation and Analysis

Xiomara offers some of her questions about religion that she doesn't feel that she can voice anywhere else. She shows here that because of what Mami and Father Sean preach and teach her, she's unable to use her own voice or think her own thoughts because she believes that she owes it to God to be devout and not ask questions that might challenge his authority over her life. In this sense, Xiomara sees that God and the church are her main foes, not necessarily Mami or the men who catcall her. This also situates Xiomara's primary challenge as extricating herself from the church and advocating for her right to use her own voice—and in doing so, figure out how she wants to conduct her relationship with God.

●● The poet talks about being black, about being a woman,  
about how beauty standards make it seem she isn't pretty.  
I don't breathe for the entire three minutes  
while I watch her hands, and face,  
feeling like she's talking directly to me.  
She's saying the thoughts I didn't know anyone else had.  
We're different, this poet and I. In looks, in body,  
in background. But I don't feel so different  
when I listen to her. I feel heard.

**Related Characters:** Xiomara Batista (speaker), Ms. Galiano

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 76

### Explanation and Analysis

In English class, Ms. Galiano introduces her students to spoken word poetry by playing a clip of a black female poet performing. For Xiomara, this is a transformative experience as, even though this poet is different from her in a variety of ways, this poet is also making Xiomara feel like she's not alone. This impresses upon Xiomara the power of language in general and poetry in particular: that it can be used to create a sense of community and camaraderie.

This experience contrasts sharply with the way that, in other places in Xiomara's life, she feels alone exactly because she feels like the only person who looks and feels a certain way—and she's not allowed to use her voice. By using her voice and putting herself in places where she can be listened to and listen to others, Xiomara discovers that she can create a space where everyone feels supported, valuable, and heard.

●● I just needed people saying words  
about all the things that hurt them.

And maybe this is why Papi stopped listening to music,  
because it can make your body want to rebel. To speak up.

And even that young I learned music can become a bridge  
between you and a total stranger.

**Related Characters:** Xiomara Batista (speaker), Aman, Papi

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 83

### Explanation and Analysis

In the lead-up to Xiomara's date with Aman, Xiomara explains how she first came to love rap and hip-hop as a kid. Music, she discovered, functions just as poetry does and connects people to each other—and especially for listeners like Xiomara, it makes them feel as though they're not alone and not the only person experiencing something.

When Xiomara wonders if Papi stopped listening to music because of its ability to inspire rebellion and a sense of community, it also suggests that music, poetry, and language more broadly are helping her to connect to the people around her and begin to empathize with them, rather than just seeing them as one-dimensional authority figures. Papi's demeanor means that, to Xiomara, he feels like as much of a stranger to her as these musicians she listens to on the internet—but by considering how he might interact with music in the same way, Xiomara can start to see him as a real person.

## Part II Quotes

●● “And about this apple,  
how come God didn't explain  
why they couldn't eat it?  
He gave Eve curiosity  
but didn't expect her to use it?  
Unless the apple is a metaphor?  
Is the whole Bible a poem?  
What's *not* a metaphor?  
Did any of it *actually* happen?”

**Related Characters:** Xiomara Batista (speaker), Father Sean, Caridad

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 120

### Explanation and Analysis

During her confirmation class, Xiomara snaps and asks Father Sean about Genesis, original sin, and if the Bible's stories are real. For Xiomara, these questions are pressing and extremely important, in part exactly because she doesn't feel like she's supposed to ask them (and Father Sean goes on to not actually answer them). Though this questioning doesn't go over well with Father Sean (or later with Mami), it shows that Xiomara is becoming more comfortable with her voice and her thoughts. Being more comfortable gives her the courage to speak up and ask

these questions, no matter what the consequences might be.

Then, wondering if the Bible is just a metaphor and a poem gives Xiomara a possible way to interact with it going forward. While the church teaches that the Bible is real and should be taken literally, Xiomara takes issue with this and sees that it's the reason why she's not allowed to ask questions and is instead told to be unquestioning and virginal. Seeing it as a poem, however—as something that Xiomara loves, and that she recognizes has the power to connect people—allows her to begin to come to a more truthful and positive relationship to the divine and to the church. In this sense, Xiomara's coming-of-age journey is tied closely to her learning that she can and should question the Bible and the church and, through doing so, find a way to be spiritual that makes her feel comfortable.

☝ And I knew then what I'd known since my period came: my body was trouble. I had to pray the trouble out of the body God gave me. My body was a problem. And I didn't want any of these boys to be the ones to solve it. I wanted to forget I had this body at all.

**Related Characters:** Xiomara Batista (speaker), Aman

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 151

### Explanation and Analysis

Prior to kissing Aman, Xiomara explains her transformation from believing her body is a problem to going on to decide that she'd like to share her body with Aman. In this stanza, Xiomara specifically speaks to the way in which, when it comes to her sexuality, she can't win—God gave her this body that, according to everyone, is too big, too loud, and too violent, and she has to pray in order to make her body even marginally more acceptable to God and to her community. Through this mindset, Xiomara also feels as though it's unsafe or improper to share her body with someone else, as doing so would mean that she'd have to accept that she has a body in the first place. This all speaks to the way in which Xiomara's experiences in the church and with Mami teach her to ignore her body and in turn, her sexuality, even though those things cannot be avoided forever.

☝ When I was little  
Mami was my hero.

But then I grew breasts  
and although she was always extra hard on me,  
her attention became something else,  
like she wanted to turn me  
into the nun  
she could never be.

**Related Characters:** Xiomara Batista (speaker), Mami

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 179

### Explanation and Analysis

As part of a rough draft for a writing assignment, Xiomara details how, as she entered puberty, her relationship with Mami shifted dramatically and for the worse. She suspects that Mami, whether she realizes it or not, is perpetuating a cycle of violence that's tied to religion and, moreover, is trying to make Xiomara compensate for violence and oppression that Mami experienced long ago. Mami does this without taking into account that Xiomara doesn't want to be a nun and, more importantly, has questions about Catholicism that call her willingness to even be a part of the church into question. In this sense, Xiomara recognizes that Mami is focusing on the daughter she *wants* at the expense of the daughter she *has*, and that both of them are suffering because of it. Xiomara can't and doesn't want to live up to Mami's expectations, while Mami can't bring herself to accept that Xiomara wants different things from her life.

☝ He grins at me and shrugs. "I came here and practiced a lot. My pops never wanted to put me in classes. Said it was too soft."

And now his smile is a little sad.  
And I think about all the things we could be  
if we were never told our bodies were not built for them.

**Related Characters:** Xiomara Batista, Aman (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 188

### Explanation and Analysis

At the skating rink, Aman tells Xiomara that he taught himself to skate because his dad wouldn't put him in lessons.

Xiomara recognizes yet again the power that words have—because Aman’s dad told him he couldn’t be a skater, Aman never had the opportunity to be anything other than an amateur when, in Xiomara’s opinion, he’s talented enough to do much more. In this sense, Xiomara understands that just as words can be used to free people by making them feel less alone, words can also make people even more confined and alone when used like this. This quotation also applies to the way in which Xiomara is told time and again that her body is too big and needs to be hidden. Xiomara recognizes that, if she celebrates her body, she can move through the world as a beautiful, compelling, and confident young woman, but being told time and again to minimize her body has kept her from living up to that potential.

●● I don’t yell how the whole block whispers  
when I walk down the street  
about all the women  
who made a cuero out of him.  
But men are never called cueros.

**Related Characters:** Xiomara Batista (speaker), Aman, Papi, Mami

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 194

### Explanation and Analysis

While Xiomara listens to her parents shout about Mami seeing Xiomara kissing Aman on the train, she hears Papi call her a *cuero* (a whore). Because of Xiomara’s fear, she doesn’t feel able to speak up or fight back for herself. Her parents create an environment in which Xiomara’s words don’t matter—unless they need to hear something specific that she dutifully parrots back—and Xiomara is well aware of this.

Then, Xiomara begins to dig into the double standards surrounding the word *cuero* and the differences between how male and female sexuality are thought of. As a younger man, Papi had casual sex with all sorts of women, to the point where people (like the ones Xiomara hears whispering on the street) do clearly call him a *cuero* in secret. However, because *cuero* only refers to women and there’s no corresponding term (or at least, not one with the same negative connotations) for men, Papi and other men never experience the kind of shame that being called a *cuero*

openly creates in women like Xiomara.

●● I’ll be anything that makes sense  
of this panic. I’ll loosen myself from this painful flesh.

See, a cuero is any skin. A cuero  
is just a covering. A cuero is a loose thing.  
Tied down by no one. Fluttering  
and waving in the wind. Flying. Flying. Gone.

**Related Characters:** Xiomara Batista (speaker), Aman, Papi, Mami

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 206

### Explanation and Analysis

After explaining what a *cuero* is—essentially, any woman who is perceived as being improperly sexual, no matter how she looks or behaves—Xiomara says that she’ll be anything if it allows her to escape from the physical pain of kneeling on rice and the emotional pain that Mami and Papi are currently inflicting upon her. Importantly, Xiomara recognizes that being called a *cuero* by her parents might not be the singularly horrible thing that she’s learned it is. Instead, accepting the label might give Xiomara the freedom to escape if she rejects her parents’ understanding of the word and embraces her own idea of what it could mean.

Further, Xiomara also alludes to the fact that sexually liberated or secure women experience a certain kind of freedom—a kind of freedom that Xiomara can’t experience in her repressive home. While being called a *cuero* may still be horrific and extremely hurtful, she understands that the basics of what the term connotes—sexual liberation, feeling beautiful and sexy in her skin, not being afraid of men’s advances—may not be bad things.

### Part III Quotes

●● “I’m sorry I got in trouble.  
I’m sorry I have to be here.  
That I have to pretend to you and her  
that I care about confirmation at all.  
But I’m not sorry I kissed a boy.  
I’m only sorry I was caught,  
Or that I had to hide it at all.”

**Related Characters:** Xiomara Batista (speaker), Aman,

Mami, Father Sean

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 226

### Explanation and Analysis

When Mami forces Xiomara to attend confession with Father Sean, Father Sean asks if Xiomara is actually sorry for getting in trouble. Xiomara reveals here that she's not sorry at all about what she did; she's only sorry that, because her parents are so controlling and repressive, she has to act as though she cares about church or about living up to the version of ideal womanhood that the church promotes. Through phrasing her answer in this way, Xiomara notably begins to speak her truth—and when she's willing to share this with Father Sean, it suggests that on some level, she believes that he's trustworthy and won't condemn her for feeling the way she does. This begins to teach Xiomara that, when she speaks truthfully to people who will listen, she may gain powerful and compassionate allies—especially since Father Sean goes on to support Xiomara through her later conversations with Mami.

☹️ But even business deals are promises.  
And we still married in a church.  
And so I never walked away from him  
although I tried my best to get back  
to my first love.  
And confirmation is the last step I can give you.

**Related Characters:** Mami (speaker), Papi, Aman, Xiomara Batista

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 231

### Explanation and Analysis

Angrily, Mami explains to Xiomara why Xiomara has to reform, undergo confirmation, and stop kissing boys—it's the one thing that Mami believes she can do to help Xiomara. What's more, it's also a way to try and make up for things in Mami's past that she wishes could have gone differently. Through these words, Mami all but confirms that she wants Xiomara to be so involved in church because Mami never got to become a nun and was instead forced to marry Papi. Mami believes it's her responsibility to stick with the path she was forced to take which, in her

understanding, means forcing piety out of her children to make up for leaving Jesus to get married to Papi.

It's notable that even though Mami explicitly describes having been forced by her family to forgo her true desires, she doesn't seem to realize that she's doing precisely the same thing to Xiomara. Xiomara's desires are different from Mami's, but the ways that they're oppressed by their families are very similar. This moment reinforces the idea that violence and oppression can be passed down from generation to generation unless someone steps in to interrupt the toxic cycle.

☹️ I can't remember  
the last time people were silent  
while I spoke, actually listening.  
Not since Aman.  
But it's nice to know I don't need him  
in order to feel listened to.  
My little words  
feel important, for just a moment.  
This is a feeling I could get addicted to.

**Related Characters:** Xiomara Batista (speaker), Aman, Stephan, Chris, Isabelle, Ms. Galiano

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 259

### Explanation and Analysis

During Xiomara's first poetry club meeting, she reads a poem out loud and feels important and heard for the first time in a while. While prior to this moment Xiomara was beginning to understand the power of writing poetry for herself and, at times, sharing it with Aman, she now is beginning to learn that there's power in sharing her words with others more generally. If she thinks back to the performance that Ms. Galiano showed in class months ago, Xiomara will recall that that woman's poem made her feel less alone. Now, she can begin to create that same experience for her new friends in poetry club, as well as receive validation for her poems and her thoughts. Poetry, in other words, is now helping Xiomara create community and agency where, before, she felt like she had none.

●● I actually raise my hand  
in English class  
and answer Ms. Galiano's question.  
Because at least here with her,  
I know my words are okay.

**Related Characters:** Xiomara Batista (speaker), Aman, Twin, Mami, Ms. Galiano

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 264

### Explanation and Analysis

Following Xiomara's first poetry club meeting, Xiomara learns that she can trust Ms. Galiano to respect her words and listen to them thoughtfully and considerately. This demonstrates again how language, speaking, and importantly, listening can create a sense of community and trust—and make someone like Xiomara feel seen, heard, and safe. At home, Xiomara feels as though nobody listens to her, so it doesn't feel like a safe space to be herself. In Ms. Galiano's class, however, Xiomara now trusts that she'll be taken seriously and that Ms. Galiano will stand up for Xiomara's right to exist and be listened to. Giving Xiomara this space to feel safe and heard also means that, going forward, Xiomara will feel more comfortable asking for and trying to create this kind of relationship with others in the future. This happens most notably when, after she leaves following Mami burning her poetry notebook, Xiomara reaches out to Aman. Because Xiomara learned with Ms. Galiano's help that there are people who will listen to her—and that Aman is one of them—she understands both that Aman is a safe place, and that speaking up and telling her truth is powerful and healing.

●● Because so many of the poems tonight  
felt a little like our own stories.  
Like we saw and were seen.  
And how crazy would it be  
if I did that for someone else?

**Related Characters:** Xiomara Batista (speaker), Caridad, Twin

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 282

### Explanation and Analysis

After Xiomara, Twin, and Caridad get home from going to an open mic night at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, Twin seems to feel the same thing that Xiomara does in that they connected with others like them for the first time. Important here is that, for the first time, Xiomara recognizes that through performing her poetry, she has the power and the ability to make other people in her situation feel like they're not alone. This is notable for a few reasons, primarily because this shows that Xiomara now recognizes that she's not alone in feeling too big and repressed—there are other people out there who harbor the same misgivings about their bodies and have similar questions about religion. Sharing this revelation with Twin also shows that Xiomara is already beginning to expand her community and connect better with her brother. In this way, Xiomara is building up the things she needs to stand up for herself against Mami for her right to write and perform her poetry without shame.

●● And I know that I'm ready to slam.  
That my poetry has become something I'm proud of.  
The way the words say what I mean,  
how they twist and turn language,  
how they connect with people.  
How they build community.

**Related Characters:** Xiomara Batista (speaker), Stephan, Chris, Ms. Galiano

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 287

### Explanation and Analysis

Right before winter break, Xiomara reflects on the transformation she's undergone in the last month or so since she started attending poetry club. Remarking that she's ready to slam and saying outright that her poetry allows her to connect with people and build community indicates that Xiomara understands how powerful language is, and in particular, how powerful it is when she speaks it and doesn't just write it. While writing her poetry privately was still a positive and cathartic experience for her, sharing her poems with others allows Xiomara to do even more good with it by making others feel as though they're not

alone with their worries, problems, or fears.

☝ I lay it across my wrist  
and cinch the clasps closed.  
Her daughter on one side,  
myself on the other.

**Related Characters:** Xiomara Batista (speaker), Mami

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 292

### Explanation and Analysis

For Christmas, Mami gives Xiomara her resized baby bracelet, which reads “*Mi Hija*” (“my daughter”) on one side and Xiomara’s name on the other. For Xiomara, this bracelet comes to encapsulate her fraught relationship with Mami, since the daughter that Mami wants isn’t necessarily the person that Xiomara actually is. Mami wants her daughter to be quiet, devout, and virginal, while Xiomara now knows how to use her voice to ask questions and advocate for herself—and she’s also experimented with boys and doesn’t feel the need to remain virginal just because the church tells her to. Though Xiomara’s coming of age is primarily tied up in how she comes to understand her relationship to the church, the bracelet also shows that as she does this, she also has to come to a more nuanced understanding of how to connect with Mami. Though Mami and Xiomara don’t fully resolve their differences by the end of the novel, the bracelet does offer hope that at some point in the future, Xiomara’s true self and Mami’s daughter can indeed be the same person, just as the bracelet contains both aspects of the person that Xiomara is.

☝ I have no more poems. My mind blanks.  
A roar tears from my mouth.  
“Burn it! Burn it.  
This is where the poems are,” I say,  
thumping a fist against my chest.  
“Will you burn me? Will you burn me, too?  
You would burn me, wouldn’t you, if you could?”

**Related Characters:** Xiomara Batista (speaker), Mami

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 308

### Explanation and Analysis

While Mami burns Xiomara’s poetry notebook, Xiomara shouts that her poems live inside of her. This moment represents Xiomara’s understanding that while her notebook offered her a place to organize her thoughts and compose them into poetry, those thoughts do actually exist within her. In other words, she doesn’t necessarily need her notebook for her thoughts to be real and valid, especially since by this point, she has a number of her poems memorized.

Asking Mami if Mami would burn her also speaks to the way in which Xiomara recognizes that Mami wants a daughter she doesn’t have. Xiomara isn’t as devout or small as Mami would like her to be, and the existence of the poetry journal and what Mami read in it is proof of this. Xiomara now understands that if Mami wants to squash the part of Xiomara that seems to live in the notebook, Mami has to give up her daughter as a whole—which in a way she does, when she frightens Xiomara into leaving the house for a night.

☝ She puts a soft hand on my arm  
and I look into the face of a woman  
not much older than me,  
a woman with a Spanish last name,  
who loves books and poetry,  
who I notice for the first time is pretty,  
who has a soft voice and called my house  
because she was worried  
and the words are out before I know it:

**Related Characters:** Xiomara Batista (speaker), Aman, Mami, Ms. Galiano

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 332

### Explanation and Analysis

When Xiomara shows up in Ms. Galiano’s class the morning

after Mami burns her poetry journal, Ms. Galiano asks Xiomara to speak privately and asks her what's wrong. In this instant, Xiomara begins to see Ms. Galiano as a real person, a role model, and a caring mentor—an important realization to make, especially given that Xiomara doesn't trust Mami or Papi at all at this point. That making these realizations about Ms. Galiano results in Xiomara being willing to tell her the truth about what's going on at home speaks to the power of kindness and connection to foster trust. In accepting Xiomara as she is and being a true ally, Ms. Galiano gives Xiomara permission to be truthful about what's going on and encourages her to accept Ms. Galiano's advice when she goes on to give it.

●● And so, I love this quote because even though it's not about poetry, it IS about poetry. It's about any of the words that bring us together and how we can form a home in them.

**Related Characters:** Xiomara Batista (speaker), Mami, Father Sean, Ms. Galiano

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 356

### Explanation and Analysis

In one of Ms. Galiano's writing assignments in which students must explain why they love their favorite quote, Xiomara chooses a psalm and uses it to prove her newfound belief that the Bible is a metaphor and is poetry. By seeing the Bible in this light, Xiomara is able to find a place for herself in the church that doesn't feel constricting and that instead lets her feel seen, heard, and valued in a way that interpreting the Bible literally never allowed for. Most importantly, Xiomara is now able to interpret the Bible as something that is supposed to bring people together, a quality that she attributed previously to poetry but now sees can apply to religion as well. Bringing the two together shows that, at least within the scope of the novel, Xiomara has for all intents and purposes come of age. She now knows where she fits in with the church and she understands the power of her words.



## 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.

## PART I: IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORLD

*Friday, August 24. Stoop-Sitting.* Xiomara writes that it's the last week before school starts, so she enjoys the last bits of summer from her stoop. She watches the old church ladies gossip and an old man open the fire hydrant so kids can play in the water. Cabs drive by blasting bachata music and she can hear basketballs from the nearby park. Men finish a dominoes tournament and Xiomara shakes her head at the drug dealers, who smile more in the summer when they have pretty girls to look at. They taunt her and tell her to wear more revealing clothing, but she ignores them. She waits for the shadows to get long so she can sneak upstairs before Mami gets home from work.

*Unhide-able.* Xiomara says that she can't hide. She's taller than Papi, and Mami has always said that she has too much body for a 15-year-old. Boys called Xiomara a whale in middle school—but now, they ask for pictures of her in a thong since her baby fat turned into D-cup breasts and big hips. Other girls insult Xiomara for her body, so she uses her fists and shrugs off the insults. Her skin is as thick as her body.

*Mira, Muchacha.* “Mira, muchacha” (“Listen, girl”) is Mami's favorite way to start speaking to Xiomara, and Xiomara always knows that she's in trouble. This time, Mami says that a woman across the street said that Xiomara was talking to drug dealers. Xiomara says nothing, but tells the reader that she wasn't talking to the drug dealers—they were talking to her. Mami doesn't want Xiomara to talk to boys at all or have anything to do with them. Mami confirms that Xiomara heard her and walks away. Xiomara says that she sometimes wants to tell Mami that she's the only one who nobody listens to.

*Names.* Xiomara's name is the only one in the family that isn't biblical or even Dominican. It means “one who is ready for war,” and Xiomara lives up to that description. She was born via C-section after Mami gave birth to Xavier—Xiomara's brother Twin—with no complications, and Xiomara feels like people struggle in the same way to say her name. It's pronounced “See-oh-MAH-ruh.” She no longer flinches when teachers mess it up on the first day of school. Mami supposedly thought it was a saint's name, but now, Mami curses how well Xiomara lives up to her name. Mami and Papi probably wanted a girl who would sit in church in floral dresses, but Xiomara wears combat boots.

*Though the tone of this poem is somewhat hopeful and evokes a kind of idyllic summer, note that sprinkled in is a sense that Xiomara is, in some ways, trying to protect herself. She'll go on to explain that this is because of her body and because Mami is extremely strict, but at this point, it reads simply as a hint that Xiomara isn't able to exist entirely comfortably in her world because of the attention she receives from men or might get from Mami.*



*Mami's comments about Xiomara's size certainly make Xiomara feel even more self-conscious about her body. The fact that Xiomara has to fight to keep herself safe from insults or bullying suggests that she's not entirely comfortable using her voice—or that, in her experience, using her voice hasn't been effective.*



*Mami shows here that as far as she's concerned, it's a woman's fault when they experience being catcalled, and it's up to women to ward off this kind of attention—even if it's impossible for any woman to actually make this a reality. This creates even more pressure for Xiomara in regards to her body, as she's not only too big; she receives an uncomfortable amount of attention that she's then blamed for because of her body.*



*When Xiomara notes that she doesn't react anymore when teachers mispronounce her name, it indicates that she feels she needs to protect herself when it comes to all aspects of her identity, from her name to her body. The note that Mami and Papi wanted a more demure daughter than Xiomara also begins to point to the possibility that their expectations for Xiomara are not in line with what Xiomara is able or willing to give them.*



*The First Words.* People have told Xiomara “*Pero, tú no eres fácil*” (“You’re not easy”) for her entire life. She hears it when she comes home with scraped knuckles, when she doesn’t do the dishes fast enough, or when she forgets to clean the bathroom. Sometimes, it’s positive, like when Xiomara does well in school. Mami’s pregnancy was difficult because of Xiomara; the doctors were concerned that she’d die or kill Mami. There was a prayer circle at church and Father Sean came to the ER to hold Mami’s hand while Papi paced. The doctor said that Xiomara’s was the most difficult birth she’d assisted. The first thing Papi said was “*pero, tú no eres fácil.*”

*Mami Works.* Mami cleans an office building in Queens. She rides two trains starting in the early morning and then spends her day sweeping, cleaning, and being invisible. It takes more than an hour to get home to Harlem in the evenings. Mami tells Xiomara that she spends her time on the train reading the Bible and getting ready for evening Mass. Xiomara says that if she were on the train for that long, she’d settle in, close her eyes, and try to dream.

*Tuesday, August 28. Confirmation Class.* Xiomara explains that Mami has wanted Xiomara to be confirmed in the church for three years. The first year, the class filled up and Mami couldn’t make Father Sean bend the rules to let Xiomara and Twin in. Last year, Xiomara’s best friend Caridad extended her trip in the Dominican Republic, so Xiomara asked to wait another year. Mami grudgingly agreed and Twin took the class alone. This year, Xiomara is all signed up. Mami doesn’t know that Xiomara thinks that Jesus feels like a childhood friend who has suddenly started texting too much and invites himself over too often. Xiomara doesn’t feel like she needs Jesus anymore, even though she knows writing that is blasphemous. She doesn’t know how to tell Mami that she’s not simply unready; her doubt is already confirmed.

*God.* There are lots of reasons that Xiomara wonders about God. She wonders why the holy trinity doesn’t include the mother, but she also sees how the church treats her differently. It’s like all that matters is what’s between her legs and not in her head, and she sometimes thinks that “turning the other cheek” could get Twin or men like him killed. Xiomara sometimes feels like life would be easier if she didn’t always feel like she owes a debt to God, especially since he doesn’t seem to be checking on her.

Constantly telling Xiomara that she’s not easy is a way to emphasize that she’s not living up to expectations in any way—something that likely makes Xiomara feel even more defensive and self-conscious about all sorts of things. Expectations, in this case, keep Mami and Papi from being thankful for the daughter they do have, while also making it harder for Xiomara to feel as though she’s loved and accepted for who she is.



When Xiomara makes it clear that her train activities would differ from Mami’s, it’s important because Xiomara implies that she’s not as religious as Mami is. This suggests that there will be even more areas of Xiomara’s life where Mami isn’t happy with Xiomara the way she is.



Remember that the novel is ostensibly Xiomara’s private poetry notebook. Because of this, the fact that she couches her thoughts and questions about Jesus with the qualifier that she knows they’re blasphemous speaks to the extent of the church’s influence on her life. Even in private, Xiomara feels as though she has to live up to the church’s ideals and conceptions of what and who a young woman like her should be. The fact that Xiomara already knows she has doubts suggests that, as she comes of age, she’ll have to come to terms with these doubts and eventually learn to voice them.



What Xiomara has to say about the value the church places on her sexuality begins to explain why Mami handles the sexual attention Xiomara receives the way she does—Xiomara stopping the advances is something required of her by the church. Additionally, though Xiomara isn’t entirely aware of it yet, Twin is gay. Thus, her statement can refer to him being either Latinx or gay, the combination of which makes him even more vulnerable.



"Mami," *I Say to Her on the Walk Home*. Xiomara is nervous, but she forces herself to ask what would happen if she didn't do confirmation. Mami cuts Xiomara off before she can even finish the question and declares that she won't care for a heathen. Mami says that Xiomara owes it to God and to herself to devote herself, that the U.S. is too lenient with kids, and that if Xiomara doesn't get confirmed here, she'll have to go to Dominican Republic. The priests and nuns there know how to make someone pious. Xiomara looks at Mami's scarred knuckles and thinks that she understands how Mami was taught to be faithful.

*When You're Born to Old Parents*. Xiomara says that when you're born to old parents who had given up hope of ever having children, you become a miracle and proof of God's love. Neighbors treat Xiomara well and cross themselves when they see her. They're all thankful that Xiomara and Twin weren't tumors like everyone feared they were.

*When You're Born to Old Parents, Continued*. Xiomara continues and says that when the twins were born, Papi stopped drinking and hanging out at the bodega where men flirt. He stopped playing music and became a serious man. Xiomara says that even though merengue is the music of their people, Papi rejects anything that might tempt him.

*When You're Born to Old Parents, Continued Again*. Mami had a **baby bracelet** engraved with Xiomara's name and *Mi Hija* (my daughter) on the other side. It was Xiomara's favorite gift but now, it's a shackle. Mami started going to church with even more fervor and attends Mass daily. Xiomara has to go too and her knees are filled with splinters. She still feels doubt.

*The Last Word on Being Born to Old Parents*. Xiomara hates that her parents are old. Not even Twin understands the burden that Xiomara feels. Mami sees only Xiomara, Twin, and God, while Papi seems to be serving a silent penance. Both Mami and Papi have expectations. Xiomara knows it's ungrateful to feel like a burden or to resent her birth. She knows that she and Twin are miracles—they're reminded daily.

*Realizing that Mami was probably taught to be faithful through physical abuse begins to show that Mami's overbearing nature likely stems from having experienced overbearing adults when she was Xiomara's age—it's what she knows, and she hasn't had reason or opportunity to rethink this. This illustrates how abusive behavior is normalized and then passed down through generations, hurting everyone in the process.*



*The fact that Mami and Papi were unusually old when they became parents sets up the idea that in addition to the other conflicts Xiomara has with her parents, there's also a wide generational gap between them. Mami and Papi's expectations are probably even more rigid than younger parents' expectations might be.*



*Xiomara suggests here that having children was a coming-of-age experience of sorts for Papi—but one that turned him into a staid and soulless person, not one that gave him a more nuanced or brighter view on life. This suggests that coming of age can be a freeing experience or the exact opposite.*



*That the bracelet feels like a shackle indicates that Xiomara feels stifled by Mami's expectations of her, especially those that have to do with the church. Mentioning the splinters in her knees from the pews also shows that for Xiomara, church is a painful experience.*



*Being told daily that she's a miracle and needs to thank God for her existence robs some of the joy of living from Xiomara, as it creates the expectation that her first duty is to make her life something that God would approve of rather than live for herself. Twin likely doesn't understand the burden because he's male and therefore isn't subject to quite the same expectations that Xiomara is.*



*Rumor Has It.* Mami was a snob in the Dominican Republic. She was born in La Capital and all the men thought she was beautiful, but the only man Mami wanted was Jesus. She had wanted to be a nun since she was a young girl but, supposedly, Mami's family forced her to marry Papi so she could move to the U.S. Thirty years later, Mami and Papi are still married. Xiomara thinks that Mami hasn't forgiven Papi for "making her cheat on Jesus," or for the other things he did.

*Tuesday, September 4. First Confirmation Class.* Xiomara instantly wants to hit the other kids because they stare at Xiomara and Caridad. She and Caridad are older, but they know most of the other kids from youth Bible study. She wonders if the kids stare because they thought she and Caridad had already been confirmed, or because Xiomara can't hide that she'd rather be anywhere else.

*Father Sean.* Father Sean runs the confirmation class. He's been the head priest for Xiomara's entire life. He wasn't too strict last year during youth Bible study, but Xiomara does wonder if she just didn't notice how strict he was. Older kids asked important questions then, like why they should wait for marriage and if masturbation is a sin. Confirmation class feels different. Father Sean explains that the students will deepen their relationships with God of their own volition. He says it's serious. Xiomara fixates on the word "volition." She thinks it's like a fruit she's never eaten, but she can already taste that it's sour.

*Haiku; Boys.* As Father Sean lectures, Xiomara whispers to Caridad. She asks if Caridad kissed boys when she was in the Dominican Republic over the summer. Though Caridad denies it, she blushes. Xiomara admits that she's not proud that she hasn't kissed anyone and that she's ready to kiss and let boys touch her. Caridad curses and points Xiomara toward the Book of Ruth so she can learn virtue. Xiomara scolds her for cursing and Caridad jokes that she doesn't know why she missed Xiomara. She assures Xiomara that she'll figure out the boy thing.

*Learning this piece of Mami's history shows clearly that she was never told that she could create for herself the life she wanted; instead, she needed only to follow others' ideas. Note too that while Mami wanted to immerse herself in the church as a nun, now the church is somewhat uncomfortably oppressive for her, since the Catholic Church forbids divorce and so keeps Mami stuck in a life that she never wanted.*



*Being such an open book with her emotions means that Xiomara likely has to deal with far more teasing and taunting than someone who's better at hiding their emotions, as she's previously implied with her mentions of having to fight back against bullies.*



*When Xiomara talks about her perception of Father Sean changing, it points to her growing and learning to see her world in new ways. Her comment about "volition" being unknown to her reinforces the idea that Mami is forcing Catholicism upon Xiomara, rather than letting her come to it. This makes it clear to the reader that Xiomara isn't embarking upon the confirmation class of her own choice—and is therefore violating its purpose, at least according to Father Sean.*



*Xiomara's willingness to be open with Caridad about her desire to gain experience with boys indicates that she's getting support from Caridad that she's not getting elsewhere. It's worth keeping in mind too that while Caridad is supportive, she also makes it clear that she still believes fully in Catholicism. Toeing this line is possible in part because they're peers; Caridad feels no need to shame Xiomara into submission like Mami does, hinting that close relationships can exist even between people with different beliefs.*



*Caridad and I Shouldn't Be Friends.* Xiomara says that she and Caridad are never mistaken for sisters and aren't "two sides of the same coin." Xiomara is always ready to fight, while Caridad recites Bible verses and talks about peace. Xiomara wants to like boys, while Caridad wants to wait until marriage. Caridad respects her parents, while Xiomara listens to Mami because she's afraid. She thinks that she should hate Caridad since she's everything Xiomara can never be, but they've known each other since they were babies and Caridad knows Xiomara inside and out. Best of all, Caridad isn't judgmental. She knows that Xiomara has questions but never tells Xiomara she's wrong.

*Questions I Have.* Xiomara wonders who she'd be around boys if Mami weren't so strict. Xiomara has lots of feelings and notices boys, but she also gets attention from guys that confuses her. She feels flattered but scared that they only like her breasts and her backside, and she's afraid of what Mami would say. Xiomara wonders what would happen if, like one girl she knows, she fell in love and became addicted to sex. That girl has three kids, no man, and no diploma. She wonders what would happen if she fell in love, a boy broke her heart, and she became bitter like Mami. She doesn't know what else is possible besides those two extremes. Xiomara asks how she's supposed to figure out what it means to be in love.

*Wednesday, September 5. Night before First Day of School.* Xiomara lies in bed thinking of the new school year. She can feel her body stretching her skin and she feels too small for everything inside. She wants to break herself open like an egg. Xiomara thinks that teachers always say that a new school year is a new start. She feels like she's been beginning for a while now.

*Thursday, September 6. H.S.* Xiomara's high school might have been built during the Great Depression. Kids come from all over the city, though Xiomara can walk. It's "wide and squat," while Twin's fancy "genius school" is glass and futuristic. Xiomara's school was considered one of the worst in the city not long ago, but Xiomara sees that reputations last longer than anything else. Every day she greets security guards by name, goes through metal detectors, and keeps her head down. School for her is just a place and a way to get closer to her eventual escape.

Again, the way that Xiomara talks about Caridad being able to understand both the religious world and Xiomara's world indicates that Caridad is accepting of Xiomara and her questions in a way that nobody in Xiomara's family is. Caridad thus sets an example that the novel suggests is worth striving for: because she's not judgmental, she's able to impart more advice to Xiomara and have Xiomara take it seriously, while Mami's "advice" falls on deaf ears because she doesn't respect Xiomara's perspective.



This poem begins to show that Xiomara hasn't been around healthy examples of romantic relationships; all she knows is married bitterness or sex destroying a woman's life. This means that Xiomara will be much less likely to recognize a healthy relationship if she sees it, though the fact that she seems to suspect that there's more to romance than these extremes offers hope that she won't simply replicate what she sees at home or in her community.



That Xiomara's change comes from her growing body suggests that her coming of age is something necessitated by her body, not necessarily something she'd choose if she didn't have to. Feeling like she's beginning also opens her up to accept new experiences during this school year.



The escape that Xiomara refers to is likely college, when she can get away from Mami and Papi and begin to figure out who she actually is without their supervision. That school is simply a means to escape indicates that Xiomara prioritizes her thoughts and intelligence, even if her church and her family may prioritize her body and her sexuality above her intelligence.



Ms. Galiano. Ms. Galiano isn't what Xiomara expected after hearing kids talk about her being strict and tough. Xiomara expected an old teacher in a suit, but Ms. Galiano is young, wears bright colors, and wears her hair naturally curly. She's petite, but acts much larger. Xiomara has her for first period English. They do icebreakers, Ms. Galiano pronounces Xiomara's name right on the first try, and then Ms. Galiano hands out her first assignment. She wants her students to write about the most impactful day of their lives. Xiomara feels like teachers always fake being interested, but she suspects that Ms. Galiano is genuinely interested.

*Rough Draft of Assignment 1—Write about the most impactful day of your life.* Xiomara writes about starting her period in fifth grade. Nobody had told her what to do or what it was. She got home from school and when she went to the bathroom, she found blood in her underwear. She Googled “blood down there” and then snuck money to buy tampons. She put one in, but did it wrong and blood smeared all over her legs. When Mami got home Xiomara tearfully asked for help, but Mami slapped her so hard she cut Xiomara's lip. She told Xiomara that good girls don't wear tampons and asked if Xiomara was a virgin. Xiomara didn't know how to answer. Mami threw away the tampons, said they were for *cueros*, and said she'd pray. Xiomara hoped she'd stop bleeding.

*Final Draft of Assignment 1 (What I Actually Turn In).* Xiomara writes that when she turned 12, Twin bought her a leather-bound **poetry notebook** for their birthday. It has a woman reaching for the sky on the cover and motivational quotes on the pages. Twin told her that he hoped it would give Xiomara a place to put her thoughts. Sometimes, Xiomara writes poems in it. It was the first time someone gave her a place to put her thoughts and it seemed like Twin was saying that Xiomara's thoughts are important. Xiomara writes every day and thinks that it's the only way to not hurt.

*The Routine.* Every day after school, Xiomara goes straight home. She's the girl of the house, so she has to help out. Xiomara eats an **apple**, washes dishes, and dusts. Xiomara and Twin argue about how Twin doesn't have to clean half as much, but Mami still likes him better. Sometimes Twin helps with laundry or scrubbing, but he doesn't get in trouble if he doesn't. Xiomara thinks of one of Mami's favorite sayings: that life isn't fair, which is why they have to earn their entrance into heaven.

*Being able to pronounce Xiomara's name right off the bat immediately makes Ms. Galiano a more sympathetic individual in Xiomara's eyes, as it suggests that she understands at least the language if not some of the cultural aspects of Xiomara's life. This also shows how people can begin to connect through language, both through Xiomara's name and by being asked to complete this writing assignment that will allow Ms. Galiano a window into Xiomara's life.*



*This story reveals that in Xiomara's family, talking about body functions like menstruation doesn't happen—which means that Xiomara is wildly underprepared and scared, which she didn't need to be. Mami's reaction is especially telling, since it indicates that she wants Xiomara to somehow just know how Mami expects her to behave (rather than behaving a certain way because she's been told to). In this way, Xiomara truly can't win, since there are certainly more times than this that she's not even sure of what the expectations are.*



*What Xiomara turns in contrasts sharply with her rough draft: while starting her period was a silent, confusing, and painful experience, receiving this notebook was an invitation to begin using her words to make sense of what's going on around her. This birthday then represents the starting point for Xiomara's coming-of-age journey, as it's the point where she begins to learn the power of using her words, even if only in private.*



*Drawing out the different expectations for Xiomara and Twin allows Xiomara to show how her parents truly do treat her differently. Presumably, Xiomara has to do more or different things to earn her entrance into heaven because she's female, while Twin has a bit of a free pass since he's male and already favored by the adults in his life. The apple in this scene is also a symbolic hint at the way Catholicism treats women as inherently sinful in a way that men are not.*



*Altar Boy.* Mami understands Twin better. Even though he's a science geek, he likes church and doesn't question the Bible. He's been an altar boy since he was eight and leads discussions in Bible study better than Father Sean. This summer, he volunteered at Bible camp. With school in session, he'll miss the religious crafts his campers made. He'll miss the mosaic of marbles that he hung in his and Xiomara's room. She throws it out while cleaning and vows to apologize and say it was an accident. She knows that Twin will forgive her and pretend to believe her.

*Twin's Name.* Xiomara has only ever called her brother Twin. His real name is nice and a saint's name, but it doesn't feel like her brother. His real name is for other people, but calling him Twin is a reminder that they'll always be a pair.

*More About Twin.* Even though Twin is older by about an hour, he doesn't act like it. When he and Xiomara were little, Xiomara would come home bruised and bleeding and Mami would scold her for not being like Twin. Xiomara never told Mami that Twin didn't fight because Xiomara fought for him. Twin is soft, while Xiomara is a hurricane.

*Tuesday, September 11. It's Only the First Week of Tenth Grade.* Xiomara feels like high school is a mess. In ninth grade she felt in between everything, but she thought that tenth grade would feel different. However, Xiomara still feels lonely and like people want to tear her apart. She curses at a guy who pulls on her bra strap and then shoves another guy into a locker for whispering in her ear about her body. Xiomara feels disgusted when she feels a little excited, but she also wishes that she could make her body tiny and hide.

*How I Feel About Attention.* Xiomara muses that if Medusa was Dominican and had a daughter, she'd be the daughter. She feels like a myth with tight curls, a hard mouth, and long lashes. She feels like something to be conquered by fake heroes. Xiomara thinks that if Medusa were her mother, Medusa would tell her secrets, like how her looks stop men but that the men keep coming anyway.

When Xiomara throws out the mosaic while she's cleaning, it suggests that she's trying to find the places where she can gain some degree of power over her life from within the confines set by her parents. Because she's the one responsible for the cleaning, she's the one who can "accidentally" get rid of things she doesn't like. Meanwhile, Twin's willingness to forgive and pretend suggests that he's aware of the pressure on Xiomara and doesn't want to make it worse.



The reasons Xiomara has for calling Twin by the nickname indicates that Twin is the one person she feels safe with and connected to in her family.



That Xiomara spent her childhood standing up for Twin speaks to her loyalty to those who love her unconditionally, while Mami's scoldings show how out of touch she is with the realities of her children's lives. It also suggests that Twin might not be as ideally masculine as Mami likely wants.



The conflicted emotions that Xiomara has about this attention are perfectly normal, even if the boys' behavior is horrendous. Remember that Xiomara only knows of two options when it comes to boys (love and abandonment or love and bitterness), so it makes sense these abusive and predatory boys stir up some curiosity—in some ways, Xiomara doesn't expect anything else.



Casting herself as a Medusa-like myth shows that people interact with their idea of what Xiomara is, not who Xiomara actually is on the inside—something reflected by the fact that, at this point, Xiomara is still writing all of this privately and not sharing her true self with the world.



*Saturday, September 15. Games.* Twin, Caridad, and Xiomara go to a park on the Upper West side. Neither Twin nor Xiomara is athletic, but Caridad convinced them to go to a basketball tournament. Xiomara explains that Twin and Caridad seem more like twins sometimes, but they all feel like family. It's a beautiful day and the players play shirtless. Xiomara and Twin watch the players while Caridad watches the ball. When a player catches Twin looking, Twin pretends to clean his glasses. After the game, a boy stops and accuses Xiomara of staring at him. Xiomara knows it's true and feels suddenly aware of everyone staring at her. Twin starts to pull her away, but the boy says that Xiomara is too big for Twin to handle. Xiomara gets in the guy's face and asks how he expects to handle her when he can't handle the ball.

*After.* Xiomara says that "it" happens everywhere—at school, on the train, on the stoop, and when she forgets to be cautious. She thinks that she should be used to it and that she shouldn't get angry when boys or men speak crudely to her, rub up against her, or make offers. But, she's not used to it and it always makes her feel shaky and tight. After she and Twin get home, Xiomara puts in headphones to listen to Drake. She grabs her **poetry notebook** and writes poems about all the things she wishes she'd said. Xiomara says that it happens whether she's wearing jeans or shorts, whether she's sitting or walking, and even if she's on her phone. It never stops.

*Okay?* Twin asks if Xiomara is okay. Xiomara doesn't know if she wants to hug him or hit him, and Twin sees it on her face. Xiomara thinks that Twin is older and male, but he never defends her. She wonders if he knows how tired she is of having to defend herself. Twin turns back to the computer, and neither of them voices their disappointment.

*Sunday, September 16. On Sunday.* Xiomara stares at the back of the pew in front of her so she doesn't have to look at the pictures of saints or the sculpture of Jesus. Church feels like a prison, not a party.

*When Xiomara notes that Twin is looking at the players just like she is, it opens up the possibility that Xiomara knows on some level that Twin is gay, but isn't yet willing to say anything to him about it. The insult that Xiomara throws at the boy who challenges her and Twin shows that she has a way with language and already has a firm grasp of how to use it to get what she wants—but at this point, she has to use it in a defensive way, rather than speaking for the sake of expressing herself. Spoken language, at this point, has a very specific purpose for her.*



*"It" is presumably catcalling or other inappropriate behavior from men. The fact that it happens all the time makes it very clear that there's nothing Xiomara can do to stop it, no matter how much Mami tells her it's her responsibility to make it stop. Rather, these men are the ones doing horrible things and it's not Xiomara's fault for existing in a world where she suffers this kind of constant abuse from men.*



*Xiomara shows here that she also has expectations of Twin that, his actions suggest, will never come true. In this way, Xiomara is doing what her parents have taught her to: she's unable to see that the Twin she has is the Twin she'll always have; he won't change overnight. This mirrors the way that Xiomara won't become suddenly demure and devout overnight, as Mami and Papi would like.*



*That church feels like a prison makes it very clear that Xiomara isn't going to accept God into her life of her own volition, as Father Sean wants.*



*During Communion.* Xiomara says that she's always taken communion. Today, however, she feels glued to her pew. Caridad raises an eyebrow and Mami elbows Xiomara, but Xiomara stares straight ahead at a stained glass Virgin Mary. Mami whispers for Xiomara to take communion and thank God for her life. Usually this works, but Xiomara sits and silently asks what the point was of God giving her life when she can't live it. She wonders why obeying him means that she can't voice her own thoughts.

*Church Mass.* Xiomara says that when she was little, she loved Mass. The music was loud, everyone was happy, and Mami cried. Now, when Father Sean talks about Scriptures, everything feels weird and wrong. She hates when he says that girls shouldn't do things, should obey, and shouldn't be like Eve or Delilah. Xiomara is supposed to be like Mary, but Mary was probably terrified. Xiomara notices that none of the angels or Mary look like her, and thinks that even though she's told to believe in the father and the son, men are the ones who make her feel small.

*Not Even Close to Haikus.* Xiomara says that Mami's back is like a coat hanger, and her anger is heavy wool. Mami scolds Xiomara for not taking communion. Xiomara mimics Mami's straight back and spits that Father Sean says that communion should only be taken with joy. Xiomara isn't sure who wins this battle.

*Holy Water.* Xiomara listens to Mami and Papi talking about her—they never think that Xiomara and Twin listen in, but it's impossible not to. Mami spits that Xiomara has the same devils in her that Papi had and that Father Sean will speak to Xiomara. Xiomara thinks that Father Sean won't help and that she doesn't understand God anymore. Papi assures Mami that puberty messes with teen girls and Mami doesn't argue, since Papi knows more about girls than she does. Xiomara hopes to drown in her feelings.

*People Say; On Papi.* Papi used to be a womanizer. He'd touch women and compliment them, but people also suspected he was infertile—that's why he had so much casual sex. People think that Xiomara and Twin saved him and his marriage. Papi used to love to dance but now, thanks to his children, he stands up straight. Xiomara says that it's possible to have a dad who doesn't seem like he's around, even though he's actually at home often. Papi feels absent.

*Because of the way that Xiomara has learned to be religious from Mami, she doesn't have any conception of how to be a spiritual person without fully embracing the entirety of Catholicism the way that Mami interprets it. Given Father Sean's focus on choice, it's likely that he'd encourage Xiomara to voice her own thoughts—but at this point, Mami's influence is too strong for her to consider other ways of thinking about religion.*



*When Xiomara picks up on the hypocrisy of being told to revere certain men (and trust Father Sean) while being made to feel small by men in real life, Xiomara shows that she's thinking critically about religion and is starting to find her voice to talk about how what she hears doesn't match up to reality. Even though this is all still private, being able to articulate those thoughts represents a major leap in maturity.*



*Invoking Father Sean shows that Xiomara is versed enough in the church traditions to be able to use Mami's beliefs against her—given Mami's sense of internalized sexism and rigid religious beliefs, Father Sean is far more powerful than Mami is.*



*Writing off Father Sean like this suggests that Xiomara has written off church entirely at this point. She feels completely alone, which means that Xiomara is going to be much less likely to be able to figure out her mixed-up feelings. In order to come to real conclusions, she'll need to reach out and ask for help.*



*The fact that Xiomara and Twin "saved" Papi offers more backstory as to why Xiomara needs to behave herself and act a certain way—if she doesn't, Papi might slip back into his old habits. Papi's emotional absence indicates that Mami is the only person Xiomara really hears from at home, thereby depriving Xiomara of a possible ally in her father.*



*All Over a Damn Wafer.* Mami forces Xiomara to go to evening Mass with her every day for a week. Xiomara stands to take communion but instead of eating her wafer, she secretly spits it into her palm and leaves it under the pew.

*This becomes a major turning point for Xiomara, as she is exercising her own choice to not take communion. Having to hide it, however, means that she's unable to think through this choice or its implications with help from anyone else.*



*Monday, September 17. The Flyer; After the Buzz Dies Down.* Xiomara finds a plain poster that announces the spoken word poetry club, which is run by Ms. Galiano. Xiomara stops in her tracks on the stairs and ignores the kids trying to push her, as the poster feels personal. Xiomara wads up the flyer and puts it in her backpack. She has confirmation class on Tuesdays when the club meets and she knows that Mami will never let her out of the class. Xiomara doesn't want anyone hearing her poems, but something in her chest nonetheless feels fluttery and confined.

*Xiomara's reaction to the poetry club flyer suggests that, even if she insists she doesn't want people to hear her poems, a part of her isn't entirely sure that this is true. She's able to draw out this tense internal relationship by talking about the thing she feels in her chest, which is proof that, as she continues to write, she's learning better how to harness language to express her emotions.*



*Tuesday, September 18. Aman.* Two weeks into school, Xiomara's science class finally gets to start real work. A boy named Aman is Xiomara's lab partner. Their forearms accidentally touch, but Xiomara pulls away. She likes touching him, but she doesn't want anyone to notice and insult her. Xiomara feels like everything has suddenly changed. She notices that she's taller, but he's handsome and quiet. Their arms rest against each other.

*Having this positive physical experience with Aman begins to open up the possibility for Xiomara that physical intimacy doesn't have to be unwanted or aggressive, like what she experiences in the hallways. This helps her begin to learn about how a healthier relationship starts and how she can seek out different kinds of relationships than the ones she's seen.*



*Whispering with Caridad Later That Day.* Xiomara whispers that there's a boy at school, which Caridad says is proof that Xiomara should've come to St. Joan's with her. Xiomara jokes that the St. Joan's girls get pregnant and she refuses to focus on the verse they're studying. She says that it's not wrong to think a boy is handsome, but Caridad says it's wrong to lust. She insists that even if their parents lusted, they were married so it was okay. Xiomara suggests that their parents lusted before marriage, and says that the boy is cute and his arm is warm. Caridad scoffs and says that she's trying to protect Xiomara from herself.

*Caridad's insistence that their lusting parents were in the clear because they were already married reads as somewhat silly, given that Xiomara is probably correct (at least in the case of Caridad's parents, since Mami didn't want to marry). Idealizing her parents like this suggests that Caridad isn't yet able to see her parents as people with flaws, since they're still her role models in every way.*



*What Twin Be Knowing.* As Xiomara gets ready for bed, she finds the flyer for the poetry club unfolded on her bed. Twin whispers that the world has been waiting for Xiomara for a while. Xiomara smiles about their shared secret hope. However, when he leaves the room, Xiomara tears up the flyer. She has to go to confirmation class on Tuesdays.

*Xiomara begins to see religion as even more constricting exactly because her confirmation class and the poetry club are at the same time. Confirmation is literally keeping her from the thing she wants, a conflict that also keeps Xiomara silent for longer.*



*Sharing.* People think it's odd how much Xiomara and Twin share, even though they're very different. Mami wanted to move so they could each have their own room, but Papi refused. Xiomara remembers hearing that goldfish only grow as big as their tank will allow, and she wonders if she and Twin are keeping each other from growing.

*In her musings about Twin, Xiomara suggests that their entire family's expectations of them are stifling them and keeping them from becoming their true selves. This suggests that just as Xiomara has unrealistic expectations for Twin, Twin has the same of Xiomara.*



*Questions for Ms. Galiano.* Xiomara is early to English class. She asks quickly if Ms. Galiano runs the poetry club. Ms. Galiano explains what spoken word poetry is and agrees to pull up a clip to start class. Xiomara says she's not interested in joining, but Ms. Galiano seems to be sizing her up.

*Remember that Xiomara is quiet and keeps her head down at school. Ms. Galiano certainly knows this, so Xiomara's interest in poetry club likely reads as out of the ordinary and an indicator that this actually is important to Xiomara.*



*Spoken Word; Wait—* Ms. Galiano shows a video of a woman onstage. The woman talks about being black, female, and how beauty standards make her feel like she's not pretty. Xiomara holds her breath and feels like the woman is speaking right to her. She feels heard. After the clip ends, everyone claps. Xiomara puts her hand to her heart and hopes that her chills will go away. She tells herself it was just a poem, but it feels like a gift. Xiomara realizes that this is what Ms. Galiano wants her to do in poetry club. She thinks it's silly that Ms. Galiano thinks that quiet, mean Xiomara will ever perform her poems.

*While neither Xiomara nor the reader gets any insight into why Ms. Galiano chooses the video that she does, it's possible that, knowing what she knows about Xiomara, she chose one that she thought might appeal to her specifically. This illustrates how mentors and teachers can profoundly impact their students and point them in the direction of meaningful activities—in effect, not expecting certain things but rather letting the students show them who they are.*



*Holding a Poem in the Body.* After Xiomara's shower, she memorizes one of her poems. She thinks of the video from class and lets her hands move. She lets her body take up space as she speaks. Mami knocks on the door and asks Xiomara what she's reciting. Xiomara says that she's reciting verses and knows that Mami thinks she means Bible verses. She hides her **poetry notebook** in her towel and reminds herself that she didn't really lie.

*It's especially important that Xiomara makes it clear that she's allowing her body to just be as she recites this poem. This creates a link between finding her voice and celebrating her body, suggesting that as Xiomara grows and comes of age, she'll become happier with her body as she becomes more comfortable performing.*



*J. Cole vs. Kendrick Lamar.* Aman and Xiomara have to speak once they start doing real labs. One day, Xiomara asks if he's heard the new J. Cole album. Aman shuffles papers and says that he has the album, but he likes the new Kendrick Lamar better. He suggests they listen to it together.

*Being truthful about his preferences with Xiomara allows Aman to make truthfulness a part of their relationship from the beginning, which in turn, helps them get to know each other on a more honest level rather than harbor unrealistic expectations.*



*Asylum; What I tell Aman.* Xiomara's family got their first computer when Xiomara and Twin were nine. Twin looked up science stuff or anime movies, but Xiomara streamed music. She fell in love with rappers like Nicki Minaj, Drake, Jay Z, and Eve. Searching for songs felt like applying for asylum. Those rappers helped her escape from silence, and she needed to hear people speaking about the things that hurt them. She wonders if Papi stopped listening to music because it made his body want to rebel or speak up. Xiomara learned that music can be a bridge between strangers. Xiomara tells Aman that maybe she'll join him to listen to the Kendrick Lamar album.

*Dreaming of Him Tonight.* Xiomara dreams of Aman's face in her hands. She remembers Mami's words, but she touches his face anyway. Xiomara can feel Aman touching her hips and her breasts. Her alarm goes off as they lean in to kiss. In her dreams, Aman's mouth knows more than Xiomara knows.

*Thursday, September 20. The Thing about Dreams.* Xiomara knows she can't look Aman in the face—she knows he'll see that she dreamed about him last night. She's nervous but in biology, she says that she'd love to listen to Kendrick tomorrow.

*Date; Mami's Dating Rules; Clarification on Dating Rules.* Xiomara says that this isn't a date or anything sinful. Mami's rules for dating are that Xiomara can't date until she's married. Xiomara explains that Mami won't have anything to do with dating and that Xiomara can't have a boyfriend until after college. Even then, Mami has strict ideas about what kind of boy Xiomara can date. Xiomara knows that Mami would never allow her to meet Aman alone, but Xiomara can't wait to do it anyway.

*Friday, September 21. Feeling Myself.* Xiomara thinks that last night, she relished the secret that she was going to meet Aman. She was afraid that Mami or Twin would know something is up, especially since this morning, she ironed her shirt—which she hates doing. Nobody says anything. Xiomara pulls on her jeans and thinks that her legs feel powerful. She smiles at her backside in the mirror.

*Discovering the power of music at an early age allowed Xiomara to learn that language is what ties people together. Expanding this to apply to her relationship to Aman represents the next step in this evolution, as it shows Xiomara that she can begin to connect with actual people in her life, people who can then go on to support her.*



*The dream suggests that Xiomara is more than a little aware that relationships with men don't have to be uncomfortable—and it also reveals that she's very interested in experimenting, even if the church forbids it.*



*The shame that Xiomara feels speaks to her repressive environment at home, where any sexual behavior is discouraged. Because of this, she's been primed to be embarrassed about having sexual thoughts and believes—probably incorrectly—that the thoughts themselves are obvious.*



*Again, it's important to note that even though Xiomara knows what the rules and expectations are, she's still more than happy to break them. This is resounding evidence that the expectations of her family, religion, and culture are, to some degree, not useful at actually making Xiomara conform to how Mami wants her to be.*



*Thinking that she looks good in her jeans speaks to the fact that Xiomara is beginning to come into herself as she moves away from Mami's overbearing expectations and those of the church. Rebelling gives her an opportunity to think about herself in a new way, one that the church and Mami wouldn't condone.*



## PART II: AND THE WORD WAS MADE FLESH

*Smoke Parks.* Xiomara says that since she won't go to Aman's house (plus, he didn't invite her), they go to the smoke park. Their school lets out early on Fridays, so Xiomara and Aman go then. Xiomara can smell marijuana on his sweater. They sit on a bench close enough to touch and Aman puts an earbud in Xiomara's ear. Xiomara wants to sniff his cologne, but she's afraid of looking obvious. She closes her eyes and listens. When the album is over, Aman takes Xiomara's hand and pulls her up. Xiomara is thankful for the throngs of people to hide her.

*I Decided a Long Time Ago.* Xiomara says that when it comes to boys, she'll only ever love Twin. She doesn't want a "converted man-whore" like Papi, or a boy more in love with himself than anything else. She has to love Twin because he's the best guy she knows, but he's also the worst twin.

*Why Twin is a Terrible Twin.* Twin is small, scrawny, and looks nothing like Xiomara. He refuses to wear contacts and doesn't try to look cool. He's a horrible Dominican in that he doesn't dance, he has a unibrow, and he doesn't like baseball. He hates fighting—Xiomara was the one who protected Twin's anime collection when bullies tried to take it.

*Why Twin Is a Terrible Twin, for Real.* Twin is a genius. He started talking early and has always gotten straight As and scholarships to space camp. He and Xiomara haven't been in the same grade for a long time, so she can't copy his homework. Now, he goes to a special high school. Xiomara thinks that he's a bound book, while she's just loose blank pages.

*Why Twin is a Terrible Twin (Last and Most Important Reason).* Twin has no twin intuition and never knows if Xiomara is in pain or needs help. He seldom looks up from Japanese comics or the computer to acknowledge Xiomara.

*But Why Twin is Still the Only Boy I'll Ever Love.* Despite all his flaws, every now and then Twin says something that shocks Xiomara. Today, Twin says that Xiomara looks like something in her shifted. Xiomara wonders if Mami will be able to see that she spent time with Aman. Xiomara wants to tell Twin that he looks different too but before she can speak, Twin says that it might just be Xiomara's period making her look bloated. She throws a pillow at him.

*This experience appears to be everything that Xiomara wanted: she gets to listen to good music and Aman shows himself to be kind, rather than putting pressure on Xiomara to do something she doesn't want to do. This also begins to show Xiomara that she can take control over her romantic life and her sexuality, and that doing so can be a positive and freeing experience.*



*Xiomara's assertion that she'll only love Twin again speaks to the fact that she hasn't had a lot of good male role models, especially when it comes to romance—Papi's exploits seem legendary, and Xiomara understands that dating someone like Papi will negatively affect her.*



*Again, Xiomara shows that she has intense expectations of how Twin should be, showing that she's learned from Mami that it's impossible to focus on the Twin she has; instead, she must focus on the ways in which Twin falls short.*



*As far as Xiomara can tell, Twin is the more successful child in her family. Next to him, she feels inadequate and in this sense, Twin is keeping Xiomara from growing—she focuses on what he's doing better, not on what she's also doing well.*



*What Xiomara truly craves is an emotional connection, whether with Twin or a romantic partner. Her loneliness means that she doesn't call on Twin for help, as she doesn't always trust him to be there.*



*It's possible that Twin is more in tune with Xiomara's thoughts and feelings than she gives him credit for, which suggests that Xiomara may be cutting herself off from a possible line of support. Her sense of loneliness, in this way, makes her more likely to focus on times when she feels alone and miss support when it does appear.*



*Sunday, September 23. Communication.* When Xiomara leaves Mass, she finds a text from Aman asking what she thought of Kendrick Lamar. Mami scolds Xiomara again for sitting out communion, so Xiomara quickly texts back that she enjoyed it and they should listen to something else. Aman agrees immediately.

*Juxtaposing refusing communion with accepting Aman's invitation shows clearly where Xiomara's priorities are. Her relationship with Aman is teaching her things and making her feel more seen and heard than anything she experiences in church.*



*About A.* When Xiomara thinks about Aman, she feels poems grow inside her. She thinks that it feels like someone gave her “metaphor Legos” to stack, but she keeps waiting for someone to destroy her tower. Nobody seems to care, however. Xiomara recites her poems to herself like a prayer.

*Writing poems about Aman allows Xiomara the space to consider their relationship and make sense of how it's unfolding, which again speaks to the power of language. Because she and Aman communicate openly, their relationship is also easier and healthier than the others in Xiomara's life.*



*Monday, September 24. Catching Feelings.* Things feel different at school. Xiomara tries to pretend that she forgot about the poetry club, but she sees that Ms. Galiano seems to know that she's been writing and practicing her poems. At lunch, Xiomara sits with girls who want to be left alone and in biology, she wonders if she should touch Aman when their teacher isn't looking. She and Aman pass notes. Xiomara feels like a bottle of soda that somebody shook, ready to pop open at any moment.

*Feeling like a bottle ready to pop speaks to the fact that Xiomara doesn't think anyone should be able to see the changes going on inside of her—while Ms. Galiano's attention, at least, suggests that Xiomara is changing and becoming more confident as she gets deeper into her relationship and continues to privately recite her poems.*



*Notes with Aman.* Aman asks if Xiomara has gotten involved with anyone at school and asks if the boys aren't cute enough for her. Xiomara jokes that they aren't and says that Aman just wants her to admit that she thinks *he's* cute. She says she's still deciding.

*These notes with Aman represent one of the first times that Xiomara is able to communicate truthfully with a boy. This moment then becomes indicative of Xiomara's growing confidence.*



*Tuesday, September 25. What I Didn't Say to Caridad in Confirmation Class.* Xiomara says that if Aman were a poem, he'd be written all over a paper bag and have a witty punch line. He's not elegant like a sonnet and takes up too much space to be a haiku.

*Thinking of Aman like a poem allows Xiomara to expand her conception of what poetry can be, while also giving her another venue to increase her emotional attachment to Aman.*



*Lectures.* Mami tells Xiomara to listen. Xiomara's eyes roll as Mami says that she saw Xiomara and Caridad whispering in class. She tells Xiomara to not get distracted and lead herself and others from God. Xiomara feels her forehead get sweaty and thinks of all the things she can't say.

*Note specifically that Mami doesn't want Xiomara to lead others from God. Mami wants Xiomara to understand that she has a responsibility to the community—which Xiomara understands is in direct opposition to what she wants for herself.*



*Ms. Galiano's Sticky Note on Top of Assignment 1.* Ms. Galiano says that she thinks that Xiomara's assignments have been very poetic and asks why Xiomara doesn't think of herself as a poet. She says that she thinks Xiomara would get a lot out of poetry club.

*Praise from Ms. Galiano gives Xiomara validation that what she writes is worthwhile and, in particular, worth sharing—even if they're not strictly poems. This support means that Xiomara can begin to trust Ms. Galiano more.*



*Sometimes Someone Says Something.* Xiomara says that Ms. Galiano's note makes her feel like someone is lighting a fire inside her. She crumples it up and throws it away. Poetry club is like Eve's **apple** in that it's something she can want, but she knows she can't have it.

*Friday, September 28. Listening.* Xiomara sits with Aman and waits for him to give her an earbud. He plays with her fingers and asks her to read him one of her poems. Xiomara freezes, but pulls out her **poetry notebook** and warns Aman not to laugh. Aman closes his eyes and listens to a poem about Papi. Xiomara's hands tremble and she feels naked. Aman says it reminds him of his mother and says he'll listen to Xiomara anytime.

*Mother Business.* Xiomara and Aman usually don't talk about their families, since they know their culture's rules—it's not cool to talk about people's parents, since most kids only have one person caring for them and it's not always a biological parent. But in this case, Xiomara feels like she said too much about Papi and she wants to hear about Aman's family. She asks him about his mom. Aman sits quietly, but notices Xiomara shivering and puts her hand in his jacket pocket. He looks her in the eye and Xiomara doesn't expect him to answer.

*And Then He Does.* Aman says that his mother was beautiful. She and his dad married when they were teens. His dad came to the U.S. and then sent for Aman and his mom. Aman remembers the palm trees and the mangoes of Trinidad, but he was young enough to squash his accent. Aman's mom never came. She used to call every day but now just calls on Aman's birthday. He never asks when she's coming, and Aman and his dad get along well. Aman says he learned to not be angry and that he can love his mom by letting her go.

*Warmth.* Aman and Xiomara walk together and skip every train station. They walk silently and keep each other warm, silently agreeing to walk as far as they can.

*When poetry club begins to feel like a forbidden temptation, the novel increases the tension between what Xiomara is expected to do in church and what she wants to do in real life—while putting this in biblical terms speaks to how steeped Xiomara is in Catholic culture.*



*Agreeing to perform a poem for Aman is a major step for Xiomara, as it suggests that she's becoming more confident in her writing and in her relationship with Aman. This also speaks well of Aman, as he clearly makes her feel safe exposing a very personal part of herself to him.*



*Taking this step to talk more about their families, even though it's against the rules of engagement, shows that Xiomara and Aman are beginning to figure out exactly what works for them. It's especially important for Xiomara to learn that it's not always the best to play by the rules, given how stringent her rules are at home and that, at some point, she's going to have to break them.*



*The fact that Aman eventually came to a new understanding of what he can and should expect from his mother offers an example to Xiomara of how to engage with one's expectations. It's impossible, the novel suggests, for someone to live up to every expectation—sometimes, healing can only come through adjusting expectations as Aman does here.*



*Now that they've begun to connect over poetry and music, Xiomara and Aman don't need to be as explicit about their intentions—they're developing an unspoken language.*



Tuesday, October 9. *The Next Couple of Weeks*. Time flies and it's finally October. Xiomara avoids Ms. Galiano and her invitations to the poetry club. Aman and Xiomara walk together to the train after school. She thinks that they both want to do more, but Xiomara feels shy and Aman never pressures her. Xiomara wonders if he's being respectful or just isn't into her. She reasons that if he weren't into her, they wouldn't be hanging out. Every Sunday Xiomara takes communion, but she puts the wafer under the pew. On Tuesdays, she sits in confirmation class and thinks of all the things she'd rather be doing, like writing or attending poetry club. She does a good job of pretending to listen until one day, she asks Father Sean about Eve.

Eve. Father Sean explains that Eve could've made better choices. Her story teaches people how to deal with temptation and resist the proverbial **apple**. Xiomara doesn't know if it's because of what she's learning in school and in life or not, but the story sounds like nonsense to her. She says so out loud. Caridad goes still.

"I Think the Story of Genesis is Mad Stupid." Xiomara says that God made the earth and humans in seven days, but she also points out that she's learning in science that dinosaurs were around for millions of years first. She asks if the seven days is a metaphor, and if Adam's creation was a metaphor too. She asks why God didn't explain why Adam and Eve couldn't eat the **apple**, and why he gave Eve curiosity but didn't want her to exercise it. She asks if the Bible is a poem, if it's all a metaphor, and if any of it happened. Other kids watch, transfixed. Father Sean asks to talk to Xiomara after class.

*As We Are Packing to Leave*. Caridad whispers that it's going to be awful if Father Sean says anything to Mami. Xiomara says that they're supposed to be curious and asks if priests are supposed to keep things confidential. Caridad points out that this wasn't a confession. Xiomara thinks that it was.

Father Sean. Father Sean says that Xiomara seems distracted and asks if there are other things she wants to talk about. He says that it's normal to be curious and that Catholicism is okay with curiosity. He encourages her to find solace in the church and suggests that she speak honestly and openly with Mami. However, he doesn't answer Xiomara's questions.

Again, by connecting Xiomara's developing relationship with Aman (which seems overwhelmingly positive, if a bit confusing) with her choice to distance herself further from God by not taking communion and not fully participating in confirmation classes, the novel shows that as Xiomara comes of age, she'll move more towards the things that make her happy while more confidently rejecting the religion that she sees is oppressing her. In introducing her question about Eve, this suggests that her growing confidence has real consequences.



In this moment, Xiomara begins to suspect that the church isn't actually going to help her live in the most fulfilling way, since she's enjoying her possibly sinful time with Aman so much and feeling more confident by moving away from religion.



Xiomara shows here that she's perfectly willing and capable of thinking critically about the Bible and how, in an ideal world, it might apply to her life and provide meaning for her. This suggests that if Father Sean and Mami would encourage this line of critical thinking, Xiomara may be ultimately more willing to be a part of the church community and see it as valuable—but Father Sean's reaction makes it clear that even if he's into people devoting themselves because they want to, these questions are inappropriate.



Again, while Xiomara is technically correct about the Catholic Church encouraging curiosity, Father Sean's reaction suggests that being truly curious will land a person in a similar place to Eve: cast out and despised.



Not having Father Sean answer her questions is extremely difficult, as it makes it far harder for Xiomara to accept that what Father Sean is saying is true. This suggests that even Father Sean has some growing to do and will need to develop a more understanding way of dealing with questioning congregants.



*Answers.* Father Sean looks like he expects answers. Xiomara stares at a photo of Father Sean in a boxing ring and asks if he still fights. He smiles and says that he doesn't fight as much as he used to and cautions Xiomara that not all fights can be fought with gloves. Xiomara stands up, agrees to not ask about Eve, and leaves before Father Sean can ask her anything else.

*Rough Draft Assignment 2—Last Paragraphs of My Biography.* Xiomara writes that she will have made people say her name correctly and respect her as a woman. She has always known that the world would look at her using stereotypes, but Xiomara smashed through them. Xiomara will be remembered as many things, but she should be remembered most for striving to be a warrior.

*Final Draft of Assignment 2 (What I Actually Turn In).* Xiomara writes that she was a writer who created a nonprofit for first-generation teen girls. The nonprofit helps girls talk to their parents about dating and moving out. Xiomara bought her parents a house in the Dominican Republic. She never married or had children, but she was happy in her Harlem brownstone with Twin living down the street.

*Hands.* Xiomara admits that she and Aman have been holding hands in their desk in biology. She hopes her hands don't sweat and wonders if he's nervous too. She wonders if they're both pretending that they've done this before. Xiomara thinks that even though she's dreamed about him, it's different to touch him in real life. His touch seems to light matches inside of her.

*Fingers.* At night, Xiomara masturbates. She's learning how to be silent and when she orgasms, it feels like a relief. Then, she feels shame settle on her. She thinks that making herself feel like this is dirty, but wonders why it feels so good if it's bad.

*It appears here as though Father Sean is implying that Xiomara's questions about Eve are fighting with metaphorical gloves, while Xiomara doesn't think that she's asking fighting questions. This illustrates how language can mean different things for different people, and that what looks like a fight to one person can be simple curiosity to another.*



*When Xiomara wants to have her name pronounced correctly, it shows that more than anything, language is how she feels loved and respected—while abusing language (whether by pronouncing her name wrong, catcalling her like men do, or scolding her like Mami does) makes her feel small and unappreciated.*



*The fact that Xiomara uses this exercise to experiment with calling herself a writer tells Ms. Galiano that Xiomara is interested in the poetry club, as well as that Xiomara feels trapped at home—her desire to help other girls reflects her own sense of being stifled, as well as her dawning knowledge that this is something that can be talked through.*



*With this, Xiomara shows clearly that even this is an overwhelmingly positive and respectful relationship, broader societal expectations and models of how relationships should be still make her feel uneasy about what she's doing with Aman.*



*The church has taught Xiomara that the things that make her feel happy, from masturbating to writing poetry, aren't good—and consequently, Xiomara has learned to not trust her body and her brain when she feels good and safe.*



*Tuesday, October 16. Talking Church.* Aman confirms that Xiomara goes to church often. Xiomara freezes. She knows that Aman is going to think that she's either a freak who won't do anything or a freak who wants to have sex with the first interested guy. Aman calls Xiomara's attention by calling her X, and Xiomara thinks of how much she loves the nickname. Finally, Xiomara says that Mami loves church. Aman asks what Xiomara loves. She says that she loves poetry and Aman asks what her stage name is. Xiomara insists that she's just a writer, but she'd like to be the Poet X. Aman smiles and says he thinks the name is perfect.

*Swoon.* In science, Xiomara learns about how heat flows through some materials better than others. She thinks that the best conductor is something said by a boy. Her toes feel warm as the heat shoots through her.

*Telephone.* Twin doesn't ask who Xiomara spends all night texting and Xiomara doesn't share. Xiomara thinks that she's never had friends aside from Caridad, but now she talks to Aman all the time. He sends her Drake lyrics and asks for poems in return. Xiomara knows that Twin wonders because she wonders who *he's* texting. Twin is smiling and giggly, and Xiomara knows they're both keeping secrets.

*Over Breakfast.* Twin sings under his breath as he cuts an **apple** and gives half to Xiomara. Xiomara asks who Twin is smiling about, which makes Twin stop smiling. Twin asks who's making Xiomara smile. She blushes and looks away. Xiomara insists that she's just happy and suggests they get on planning their scary movie Halloween date with Caridad.

*Angry Cat, Happy X.* Caridad texts Xiomara an angry cat meme because it reminds her of Xiomara. Xiomara brushes it off and confirms that they're on for their Halloween date. Caridad asks about the boy, but Xiomara doesn't want to talk because she knows Caridad doesn't approve. Caridad insists that she doesn't want Xiomara to get in trouble, but she loves seeing her happy. She sends a happy cat meme.

*Friday, October 19. About Being in Like.* Xiomara relishes her afternoon at the park with Aman. He gives her an earbud and asks if she's ever smoked marijuana. Xiomara shakes her head. Aman says that Drake is better stoned, but they can listen without. Xiomara shuts her eyes and leans on his shoulder. He puts a hand on her thigh.

*This exchange is a major learning moment for Xiomara, as she goes into it with major expectations for how Aman is going to act—and he doesn't do what she thinks he's going to do at all. With more experiences like these, Xiomara will begin to learn that she can trust people like Aman to not make assumptions about her, while also understanding that Mami's love of church doesn't have to ruin her own life like she initially thinks it will.*



*These shorter poems allow Xiomara to play with imagery and develop some of her feelings for Aman, giving her an outlet to express herself that's purely emotional and positive.*



*That neither Twin nor Xiomara asks about who the other is texting suggests that there's an understanding that what they're doing is dangerous and could have disastrous consequences if Mami found out. To this end, not talking helps them stay safe and protect each other, again showing how oppressive environments make it hard to use language to form connections.*



*Again, not talking about their respective crushes means that Xiomara and Twin can, if need be, not be forced to rat each other out if Mami finds out. This shows clearly how silence can be a way to keep oneself safe, especially in a dysfunctional household.*



*Caridad's kindness here continues to offer an example of how people can and should act when faced with a friend doing something they don't entirely approve of. Not condemning Xiomara means that Xiomara will feel better asking for help if she needs it.*



*When Aman doesn't pressure Xiomara to smoke, it again shows Xiomara that they can have an open and honest dialogue, and that her thoughts and opinions are worthy of respect. She doesn't get this at home, so this is the first time she sees how a positive relationship can unfold in this way.*



*Music for A.* Xiomara writes that putting her head on Aman's shoulder makes her happy. If they don't breathe, maybe they'll live forever. Everything he whispers sounds like poetry. She says that this was supposed to be a question, not a poem or a confession. She asks if he'd listen to the sound of their hearts.

*Tuesday, October 23. Ring the Alarm.* The big day starts normally. It's the first Tuesday since Xiomara asked about Eve. During last period bio, the fire alarm goes off. Xiomara suggests to Aman that they go to the park. He reminds Xiomara that their teacher is going to take attendance, but Xiomara purposefully bumps her backside into Aman as she gets up. She says they should go. Aman replies that he didn't know Xiomara liked Drake that much, but Xiomara says she's not interested in Drake.

*The Day; Wants.* Xiomara and Aman sit on their bench. Aman puts his arm around her shoulders and kisses her forehead. He lifts her chin. Xiomara studies his eyebrows and leans in. They kiss. It's messier than Xiomara thought it would be, but she feels like her heart is learning to fly. Xiomara thinks that men have been telling her for years what they'd like to do to her body, but for the first time, she wants to do some of those things.

*At My Train Stop.* When the train reaches Xiomara's station, she pulls her hand out of Aman's and blushes. She doesn't hear Aman ask her questions and studies his lips. He suggests they go to a classmate's Halloween party, but Xiomara leaves without a response or a wave.

*What I Don't Tell Aman.* Xiomara can't date, be seen with a boy, or have him in her cellphone. She can't hang out with a boy, and she definitely can't fall in love. When she and Aman text at night, she avoids making plans and doesn't want to tell him what she can't do. She thinks that she isn't supposed to kiss boys at the park, but she did that anyway.

*Kiss Stamps.* As Xiomara walks into confirmation class, she feels like anyone who looks at her will know she was kissing and that she wants to do more. Xiomara says she didn't want to stop until Aman put a hand under her shirt. She's not sure if she jumped because of the cold or guilt, and she's not even sure if she wanted to stop. Xiomara says it's confusing to know that she wanted to keep going while knowing she's not supposed to. Xiomara avoids looking at Caridad, Father Sean, or Jesus and thinks that if God exists, he saw what happened at the park—and he knows that she liked it.

*In this poem, Xiomara starts to imply that her time with Aman might be fleeting, which foreshadows the awful things to come.*



*Because of the respectful way in which Aman treats Xiomara, Xiomara feels empowered to ask for what she wants and not feel weird or dirty asking for it. This speaks to the power of open communication and not harboring unreasonable expectations—Xiomara is learning she can enjoy herself and doesn't need to fixate on what she should be doing according to Mami.*



*Now that Xiomara is moving into physical territory with Aman, she's able to reevaluate the taunts and catcalls she's received. Because she's fostering a healthier relationship with Aman, it no longer seems so scary to consider being sexual—mostly because with Aman, Xiomara has a choice and feels respected.*



*Xiomara's silence as they part suggests that she's aware of the fine line she's walking: Mami would never approve of Aman or what Xiomara is doing with him, something that robs Xiomara of some of her happiness about the kiss.*



*By not letting Aman in on the strict rules she's expected to follow, Xiomara sets Aman up to fail. This suggests that even as Xiomara is learning how to communicate healthily, she's still entrenched in Mami's way of doing things and doesn't yet know how to be open all the time.*



*Especially when Xiomara mentions that God knows what she did in the park, it shows how the version of religion that Xiomara knows makes it impossible for her to enjoy herself: either she's unhappy following God and Mami's rules, or she's unable to fully enjoy breaking them due to guilt. Her shame also makes Xiomara much less likely to be willing to talk to anyone about these confusing feelings, as she knows she shouldn't be kissing in the first place.*



*The Last Fifteen-Year-Old.* Xiomara knows that it's not a big deal to kiss a guy. Boys have wanted to kiss her since she was 11. Then adult men wanted to kiss her, and Mami warned Xiomara that she needed to "pray extra" so her body didn't cause trouble. Xiomara knew that she needed to pray the trouble right out of her body. She wanted to forget that she had a body so instead of playing truth or dare in middle school, she wore big sweaters. Now, she wants Aman to touch her.

*Concerns.* Father Sean asks Xiomara if things are okay. She thinks he knows about the kiss and watches him look around. Xiomara shrugs. Father Sean assures her that they all doubt themselves at times. Xiomara asks if Father Sean doubts too, and Father Sean smiles and looks suddenly younger. He explains that he wanted to be a boxer so his body could get him out of terrible circumstances, but Jesus got him out. He sometimes misses home, especially since his mother died and he wasn't there to say goodbye. Xiomara wants to apologize and make Father Sean smile, but she nods instead.

*What Twin Knows.* Xiomara interrupts Twin's furious texting and asks if he knew that Father Sean's mom died. He looks confused and says that she died three years ago. Xiomara wonders how she missed Father Sean's absence and wonders how long she's been checked out of church. She asks Twin who he's texting. Twin fixes Xiomara with a stare and says that they're both messing around and Mami and Papi will kill them if they find out. They don't need to talk about it. Xiomara doesn't know whether to agree. She knows that their parents' expectations for her are different than Twin's and that they'd be thrilled if he brought a girl home. However, she's not sure how they'd react if he brought home someone who isn't a girl.

*Black & Blue.* Xiomara wonders what kind of a twin she is to not notice when Twin comes home with a black eye. She finds out when Mami yells at Twin, asking who hit him. Xiomara inspects his eye and says nothing. Twin insists it was just a misunderstanding, but he silently pleads with Xiomara. Xiomara says that someone "misunderstood [his] face for a punching bag." Mami looks between her children, but seems to know it's a twin thing.

*Tight.* Xiomara is angry with Twin for not telling her that someone at school was bothering him. She's silent on Friday and on Saturday morning. She wants to go to the party and see Aman, and thinks that the boys in her life will inevitably drive her crazy.

*Again, in Mami's eyes, Xiomara's body is the problem, not the boys or men who feel undeservedly entitled to comment on it or have access to it. Shifting the blame to Xiomara is one of the reasons that Xiomara struggles with guilt surrounding what she's doing, as it raises the question of what kind of a girl she is if she's willingly breaking these rules.*



*In this moment, Xiomara starts to see Father Sean as more human. He, like Mami and like Xiomara, had dreams that didn't come true and has a family that he loved and couldn't support. Beginning to see adults like Father Sean as real, emotional humans indicates that Xiomara is coming of age, as she's beginning to expand her thoughts to include others' perspectives.*



*Xiomara recognizes that it's possible that Twin is in even more danger from Mami and Papi than she is, given his sexual orientation. Knowing this makes everything even more anxiety-provoking for Xiomara, as she's forced to wonder how she's going to protect Twin this time—or if she's even going to be able to protect him from this. This illustrates how Mami and Papi's expectations put both of their children in danger, as Twin is certainly not going to ask his parents for help if he does experience bigotry or violence and Xiomara could also get hurt defending him.*



*That Twin is silently pleading with Xiomara suggests that he got his black eye because of his sexual orientation, but Twin isn't ready to let Mami know about this yet. Because Xiomara and Twin can communicate like this without speaking, it gives them the freedom to make these silent pacts and in doing so, keep each other safe from Mami at the very least.*



*Xiomara's silence is a way of punishing Twin, especially now that Xiomara is starting to find her voice and would probably love to use it to connect better with Twin.*



*Saturday, October 27. Excuses.* Xiomara asks Caridad if she'd be upset if Xiomara didn't join them at the movies. She says that it's about the boy and she'll be home on time. Caridad asks if Aman is pressuring Xiomara, but Xiomara insists he isn't. Caridad tells Xiomara to be safe and asks if Twin is coming. Xiomara says that Twin has a lot going on and to not ask about his black eye. She insists that she didn't hit him, but she's ready to hit the guy who did. Caridad tells Xiomara to not get pregnant.

*Costume Ready.* Xiomara leaves with Twin, ostensibly to go to the movies, but he goes to Caridad's house and Xiomara goes in the other direction. At a Starbucks near the party, Xiomara puts on eye shadow. She's wearing a too-tight Green Lantern tee and congratulates herself on her poor costume.

*Reuben's House Party.* Xiomara knows she's too early. She knows a few people, but they're all part of the party crowd. Someone gives her a drink, but she puts it down and ignores boys watching her. Finally, Aman shows up and grabs Xiomara's hand. He offers her a drink and Xiomara takes in his outfit. He's painted green and has stuffed his shoulders, trying to make his small frame look like the Hulk. Xiomara laughs. Aman says they were meant to be since they both chose green superheroes, and he asks her to dance.

*One Dance.* Xiomara's heart beats fast. This isn't something with coordinated steps; this is a close slow dance. She presses against Aman and they sway. He puts his leg between Xiomara's and Xiomara thinks that they're dancing like people do in music videos—like if they weren't clothed, they'd be having sex. A reggae song comes on and Aman grinds against Xiomara. It feels good, but Xiomara pushes away.

*Stoop-Sitting...With Aman.* The neighborhood is on fire. Costumed people laugh and sing. Aman holds Xiomara's hand, but Xiomara is afraid to look at him. He mentions that he doesn't live far away. Xiomara asks if Aman's dad is home, but Aman says his dad works nights. Xiomara's fingers shake. She pulls away and is glad she's telling the truth when she says that she doesn't feel well and needs to leave. Aman asks for one more poem and pulls Xiomara back down.

*Convos with Caridad.* Xiomara texts Caridad that she's on her way home. She thanks Caridad for lying and when Caridad asks if this was worth it, Xiomara says she has a lot of feelings. She says that it's impossible to be happy while breaking rules—something has to go wrong. Caridad suggests that Xiomara could just not break rules, but Xiomara promises to send snarky texts once Caridad has a boyfriend herself.

*Even though Caridad is joking, telling Xiomara to not get pregnant suggests that Caridad is functioning in the same kind of mindset that Xiomara was at the beginning of the novel, thinking that any romantic contact will inevitably lead to sex and pregnancy. This speaks to the power and insidiousness of their community's beliefs about how relationships between men and women work.*



*The tight t-shirt suggests that Xiomara, though still self-conscious, is beginning to enjoy her own body to some extent and to own her appearance rather than wishing to disappear.*



*When Xiomara laughs at Aman's attempts to bulk up, it suggests that on some level, she knows it's fruitless to try to change her body too much—trying to make herself small is likely just as ineffective as Aman's attempt to make himself bigger. In this way, her relationship with Aman begins to teach Xiomara to accept her body as it is.*



*Notice that while Xiomara ultimately decides that she's uncomfortable with dancing like this, Aman doesn't even try to force her to keep dancing. His respect for her boundaries teaches Xiomara that she can say no without fear of rejection or violence.*



*By asking for a poem, Aman effectively tells Xiomara that he values her thoughts and her mind more than he does her body—something that's empowering for Xiomara to hear, since she fears that her body is the only thing that anyone in her life seems to care about in some way or another.*



*Xiomara's unwillingness to really tell Caridad about her night could come from the fact that she doesn't have the vocabulary to even describe an experience that was both wonderful and a little scary, especially when it has to do with being intimate with a boy.*



*Sunday, October 28. Braiding.* Xiomara thinks about Aman all through Mass, even though she knows Mami will lecture her later. Fortunately, Caridad catches them after church and asks if Xiomara can come over and braid her hair. Mami allows Xiomara to go. Xiomara combs Caridad's hair and thinks that she learned to braid when Mami didn't have time to do her hair. She offers to do two long braids so Caridad can look like Cardi B for Halloween. Xiomara explains that she adores Cardi B, but Cardi and Caridad are complete opposites. Caridad turns on the TV and they watch in silence. Xiomara wonders if friends just have to help each other be their best and give each other a place to be when they don't want to be at home. She thinks Caridad would agree.

*Caridad is certainly doing what Xiomara suggests is the mark of a true friend—Xiomara doesn't want to be at home where she knows Mami will berate her, so Caridad is offering her a safe space to indulge in her love of Cardi B and spend time with a friend. Giving Xiomara this space is one of the best ways that Caridad shows Xiomara she cares—and importantly, they don't have to speak to understand this. This again suggests that as people become close, they don't need to actually speak as much and can instead develop a silent language.*



*Monday, October 29. Fights.* Xiomara heads downtown to Twin's school. She ignores Aman's questions and prepares herself for a fight. She spots Twin walking with a tall red-headed boy. The boy brushes Twin's sweater in the same way that Aman touches Xiomara. Suddenly, Twin jerks around and sees Xiomara. He leaps away from the boy and Xiomara sees confirmation of what she's always known. Twin asks what Xiomara is doing here. She doesn't have to explain that she came to beat up the guy who hit Twin, but he says that he doesn't need her help. Her heart seems to deflate as she looks at the other boy, who looks at Twin with love. Twin tells Xiomara to leave it alone, but Xiomara thinks he's telling her to leave *him* alone.

*Again, because of Xiomara and Twin's relatively close relationship, she understands what he's really saying when he asks her to leave it alone. Being outed like this is, importantly, likely very upsetting and scary for Twin—keep in mind that while Xiomara has suspected that Twin is gay, this is the first time she has proof, and there's no indication of whether or not Twin even trusts Xiomara to react well to his sexuality. Xiomara's job then is to make Twin feel safer going forward and to make it clear that he can trust her.*



*Scrapping.* Xiomara says she's not stupid—she knows that she's not always going to be bigger and meaner than boys her age. At some point, they'll be stronger. She knows she can't defend Twin forever, but she always thought that she'd stop defending him because he'd learn to fight for himself, not get a new protector.

*Though Xiomara's thoughts on Twin are understandable, it's also worth keeping in mind that as a gay man, standing up for himself is much more fraught than it might otherwise be. Not realizing this suggests that Xiomara still has a ways to go as she matures.*



*What We Don't Say.* On the train home, Twin plays chess on his phone and ignores Xiomara. Xiomara tells him that she knows he's probably felt this way forever, but Mami and Papi will kill him if they find out about this boy. Twin says the boy's name is Cody and he already knows what Mami, Papi, and Xiomara will say. Xiomara thinks that she's not sure what to say. She's always wanted to keep Twin safe, but this makes him a target and she can't protect him from everything.

*Xiomara recognizes that sexuality—whether hers or Twin's—is one of the few things that they can't fully protect from their parents, as both of them are defying their parents' teachings by indulging in sexual thoughts or actions at all. This creates even more shame and silence, which makes Xiomara and Twin even more vulnerable; their shame keeps them from even relying on each other.*



*Gay.* Xiomara admits that she's always known without knowing that Twin is gay. She thinks that they're both scared, since Twin is Mami's miracle and now he'll be her sin. Xiomara thinks that she hoped that if she never knew for sure, maybe he wasn't actually gay. Now, she wonders if not talking made Twin feel more alone and that maybe being silent was actually condoning the nasty things that people think and say. Regardless, Xiomara doesn't know how to move forward.

*Wondering if remaining silent about Twin's sexuality made things worse is an important moment for Xiomara, as it expresses an understanding that she can't just go with the flow and say nothing. In order to make Twin feel safe, she has to actively stand up for his right (and that of other gay people) to exist safely in the world.*



*Feeling Off When Twin Is Mad.* Xiomara feels a little upset that she and Twin are fighting. When he's mad, it throws her off. She can think only of his anger and is afraid that she'll make it worse, even though she doesn't know what she did wrong. She wonders why he thought she wouldn't show up. Not even Aman's smiley faces and rap videos make her feel better.

*Rough Draft of Assignment 3—Describe someone you consider misunderstood by society.* Xiomara writes that Mami used to be her hero. Mami didn't let not speaking English stop her from defending herself or getting Twin into a good school. Mami has never asked Papi for money or complained about her job, and she prays every night. Once Xiomara grew breasts, Mami's attitude changed. It started to seem like she wanted to turn Xiomara into the nun that she didn't get to be.

*Final Draft of Assignment 3 (What I Actually Turn In).* Xiomara writes that she's always admired Nicki Minaj. She thinks that the person Minaj is in her videos is different from who she is in real life, since her lyrics might be overly sexual but she tweets people to stay in school. Xiomara says that she thinks people view Minaj's music more negatively by insisting that men dictate how she raps. She thinks that Minaj's music is very positive about physical beauty, and she's not ashamed of her body or of sex. Minaj is also very talented and is a great rapper, not just a great *female* rapper. For girls who don't fit the mold, Minaj is extremely relatable.

*Wednesday, November 7. Announcements.* Ms. Galiano invites Chris, a student from poetry club, to talk about the club to her class. Chris recites a short poem and Ms. Galiano looks proud. Then, Chris hands out flyers for the citywide slam on February eighth. It's open to the public and Ms. Galiano encourages everyone to come. Xiomara blushes. She thinks she should compete.

*Ice-Skating.* Xiomara says that when they was little, Mami used to take her and Twin skating every year for their birthday on January eighth. Mami always made sure to get the day off and even though neither Twin nor Xiomara is coordinated, they were both good at skating. Mami always watched from the sidelines. One day, they stopped going and Xiomara forgot what it felt like to skate and laugh with her brother.

*Wondering why Twin didn't expect her to show up suggests that Twin might not think that he and Xiomara have a close relationship anymore, while Xiomara's expectations don't match that. This mismatch and lack of communication leave room for even more misunderstandings.*



*Here, Xiomara seems aware that she's having to pay for all the things that Mami never got to do. This shows again how abusive practices and actions are passed down through generations without question, thereby harming future generations—even as the older generation understands that this cycle creates pain.*



*Here, Xiomara shows that she understands how words—or song lyrics—can be twisted to change people's perception of a person, given that she thinks that Minaj's music doesn't necessarily translate simply to who Minaj is in real life. Stating that Minaj should be heralded as a great rapper rather than a great female rapper also shows Xiomara's wish to change the way people talk about gender differences and change the default to not just be men.*



*Thinking that she should compete at the poetry slam represents a major turning point for Xiomara, as it suggests that at least in her own private monologue, she's at the point of being willing to share her poetry with others—thereby opening up an avenue to form connections and build community.*



*In the poems like these where Xiomara talks about the past and how things have changed, she creates the sense that her childhood was, in many ways, an idyllic time when things were much easier, especially with Mami. This suggests that it's possible that Mami is simply uncomfortable having teen children with more thoughts of their own—especially when those thoughts threaten or contradict hers.*



*Until; Love.* Xiomara says that she forgot about skating until one day, Aman asks her to go skating. He suggests they go tomorrow, since there's no school. Mami will be at work. Xiomara remembers feeling free on the ice and wants Aman to see her feel that way. Aman loves winter sports. He explains that he loved watching the Winter Olympics in Trinidad and fell in love with snow. Xiomara sees that winter sports are for Aman like poetry is for her. Aman tells Xiomara to get ready to fall in love and Xiomara agrees to the date.

*Thursday, November 8. Around and Around We Go.* Xiomara invites Twin to come, but he pretends to sleep. He's still upset that Xiomara came to his school. At the rink, Xiomara puts on skates and follows Aman to the ice. She steps out and skates backwards, beckoning to him. Xiomara blushes that she made the first move, but Aman steps out and follows. They skate together for a minute and then Aman takes off doing tricks. Xiomara watches him and when he's done, asks how he learned. He says that he practiced on his own because his dad refused to put him in classes, insisting that skating was "too soft." Xiomara feels sad and thinks that they could be lots of things if people didn't say that their bodies weren't built right.

*After Skating; This Body on Fire.* At the train, Aman pulls Xiomara close and kisses her. They never kiss publicly, but Xiomara wants to kiss. She knows that someone she knows might see her, but she lets Aman make her forget everything. Xiomara knows that everyone is probably staring at them, but she doesn't care. She wants the kiss and thinks it's beautiful and real. Xiomara reasons that maybe she and Aman are doing everyone a favor by reminding them of first love. As she walks home from the train, Xiomara thinks that Aman has turned her into a junkie begging for her next hit.

*The Shit & the Fan.* Xiomara hears Mami yelling from outside the front door. Mami shouldn't be home yet, even if Xiomara did miss her stop because she didn't want to stop kissing. She hears Mami shouting at Papi that she saw Xiomara making out with a dirty boy. Xiomara realizes that Mami's eyes were a fan, and Xiomara and Aman's kiss was like shit hitting it. Xiomara lets herself into her room, shuts the door, and sits down with her head between her legs. Twin arrives. He crouches next to Xiomara and Xiomara tries to make herself as small as possible.

*Miracles.* Xiomara doesn't scream when Papi calls her a *cuero*. She doesn't tell him that people whisper about all the women who made him a *cuero*, but tells the reader that men are never *cueros*. Xiomara prays for a miracle and hopes that this is a bad dream. Mami speaks horribly about the kiss and Papi uses the same bad names that kids have flung at Xiomara since she hit puberty. She begs God to listen.

*Revealing that he loves winter sports is a way for Aman to seem even more real and complex Xiomara, which in turn helps their relationship deepen. When she understands that it's similar to her love of poetry, it suggests that she's already aware that winter sports are forbidden for Aman like poetry in many ways is for her. In this sense, Aman is confined by others' beliefs just like Xiomara is.*



*Now, Xiomara begins to see that fixating on a person's body, no matter who that person is, can't come to any good—Aman wasn't allowed to follow his dream because his dad didn't think it was appropriate for a boy. With this, Xiomara gains more evidence that she should reject other people's judgments about her body, as it can and will do what she wants it to do, from skating to performing poetry.*



*When Xiomara suggests that she's doing people a favor by reminding them of love, it indicates that at least in the moment, she doesn't see what she's doing as a bad thing at all. Instead, it's something symbolic of love and innocence that can actually help others. She's able to get to this point in part because of the positive way she's thinking about her body, which suggests that as she becomes more comfortable with herself, she'll also begin to throw off Mami's teachings more generally.*



*Xiomara's revelations about the power of celebrating her body and doing with it what she wants aren't enough to overpower Mami's anger and the violence that Xiomara knows is coming. This indicates that because Xiomara is still a teen under her parents' roof, she's extra vulnerable and can't always easily stand up for herself and what she knows is right.*



*Again, even though Xiomara is well aware of the hypocrisy of Papi calling her a *cuero*, knowing intellectually that she did nothing wrong doesn't change the fact that she doesn't feel like she can stand up to her parents and advocate for herself.*



*Fear.* Twin asks Xiomara what she did. Xiomara doesn't look at him since she knows it'll make them both cry, and if Twin cries, Papi will yell at him. Xiomara wants to lash out at the fear in Twin's voice. He suggests that she sneak out through the fire escape, but they hear Mami coming. Twin stands and balls his hands into fists, but Xiomara knows he'll never use them. Xiomara tells him that she didn't do anything wrong and sends him back to his homework.

*Ants.* Mami drags Xiomara to her alter of the Virgin Mary. She pushes Xiomara down and commands her to ask for forgiveness. Xiomara bows her head and studies the tiles. She tries to make herself as small as an ant, even if she knows it's impossible. As Mami tells Xiomara to look at Mary, Xiomara thinks of how ants can hold ten times their weight, crawl through crevices, have no God, and will survive the apocalypse.

*I Am No Ant; Diplomas.* Mami yanks Xiomara up by her hair and shoves her face close to Mary's. Xiomara thinks she's not an ant. She's torn and broken where Mami holds her. Mami spits that Xiomara just wants to go to college so she can have sex with any boy who smiles at her. She says that Xiomara will get pregnant and never get a degree. Mami calls Xiomara a *cuero*.

*Cuero.* Xiomara says that *cuero* is the Dominican word for whore. *Cueros* are regular girls, but with long hair, piercings, and no rings on their left hands. They wear revealing clothing and know that they're hot. They're sassy. They're also plain and forgotten, and they don't have cleavage. Xiomara thinks that she is a *cuero* and she hopes it's true. She thinks that she'll be anything that allows her to make sense of her panic and her pain. A *cuero* can fly and disappear.

*Mami Says.* Mami tells Xiomara that men's hands are never clean. Even if they smell like soap, there are still sins in their hands. Mami says that men's hands were made to scratch dirt. She tells Xiomara to make her heart steely to protect herself. If she dreams of men touching her tenderly, she should remember that Adam was made from dirty clay and that Eve was tempted easily.

*Repetition.* Mami's firm grip makes Xiomara nauseous and dizzy. Mami prays while Xiomara feels the rice that she kneels on biting into her knees. The statue of Mary, and the rest of the house, watches as Xiomara pays the price.

*Feeling as though she also has to protect Twin makes the situation even worse for Xiomara, especially since she seems to accept that there's nothing she or they can do to protect her from Mami. Telling Twin that she did nothing wrong, however, shows that Xiomara is still becoming more confident in her voice.*



*As Xiomara sees it, ants can survive anything—even abuse from Mami and scorn from God. In this abusive situation, Xiomara is taught again that religion is something designed to punish her and keep her in line. This makes it even clearer to her that she doesn't want to be a part of the church.*



*Feeling broken where Mami has ahold of her suggests that the most damaging thing in Xiomara's life is her abusive home life. Mami's expectations of Xiomara make it okay (in Mami's eyes) to use the word *cuero* to describe her daughter, something that's extremely hurtful.*



*Notice that according to Xiomara here, a *cuero* can be any girl, whether that girl looks sexy and desirable or whether she's plain. Being a *cuero*, however, offers Xiomara an out, as she hopes that accepting the label will mean that she can use it to escape—if she's not going to be a good girl, she may have more freedom.*



*It's possible that Mami is using the story of Genesis to explain her own poor experiences with men, which shows that someone can warp anything to make it fit their worldview—and in this case, then go on to tell Xiomara that she has to think the same way, thereby harming the next generation.*



*Notice that Xiomara isn't praying—she's focusing on the pain. Again, this makes it clear that religion isn't something positive for her. It's damaging and painful.*



*Things You Think While You're Kneeling on Rice That Have Nothing to Do with Repentance.* Xiomara remembers watching Papi peel an orange without lifting his knife. The peel curled away and he dropped it before giving the fruit to Mami to eat.

*Because Xiomara is in so much pain, she fixates on anything that might make it better—such as a memory of Papi being kind to Mami, but possibly in a way that Xiomara has never experienced firsthand.*



*Another Thing You Think While You're Kneeling on Rice That Has Nothing to Do with Repentance.* Xiomara thinks that Mami has always had rough, calloused hands. She used to rub Mami's calluses while they walked and Mami would say that Xiomara was her reward for hard work and patience. Xiomara loved being the reward, but she's not sure when she got too big for the pedestal.

*Xiomara makes it very clear that becoming too big for the pedestal has everything to do with reaching puberty and sexual maturity. Her sexuality was something that Mami didn't have to control when Xiomara was a little girl but now, it's essential in Mami's eyes to shame Xiomara for experiencing sexual thoughts.*



*The Last Thing You Think While You're Kneeling on Rice That Has Nothing to Do with Repentance.* Xiomara thinks of the grain indents on her knees, and how lucky it is that she's wearing jeans. She thinks that kneeling on pews was never this bad. She thinks of Papi and Twin not saying anything. Her fists are clenched and pain shoots up her thighs. It hurts less if she sits very still, but the thoughts are still pointless. She thinks that kissing shouldn't hurt so much.

*It's possible that Mami was, at some point, forced to kneel on rice as well. This would show again that Mami is simply replicating what she experienced as a young woman, and she knows exactly how this is making Xiomara feel—but because she's now the one in power, she nonetheless carries out the vicious cycle.*



*Leaving.* Twin puts frozen bags of veggies on Xiomara's knees and cheek. He notes that Mami didn't make her kneel very long and Xiomara knows it's true. Twin pleads with Xiomara to be good until they can go to college and get out. She's never heard him sound desperate and didn't know that he also wants to leave. Xiomara tries not to resent that he's a grade ahead and will get out faster. She elbows him away and feels afraid that she wants to hurt everything.

*Despite Xiomara's emotional turmoil and physical pain, it's telling that this is a learning experience for her when she discovers that Twin also wants to escape. This turns Twin into a more sympathetic person in Xiomara's mind, as it suggests that they're more alike than Xiomara initially thought. Still, wanting to hurt him shows that even now, Xiomara is at risk of perpetuating the cycle of violence.*



*What Do You Need from Me?; Consequences.* Caridad texts Twin later and asks him to show the message to Xiomara. Xiomara looks at it and hands back the phone. She knows they're worried, but what she needs is to curl into a ball and cry. Mami takes away Xiomara's phone, lunch money, and freedom. She also has to attend confession with Father Sean.

*Requiring that Xiomara attend confession with Father Sean shows that Mami wants to make it very clear that she's not the one punishing Xiomara; rather, the church is. With this, Mami tries to make Xiomara feel even more isolated and in the wrong.*



*Late That Night.* Xiomara only wants to talk to Aman. Twin offers to let her use his phone, but Xiomara isn't sure what she'd even say. Her heart hurts more than her knees, and she thinks they can't be together anymore. She wonders if she'd let Mami beat her again to be with him. She wants to be held.

*Wondering about her own resolve shows that Xiomara isn't quite ready to break away from Mami entirely, which suggests that there's more violence and pain to come before Xiomara truly finds herself.*



*Friday, November 9. In Front of My Locker.* Xiomara barely notices a group of guys circling until one squeezes her buttocks. The boys laugh and start to walk away. Xiomara notices Aman and thinks that he'll stand up for her. She feels too beaten to do it herself. He must know that it bothers her, but he doesn't move. Suddenly, Xiomara is angry. She feels her bruises and thinks that this is Aman's fault and now, nobody will take care of her. Xiomara turns to the guy who groped her, shoves him, and threatens to hurt him. As she walks away, she tells Aman that the same goes for him.

*While it's entirely understandable why Xiomara is upset with Aman—he, and others in the hallway, should stand up for Xiomara and girls like her—lashing out at him represents a step backward for Xiomara. She's relying on her strength and her body to defend herself, rather than using her voice to express her hurt. Feeling so alone also means that Xiomara is less likely to get the help or support she needs to heal emotionally.*



### PART III: THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS

*Silent World.* All weekend, Xiomara purposefully hears nothing. Aman tries to speak to her, but she pretends not to hear. She thinks it's almost peaceful to stop trying to understand the world.

*Shutting down like this is Xiomara's way of protecting herself, showing that silence, like language, can be a way of making the world easier to handle.*



*Sunday, November 11. Heavy.* Xiomara asks Father Sean to meet her for confession as Mami looks on. He asks Xiomara to meet him in the rectory. Xiomara isn't sure how much she'll say. She enters the rectory and avoids looking at the saints.

*Asking Xiomara to meet him in the rectory suggests that Father Sean is going to try to connect with Xiomara more openly than he might in a formal confession, which begins to offer hope that Father Sean is more on Xiomara's side than she thinks.*



*My Confession.* Xiomara notes that a person would think she's pregnant by how Mami is acting. Papi just tells Xiomara to listen to Mami. Xiomara wants to tell them it's not such a big deal—she didn't get an STD or a baby; it was just a kiss. She doesn't think this is one of the seven sins. Father Sean joins Xiomara and offers her tea. Xiomara stares at her hands and says that she lusted and disobeyed her parents, but she's not even sure if she disobeyed since they never forbade her from kissing on the train. Father Sean asks if Xiomara is really sorry. She shakes her head and says that she's sorry she got in trouble and has to pretend that she cares about confirmation, but she's not sorry she kissed a boy.

*Again, Xiomara's questions to Father Sean are perfectly valid, and it's a step in the right direction to be so direct with Father Sean about her qualms. This scene suggests that on some level, Xiomara does trust Father Sean to not treat her violently like Mami did, since this is the most truthful she's been with anyone about what happened to her and how she feels about it. This begins to situate Father Sean as an ally, even though Xiomara is pushing away from the church in general.*



*Father Sean Says.* Father Sean says that God is forgiving and understands that people are weak. However, he only forgives people if they're actually remorseful. Father Sean suggests this is about more than just a kiss.

*It's possible to read Father Sean's reply as either extremely condescending or somewhat supportive, but it suggests either way that he believes Xiomara will have to come to her own conclusions.*



*Prayers.* Father Sean is Jamaican and speaks with an accent that makes people laugh. When he speaks to Mami, he's gentle and serious. He says that Xiomara isn't ready to be confirmed and should have time to answer some questions. He assures Mami that it's not what Xiomara confessed; it's her questions and comments. Father Sean would like her to come to class but not be confirmed. Mami looks like someone stole her joy. Father Sean reminds Mami that anger is a sin, just like whatever Xiomara did. Xiomara isn't sure if Father Sean just blessed her or signed her death sentence.

*How I Can Tell.* Xiomara knows that Mami is angry because she speaks quickly in Spanish. Mami scolds Xiomara to not embarrass her in church again and tells Xiomara to fix herself. She says that she won't tell Xiomara again, but there will be big changes.

*Before We Walk in the House.* Mami tells Xiomara that she can't turn away from God. She says that she was ready to marry God when she married Papi. It was God's punishment to make her marry Papi, withhold children, and make her question if anyone would ever love her. But Mami says that she and Papi married in a church, so she'll never walk away. Confirmation is the last thing she can give Xiomara, but Xiomara is sinning just like her parents. Mami doesn't know if Xiomara is more like Papi or like her.

*My Heart Is a Hand.* Xiomara feels her heart turn into a fist. It shrinks like a raisin or like a t-shirt that's too tight. Her fingers have nothing to hold, so her nails leave marks in her palm.

*Wednesday, November 14. A Poem Mami Will Never Read; In Translation.* Xiomara gives the same poem twice, first in Spanish and then in English. She says that her mouth will never surrender or apologize to Mami or to God. Mami wants Xiomara to think that it's her mouth's fault, but Xiomara points out that Mami's mouth hurts her. Xiomara can't talk since she knows that Mami won't listen. Mami's silence is dark, but Xiomara notes that moths always seek the light, even though they might burn.

*Heartbreak.* Xiomara admits that she didn't mean to hurt anyone and doesn't understand *how* she hurt people, since it was just kissing. She ignores Aman at school and her family at home. Xiomara feels like an actress deserving of an Oscar and wonders if she's worthy of forgiveness.

*Being willing to reprimand Mami for getting angry with Xiomara suggests that Father Sean is truly on Xiomara's side, even if he can't guarantee that Mami won't beat Xiomara again at home. Xiomara's inability to recognize Father Sean's support at this point speaks to her fear of Mami and her (understandable) distrust of the church and of Father Sean, since he preaches church doctrine that she finds questionable.*



*For Mami, Xiomara's behavior reflects on her and, she believes, makes her look bad. This suggests that she wants to look powerful in front of the congregation no matter what Xiomara wants or needs.*



*Mami's comment that Xiomara is like her opens up the possibility that Mami's past wasn't as devout and perfect as Xiomara has heard, though it's also possible that Mami is referring only to her forbidden desire to be a nun. It's worth noting that forcing Xiomara to be confirmed won't actually fix anything for Mami; fixating on this only causes pain and suffering for all.*



*Noting that her hands hurt themselves suggests that on some level, Xiomara recognizes that she's only hurting herself by remaining silent.*



*This poem becomes a manifesto of sorts and suggests that Xiomara is coming to new conclusions. She seems to understand that her body isn't her fault, that Mami is the one causing harm, and that she's going to continue fighting for what she wants—something that, the novel suggests, will happen as Xiomara becomes increasingly comfortable with her voice.*



*As before, remaining silent does make Xiomara feel safe and in a cocoon of sorts, but in the long run isolating herself is not how she'll pull through this. She can only do that by communicating and learning to believe in her voice.*



*Reminders.* Xiomara does homework in bed while Twin watches anime without headphones so Xiomara can listen. It's against Mami's rules, but she won't reprimand Twin. A Winter Olympian appears in a commercial and Xiomara makes a noise. Twin asks if Xiomara is okay, but Xiomara puts her face in a pillow and tells herself to breathe.

*Writing.* Xiomara spends every day in class writing in her **poetry notebook**. Ms. Galiano sends Xiomara to the counselor, who threatens to call home when Xiomara refuses to talk. Xiomara thinks that writing is the only way she can keep from crying. Twin stops speaking to her, afraid to upset her, and Mami makes plans to send Xiomara to the Dominican Republic for the summer. Xiomara feels unmoored thinking about being away from home.

*What I'd Like to Tell Aman When He Sends Another Apology Message:* Xiomara wants to tell Aman that he doesn't need to apologize. Xiomara is good at silence and for her, he was just a failed rebellion. She admits she's lying: she wants to be with Aman, but she won't win that fight. She didn't want to get into any of these fights.

*Wednesday, November 21. Favors.* Twin pulls out Xiomara's headphones and offers her a cut **apple**. Xiomara is surprised, but eats the entire thing to ease Twin's fears. Twin asks Xiomara to write a poem about love or about being thankful for someone. Xiomara is ready to throw her apple seeds at Twin and she briefly thinks she'll vomit. She shoves the plate at Twin and asks if he wants her to write a poem for his "White Boy." Twin looks shocked, but says that his boyfriend is named Cody and he wants Xiomara to write something beautiful for herself.

*Pulled Back.* Xiomara helps Mami in the kitchen when the phone rings. Mami answers and hands the phone to Xiomara. Caridad shrieks that Xiomara can't ignore her just because Mami took her phone. Xiomara tears up at how normal this feels. Caridad softly says that she's worried. Xiomara nods, apologizes, and knows that Caridad understands that she's thanking her.

*Thursday, November 22. On Thanksgiving; Haiku: The Best Part About Thanksgiving Was When Mami:* Xiomara and Twin help Mami serve American food to homeless people at church. Xiomara feels sick and thinks that everyone can see that she's just grateful for Mami's silence. Everything makes her want to flip the table and crush peas into the ground. Later, Xiomara is ecstatic to get her phone back until she remembers that she doesn't have anyone to talk to.

*Allowing Xiomara to listen to his show shows Twin using his privilege in a positive way, which suggests that he might stand up for Xiomara and for himself at times—just possibly in ways that Xiomara doesn't always see or think are meaningful.*



*Focusing all her energy into writing in her notebook is, given the way that the novel characterizes the written word, an early indicator that Xiomara is starting to heal and make sense of what happened. Even though she's just writing for herself, she's able to use it to keep from crying and, in her situation, that's a big win.*



*Xiomara's sense of defeat speaks to the pressure she feels to conform to Mami's desires and her inability to push back on Mami's rules. Mami has, in other words, successfully made Xiomara feel entirely powerless.*



*The fact that Xiomara refuses to use Cody's name suggests that she has a long way to go when it comes to making people feel respected, especially since so much of her own pain comes from people mispronouncing her name. Twin's suggestion, meanwhile, shows that he already has a firm grasp of how language can heal, although he finds here that he can't force Xiomara to heal herself.*



*Caridad understands that the best thing she can do for Xiomara is to make things feel normal and like nothing happened, even though she may agree with Mami that Xiomara went too far with Aman. Offering Xiomara this support positions her again as a supportive and open friend and reinforces the idea that having differing beliefs doesn't have to cause strain in close relationships.*



*Though the phone symbolically suggests that Xiomara can get back to making connections with people, Mami has done a good job of making Xiomara feel entirely alone and unmoored in the world by depriving her of the ability to connect with people for so long.*



*Rough Draft of Assignment 4—When was the last time you felt free?* Xiomara recalls being five or six. Papi had watched a karate movie and Mami was at church. Xiomara and Twin were home alone, so they tied shirts around their heads and sashes from dresses around their waists like karate belts. They hopped on the furniture, avoiding the lava. Xiomara has no idea why they were ninjas in volcanoes. Mami got home and Xiomara leapt at her. She felt free while she flew, knowing that Mami would catch her. Xiomara doesn't remember if Mami caught her, but she reasons that Mami probably did—she'd remember falling.

*Rough Draft of Assignment 4—When was the last time you felt free?* Xiomara thinks that she was last happy when she recited a poem for Aman. She remembers feeling nervous, but knowing that she could perform and that Aman would listen.

*Rough Draft of Assignment 4—When was the last time you felt free?* Xiomara wonders if a stoop can be a place for freedom. She loves sitting on the stoop and watching people, with nothing else to do but enjoy the sunshine. Guys don't bother her much there. She remembers sitting with Aman on a stoop and thinking that she felt free when she let herself lean toward him. She thinks that it's freeing to be able to choose where to go and when, and in sitting still when everything tells her to move quickly.

*Final Draft of Assignment 4 (What I Actually Turn In).* Xiomara says that freedom is complicated. She hasn't experienced imprisonment like Nelson Mandela or like fighting dogs, but it seems like a big word. She thinks that it might be a skyscraper that she's seen from the bottom, but has never climbed.

*Gone.* Xiomara hates lunch now too. Boys try to squeeze in and look at her **poetry notebook** or other girls' drawings. Sometimes teachers intervene. Ms. Galiano always does, but not all the teachers care about the quiet girls. Xiomara knows she can't get in any more trouble, so she tries to ignore the boys and wishes she could disappear.

*Monday, December 10. Zeros.* Xiomara expects a zero on her last assignment, but Ms. Galiano leaves a note asking if things are okay and asking if Xiomara will stay after class to talk. Xiomara tries to figure out how to sneak out and folds the paper until it's small enough to fit in her palm.

This memory is another one in which Xiomara presents her childhood as an easier and better time, which reminds the reader again that her issues with Mami began as Xiomara's body began to grow and develop. Xiomara also recognizes here that she'd remember trauma more than she'd remember being treated kindly—and that Mami was kinder when her children were little.



Important here is that Xiomara knew Aman would listen, a certainty she doesn't have with others. Mami doesn't listen to her and she doesn't believe Twin will get it, which makes Xiomara feel more alone.



The stoop that Xiomara paints in this poem represents choice and safety. It's a place where she's more or less protected and safe, but where she can still observe the world going by—and choose how much to interact with it. In this sense, the stoop represents a somewhat idealized version of adolescence, in which Xiomara has both safety and the ability to experiment.



To a teacher, Xiomara's assignment reads as nothing less than a cry for help and suggests that there's a lot going on at home. This raises Ms. Galiano's alarm bells and later, she helps Xiomara get the support she needs.



Here, Xiomara again can't win: if she stands up for herself or other girls at her lunch table, she'll get in even more trouble at school and then at home. Because of this, she's forced to put up with this bullying and feels even more powerless.



Ms. Galiano's request for a chat allows her to show Xiomara that she genuinely cares, even if Xiomara isn't thrilled about actually having to talk with her teacher.



*Possibilities.* Ms. Galiano asks Xiomara to stand with her while she dismisses the other students. Once they're alone, Ms. Galiano asks what's going on. Xiomara's family believes that what happens at home stays at home, so she shrugs. Ms. Galiano asks if Xiomara would come to poetry club, since her writing is so good. Xiomara thinks that she has confirmation class, but remembers that Father Sean isn't expecting her. Mami wouldn't know she skipped as long as she's there when Mami picks her up. Xiomara plans to be at poetry club tomorrow and agrees to redo the assignment.

*Can't Tell Me Nothing.* Xiomara wonders when she last looked forward to something, since meeting Aman seems so long ago. She has a new lab partner now, but she catches Aman looking at her. Xiomara is still angry, but she wonders if she also messed up. She reasons that it's not worth it to try to fix it, since they can't be together. Xiomara reasons that it's better they broke up since she can't give him everything. She's looking forward to poetry club.

*Tuesday, December 11. Isabelle.* A girl in a pink tutu and Jordans asks if Xiomara is the "big-bodied freshman" that the boys talk about. Xiomara almost laughs. She shrugs and says she's a sophomore. The girl motions to a seat next to her, introduces herself as Isabelle, and says it's cool that Xiomara is a poet.

*First Poetry Club Meeting.* Xiomara thinks that it feels like moments are lining up to knock her down in a good way. She feels like she should be upset about Isabelle's comment, but she likes how direct Isabelle is—everyone else talks behind Xiomara's back. There are only three other people at the poetry club meeting: Stephan, Isabelle, and Chris, who did the poem for Xiomara's class. Ms. Galiano asks everyone to read a poem as an introduction. Stephan's poetry is filled with lush visuals, while Chris is loud and uses big words. Isabelle's poem rhymes and Xiomara can tell she likes Nicki Minaj too. Xiomara wonders at the fact that writing can bring such different people together.

*Nerves.* Xiomara thinks this feels different than reading to Aman—she didn't feel like she needed to impress him. She takes a deep breath and thinks that her poems were intended to be seen, not heard. Isabelle reassures Xiomara and Ms. Galiano nods. Xiomara grips her **poetry notebook** and reads.

*The belief that what happens at home stays at home means that Mami essentially ensures that neither of her children will ever ask for help in standing up to her, since the expectation is that they'll never tell. In this way, Mami creates a home environment in which she can exert control over her children in any way she chooses without fear of having someone else step in—showing again that silence can be dangerous.*



*This poem begins to indicate that Xiomara is moving forward from what happened and is starting to see a way forward for herself. Suspecting that she could've behaved differently with Aman speaks to some growth on her part, as it means that in the future, she may be able to make better, healthier choices with partners.*



*Isabelle's forward nature again speaks to the power of being straightforward and speaking one's mind: she makes Xiomara laugh and puts her at ease by being direct. With this, Xiomara is made to feel more welcome.*



*Xiomara's sense of wonder at how different and respectful everyone at poetry club is shows again that language and a safe space to share it can do amazing things. Xiomara is able to learn more about her fellow students in a way that seems less contrived and more truthful than, for example, Ms. Galiano's first-day icebreaker exercises (since Xiomara didn't mention meeting anyone then).*



*Taking the step to read a poem to the group shows that Xiomara is now ready to truly find her voice and begin sharing it with the world. That the club is reassuring gives Xiomara a good experience and teaches her that it's positive to share.*



*When I'm Done.* Isabelle snaps, Ms. Galiano smiles, and Chris comments on her narrative structure. Xiomara thinks that she doesn't remember the last time people listened to her speak. It's nice to know that she doesn't need Aman to feel heard. She thinks that her words feel important, and she could get addicted to this.

*With this, poetry club becomes the one place where Xiomara feels seen, heard, and appreciated for who she actually is, not who others would like her to be. This suggests that poetry and language allow people to be their true selves, especially when shared with others.*



*Compliments.* Ms. Galiano compliments Xiomara on taking the leap to perform. Xiomara is used to compliments, but not ones about her thoughts. She smiles, but wipes it away. Xiomara feels like an adult heard her for the first time and feels happy. She wants to stay and talk, but she sees that she needs to hurry or Mami will know she skipped confirmation class.

*Not wanting to look too happy about Ms. Galiano's compliment indicates that Xiomara still feels like she needs to put on a show for people and not look too soft, something which will hopefully change as she attends more meetings.*



*Caridad Is Standing Outside the Church; Hope is a Thing with Wings.* Caridad says that class got out early. She told Mami that Xiomara was in the bathroom. Xiomara apologizes for making Caridad lie. Caridad asks if Xiomara is seeing Aman again. Xiomara says she was at a poetry club meeting, so Caridad invites Xiomara to an open mic event on Friday. Xiomara insists that Mami won't let her go, but Caridad believes Mami will as long as Caridad and Twin are there. Xiomara doubts it, but she feels herself fill with hope.

*Even though there's no indication of what poets Xiomara is reading, calling the poem "Hope is a Thing with Wings" is a reference to a poem by Emily Dickinson and suggests that Xiomara is truly becoming a part of the greater poetry community, both past and present. In this situation, language and poetry are able to make Xiomara feel uncharacteristically hopeful.*



*Thursday, December 13. Here.* Mami is still angry; Aman has stopped trying to apologize, and Twin seems to be getting progressively sadder. Xiomara is silent most places but in Ms. Galiano's class, she raises her hand. She knows that speaking is okay in her class.

*Ms. Galiano is able to show Xiomara that her words are important and valued by praising her when she does speak. This alludes to the positive effects of listening and of speaking, as Xiomara feels this way nowhere else.*



*Haikus.* Xiomara writes that cafeterias aren't safe anymore. She skips eating there and instead writes poetry in a bathroom stall. She explains what haikus are and that they often tie together contrasting ideas. Xiomara believes that she's like a haiku with different sides, but she's not tied together neatly.

*At this point, Xiomara isn't tied together neatly because she hasn't yet completed her coming of age journey—but this moment foreshadows how, as she becomes more comfortable writing and performing, she will figure out how to put together all her different aspects.*



*Offering.* Xiomara packs up to leave the bathroom and the door swings open. Xiomara tries to escape, but Isabelle greets her and asks if she was really eating lunch in the bathroom. Xiomara ignores her and dumps her tray, thinking that they're not friends. Isabelle puts a hand on Xiomara's shoulder and says that she eats in the photography room, which is quiet and a good place to write. She invites Xiomara to join.

*Xiomara is interested in accepting Isabelle's offer because, though she doesn't want to be friends, she met Isabelle in a place where they both had to be vulnerable and supportive. Should Xiomara choose to trust Isabelle, she'll begin to learn that she can create situations like that outside of poetry club as well.*



*Holding Twin; Cody.* Xiomara gets home and reaches for the phone to call Mami, but she hears Twin sobbing and runs to him. Xiomara knows something happened with Cody and asks if Twin got in another fight or if Cody hit him. Twin says that Cody wouldn't hit, but this is worse. Twin explains that he met Cody's family last week. Xiomara offers an aside that she doesn't understand families who accept their kids' sexuality. Twin loved them, but he learned that Cody's dad is getting a new job and the family is moving. Cody didn't want to do long distance and broke up with Twin. Xiomara rocks Twin and sighs that they should know to be smarter with their hearts.

*Problems; Dominican Spanish Lesson.* Twin shakes and struggles to calm down. Xiomara pats his back and takes his glasses off. She tells him that he needs to calm down before Mami gets home and realizes that she forgot to call Mami. Xiomara defines the word *brava*, which is an adjective that means fierce or ferocious. Mami is "mad *brava*" when she gets home, first because Xiomara didn't call and then when she thinks Xiomara did something to Twin. Xiomara becomes *brava* when Twin doesn't correct Mami. Mami threatens to send Xiomara to the Dominican Republic after winter break and then sends Xiomara to clean the bathroom.

*Permission.* Caridad calls later and asks Mami if Xiomara can come to the poetry event. Mami shoots dirty looks at Xiomara, but agrees that she can go as long as Twin goes too. Xiomara is afraid that Twin won't want to go, but Twin agrees quickly. Xiomara thinks that he must want something to get his mind off of Cody.

*Friday, December 14. Open Mic Night.* Caridad, Twin, and Xiomara have to take two trains and then walk to get to the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. The line snakes around the block and is longer than those for nightclubs. A beautiful black woman hosts the event and Xiomara is surprised when the woman calls her name.

*Signed Up.* Caridad tells Xiomara that she signed her up to perform. Xiomara starts shaking and wants to leave, but Caridad and Twin drag her in. Xiomara compares herself to every poet who performs. Some of the poems are good and make people cry and laugh. Finally, the host calls Xiomara's name and asks people to keep clapping until Xiomara takes the stage. Once onstage, the audience looks huge. Everyone waits for Xiomara to speak. She's not sure she can do it and forgets her poem.

*That Xiomara expects Cody to hurt Twin speaks again to Xiomara's belief that romance is inevitably violent in some way, especially when men are involved. Twin's willingness to confide in Xiomara allows the two to begin to repair their relationship, as it suggests that Twin trusts Xiomara enough to share with her what's actually going on in his life. Going forward, then, Xiomara and Twin can work harder to support each other, knowing it's possible to do so.*



*Letting the reader in on Dominican words makes the novel richer and gives the reader more ways to connect with Xiomara and with her experience. In this way, Xiomara shows again how language can be a tool for interpersonal connection and cross-cultural understanding.*



*In this situation, the open mic represents an evening of escape for both Xiomara and for Twin, showing that one doesn't have to be a poet themselves to benefit from experiencing poetry.*



*The long line points to the deep value that this particular space holds in the spoken word poetry scene, and more generally speaks to the power of the poetry—on this night at least, the people there are more interested in connecting over language than anything else.*



*The way that the host handles Xiomara's hesitation shows that she understands the kind of fear and pressure that Xiomara feels to perform, and she knows that the best way to help Xiomara is to make her feel supported by every audience member. Though Xiomara can't fully appreciate this now, this shows her that she has a large community to support her if she wants it.*



*The Mic Is Open.* Xiomara remembers the first line, recites it shakily, and then begins again. She forgets everything but her poem and everyone listens attentively. When she's done, they all clap. Xiomara wants to hide. Caridad and Twin praise Xiomara and Twin even looks happy. As they leave, the host grabs Xiomara and invites her to the youth slam in February. Xiomara knows that she wants to perform.

*Invitation.* The youth slam that the host mentions is the same one that Ms. Galiano talked about at poetry club. Xiomara doesn't really believe in signs, but this seems like a sign. At home, she tries to not appear as overwhelmed as she feels. Twin looks happy and continues to compliment Xiomara. Xiomara feels giggly and giddy. She thinks that lots of the poems she heard at the open mic seemed to talk about her and Twin's own stories. They feel seen, and Xiomara thinks it'd be amazing to help someone else feel that way.

*Sunday, December 16. All the Way Hype.* Xiomara thinks about the open mic all weekend and spends all her free time writing. She can't wait to tell the poetry club about performing. Her **poetry notebook** seems to swell with all the new poems and Xiomara feels like as she writes, she heals. She thinks that poetry club feels like a prayer circle for her.

*Monday, December 17. At Lunch on Monday.* Xiomara goes to the art room and sits across from Isabelle. Isabelle pulls off her headphones and asks Xiomara for her opinion. As she recites her poem, Xiomara puts her **apple** down to focus. When Isabelle finishes, she doesn't look at Xiomara. Xiomara thinks the poem is beautiful and good; she says that it gave her chills and that Isabelle should finish it. Isabelle smiles and Xiomara smiles back.

*Tuesday, December 18. At Poetry Club.* Xiomara shares with the poetry club that she went to an open mic. Everyone is amazed and wants to come along next time. Isabelle squeals and grabs Xiomara's hand, which makes Xiomara feel heady. Ms. Galiano smiles. Chris asks how Xiomara did, and she says that she didn't suck. Everyone knows this means that Xiomara did great.

*Everyone's reaction makes it clear to Xiomara that she does have more than just her poetry club to support her if she wants to continue writing and performing. This makes Xiomara feel more powerful, as she's beginning to understand that her words have power.*



*Now that Xiomara has made the connection that she's not the only one who feels the way she does, she's already able to look forward and see that others may benefit from hearing her poetry. In this way, she's learning a healthier way to pass along information and ways of acting than what Mami teaches her.*



*After her experience at the open mic, Xiomara is more fully able to recognize the power of poetry. Now that she's aware of how it feels to share her thoughts with others, she recognizes that her poetry can help her as well as others.*



*Xiomara demonstrates here that in addition to learning that she can perform, she's also learning how to listen and respond in kind, meaningful ways—which offers hope for her improving her relationships with Aman and with her family, as what she's learning here can apply elsewhere too.*



*Getting support from the poetry club helps Xiomara to begin feeling good about herself—and importantly, begins to shift her focus away from her unruly body to the words that she can control and that make her feel powerful.*



*Every Day after English Class.* Ms. Galiano starts asking Xiomara to read her a new poem after each class. Xiomara chooses her best and shortest pieces and learns to pace herself and show emotion. On the last day before break, Ms. Galiano says that Xiomara is blossoming and though it's cliché, Xiomara feels like it's true. Stephan reads Xiomara haikus in the hall and Chris greets her on the street. Xiomara's poetry is a point of pride now. She loves how her words let her communicate and build community. She knows that saying before that she wouldn't perform came from being afraid. Now, no one can stop her.

*Monday, December 24. Christmas Eve.* Mami buys three big poinsettias instead of a Christmas tree. Xiomara explains that Christmas Eve is one of her favorite holidays, since most Latinx families open gifts. Caridad comes over during the day and then at night, Xiomara, Mami, and Twin go to midnight Mass. Xiomara goes straight to her room when she gets home. She doesn't expect any gifts and settles in with Chance the Rapper. Mami knocks and puts a small box on the desk. She awkwardly folds a sweater, sits, and stands back up. She explains that she had the gift resized, since she knows that Xiomara loves jewelry.

*It's a Rosary.* Xiomara tempers her expectations. It's probably a rosary, since Mami doesn't believe in any other jewelry. However, when Xiomara opens the box, she sees a bracelet with a small plaque. The plaque has her name on one side and *Mi Hija* on the other. It's her **baby bracelet**. She doesn't understand why Mami resized it now, but puts it on anyway. She feels like she has Mami on one side and herself on the other side. Xiomara is mostly relieved it's not a rosary.

*Wednesday, December 26–Tuesday, January 1. Longest Week.* The week after Christmas seems like the longest week of Xiomara's life. She writes and reads poems to Twin, who texts Caridad about Cody. Xiomara finds that she starts memorizing her poems as she edits. She recites them in her dreams and feels herself getting braver. She writes about Mami making her feel like an ant, about boys catcalling her, and about Aman and Twin. Occasionally, Xiomara is still up when Mami wakes to go to work. Xiomara can't wait to share her poems next week at poetry club.

*Wednesday, January 2. The Waiting Game.* School starts on Wednesday, so Xiomara misses poetry club by a day. She's disappointed, but takes the extra time to write. She shares poems with Isabelle at lunch and talks with Stephan and Chris in the hallways. Xiomara's birthday is next week and she thinks that the new year isn't going too horribly.

*Even though Xiomara mentions fear specifically as holding her back, she was also held back by the shame she felt about her body and her confusing thoughts. Losing her fear also frees her from some of that shame, while the community she's now a part of constantly reminds her of why her words—and her body that lets her share those words—are valuable and worth listening to.*



*While Xiomara doesn't explain whether she's not expecting gifts because of what happened with Aman or because she's just getting older, it's still telling that Mami has made the effort to get Xiomara something. Mami's gift then becomes an offering of sorts, as it suggests that Mami may be ready to start moving on from their argument and fostering a better relationship with her daughter.*



*Noting that the bracelet puts Xiomara one side and Mami on the other is another reminder that Mami doesn't see Xiomara for who she truly is—she sees Xiomara only for where she meets expectations and then for where she fails to meet them. Despite this, Xiomara also recognizes that this is a peace offering and in this sense, the bracelet says what Mami can't bring herself to say: that the two of them are connected despite their differences.*



*The poems that Xiomara talks about writing are, presumably, many of the poems in the novel, which suggests that with some distance from these traumatizing events, Xiomara can edit them with more of a critical eye and a level head. Reciting poems to Twin shows too that they're working on improving their relationship and being truthful, especially if Xiomara is reading him especially intimate poems like "Ants."*



*It's certainly an amazing feeling for Xiomara to be reminded that she has new friends and a community at school, especially after a long winter break at home. Now, school is becoming a happier place, rather than just a place to be to get her out of the house.*



*Tuesday, January 8. Birthdays.* In the morning, Twin and Xiomara exchange gifts. Xiomara gets him an *X-Men* comic about Iceman, who's gay. They hug and Xiomara assures Twin that she's always on his side. Twin's gift is another notebook. Xiomara jokes that Twin is running out of ideas, but Twin says that Xiomara isn't running out of ideas and needs a new notebook. They walk to the train together.

*The Good.* Caridad leaves voicemails singing "Happy Birthday" on Xiomara's phone. When Xiomara goes to her locker, she finds an envelope in her biology textbook holding two tickets to visit an **apple** farm. They're clearly from Aman, and Xiomara laughs. At poetry club, Chris sings "Happy Birthday" and Isabelle gives Xiomara a cupcake. Xiomara feels like she'll remember this birthday forever.

*The Bad.* Xiomara rummages through her bag for her **poetry notebook**, but she only finds the one Twin just gave her. Her old one is on the kitchen table. Xiomara is upset she doesn't have a poem to share, but she recites one from memory and feels great about it. She realizes she's running late to church and thinks that soon, Mami will find out that she's been skipping confirmation class. Xiomara grabs her things and runs out. She grabs her phone and listens to a voicemail from Mami. Mami says that she's waiting for Xiomara at home.

*The Ugly.* Xiomara notices right away that her **poetry notebook** isn't on the kitchen table. Mami is sitting on Xiomara's bed, holding the notebook. Softly, Mami says that she knows enough English to know that Xiomara is writing about boys, church, and her. Even though Mami is a small woman, she seems to grow and Xiomara shrinks away. Mami spits that Xiomara writes horrible things without guilt or shame and asks what kind of daughter she is. Xiomara thinks that Mami seems lost. Mami grabs the notebook and then a match. Xiomara feels her chest tightening as Mami lights the match.

*Let Me Explain.* Xiomara tries to explain that the poems are just her personal thoughts. They're private, and it helps to write them down. She's sorry and clings to the doorframe to hold herself up. Xiomara wants to leap at Mami, but she is sorry for ever thinking that her thoughts could be private. Mami lights the match and tells Xiomara to get a trashcan.

*Both Xiomara's and Twin's gifts show that they're at a point where they truly understand each other and want to make the other feel heard and loved, especially since they're the only ones who will be truly supportive in their family.*



*Now that Xiomara is part of a wider community, her birthday is better than normal—and her happiness even means that she's willing to consider talking to Aman again, which suggests that as she becomes more confident, she may also be more willing to speak openly with him about where things went wrong.*



*The fact that Xiomara's concern is simply that she doesn't have a poem to share shows how on top of the world she feels right now. Mami's voicemail, however, indicates that things are going to get bad quickly, since she presumably found Xiomara's notebook.*



*Note that Mami suggests here that Xiomara should be guilty and ashamed of what she wrote, and that guilt and shame are just part of how Xiomara should feel in general. Xiomara's experiences in poetry club, however, have taught her the opposite: shame holds her back and makes her feel small, while confidence makes her feel important and respected. Mami understands this on some level, hence her attempt to make Xiomara feel small.*



*That Xiomara even tries to explain herself shows that she's learned the power of using her words to express herself, though it's clear that Mami hasn't had the same kind of education and won't engage in a real dialogue about the notebook.*



*If Your Hand Causes You to Sin; Verses.* Mami puts the match to the leather cover and begins to pray. Xiomara leaps and grabs for her **poetry notebook**, but Mami turns and shoves Xiomara. Xiomara feels like she truly understands what it means to be desperate. They fight over the notebook, but Mami slaps Xiomara back again and the **baby bracelet** breaks and goes flying. Xiomara recites her poems from memory as Mami recites Scripture. Both of them get louder and louder. Xiomara's poem is about her name and about being a warrior ready to defend herself.

*Burn; Where There Is Smoke.* Mami stares at Xiomara like Xiomara is insane and keeps praying. Suddenly, they both gasp and cry. Xiomara feels like something is dying and shouts that her poems are in her chest. She asks Mami if Mami is going to burn her too. Twin races in and grabs for the **poetry notebook**, but Mami pushes him back. Papi gently coaxes the notebook out of Mami's hands and knocks it against the wall to try to put out the fire. He yells at Twin to get the fire extinguisher. Xiomara fixates on the burning smell and thinks that her heart is burning too.

*Things You Think About in the Split Second Your Notebook Is Burning; Other Things You Think About in the Split Second Your Notebook Is Burning.* Xiomara wonders who would put her out if she were on fire. She wonders who would gather her ashes and, if she turned to dust, if anyone would try to collect the blowing dust. Xiomara vows to never write a poem again. She thinks that she'll never allow anyone to see her heart so that they can destroy it.

*My Mother Tries to Grab Me; Returning.* Papi puts out the fire with the fire extinguisher. Mami watches him silently, but Xiomara knows that as soon as the air clears, Mami will chase her. Xiomara stands, glad she's still wearing her coat and backpack, and races for the door. Twin holds Mami back. Xiomara breathes deeply once she's outside, but she realizes that she has nothing and nowhere to go. Twin texts Xiomara immediately, but Xiomara ignores him. She texts Aman and asks if he can meet her.

*On the Walk to the Train.* Xiomara calls Caridad. Caridad starts singing "Happy Birthday," but she stops when she hears Xiomara crying. Xiomara knows that Caridad is aware that something is seriously wrong. She asks Caridad to check on Twin and says that she needs to leave. Caridad reminds Xiomara that she's always here for her and assures her that she'll figure it out.

*When the baby bracelet breaks, Xiomara symbolically breaks free from Mami. Reciting her poems, especially the one about her name and being a warrior, is a way for Xiomara to assert her independence and her right to write poetry, no matter how Mami feels on the matter. At the same time, Mami feels more powerful as she recites Scripture, showing that even the Bible can, for some, provide the same kind of release as Xiomara's poetry provides her.*



*This is an important moment for Twin, as this is the first time that he even tries to stand up for Xiomara. This suggests that because he and Xiomara have begun communicating and being truthful with each other, he now understands better what kind of a relationship she wants and how important it is to her that he attempt to defend her in times like these.*



*Even as Xiomara vows to never write poetry again, these poems show that she's still using poetry and language to make sense of this trauma—she's not going to stop, in other words, even if it feels cathartic to say that she is. This also speaks to how alone Xiomara feels, as she clearly doesn't think her own family will care for her after this incident.*



*Again, when Twin holds Mami back from chasing Xiomara, he's showing Xiomara how much he cares about and respects her—he's willing to put himself in Mami's line of fire to help her get to safety. Texting Aman, meanwhile, suggests that Xiomara recognizes that now is not the time to be prideful. Now is the time to be honest and ask for help.*



*Caridad's kindness and assurances help Xiomara feel as though this supportive friendship will remain, even if everything else is changing and disappearing in front of her eyes. Caridad, then, helps Xiomara understand that they can still be friends, even as Xiomara behaves in a way that Caridad never would.*



*The Ride.* The train proceeds with stops and starts, but it doesn't bother Xiomara. She gets off and it starts to snow. Xiomara turns her face to the sky and imagines that the snow is healing, like in the movies. She isn't aware that Aman has arrived until she smells his cologne and thinks of the memories they made. Aman takes Xiomara's hand and squeezes it, but Xiomara looks at the sky.

*No Turning Back.* Aman tries to ask Xiomara questions, but she doesn't hear them. She only feels his fingers. They walk until Xiomara realizes that Aman is shivering—he isn't wearing a coat or socks. Xiomara whispers that they should get out of the weather and confirms that he lives nearby. Aman raises his eyebrows.

*Taking Care.* Xiomara thinks all the way up the stairs. Aman's father works nights, so Aman spends his time listening to music and doing homework. She almost laughs thinking about how she avoided his house when they were together, but is here now that she's a mess. Aman's house is soft and cushioned. Xiomara leans against the wall and closes her eyes. Aman puts on soft soca music, which is soothing. Xiomara opens her eyes when she feels Aman taking off her boots. She tells him about her **poetry notebook** and her chest hurts. Aman pulls her close.

*In Aman's Arms.* In Aman's arms, Xiomara feels warm and safe. They apologize and start kissing. Xiomara takes off her shirt and though she's shy at first, she feels beautiful. They both undress and Aman touches Xiomara's breasts. Xiomara stops breathing, but she feels good.

*And I Also Know.* Xiomara knows they need to stop. Aman is on top of her on the couch and everything feels good, but she can feel his erection. His hand brushes Xiomara's thigh, and she understands why people cliff dive to feel free. She stops his hand, pulls away, and says they have to stop.

*The Next Move.* Xiomara sits up, holds her bra against her chest, and waits for Aman to call her names. He touches her back, but only fastens her bra and hands Xiomara her shirt. They dress silently and Xiomara waits for Aman to hand her her boots and turn her away—she knows that if she's not going to sleep with him, he'll dump her. Instead, Aman hands Xiomara his own t-shirt. She's confused, but Aman takes it back and uses it to wipe away Xiomara's tears.

When Aman shows up for Xiomara, it confirms for Xiomara that she has a community of people—Aman, Twin, Caridad, and poetry club—to care for her when she needs help. Importantly, she built this community by sharing her words with them.



At this point, Xiomara doesn't have anything to lose since Mami is already so angry with her. Going to Aman's house is likely the least of her worries, which also speaks to the fact that Xiomara is also beginning to abandon some of her shame in general.



The way that Aman touches and cares for Xiomara shows that it's not always necessary to communicate verbally to make someone feel loved and cared for. Because Aman is so kind and gentle, he's able to make Xiomara feel safe in a way that she likely hasn't felt for a long time.



Now that Xiomara feels more secure in herself, she's able to enjoy her experience with Aman and not allow shame to cloud her experience and ruin it for her. This shows her that relationships don't have to be awful in some way—they can be fulfilling and comfortable.



When Xiomara asks Aman to stop, it shows that even if she goes on to say that she's afraid of the consequences, she is certain enough of herself to feel comfortable asking, rather than letting him keep going unchecked.



Again, Xiomara has to reckon with the new knowledge that refusing sex doesn't mean that she's going to be scorned and kicked out—that's only what she's learned from Mami and what she's seen on the street, and it's not universally true and is in no way healthy. Instead, she now starts to see that she has the power to build the relationship she wants.



*Tangled.* Xiomara thinks of the long three-strand necklaces she wears sometimes. They're beautiful, but it's impossible to put them away—they always get tangled. Xiomara feels like one of those necklaces after asking Aman to stop. She feels guilty, like she wants more, but she also wants to cry. Her panic dissipates and Xiomara thinks she needs a minute to slow down and think.

*There Are Words.* Xiomara knows that she and Aman need to talk, but they watch highlights of the Winter Olympics and fry eggs and plantains. Xiomara feels like time stopped and listens to Aman's breathing. She thinks of all the firsts she experienced today, and all the firsts she chose not to experience. This is a more comfortable train of thought, as Xiomara knows that she's made other choices today that she won't be able to take back.

*Wednesday, January 9. Facing It.* As soon as Xiomara walks into Ms. Galiano's class, Ms. Galiano calls her into the hallway. Xiomara is wearing the same outfit from yesterday—Aman's shirts were too small—and Ms. Galiano seems to know. Ms. Galiano says that she called Xiomara's house yesterday because she was concerned. Papi sounded frantic and didn't know where Xiomara was. She asks if Xiomara has called home and what's going on. Xiomara doesn't know what to say. She looks at Ms. Galiano and thinks that she's not much older, is pretty, has a Spanish last name, loves poetry, and called Xiomara's house because she was worried. Xiomara tells her everything. She says that she hates Mami. Ms. Galiano holds Xiomara and soothes her.

*"You Don't Have to Do Anything You Don't Want to Do"; What I Say to Ms. Galiano After She Passes Me a Kleenex.* Xiomara takes a breath and thinks that nobody has ever told her before that she's free to make her own choices. Maybe in some way Aman has, since he never forces her to do anything. Xiomara thinks that Mami wants her to be proper, Papi wants her to be quiet, and Twin and Caridad want her to be good. God wants Xiomara to earn her life. Xiomara thinks that nobody has told her that she can make things stop with her words. Ms. Galiano says that Xiomara does need to speak to Mami and figure out their relationship. Xiomara agrees.

*Going Home.* Xiomara feels like going home is the hardest thing. She's not sure what she needs to do or how to do it, and she's not sure how Mami will react. Isabelle shares food with Xiomara during lunch and after bio, Aman holds Xiomara's hands. Ms. Galiano gives Xiomara her cell number in case she needs to talk. Xiomara walks outside at the end of the day with Aman and finds Caridad and Twin waiting for her. She knows that she's not alone, and she knows who might be able to help her.

*Realizing that she needs to gather her thoughts in this situation mirrors the way that Xiomara steadied herself before her open mic performance. The similarities imply that she'll have a similarly transformative experience here as she did there.*



*It's telling that it's more comfortable for Xiomara to think about what she did sexually than anything else, given that only a few months ago, Xiomara was so conflicted about any kind of physical contact with boys. This makes it clear that she's no longer ashamed of her body or what she does with it. Now, her most important challenge is to reconcile with Mami.*



*Just as Xiomara did when she spoke with Father Sean, she begins to see here that Ms. Galiano is a real person and is a role model for her. That Xiomara can make such a transition to crying and telling the whole truth just because Ms. Galiano called home speaks to just how alone Xiomara feels in life right now. It also suggests that Xiomara is beginning to move past the idea that everything that happens at home needs to stay there, especially since she learns here that she can get help and comfort if she speaks up.*



*Hearing that she can control where her life goes next is so transformative for Xiomara exactly because nobody else, save for Aman, has ever indicated that Xiomara has any say in her life. Hearing this from Ms. Galiano situates Ms. Galiano again as an important mentor in Xiomara's life, as she reminds Xiomara that she's in control while also emphasizing the reality that certain things, like talking to Mami, must happen.*



*The way that Isabelle, Aman, Caridad, Twin, and Ms. Galiano all rally around Xiomara make it clear to Xiomara that there are people in her life who are more than willing to help her—while deciding to ask someone else for help shows that Xiomara is now more comfortable seeking support, not just accepting it when others offer.*



*Aman, Twin, and Caridad; Divine Intervention.* Xiomara introduces Aman to Twin and Caridad and they walk to the train. She wants to ask Twin what happened last night, but she's not sure she wants to know and she knows it wasn't good. Caridad squeezes Xiomara's hand, Aman kisses her forehead, and Twin smiles softly. He begins to cry and then he and Xiomara hold each other. Xiomara makes a stop before she goes home. She understands that help can come in mysterious ways, and she knows she needs as much help as she can get.

Bringing everyone together for the first time is no doubt an odd experience for Xiomara, but it reflects her belief that she's done feeling so alone and keeping the different aspects of her life so separate. Allowing everyone to be together suggests that going forward, Xiomara will hopefully not have to spend so much time pretending and will instead be able to feel whole and valued for all she is.



*Homecoming.* Xiomara puts her key in the lock, but she doesn't turn it. Mami might not be home yet, but she's in the kitchen wringing a dishrag when Xiomara opens the door. Her eyes are red and she looks small. Twin squeezes Xiomara's shoulder and Xiomara tells Mami that they need to talk. She lets Father Sean into the kitchen and he reaches for Mami. Xiomara watches Mami begin to sob and thinks that she's been both a mother and a monster. Xiomara goes to her.

Asking for help from Father Sean shows that Father Sean's attempts to connect with Xiomara and respect her autonomy worked. Because he has such a good relationship with Mami, he's a perfect person to help facilitate this conversation and teach both Mami and Xiomara that they can truly communicate, not just speak over each other.



*My Mother and I.* Xiomara thinks that she and Mami might not be friends. They'll never shop for a prom dress or paint each other's nails. They may never learn to apologize, but they can hold each other tight. They can remember that love is like a band that can tear, but it can also hold in so much. Mami doesn't say that she's sorry or that she loves Xiomara. Xiomara hopes to hear that someday, but thinks that Mami's soft touch is enough.

Now, Xiomara can apply what she learned with Aman and with Twin to her relationship with Mami. She can now understand that this hug may not be exactly what she wants to hear from Mami, but it can nonetheless communicate things that Mami doesn't have the communication skills to say outright.



*Thursday, January 24. Stronger.* In bio, Xiomara learns about erosion and how, over time, small streams can break apart mountains. Xiomara and Mami try to break down their own walls by meeting weekly with Father Sean to talk. Mami starts teaching communion classes and seems happier than ever. She's excited and happy with the little kids, and Xiomara remembers how it used to be like that when she was little. In their third session with Father Sean, Mami gives Xiomara back her repaired **baby bracelet**. Sometimes, Twin and Papi come too. Twin is quiet, but Xiomara hopes he'll be able to speak up someday. Xiomara is surprised that Papi loves to talk and is a good listener. One afternoon, Father Sean says that Twin mentioned Xiomara's upcoming poetry slam. He asks if they can all come.

Returning Xiomara's baby bracelet to her, repaired, is symbolic of Mami and Xiomara's healing relationship. Even though Xiomara may still see it as representative of the two different parts of her, the fact that it can be repaired offers hope that Xiomara can, someday, achieve a relationship with Mami where Mami's daughter and Xiomara herself are one and the same. Xiomara's understanding that Twin is keeping secrets during their counseling sessions also shows that she respects Twin and understands that she can't force him to speak—he'll need to tell people when he's ready and feels safe.



*Slam Prep.* Ms. Galiano convinces Xiomara to commit to the poetry slam. Xiomara practices in her mirror and at poetry club. She's still upset about losing poems, but she's proud of remembering so many and tells herself that if she rewrites them, it means they mattered. Xiomara knows she needs one strong poem and loves that people will listen, but she hates the idea of being judged. She's concerned because her poems seem too personal to perform in front of strangers. Ms. Galiano tells Xiomara that words give people permission to be their true selves, and points out that poems like this are the ones that Xiomara needed to hear.

*Ms. Galiano Explains the Five Rules of Slam; Xiomara's Secret Rules of Slam; The Poetry Club's Real Rules of Slam.* Ms. Galiano's rules are that poems must be original and under three minutes, and that there are no props, instruments, or other people onstage. Xiomara's rules are that she can't faint, forget her poem, mess up, give a disclaimer, or fail to finish. The club's rules are that performers must perform with heart, remember why they wrote the poem, be emotional, share, and not suck.

*Friday, February 1. Poetic Justice.* A week before the slam, Xiomara takes a deep breath and prepares to practice her poem in front of Twin, Mami, and Papi. She feels like she can't do it, but Twin nods encouragingly. Xiomara finds her words, but the room still feels too small. When she finishes Twin smiles, Papi claps, and Mami tells Xiomara to speak up next time.

*Friday, February 8. The Afternoon of the Slam.* Aman and Xiomara go to the park. He holds her hand and they listen to Nicki Minaj. Xiomara gets up to leave when the album is over, but Aman pulls Xiomara into his lap despite her protestations. He opens up the Notes app on his phone and reads her a poem. It's short and bad, but Xiomara cries anyway. It's the first poem that anyone ever wrote for her. Aman says that he believes that Xiomara can defend herself and everyone else, but he'll always support her and protect her heart.

*Now that Xiomara is feeling better and is happier and healthier at home, Ms. Galiano is able to make the point that Xiomara has a story to share that will no doubt be compelling and meaningful for others—and that, as a poet, it's Xiomara's responsibility to keep putting herself out there so that others can realize they're not alone. With this, the novel returns to its core theme of language's power puts Xiomara at a new point in the cycle of communication and empowerment: helping and mentoring others.*



*The different rules provide both structure and levity for the members of the poetry club, which helps ease fears and helps them feel more secure in what's going to happen. Xiomara's rules for herself suggest that she's taking this seriously and wants to make sure to work on her performance and improve so that she can connect better with others—showing just how far she's come since her initial reluctance to share her words.*



*It is worth noting that Mami's turnaround is somewhat idealistic, as it's unlikely that an abusive parent like Mami would transition from burning journals to encouraging their child in less than a month. However, Mami's reaction is still something to strive for, as it shows Mami being a supportive parent to the daughter she has rather trying to turn Xiomara into someone different.*



*Having a poem written for her for the first time shows Xiomara clearly that Aman is truly there to support her. It's not the words themselves that matter, since the poem isn't very good, but the thought behind it makes Xiomara feel loved and appreciated in a way that few others have ever made her feel. With this support, she's even more ready for the slam later.*



*At the New York Citywide Slam.* With Ms. Galiano's assistance, Xiomara recites a truthful poem. Twin's help with practice means that it's polished, and her new **poetry notebook** makes her feel like she deserves to be there. Aman's support makes her not see the standing ovation, and thinking of English class means that she doesn't see Caridad and Isabelle cheer. Caridad holds Xiomara's hand, so Xiomara misses Aman and Twin messing around. Because Mami and Papi are in the front row, Xiomara doesn't see Father Sean. When she does notice Father Sean, she doesn't hear Papi telling people that Xiomara is his daughter. She looks at Mami, nods, and recites her poem. She knows her words are powerful.

*Celebrate With Me.* After the slam, Mami and Papi invite everyone to their house for pizza and rice and beans. Mami and Papi let Aman sit on the couch, but they won't call him Xiomara's boyfriend. Isabelle plays bachata and asks Caridad to dance. Xiomara watches Twin pretend he's not watching Stephan as Aman takes over as DJ. Ms. Galiano and Father Sean argue about boxing and then Papi holds out his hands to Xiomara to dance. He explains that he should've taught Xiomara to dance long ago, and that dancing is a way to tell people she loves them. Mami smiles at Xiomara and says that they won't take any more backwards steps. Xiomara smiles and steps forward.

*Assignment 5—First and Final Draft.* Xiomara gives the Psalm "The unfolding of your words gives light; / it gives understanding to the simple" as her favorite quote. She writes that though she was raised with religion, she didn't always feel loved. The Bible is entirely a metaphor, so Xiomara suggests that God doesn't just exist in churches—everyone is like God. She believes that talking with others is talking about God and, therefore, is like church. This quote is also about poetry and how words bring people together. Xiomara isn't sure if she'll ever be as devout as Mami, Twin, or Caridad, but she knows now that it's freeing to believe in the power of her words.

*The nod to Mami at the end of this poem suggests that Xiomara and Mami have truly begun to move past their differences and now, Mami is a source of support and confidence for Xiomara. Again, this is somewhat idealistic, but it still presents a version of familial support and unity that the novel suggests is worth striving for regardless. The amount of support that Xiomara has in the audience speaks to the power of her words—these people have all moved to support her since the novel started, in large part because she found her voice and learned to connect with them.*



*Papi's newfound willingness to speak honestly and happily to Xiomara, as well as his willingness to dance at all, suggests that though Papi has been a pretty quiet character, this has been a major transformative experience for him as well. It's possible that just as Xiomara is beginning to put together opposing sides of herself, Papi—and for that matter, Mami—may be able to do the same, allowing everyone to come to a happier and more supportive place.*



*Using a Psalm shows that now, Xiomara has come to terms—at least to a degree—with how to be a part of her church. She now understands that she truly can ask questions and interpret the Bible in a way that makes sense to her and in a way that makes her feel as though she can be a part of the church community, just as she can be a part of the poetry community. Importantly, she doesn't have to be the same as Mami to be a valid member of the community—what's important is that she's there and supportive, and Mami is in return. What's more, the fact that Xiomara only writes one draft of this assignment shows how she no longer feels the need to separate her true feelings from the words she presents to the world; these different versions of herself have finally become one and the same.*





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