

When I Was Puerto Rican



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ESMERALDA SANTIAGO

Esmeralda Santiago was born in Santurce, Puerto Rico, a suburb of San Juan. Her family moved to Macún when she was four. As *When I Was Puerto Rican* describes, Esmeralda's mother moved her growing family to and from the city a number of times before deciding to relocate permanently to Brooklyn. There Santiago attended New York City's Performing Arts High School. By the time she graduated, she was the oldest of 11 children. After studying at community colleges for eight years, she received a full scholarship and transferred to Harvard, graduating with honors in 1976. Soon after, she married Frank Cantor and with him founded CANTOMEDIA, a production company that focuses on documentary filmmaking. Initially, Santiago began writing essays and opinion pieces for newspapers, as well as writing for CANTOMEDIA's documentaries. An article she wrote about her mother attracted the attention of her first publisher, and the result was *When I Was Puerto Rican*. Santiago has since written two more autobiographies and several novels. Santiago describes herself as an active volunteer: she's spoken on behalf of public libraries, founded shelters for battered women, and designed community programs for adolescents. The Girl Scouts of America recognized her in 2002 for her community service endeavors. She suffered a stroke in 2008 while working on her novel *Conquistadora*. Santiago made a full recovery and was able to finish writing the book, which was published in 2012.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As Papi explains to Negi, Christopher Columbus arrived in Puerto Rico in 1493. After Spain began colonizing Puerto Rico in the early 16th century, they forced the native tribes into systems of forced labor. The Spanish colonists soon began importing enslaved Africans to take the place of the dying natives on sugar plantations. Puerto Ricans began pushing for independence in the early 1800s, which led Spain to encourage non-Spanish Europeans to settle in Puerto Rico and quiet the unrest by diluting the dissenting populations. In 1898, Spain was forced to cede Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam to the United States at the end of the Spanish-American War. The United States passed the Jones Act in 1917, which gave Puerto Ricans born after 1898 American citizenship. The entirety of Puerto Rico's house of delegates opposed this act, stating that it was a way for the US to legally draft Puerto Rican men into the army for World War I.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

When I Was Puerto Rican is the first in a trilogy. It's followed by *Almost a Woman* and *The Turkish Lover*, which follow Negi's story through her young adulthood and continue to develop the relationship between Negi's Puerto Rican heritage and her new life in America. Many other Puerto Rican writers explore similar themes and experiences. *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* by Judith Ortiz Cofer details the author's experience growing up as the daughter of a Navy officer and splitting each year between Puerto Rico and New Jersey, and her struggle with the ensuing identity crisis. Marta Moreno Vega's *When The Spirits Dance Mambo* takes place entirely in New York at roughly the same time Negi's family moves to New York, though it seems unlikely that Mami would've allowed Negi to experience the Latin nightlife the author experiences. Esmeralda Santiago's work is often compared to that of other female Latin American authors such as Julia Alvarez (*How The Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*) and Sandra Cisneros (*The House on Mango Street*). However, Esmeralda Santiago's work also shares broad thematic similarities with novels and memoirs from other authors who write about the experience of being an immigrant in America, including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah* and Eva Hoffman's memoir *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** When I Was Puerto Rican
- **When Written:** 1990-1992
- **Where Written:** United States
- **When Published:** 1993
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** Puerto Rico and Brooklyn, New York from 1950 to 1962
- **Climax:** When Negi auditions for the Performing Arts High School
- **Antagonist:** At various points Mami and Papi are arguably Negi's antagonists, though her more overarching conflicts are with sexism, racism, and social norms
- **Point of View:** First person, narrated by Negi

EXTRA CREDIT

Hurricane Santa Clara. Hurricane Santa Clara was the first hurricane observed from the San Juan radar, and the warning for Santa Clara was the first to be broadcast on television in Puerto Rico.

Learning to Read... Again. When Santiago had a stroke in 2008, she lost the ability to comprehend English. She taught herself to read again over the course of 18 months using children's books, the same way she learned to read English the first time in *When I Was Puerto Rican*. Though not a complete anomaly, her recovery was notable enough to be featured in an issue of *Neurology Now*, a publication of the American Academy of Neurology.



PLOT SUMMARY

In the prologue, an adult Negi inspects guavas in a New York grocery store and tells the reader how to properly eat one. She says she had her last guava on the day she left Puerto Rico, and begins her story.

Negi's family comes to Macún, Puerto Rico when she's four years old. One day while Negi helps Papi rebuild the floor in their home, Mami notices that Negi and the board are covered in termites. Mami scrubs Negi clean and chastises her for helping Papi even though she told Negi not to. Negi desperately wants to be a jíbara (country people, usually of indigenous origin), though Mami tells Negi she can't be a jíbara because Negi was born in the city. Though Puerto Ricans celebrate jíbaro art and music, they look down on the jíbaro people themselves. Negi finds this hypocritical.

Mami soon gives birth to baby Héctor and Negi notices that her parents start fighting more. Papi leaves and is gone for days, and Mami accuses Papi of seeing other women. Negi learns that Papi has a daughter, Margie, with another woman. She's thrilled at the possibility of having an older sister, but Papi tells her that Margie's mother moved Margie to New York. Mami gets pregnant again, and Negi starts school.

One day, Mami moves Negi and her siblings to Santurce, a suburb of San Juan. Mami does this whenever she gets tired of Macún or Papi. In Santurce, Negi's classmates call her a jíbara as an insult, and Negi doesn't make any friends. Papi begins visiting around Christmas, though Mami mostly ignores him. Mami gives birth to Alicia, and not long after she forgives Papi and moves back to Macún with him. Negi is thrilled to be home again. She makes a friend, Juanita. Negi and Juanita often listen to Juanita's grandfather, Don Berto, tell them jíbaro stories. When Don Berto dies, Negi and Juanita lead the procession to the cemetery carrying a heavy wreath. The next day, Papi explains to Negi what a soul is and tells her that souls stay in a person's body until the person dies. Negi knows Papi is wrong, because her soul often walks beside her.

The following year, Mami has another baby, Edna, at the end of April. When it starts raining the week after, Mami tells her children to undress and play in the rain for good luck. Negi's new teacher, Miss Jiménez, tells the class that the new community center will be offering the children breakfast and

putting on a meeting where experts will talk to their mothers about proper hygiene and nutrition. Mami, Negi, and the children go to the meeting, and Negi is upset that Mami makes her watch her siblings outside instead of letting her attend the meeting. Several days later, Negi wakes up and finds a tapeworm wiggling in her panties. Mami gives all the children laxatives, figuring that they all have worms. The school starts a vaccination program and a classmate introduces Negi to the word "imperialist" and the insult "gringo." He tells her that politicians are offering breakfasts and vaccines so that the children's fathers will vote for them in the upcoming election. When Negi asks Papi about this, he explains the words to her but tells her to not use them. Negi doesn't like any of the breakfasts at the community center and finally reaches a breaking point when they serve peanut butter in warm milk. Negi gets sick for days and by the time she returns to school, the elections are over, along with the breakfasts.

One Sunday, Mami dresses Negi up and Papi takes her to Abuela's house to spend a week. They stop in a market to get food and Negi learns the word *jamona*, which means spinster. Papi assures Negi that she'll never be *jamona*. When he leaves Negi at Abuela's house, Negi realizes that Papi is using her as an excuse to see another woman, and she feels angry. That night she wonders if Papi doesn't truly love her family. She starts crying, but slams her fingers in a door so she won't have to explain her tears to Abuela. Abuela teaches Negi to crochet later that week, and Negi loves learning. On Sunday, Abuela takes Negi to church and tells her to think only good thoughts, which Negi struggles with. Negi waits all day for Papi to come and he never does. Mami, looking very pregnant and very sad, arrives several days later to get Negi. Negi decides it must hurt less to be *jamona* and alone forever than it does to be continually disappointed by a man.

Negi and her family weather Hurricane Santa Clara in a neighbor's house with their new baby brother, Raymond. The neighborhood experiences financial hardship after the hurricane, and Mami decides to get work in a **bra** factory. Gloria, a neighbor girl, helps care for Negi and her siblings, but then she elopes. While Mami is unable to work, she and Negi visit Doña Lola's house often, where Negi and Doña Lola's son, Tato, secretly look at each other's genitals. One day when Negi has had enough of their arrangement and pulls up her panties, Tato tries to grab her. Negi kicks him in the crotch. Mami drags Negi home and beats her with a frying pan. Gloria returns to Macún soon after, and Mami goes back to work. Gloria explains menstruation and where babies come from to Negi, and Negi is disturbed to learn about human sex.

Negi's family begins to attract negative attention because of Mami's job, and Papi dislikes the fact that Mami works. Mami insists that they need the money and soon asks Negi to take on more responsibility for caring for her siblings. Negi tries, but as a child herself she struggles to imitate her mother's authority.

During this time Negi envies her cousin Jenny, a spoiled only child. One day, Negi's sister Delsa comes home and says that Jenny is giving kids rides on her new bike. Negi runs to gather her siblings, but Jenny insists on giving little Raymond a ride. Negi is unable to control her siblings and goes home alone, though she runs back when she hears screams of pain and terror. Raymond and Jenny have fallen, and Raymond's foot got caught in the bike chain. Negi feels responsible, but is later furious when the adults blame Jenny. Not long after Raymond's accident, Mami moves the children back to Santurce, to a neighborhood called El Mangle.

El Mangle floats on a lagoon filled with sewage. Negi gets up the first morning and Mami shows her how to use the bathroom, which is nothing more than a hole cut into the floor. Negi panics when she tries to use this toilet and Mami and Doña Andrea, the woman they're staying with, laugh at Negi. Negi punches Mami for laughing. Mami eventually enrolls Negi in school. Negi hates her teacher, Señora Leona, because she's mean and insists on speaking only in Spanish. Señora Leona calls Negi jíbara as an insult.

One morning, Mami asks Negi to do something very special: close a dead baby's eyes. Negi hesitantly agrees. The experience is terrifying and Negi scrubs herself afterwards. A few days later, Negi and Señora Leona have an altercation in class, but Papi miraculously appears and saves Negi. Papi convinces Mami to move to an apartment in Santurce behind a bar. Raymond's foot refuses to heal, and Mami vows to find him a specialist. After Christmas, Mami takes Negi to Tío Lalo's house to stay for a while. At dinner, Negi learns that Mami is going to New York with Raymond to see a specialist. That night, Negi learns from her cousin Gladys that Negi will have to help peel potatoes for her uncle's famous stuffed potato balls. Negi peels potatoes every morning for the next several weeks until Mami returns. Soon after Mami returns, the family moves again and Negi expresses a desire to learn to play piano. Papi arranges for Negi to take lessons with Don Luis. Negi enjoys her lessons and the attention she receives from Don Luis until she realizes that he's trying to look down her blouse at her developing chest. The lessons stop immediately.

Titi Generosa comes to stay with the children, and Negi's siblings torment her. Papi finally takes Negi back to Tío Lalo's house. When Mami comes back from New York to get Negi, she tells Negi that she came home to find the house locked and the kids distributed among relatives. As Mami and Negi walk to the bus, men catcall Mami, and Negi is terrified and angry. Mami and Papi move together to a new house near a golf course. Negi gets her own room and spends her time listening to radio soap operas about kind men named **Ricardo or Armando**, and dreams about loving relationships as she watches her parents fight more and more. Negi's first crush, Johannes, comes to the house one day, but Negi thinks he doesn't compare to the men in her soap operas.

The week before Negi's 13th birthday, Papi tells her that Mami is going to move to New York. Mami confirms, and she and Papi have a horrible fight about the fact that Papi won't marry her. Mami packs her things and a month later, takes Negi, Raymond, and Edna with her to New York. They move into an apartment above Tata, Mami's mother. When Negi starts school, she negotiates with the guidance counselor to allow her to enter eighth grade if she can learn English by Christmas. Negi is perplexed by the social structure at the school: white Americans, Italians, Puerto Ricans, and black Americans fight each other constantly. After two months, Mami and Negi move to a larger apartment so the rest of Negi's siblings can come. Soon after they arrive, Negi starts her period and Mami buys her her first bra.

Mami falls in love with Francisco. Tata hates him, and Mami moves into her own apartment. One day, Negi sits in the window and a truck driver on the street starts masturbating and smiling at her. Negi is confused, especially when the man stops when Negi smiles at him. Mami gets pregnant around the same time Francisco is diagnosed with cancer, and he dies not long after their son is born. Around this time, Negi learns that Papi married someone else. She tries to disown Papi, but Mami won't let her. Chico, Tata's brother, pinches Negi's nipple one day and gives Negi a dollar. Negi buys her first sundae with it. When Mami gets laid off, she takes Negi with her to the welfare office to translate.

When Negi starts high school, she sees a guidance counselor and tells him she'd like to be an actress. He's unimpressed, but helps her prepare for her audition for the Performing Arts School in Manhattan. During her audition, Negi forgets a lot of her English and struggles through her monologue. She fears she'll never get out of Brooklyn.

In the epilogue, Negi returns to the Performing Arts High School ten years after graduation to see her mentor. Her mentor compliments Negi on her audition monologue, and Negi hopes that one day she'll be on the school bulletin board of successful former students.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Negi – The protagonist and narrator of the book. Negi's real name is Esmeralda; she was given “Negi” as a nickname as an infant because her skin was nearly black. She's the first child that Mami and Papi have together and is four years old when her memoir begins. As a young child, she wants desperately to be a jíbara (a country person, usually of indigenous origin) because she thinks the lifestyle is romantic, but Mami tells her she can't be a jíbara because she was born in the city. Negi is an extremely perceptive child and notices a number of inconsistencies between what she observes and what her

parents tell her is true, but she knows that Mami is always right and doesn't ask her questions. As the oldest, Negi gets the brunt of Mami's violence towards the children and, though she usually doesn't fight back, she believes the situation is very unfair and is often angry with Mami. She's a tomboy and loves playing outside with boys, which becomes problematic as she gets older and begins approaching puberty, but she rails against Mami's warnings to behave like a lady since she's "casi señorita" (almost a woman). When Mami gets a job, Negi is put in charge of watching her siblings. Because Negi is still a child herself, she's unable to accomplish her chores and keep her siblings out of trouble in Mami's absence, which makes Negi feel as though she's failing at being a woman. Because Mami moves the children between rural Macún and urban San Juan many times during Negi's childhood, Negi constantly has to "code switch" to try to fit into the culture of her current locale. As a preteen, Negi begins listening to **radio soap operas** that offer her an escape from her parents' worsening relationship and she begins to wonder what a real, loving relationship is like. She moves with Mami to Brooklyn at 13 and feels betrayed by Papi's unwillingness to fight for the family. Negi hates how urban and violent Brooklyn is and makes it her goal to get out, which she does by getting accepted to the Performing Arts High School in Manhattan. While living in Brooklyn, Negi also discovers that she's strong enough to resist Mami's physical violence, which puts an end to the regular abuse.

Mami – Mami is Negi's mother. She's a light-skinned woman and in Negi's perception, is always pregnant. By the end of the memoir, Mami has 11 children. Though she and Papi love each other and spend 14 years in an on-again off-again relationship, they're never married. During times when the fighting gets particularly bad or Papi is gone for long periods of time without explanation, Mami packs up her children and moves them to Santurce, where she has a vast web of family to call on for help. She loves Papi, but she also believes that he sees other women behind her back and believes that this is to be expected of men in general. She desperately wants to be self-sufficient and as such, she's one of the first mothers in Macún to get a job outside the home, sewing **bras** in a factory. Though this makes her days particularly long (she cooks breakfast and supper for her children in the morning before she leaves), she takes pride in her work and loves having a job. Despite the fact that she cares deeply for her children and makes sure they're fed, dressed, and in school, Mami is often violent and abusive towards them. She demands complete submission and administers beatings when the children fail to comply, though Negi suffers the most. Mami is, however, more reliable than Papi. When Papi refuses to marry Mami, Mami moves her children to Brooklyn and continues to work in bra factories. At this point, Negi realizes that Mami is the only family member she can count on to always be there for her. Mami fully believes that with hard work her children can get ahead, and she encourages them to do well in school so they can go to college.

Papi – Papi is Negi's father. Though he has a 14-year relationship with Mami, both Negi and Mami are aware that Papi sees other women behind Mami's back. He works in construction and often goes away for days at a time for work, though Mami suspects he also sees other women during these absences. He and Mami fight regularly and violently, but Papi always manages to make Mami forgive him and he always finds the family when Mami moves away without telling him where she's going. He carries a radio with him at all times and listens to jíbaro music and poetry, and he considers himself a poet. He's far more willing than Mami to humor Negi's incessant questions, so he explains things like souls and imperialism to her. Though Papi considers himself Catholic and is often called on to lead prayers, he tells Negi he's not a very good Catholic. Negi idolizes Papi when she's a child, but realizes as a preteen that he's unreliable and sometimes uses her as an excuse to see his other women. Negi sees it as the ultimate betrayal when Papi refuses to either marry Mami or fight to keep the family together, though Papi feels he's done his duty by legally recognizing each of his children with Mami. After Mami moves to Brooklyn, Papi scatters their remaining children among family members and marries another woman. Though Negi tries to sever contact with Papi when she learns about this, Mami insists she send Papi cards on holidays because he's still family.

Abuela – Abuela is Papi's mother and Negi's grandmother ("abuela" means grandmother in Spanish). She's an extremely religious woman and is very accomplished at crocheting. When Negi stays with Abuela, Abuela teaches her how to properly cross herself and how to crochet. Abuela is entirely aware that Papi sees other women besides Mami, and commiserates with Mami about him. Though Abuela is married to Abuelo, the two don't seem close.

Tata – Tata is Mami's mother. She lives in New York with her "friend," Don Julio, and her brother Chico. She's quite tall and is generally very kind and generous to Negi, Mami, and their family. For most of the year, Tata drinks beer and wine through the evening. Don Julio says that Tata's blood never "thickened," so in the winter she starts drinking early in the day. When she drinks she gets very nasty, though she's still able to cook for and feed Mami's children when she's drunk.

Delsa – Delsa is Mami and Papi's second child, and Negi's sister. She's exceptionally beautiful and Mami and Papi refer to her as Muñequita, or "little doll." Negi says that Delsa can make perfect beans by age nine, and when she arrives in Brooklyn at 11 years old, she already looks like a woman.

Doña Andrea – When Mami moves her family to El Mangle, she moves in with Doña Andrea. Doña Andrea looks like a witch and Raymond is scared of her. Negi hates that Doña Andrea laughed at her for being scared of the bathroom, but Doña Andrea is generally kind. She gives Mami food and cares for the children while she's at work.

Tío Lalo – Tío Lalo is Mami's uncle. He owns a shop that sells Puerto Rican street food and is famous for his stuffed potato balls. He makes his daughter Gladys peel potatoes and when Negi stays with him, he makes her help. Negi thinks that Tío Lalo purposefully humiliates her when she stays with his family.

Francisco – Francisco is Mami's boyfriend in Brooklyn. He's ten years younger than she is and Tata doesn't like him. Negi and her siblings, however, love him because he's kind to them and to Mami. He's diagnosed with cancer around the same time that Mami becomes pregnant, and he dies not long after Franky is born.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Norma – Norma is Mami and Papi's third child.

Héctor – Héctor is Mami and Papi's fourth child. He's born when Negi is four years old.

Alicia – Alicia is Mami and Papi's fifth child. She's born in Santruce while Mami and Papi are separated.

Edna – Edna is one of Negi's younger sisters and is Mami and Papi's sixth child.

Raymond – Raymond is Mami and Papi's seventh baby. As a child he gets his foot caught in a bike chain, which does permanent damage. Mami travels to New York with him to see a specialist.

Abuelo – Abuelo is Negi's paternal grandfather. He sells oranges from a cart. He sleeps separately from his wife, Abuela, in a sparsely furnished room.

Tato – Tato is Doña Lola's son. He's a year older than Negi, exceptionally dirty, and skilled at making and shooting slingshots. He and Negi inspect each other's genitals, but when Negi decides she's done, Tato tries to grab her.

Doña Lola – Doña Lola is one of Negi's neighbors in Macún and is Tato's mother. She and Mami are friends and they see each other often. Negi loves how Doña Lola speaks in confusing proverbs.

Juanita – Juanita is Negi's best friend in Macún when they're small children. She lives down the road from Negi's family, and they walk to and from school together.

Don Berto – Don Berto is Juanita's ancient grandfather. He spends his days sharpening his machete and tells Juanita and Negi jíbaro stories of talking animals and magical happenings. When he dies, Negi and Juanita lead the funeral procession.

Miss Jiménez – Miss Jiménez is an English teacher at Negi's school in Macún. Negi describes her as looking like a grown-up doll, and one of Negi's neighbors says that Miss Jiménez has the prettiest legs she's ever seen.

Gloria – Gloria is a young woman in Macún who cares for Negi and her siblings while Mami is at work. She explains to Negi what being “señorita” entails.

Provi – According to Mami, Provi is one of Papi's “putas” (whores). She and Papi have a daughter, Margie, who is a year older than Negi. Provi eventually moves with Margie to New York.

Margie – Margie is Papi and Provi's daughter, and she's a year older than Negi. Provi takes Margie with her to New York, and Negi never gets to meet her.

Tío Cucho – Tío Cucho is one of Negi's uncles in Santurce. He sees a woman named Rita, and Mami tells him he can't bring Rita to her house.

Rita – Rita is Tío Cucho's girlfriend. Negi suspects she's a “puta” because she wears hairspray, high heels, and low cut dresses. According to Mami and her friends, Rita has two sons that she leaves at home while she parties.

Doña Ana – Doña Ana is one of Negi's neighbors in Macún. She has the strongest house in the neighborhood, and the residents of the neighborhood weather hurricanes in her house. She is Gloria's mother.

Jenny – Jenny is Negi's cousin. She's an only child and is very spoiled, and Negi envies her. Jenny is responsible for Raymond's foot injury.

Senora Leona – Senora Leona is Negi's teacher in El Mangle. She insists on using Spanish only and is very mean. She regularly humiliates Negi and calls her a “jíbara” as an insult.

Gladys – Gladys is one of Mami's cousins, though she's Negi's age. She's tall with watery eyes, and Negi understands that Gladys will remain “jamona” (a spinster). Gladys resents her sister Angie because Angie is spoiled while Gladys is forced to peel potatoes and is beaten for talking back.

Angie – Angie is one of Mami's cousins, though she's Negi's age. Angie is spoiled by her parents, Tío Lalo and Angelina; they don't make her help peel potatoes like her sister Gladys. Her bedroom is pink and ruffled and she doesn't allow anyone else in it.

Angelina – Angelina is Mami's aunt. She and her husband, Tío Lalo, care for Negi while Mami is in New York. Negi thinks that Angelina is mousy and not a good cook. She's an Evangelical, though she doesn't try to convert Negi.

Don Luis – Don Luis is Negi's piano teacher and a school principal. He often compliments Negi on her clothing when she comes for lessons, though she realizes he likes particular tops because they allow him a view of her developing chest.

Titi Generosa – Titi Generosa stays with Negi and her siblings while Mami is in New York. The children call her Titi Avena (Auntie Oatmeal) behind her back because that's the only thing she cooks. Negi likes her because she has a foul mouth and believes whatever the children tell her.

Johannes Vélez – Johannes is Negi's first crush. His father is in the United States Navy.

Chico – Chico is Tata's brother. He doesn't live with Negi, Mami, and Tata, but he spends a lot of time at their house drinking. Though Mami deems him a harmless drunk, he asks Negi to take off her shirt for him and later pinches her nipple.

Don Julio – Don Julio is Tata's "friend." He sometimes lives with Tata, and they drink together in the afternoons.

Mr. Grant – Mr. Grant works in the office at Negi's first school in Brooklyn. He tries to assign Negi to seventh grade, but makes a deal with her that she can stay in eighth grade if she learns English by Christmas.

Miss Brown – Miss Brown is Negi's first teacher in Brooklyn. She teaches the class for students with learning disabilities. Negi loves her musical voice, and how she teaches English Composition as though everyone cares deeply about it.

Franky – The child of Mami and Francisco in Brooklyn. His father dies soon after he is born.

Mr. Barone – Mr. Barone is a guidance counselor at Negi's high school who helps her apply for the Performing Arts High School.

Negi's Mentor – Negi's mentor is one of the women who conducts Negi's audition for the Performing Arts High School. She's tall, elegant, and always seems to be trying to hide a smile.

Negi describes jíbaros as proud country people whose art, music, and image are celebrated throughout Puerto Rico. She notes that stories by and about jíbaros are required reading at every grade level in school, and Negi's family regularly listens to a radio program that plays jíbaro music and poetry. Mami, however, tells Negi that she absolutely cannot be a jíbara, since Negi was born in the city. But this isn't the only reason why Mami doesn't want Negi to identify as jíbara. Particularly once Mami moves the family to the city, Negi learns that though Puerto Rico celebrates jíbaro art forms, the jíbaro people themselves are ridiculed as being simple and unsophisticated by their city-dwelling counterparts. What Negi finds even more confusing than having her chosen identity thrown at her as an insult, however, is the fact that when her family lives in rural Macún, they *do* live like jíbaros, yet Mami insists that they reject the label. Negi is faced with the uncomfortable truth that the very identity she'd most like to assume is an identity that many, including her own mother, consider shameful and worthy of ridicule. This suggests early on that identity isn't as simple as choosing a label for oneself.

During Negi's school experiences, she constantly has to navigate a complex social pecking order that she struggles to figure out or struggles to fit into because it differs so greatly from the social structure at work in Negi's home. Because of this, Negi constantly has to code switch, or adopt different attitudes or ways of doing things depending on who she's around and what's expected of her. This often takes on a humorous bent, particularly when Negi is asked to participate in religious rituals or events despite the fact that Papi describes the family's religious identity as "Catholic, but not very good ones."

The necessity of code switching becomes even more pronounced when Negi moves to Brooklyn and has to navigate the even tenser social fabric of a public school made up of distinct ethnic groups, none of which offer her friendship or safety. In this environment, Negi isn't able to find her place or begin to construct a more useful and true identity until she's accepted to the Performing Arts High School in Manhattan. However, to get into the school, Negi's advisors force her to adopt an overly Americanized and English-speaking persona, one that her interviewers find absolutely hilarious. Even though Negi doesn't realize it at the time, the interviewers are in awe of the fact that Negi auditions with a barely-intelligible monologue about a middle-aged, possessive mother-in-law at the turn of the 20th century, which requires Negi to adopt a persona that's hilariously far away from Negi's true self. The fact that Negi is both willing and able to perform the monologue at all reveals her years of practice at code switching and assuming new identities.

In the epilogue, the reader learns that Negi went on to study at Harvard, while in the prologue, Negi laments the loss of her Puerto Rican identity as she studies guavas in the grocery



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.



IDENTITY

Negi is constantly questioning her identity, even before the move from Puerto Rico to Brooklyn causes her to have a full identity crisis. She

wonders how or where she fits into her world, since her world is constantly changing, undefined, or uncertain, and she struggles to construct her identity when parts of her identity are unreliable or don't make sense.

When Negi is seven or eight, she begins to question Papi about what a soul is, coming to the conclusion that her soul is the part of her that she often notices walking beside her or watching her during highly emotional events. These out of body experiences represent a physical manifestation of Negi's split identity. By conceptualizing her soul as something simultaneously separate from her body and a part of it, Negi is able to more productively consider the different states of being that make up her identity.

As a young child, Negi wants to be a jíbara when she grows up.

store. This juxtaposition of a major success with a sense of cultural loss suggests that even though Negi eventually experiences outward success, the process of constructing her identity is an ongoing and difficult one, and one that she'll struggle with continually as she seeks to reconcile her childhood desire to be a jibara with her American educational successes as an adult.



COMING OF AGE

When I Was Puerto Rican follows Negi from age 4 to 14, from early childhood to the beginnings of puberty. As the oldest sibling, Negi is required by

Mami to grow up and mature much faster than her younger siblings, male or female. Because of this, Negi is acutely aware of how she mentally and emotionally develops. Her family members, however, seem to care little for Negi's emotional development and instead fixate on Negi's developing body and physical passage from child to woman. Though Negi is certainly interested in and perplexed by her changing body, she sees Mami's consistent refrains to sit with her legs closed as reductive and not useful in light of the very intense emotional coming of age that Negi undergoes.

Once Mami gets a job, Negi—as the oldest child—is tasked with caring for her siblings after school. Negi struggles with this responsibility, partially because she herself is still a child—she's around nine years old when Mami first gets a job. She's also aware of the gross unfairness that her younger siblings are allowed to act like children, while Negi must act like a much older person in order to carry out Mami's instructions and "parent" her siblings. As a result of being forced to take on an adult role so young, Negi cannot have the dependent relationship to Mami that her younger siblings do. Because she sees how hard Mami works for her family, Negi feels that it's her responsibility to not need things, even when her requests are as simple as attention or kindness. This attitude kindles an early sense of independence in Negi, though it also makes her feel unmoored and distant from the person who is supposedly raising her. Notably too, Negi experiences these realizations fully on her own, as she's unable to talk to Mami about any of them. This contrasts greatly with her physical coming of age, which is the subject of much conversation among Negi's family members.

Negi's physical coming of age is a much more public process than her internal, emotional coming of age. Beginning when she's around ten years old, adults begin to remind her that she's "casi señorita," or quickly approaching womanhood, as represented by beginning to menstruate. Negi's family watches her closely as she matures until she finally does begin menstruating at age 14. Though the adults in Negi's life make a major fuss out of Negi's impending señorita status, when Negi finally does start her period, it's a surprisingly anticlimactic event. Mami shows Negi where she keeps her Kotex hidden

and agrees to get Negi a **bra**, but keeps her excitement mostly between herself and Tata. This suggests that the physical markers of adulthood that Negi experiences are far less important to Negi than they are to her family, drawing an even more distinct boundary between physical and emotional coming of age.

Negi's true coming of age happens in several events: first, when she realizes she's strong enough to escape Mami's physical abuse, and then when she gets accepted to the Performing Arts High School in Manhattan, thereby accomplishing her goal of getting out of Brooklyn. These events are moments in Negi's life when she gains a degree of independence and for the first time in her life, gets to dictate the course of her future, set her own goals, and work to accomplish them.



WOMEN, SEX, AND POWER

Though much of Negi's coming of age is linked to her physical development and the responsibilities she's asked to shoulder since she's the oldest child,

Negi's developing understanding of sex and the female experience deserves special consideration. Her world is one in which there are clear differences between men and women, and also between the roles they're expected to play in society. She's also acutely aware that there's a double standard when it comes to sex, and that sex is, more than anything, a power struggle between men and women.

Negi learns at a young age that there's only one type of man: the *sinverguenza*, or shameless sexual being. Women, however, are divided into several categories: long-suffering wives, future wives, *jamona* (spinster), and the scorned "putas" (whores, either in the literal sense of prostitution or as used in the derogatory sense). Though Papi is regularly referred to as a *sinverguenza*, it isn't until Negi is much older that she has any real problem with his constant absences to see other women. Further, as a young child, Negi is led to believe that her neighborhood is made up of only wives and future wives—she's told that Macún has no putas, though this is almost certainly not the case. As a result, Negi nurses a secret desire to see a puta in real life so she can understand better how their power over men works. She's led to believe that "bad" women have a vast amount of power over men, while women like Mami and her other adult female neighbors are helpless to keep their husbands from leaving them for these other women.

As Negi gets older, she naturally becomes very curious about sex and has her first sexual experiences with a neighbor boy, Tato. Though Negi and Tato initially consensually engage in viewing each other's genitals, when Negi decides she's had enough, Tato tries to forcibly touch her. This is the first time that Negi is made personally aware of the power dynamic involved in sexual relationships. It's made very clear to her that as a female, she has something that men want, and she's responsible for keeping it from them. This lesson continues

when Gloria, the neighbor woman who cares for Negi and her siblings, explains menstruation and where babies come from. Though Negi had seen animals have sex and give birth before, she'd never connected what she'd seen to the possibility of human sex. Notably, when Negi makes this connection, she phrases it in terms of power: in her understanding, sex is something that men do to women, not something that men and women agree to. Not long after making this connection, Negi begins to feel less warmly towards Papi. Though she was previously able to love her father despite knowing he's a *sinverguenza*, her new understanding of sex makes it difficult for her to see him as a loving person when she thinks she understands what goes on in private between her parents (it's important to note, however, that though Negi's understanding of sex is connected to power and fear, there's never any indication that Papi and Mami's sexual relationship is anything but consensual).

What follows throughout the rest of the memoir are highly uncomfortable sexual experiences in which Negi is catcalled, groped, or otherwise made to feel uncomfortable by the men around her. She struggles to reconcile her changing pubescent body with the unwanted male attention she receives because of it. What Negi deems her first true sexual experience is extremely confusing for her, and rightly so: she did nothing to attract the attention of a man sitting in a truck watching her and masturbating, yet Negi understands that he seemed to enjoy the experience anyway. This final sexual experience of the memoir leaves Negi's sexual development in a precarious place, as she struggles to understand how she can protect her body from men who want to use her body for their own pleasure, even when there's a great deal of physical distance between them. This offers the final, chilling note that Negi isn't really in control of her sexual body. Though Negi knows that she does have the power to seduce men, at least in theory, she understands that her power is minimal compared to that of the men around her.



FAMILY

When I Was Puerto Rican is a study of family dynamics, structure, and culture. Negi's family, both nuclear and extended, is large, ever-changing, and

at times fiercely loyal. However, family isn't always perfectly defined or straightforward: particularly during times when Negi lives with various extended family members, she struggles to understand what it really means to be family, and seeks to define what family means for herself. In this way, Negi questions who's family, who isn't, and who's technically family but doesn't act like a family member should.

Mami is one of 15 siblings, and it's never stated how many siblings Papi has. This creates a vast web of aunts, cousins, and grandparents for Mami to call on when she needs help or is attempting to escape Papi. Negi notes that she barely knows

most of these aunts or female cousins, yet they're always there to help Mami when she needs it. They treat Negi and her siblings as though they've known each other forever, and Mami's mother in New York sends regular packages of money and outgrown clothes from Mami's cousins. This gives Negi the security of a reliable extended family; they're always willing to take in Mami and the children, or just the children, as needed.

Over the course of the memoir, Negi is offered a variety of conflicting narratives regarding what's to be expected of a man in family life. She listens to Mami discuss with her friends that they fully expect their husbands to be unfaithful, even though it's always a surprise when their husbands or partners indeed act unfaithfully on a regular basis. These constant betrayals, however, don't stop Mami from dutifully preparing supper for Papi every night during his absences, on the off chance he comes home. When Papi is home, he and Mami seem both intimately close to each other and as though they hate each other in turn, sometimes within the span of a single day. Eventually, Negi witnesses her parents' most brutal fight, which comes about because Mami has decided to move her children to New York, since Papi refuses to marry her. As Negi watches the fight unfold, she realizes that Papi believes that family is mostly symbolic. His reason for not wanting to marry Mami is that he's already legally claimed every one of his and Mami's children, and they all have his surname. He insists that he's always provided enough money for food for their children, but Mami insists that a surname and money for food isn't enough. She craves the legitimacy that comes from a marriage license, and the fidelity that Papi has denied her for the entirety of their 14-year relationship.

This fight defines Negi's relationship to her family. She comes to see her mother as fully in the right, particularly when Papi shows so little remorse as he drives Mami, Negi, and two of her younger siblings to the airport. She feels even more betrayed when she finds out that Papi distributed Negi's remaining siblings among family members and married another woman following Mami's departure. Negi sees his unwillingness to keep their family together as the ultimate betrayal, one that suggests that for Negi and Mami at least, the true meaning of family is tied closely to reliability and fidelity.



ROMANTIC LOVE AND RELATIONSHIPS

Negi's interest in and interpretation of love and relationships changes over the course of the memoir. As a child, Negi believes that her parents' relationship is normal; she's raised to believe that all men are indiscriminately sexual and therefore have affairs. However, as Mami and Papi's relationship grows more fraught as a result of Papi's continued infidelity, Negi begins to escape the unpleasantness of watching her parents fight by daydreaming about fantasy boyfriends and lovers. She finds herself caught between the extremes of her family and her fantasies, and

because of this, she struggles to form her own understanding of what love is and what makes a good or bad relationship.

As a child, Negi is attuned to the ups and downs of her parents' relationship. Though oftentimes Papi lives with the family and there seems to be genuine warmth between him and Mami, at other times their days are marked by verbally violent fighting and days-long absences in which Papi is assumed to be with another woman. This creates a situation in which there's certainly love between Papi and the rest of his family, but his love is wholly unreliable. Though Mami's love for her children often turns to physical violence or verbal abuse, she does the work that Papi won't: she genuinely cares for the wellbeing of her children and makes sure that they're fed, clothed, and attending school on a regular basis.

As Negi enters puberty and Mami and Papi's relationship worsens and grows more verbally violent, Negi escapes into a fantasy world influenced by the overwhelmingly romantic jíbara music and soap opera programs she hears on the radio, as well as romance novels. These media representations introduce Negi to the possibility that two people can speak to each other kindly and "touch each other gently," something she sees very little of between her parents growing up. As a preteen, the radio introduces her to "**Armandos**" and "**Ricardos**," Prince Charming figures who sweep women off their feet and whisper kind, loving words to their girlfriends. In Negi's imagination, the Armando or Ricardo du jour is not a sinvergüenza, and she craves a relationship of her own with a real version of the fictional Armando or Ricardo.

In contrast to these idealized romances, Negi also learns that it's possible for a woman to be jamona, which translates to "spinster." Though Papi insists that Negi will never become jamona, Negi later decides that being alone must be better than crying over men who are expected to disappoint the women in their lives. Though *When I Was Puerto Rican* comes to no clear conclusions about true love or what makes a truly good and healthy relationship, Negi's adolescent daydreams suggest that she does at the very least aspire to a relationship that's more loving and reliable than what she witnessed of her parents' relationship. Further, her realization that being jamona is better than being abused suggests that Negi realizes the only person she can rely on to love her, care for her, and never leave her is herself.

becomes increasingly curious about what loving and healthy relationships look like, since Mami and Papi's relationship becomes increasingly fraught during this time. At this same time Negi spends her afternoons listening to soap operas on the radio. These soap operas offer convoluted storylines of women with beautiful names and men named "Armando" or "Ricardo," and they introduce Negi to the idea that it is possible for men and women to interact kindly, romantically, and lovingly with each other. Armando and Ricardo in particular become symbols for what Negi wishes Papi could be to Mami, as well as for what Negi hopes to someday experience herself.



BRAS

Mami is one of the first women in Macún to get a job outside the home. She begins as a thread cutter in a bra factory and moves up quickly to sewing the bras. Sewing bras gives Mami pride and purpose, and most importantly, it allows her to be self-sufficient. In Brooklyn, Mami continues to sew bras in order to remain independent and care for her family. When Negi gets her first bra after starting her period, it represents the same thing that sewing bras does for Mami. It represents Negi's passage into adulthood, her growing independence, and the possibility for self-sufficiency in the future.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Da Capo Press edition of *When I Was Puerto Rican* published in 2006.

1. Jíbara Quotes

●● Even at the tender age when I didn't yet know my real name, I was puzzled by the hypocrisy of celebrating a people everyone looked down on. But there was no arguing with Mami, who, in those days, was always right.

Related Characters: Negi (speaker), Mami

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Negi explains to the reader her childhood confusion at the disconnect between how jíbaros are thought of and treated: their art is revered, while the people themselves are treated as less than. Negi's struggle to understand the role of the jíbaro in Puerto Rican society mirrors her own journey to



SYMBOLS

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



ARMANDO AND RICARDO

Particularly once Negi reaches age 12, she

figure out her personal identity. Though Negi longs to be a jíbara, Mami tells her she can't be one. This leaves Negi wanting desperately to spend her time in rural settings and hating city life, while her family (Mami in particular) makes her exist at various points in cities. Essentially, Negi is never afforded the opportunity to know exactly who and what she is because the one thing she wants to be is something that is looked down upon on a societal level.

This also sets up the relationship between Mami and Negi as one in which Mami is entirely powerful, while Negi must agree to go along with Mami's thoughts and desires or suffer the consequences. This too will influence Negi's coming of age as she struggles to differentiate her personal identity from the identity Mami would like Negi to assume.

☝ "Does anyone call Titi Merín Esmeralda?"
"Oh, sure. People who don't know her well—the government, her boss. We all have our official names, and then our nicknames, which are like secrets that only the people who love us use."

Related Characters: Negi (speaker), Mami

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Negi has just learned that her real name is Esmeralda, while Negi is a nickname. Mami explains how nicknames function in their family culture, which greatly confuses Negi. The idea that each person has two names continues to develop the idea that Negi's identity isn't entirely straightforward; she has to reckon, at four years old, with the knowledge that she has two names, one of which she'll only ever hear from people who don't love her. This suggests that Negi's identity is made up of two opposing parts, which is later crystallized when Negi learns about her soul. Though Papi tells Negi that a person's soul stays inside a person until they die, Negi knows that her soul travels outside her body and represents the free-spirited, jíbara part of her identity. It's also the part of Negi's identity that loves and is loved, and is therefore the part that truly goes by the name Negi, while her body suffers the restrictions of being Esmeralda.

☝ Doña Zena dragged Delsa and Norma into her yard, while I straggled behind, fretting about what had just happened, jealous that, even though my lap had been stolen years ago by Delsa and then Norma, another baby was coming to separate me further from my mother, whose rages were not half so frightening as the worry that she would now be so busy with an infant as to totally forget me.

Related Characters: Negi (speaker), Héctor, Norma, Delsa, Mami

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Negi's neighbors lead Negi and her sisters away from the house while Mami gives birth to Héctor. As Negi frets, the reader realizes that though Negi spends much of the novel terrified of her mother, what she truly craves is her mother's love and attention. In Negi's eyes, Mami is a seriously flawed character; though Mami makes sure her children are fed and clothed, she's often quite violent when the children don't behave appropriately. As Mami has more children, gets a job, and spends weeks in New York, Negi must grapple with the knowledge that even though Mami loves her, Negi is in many ways correct that Mami is incapable of loving Negi the way Negi craves to be loved. Part of Negi's struggle to discover her identity and her place in her family, then, is contingent on figuring out where she fits into Mami's life and wondering if Mami's love is even real if it's not the specific type of love that Negi wants.

2. Fighting Naked Quotes

☝ An older sister! I'd wondered what it would be like not to be the oldest, the one who set an example for the little ones.

Related Characters: Negi (speaker), Margie, Papi

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

Papi explains to Negi that she has an older sister: Margie, who lives in Santurce and has a different mother. Though Negi is initially hurt when she learns that she shares Papi with another sibling, she's delighted when she gets wind of the possibility of not being the oldest. This shows that Negi is pushed very much to identify with the fact that she's the

oldest and must therefore behave perfectly. Because of this, Mami and Papi set very high expectations for Negi that she often struggles to meet. When Negi dreams about having an older sister, it shows that what she'd very much like is the opportunity to be a child like her younger siblings get to be, rather than be forced to mature long before she's ready.

☛ Chief among the sins of men was the other woman, who was always a puta, a whore. My image of these women was fuzzy, since there were none in Macún, where all the females were wives or young girls who would one day be wives.

Related Characters: Negi (speaker), Provi, Mami, Papi

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

Negi explains to the reader how she was taught to think of Papi's "other women" and the demographic makeup of women in Macún when she was a child. Negi's explanation does several things. First, it suggests outright that men are nearly always expected to not be faithful to their wives. This sets up a system in which male infidelity is almost encouraged, as the women that Negi learns this belief from feel there's no way to make their husbands stop looking outside their primary relationships for sexual fulfillment. This gives men a great deal of power, as there are few real consequences for simply playing the role society sets out for them.

Then, Negi asserts that the "other woman" is always a whore, and that none of those women live in her neighborhood. The idea that the other woman is a whore creates conflict between women and allows Negi's mother and her neighbors to effectively "other" and look down upon the other women their husbands see. Negi's belief that none of the putas live in Macún is indicative of Negi's youth and naïveté, as it's almost certain that this is an incorrect assumption. This is complicated even further by the later realization that Negi's parents aren't married, though they've been together 14 years. This suggests that it's possible that another of Papi's lovers might have referred to Mami as a puta. This possibility is given even more credence later in the memoir when Negi learns that Papi married another woman after Mami's departure from Puerto Rico. Though Negi never confirms or denies the particulars of Papi's relationships with Mami or other women, she at the very least leaves it open for the reader to consider whether or not Mami was possibly not Papi's

primary lover, but herself an "other woman."

3. Someone is Coming to Take Your Lap Quotes

☛ In Santurce a jíbara was something no one wanted to be. I walked to and from school by myself, watching the jíbara girl with eyes cast down...

Related Characters: Negi (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

After Mami moves her children to urban Santurce, Negi realizes that she's actually far more provincial than she previously thought, and is very much seen as a jíbara despite Mami's insistence that Negi not aspire to be one. When Negi speaks about walking "by" (beside) and watching herself, it develops the idea that Negi's identity is made up of two parts. This becomes a physical representation of Negi's split identity and her struggle to reconcile the jíbara with what her parents would like her to be. Further, though Negi's overwhelmingly friendless state throughout the memoir is heartbreaking, it also begins to allude to the idea that Negi can really only rely on herself.

☛ The doubt in his voice let me know that I knew something he didn't, because my soul traveled all the time, and it appeared that his never did. Now I knew what happened to me when I walked beside myself. It was my soul wandering.

Related Characters: Negi (speaker), Papi

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

As Negi and Papi walk to Don Berto's novena, Negi asks Papi whether a person's soul ever leaves their body. Papi's answer allows Negi to understand how her split identity functions: she can walk beside herself during highly emotional events, or sometimes send her soul away when she wants to escape something. This new understanding provides her a framework for her to continue developing the different aspects of her identity as she grows up. In particular, Negi's soul is representative of the part of Negi

that's wild and wants desperately to be a jíbara, while her physical body is often subjected to abuse and at times, crushing city life. Further, this gives her a sense of power and agency over Papi, which isn't something she's used to—he is clearly unsure about souls, while Negi feels secure in her knowledge of her soul's nature and actions.

5. Why Women Remain Jamona Quotes

☝ "What do they call a man who never marries?" I asked as we settled ourselves in the front of the publico. "Lucky," the driver said, and the rest of the passengers laughed, which made me mad, because it felt as if he were insulting me in the worst possible way.

Related Characters: Negi (speaker), Papi

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

As Negi and Papi travel to Abuela's home, Negi learns that an unmarried woman is called jamona (spinster), while unmarried men are considered lucky. Negi is angry because even if she doesn't fully grasp the nuance of this, she's well aware that there's a glaring double standard at play. This is indicative of the general power dynamic between men and women in Negi's world. Negi believes that women neatly shake out into categories of wives, future wives, putas, and now jamona, while men are all sinverguëznas and are lucky to remain unmarried. This breakdown shows that a woman's worth is dependent on her relationship to a man (wives are of a higher social standing than the putas), even though the driver's reaction here shows that men don't necessarily speak as though they want to truly associate and have partnerships with women in a legal capacity.

☝ I wondered if Mami felt the way I was feeling at this moment on those nights when she slept on their bed alone...whether the soft moans I heard coming from their side of the room were stifled sobs, like the ones that now pressed against my throat...

Related Characters: Negi (speaker), Abuela, Mami, Papi

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

Negi is at Abuela's house and Papi didn't show up to retrieve her when he said he would. Negi feels extremely betrayed here, and in this betrayal feels much closer to Mami. This begins the process of Negi slowly refocusing her love and attention from Papi to Mami. Though she idolizes Papi when she's a young child and seems to simultaneously fear Mami and desire her attention, when Papi begins to regularly disappoint Negi she refocuses her attentions on Mami. This happens because for the first time, Negi can truly empathize with Mami, since Papi begins more pointedly neglecting Negi and her siblings. As Negi begins to humanize Mami and see that Mami is in constant pain because of Papi's unreliable nature, she learns that the true meaning of family is linked closely to being able to truly rely on family members.

☝ It seemed to me then that remaining jamona could not possibly hurt this much. That a woman alone, even if ugly, could not suffer as much as my beautiful mother did.

Related Characters: Negi (speaker), Abuela, Mami, Papi

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

When Mami finally comes to fetch Negi from Abuela's house, Negi hears Mami and Abuela talking sadly about Papi's unreliability, and Negi decides that it's better to be alone than to cry over a man. Negi begins to understand that women don't really have many options when it comes to their future, but Negi is aware that she can choose to allow a man into her life or not. This belief is a direct result of Negi's process of learning to see Mami as a rounded individual who suffers a great deal when Papi proves himself to be unreliable. This in turn leads Negi to the understanding that she can only count on herself to be there 100% of the time, and she certainly can't count on Papi.

6. Mami Gets a Job Quotes

☝ But until Gloria asked, I'd never put it together that in order for me and my four sisters and two brothers to be born, Papi had to do to Mami what roosters did to hens, bulls did to cows, horses did to mares.

Related Characters: Negi (speaker), Gloria, Papi, Mami

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

Gloria has just explained menstruation to Negi and then asked Negi if she knows where babies come from. Most important here is the power dynamic that Negi introduces with the specific language she uses to describe sex. She conceptualizes sex as something that men *do* to women, not something that men and women consensually and equally engage in together. In this conceptualization, this turns men into aggressors and women into either victims or passive beings who accept men's sexual advances. This creates a great deal of anxiety around sex for Negi, as she believes she has little control over her sexuality and her body. It makes her feel powerless. In many ways, this realization also leads Negi to further reject Papi's role in her life, as it's highly uncomfortable for her to think of her father in this very aggressive and dominant role.

☝ "I can't count on anyone from outside the family. Besides, you're old enough to be more responsible." And with those words Mami sealed a pact she had designed, written, and signed for me.

Related Characters: Negi, Mami (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

When Mami gets a job, the neighbors treat her as though she's violating every code of conduct. Mami then turns to Negi to take care of her siblings, instead of asking a neighbor to help out as Mami had done previously. Mami's assertion that she can't count on individuals outside the family to help continues to develop the memoir's

conception of family and what qualities make a family member a good one. This suggests that the idea of family is tied to helpful action; family means doing things that help and support the family, not just calling oneself "family."

Part of the reasoning behind Mami's decision certainly has to do with the way her community rejects her after she gets a job, but it's also tied to Mami's desire for Negi to grow up and begin acting more like an adult long before she feels she's ready to do so.

☝ What makes them so good and me so bad?

Related Characters: Negi (speaker), Mami

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

Following Mami's employment, she puts Negi in charge of watching her siblings after school and asks her to do a number of household chores. Negi struggles to meet Mami's demands, as she's still a child at ten years old. However, Negi also watches her siblings behave and help out: Norma can make perfect rice, and Héctor changes out of his school uniform without being asked. They perform these tasks well, while Negi struggles to accomplish all the household duties that Mami sets out for her, and Negi is the only child who receives punishment for failing. What Negi is unable to see, however, is that what Mami is asking her to do is far above her maturity level as a child. She doesn't yet have the emotional maturity or the leadership skills to perform the role of an adult and essentially "parent" six young children. This shows that though Mami thinks highly of Negi by assigning these tasks in the first place, Negi hasn't yet come of age enough to be truly successful at them. This mismatch of maturity level and task assignment has disastrous effects, as it encourages Negi to consider herself a bad person even though it's not her fault.

9. Casi Señorita Quotes

☝ She was overwhelmed by what she called "the sacrifices I have to endure for you kids," and my love, expressed in demands, added a greater burden.

Related Characters: Negi (speaker), Abuela, Mami

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis

Negi learns from Abuela that Mami will be returning to New York. Negi feels that it would be cruel and too demanding to tell Mami that she doesn't like it when Mami leaves. Even though Negi is still very much a child, she's doing a lot of work to protect Mami from any burden she can by not asking her to worry about Negi's emotional wellbeing. This does, however, make Negi feel alone and unsupported, as she feels guilty for demanding any more attention than absolutely necessary. This shows that Negi is learning to protect her family, and Mami specifically, by removing difficult emotional questions. At the same time, however, Negi's relationship with Mami is made worse because she can't offer Negi a safe place to ask for love. This forces Negi into early independence and coming of age.

10. Dreams of a Better Life Quotes

☝ Each man who did a double take or pledged to love her forever, to take her home with him, to give his life for her, took her away from me. She had become public property—no longer the mother of seven children, but a woman desired by many.

Related Characters: Negi (speaker), Mami

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

As Mami walks with Negi after picking her up from Tío Lalo's house, Negi watches in fear and awe as men catcall Mami while they walk. This is the first time that Negi sees men behave this way towards her mother, and it drives home the fact that Mami is still a desirable sexual being in the eyes of men. This also shows Negi that women's bodies aren't seen as their own if men desire them, which continues to develop Negi's sense that sex is something dangerous and not consensual. Negi is aware that the men who try to pledge their love to Mami have the power to wreak havoc on her family. This suggests that Negi fears that sex and male desire are potentially more powerful than familial ties.

☝ The women suffered. Frequently they were orphaned, brought up by nuns or stepmothers who made them do all the housework. In spite of this, they were cheerful and optimistic, never doubting that if they were pure of heart, life would eventually get better.

Related Characters: Negi (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

Negi tells the reader about the radio soap operas she listens to after school. Through listening to the convoluted and romantic shows, Negi begins to imagine a future for herself, as well as a relationship for herself, that's very different than what she's seen from her parents. This is a crucial part of Negi's developing identity, as she acquires a lens to help her make sense of the suffering that she herself has experienced throughout her life. Even if she's listening to fairy tales with little grounding in reality, they offer her an escape from her confusing everyday life and provide a basic roadmap for how to construct her identity going forward. They also give her something to aspire to, and suggest that if she keeps her hopes up, she too can someday have happiness.

☝ I called up the images of Armando or Ricardo, and with Mami and Papi's shrill fights as background, I imagined a man and woman touching one another gently, discovering beauty in a stubbled cheek or a curl of hair, whispering adoring words into each other's ear, warming one another's bodies with love.

Related Characters: Negi (speaker), Papi, Mami

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

Negi listens to her parents fight and imagines a very different kind of relationship to mentally escape the anger in her house. This shows how Negi uses what she learns

from the radio soap operas to develop an idea of what she'd like her own relationships to look like one day. She realizes now that Mami and Papi's relationship isn't something to aspire to, and isn't normal in the sense that it's positive. The radio soap operas, and particularly the romantic Armando and Ricardo characters, have taught her that not all men are *sinverguëznas*; some men treat women kindly and respectfully. This particular realization is one of the major factors in the deterioration of Negi and Papi's relationship. Though Negi certainly still loves her father, she realizes that there are other men in the world who aren't *sinverguëznas*, and this realization is another sign of Negi's coming of age and growing independence.

☝ Is that what you want? Marriage? What would that do? I've recognized them all. They all have my last name...

Related Characters: Papi (speaker), Negi, Mami

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

Negi watches Mami and Papi's final blowout fight, which is mostly about the fact that Papi refuses to marry Mami. Papi's statement here shows that his idea of family rests on the idea that family is symbolic more than anything. He believes that he's done his duty as a father by giving Mami's children his last name. Though this is certainly part of being a parent, Papi doesn't understand that what Mami (and Negi) need is for him to actual perform familial duty by showing up and supporting them when they need him. For them, family is more than a name; it's the knowledge that they can count on him and trust him to care for them.

☝ It didn't seem possible that he was a good man when he wasn't fighting for her or for us. He was letting us go to New York as if it no longer mattered where we were, as if the many leavings and reconciliations had exhausted him, had burned out whatever spark had made him search for us in swamps and fetid lagoons.

Related Characters: Negi (speaker), Papi, Mami

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

Following Mami's decision to move her children to Brooklyn, Negi struggles to understand how Mami can still call Papi a good man when he isn't actively trying to convince her to stay. For Negi's entire life, Papi has come to find Mami and convinced her to forgive him, time and again. Negi saw this as proof that her parents loved each other and proof that Papi cared for them since he continued to search for them. Seeing that Papi is giving up on this endeavor is thus a shock for Negi, and one that forces her to confront the fact that the man she once idolized perhaps isn't a "good man" at all. Also, Papi doesn't fight for Mami at this point in part because both of them realize that they define marriage and family in different and irreconcilable ways. This is somewhat out of Negi's realm of understanding as a 13-year-old, which shows that while she's certainly growing up, she's not there yet.

11. Angels on the Ceiling Quotes

☝ I hadn't done any of the things women did to get men interested. I'd been minding my own business at home...It was alarming, and at once I realized why Mami always told me to be *más disimulada* when I stared at people, which meant that I should pretend I wasn't interested.

Related Characters: Negi (speaker), Mami

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 239

Explanation and Analysis

Negi has just had what she considers to be her first sexual experience, in which a man in a delivery truck masturbated and smiled at her sitting in her apartment window. This is wholly confusing for Negi, as she notes that she didn't do anything to let the man know she was interested (though it should be noted she wasn't; this is a terrifying and unwanted experience for her). The experience is as alarming as it is because it reinforces Negi's suspicions that men are extremely powerful in a sexual sense. This teaches her that they have the power to use her body sexually whether she consents or not; indeed, they can use her for their own sexual pleasure whether she's even in close proximity to them or not.

☝ Men only want one thing, and until then, I thought it was up to me to give it up. But that's not the way it was.

Related Characters: Negi (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 240

Explanation and Analysis

Negi continues to question the how and the why behind her first sexual experience, in which a man sitting in a delivery truck masturbates and smiles at Negi as she sits looking out an apartment window. Here, Negi comes to the conclusion that she's not in control of how men see or use her body in a sexual sense. Prior to this, Negi believed that she had some degree of control over how men saw or used her body. She believed she had the power to say no, and further, that she'd get the opportunity to do so. This event crystallizes that at times, she won't have the power or opportunity to say no. This creates a great deal of fear for Negi, particularly as she hears stories of women who are raped and murdered regularly in her neighborhood. It makes her feel especially unsafe and ungrounded in Brooklyn, and as a woman in general.

Francisco's untimely death made him unreliable as well, though he was exceptionally kind to the family when he was alive. The fact that this realization comes from Negi shows that she's redefining her idea of family after seeing these other family members abandon Mami and her siblings. What truly matters to family is that a person is trustworthy, reliable, and most of all, present.

☝ But more and more I suspected Mami's optimism was a front. No one, I thought, could get beat down so many times and still come up smiling.

Related Characters: Negi (speaker), Mami

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 247

Explanation and Analysis

Though Mami is still excited to discover all the opportunities available to her and to her children in New York, Negi wonders whether Mami is just pretending in order to keep her children's morale up. Negi's suspicion shows that she's developing a view of Mami that treats Mami as more human and less superhuman. It allows Mami to have fears and, potentially, to tell lies. This ties into Negi's own coming of age, as much of the growing up that Negi does in New York is connected to her realization that Mami is indeed a flawed and vulnerable human being.

However, it's important to note that if Mami is indeed lying, it's to keep her family together and moving forward with hope for the future. This shows that even if Mami is disillusioned with what New York holds for her family, she's unwilling to give up and allow them to suffer. She believes fully in the possibility for her children to have a better life, and though Negi never confirms whether Mami is lying or not, if she is, it's to help her children survive.

☝ "Hit me, go ahead. You can kill me if that makes you feel better," I screamed loud enough for the world to hear. I stood in front of her, shaking all over, hands at my sides, martyrlike, fully aware of the dramatic moment that might backfire but willing to take the chance.

Related Characters: Negi (speaker), Tata, Mami

Related Themes:    

12. You Don't Want to Know Quotes

☝ Mami became, even more than before, both mother and father to us. We could count on her in a way we had never been able to count on Papi, Tata, or Francisco, who had made everyone happy for such a short time before dying and becoming a ghost that haunted us all for the rest of our lives.

Related Characters: Negi (speaker), Francisco, Tata, Papi, Mami

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 245

Explanation and Analysis

Following Francisco's death, Mami takes on the role of primary parent to her children more than ever. When Negi makes this realization, she realizes that Mami was right years ago when she said that family is all she can rely on. This, however, shows that the different definitions of family offer different levels of reliability. Papi has proven himself unreliable since refusing to fight to keep the family together, and insisting that all he has to do to be a good father is legally recognize his children and provide grocery money. Though Tata cares for Negi and her siblings, she's often drunk and certainly doesn't respect Mami's decisions.

Page Number: 245

Explanation and Analysis

Negi has just arrived home from the library and Mami accuses her of misbehaving and attempts to hit Negi. Negi takes a major chance by inviting Mami's violence and banking on the hope that Mami will back down now that Negi is strong enough to fight back.

This is the moment that truly signals Negi's coming of age. It puts an end to the violence that Negi experiences from Mami throughout her life and it begins a new chapter for Negi. She asserts her independence from Mami when she forces Mami to confront her as a near equal and not a subordinate child. It has lasting results, too—Mami doesn't hit Negi again after this point.

13. A Shot At It Quotes

☝☝ "We don't have time to study the meaning of every word," Mr. Gatti said. Just make sure you pronounce every word correctly."

Related Characters: Negi

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 261

Explanation and Analysis

Several teachers at Negi's school help her prepare her monologue for her audition at the Performing Arts High School. They select a monologue for Negi that is so far away from Negi's true identity that it's funny: her character is a white, American, married woman confronting her overbearing mother-in-law at the turn of the century. Mr. Gatti's insistence that Negi only concentrate on pronouncing the words recalls Negi's early school experiences during the "American invasion" of Macún. It requires that Negi regurgitate American culture in the form of language without truly understanding it or getting a say in the matter. However, Negi's success in doing so shows her skill at code switching. Negi is able to (somewhat) successfully perform the monologue because she's spent her life assuming different identities to please others, and this time is different only because of the language element.



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.

PROLOGUE: HOW TO EAT A GUAVA

The narrator, adult Negi, is in her local Shop and Save examining the guavas. She inspects one that isn't quite ripe and describes its color and shape to the reader. She says that when you bite into a guava, you must be careful to not hit the seeds, as they get stuck in your teeth for hours. She says that as children, she didn't always wait for the guavas to ripen. Underripe guavas are hard and sour. Negi says that at night, Mami would make her drink castor oil while saying that castor oil tastes better than a green guava. Negi says that when she heard that, she knew she was still a child, and knew her mother wasn't a child anymore.

Negi says she had her last guava on the day she left Puerto Rico. She ate it in the car to the airport. Today, in the Shop and Save, the guavas are \$1.59 each and remind her of Puerto Rico, even though it's autumn in New York and she's an adult now. She puts the guava back on the display and pushes her cart towards the "predictably sweet" apples and pears.

Negi as the narrator makes it very clear from the outset that there are major differences between herself now, as an adult, and the child she once was. She also sets up that she and her mother are very different from each other. This suggests that as a child, Negi saw that there was a great deal of distance between herself and her mother, though it also leaves room for Negi to learn about Mami throughout the memoir.



Today, the guavas are a reminder of the identity that Negi seems to barely have anymore—rather than connect to her past by choosing guavas, she chooses "predictable" fruit. This introduces the idea that Negi struggles with an identity that isn't necessarily homogenous.



1. JÍBARA

Negi says that she and her family came to Macún when she was four years old. Their house is made of metal and sits up on stilts. Negi touches a hot metal wall and burns herself, and Mami scolds her before rubbing Vick's VapoRub on the burn. Papi replaces parts of the floor to make it useable, but says he'll need to rip the whole thing out. Mami shudders at the possibility of the snakes and scorpions that live under the floor, while Negi imagines a fascinating world of crawly creatures.

Later, when Papi pulls up the floor, Negi helps him collect the nails that are still useable. Mami calls for Negi to help gather kindling, but Negi insists on helping Papi. Papi ignores Negi, though she wishes he'd ask her to stay and help. Negi slowly goes to help Mami. Negi asks why her younger sisters, Delsa and Norma, don't have to help. Mami swats Negi for talking back.

Though Mami cares for Negi's burn, she also makes sure that Negi knows that touching the hot wall wasn't appropriate. This begins to set up the idea that Mami requires Negi to meet certain standards of conduct and behavior, even if those standards aren't made common knowledge outright. It essentially sets Negi up to fail, and gives Mami a lot of power over Negi.



Papi supports Mami's parenting efforts here; he doesn't try to put Negi in the middle of an adult argument. This shows initially that Papi respects Mami. Negi seems to idolize Papi and wants to participate in men's tasks rather than feminine tasks like cooking, suggesting that Negi is a "tomboy."



Mami leads Negi to a thicket. A butterfly flies close to Mami's head and she swats it away. Delsa and Norma join Negi and Mami and show them a hen's nest. Mami says they can't eat the eggs and helps her daughters pick up their piles of kindling. She then leads them back to the kitchen and tells Negi to help her make supper. Negi ignores Mami and stares at Papi working. Papi tells Mami to allow Negi to stay, and Mami goes to the kitchen shed in a huff.

Papi gives Negi some old boards and tells her to put them in the pile of wood for the kitchen fire. Negi tries to avoid Mami, but Mami asks to see the board. Mami starts screaming that the board, and now Negi, are covered in termites. Negi feels the bites and starts screaming as Mami lifts her into the washtub and strips her clothes. When Mami has scrubbed enough, she wraps Negi in a towel and carries her to hers and Papi's bed. Mami lies down beside Negi and soothes her, and Negi relishes the closeness and comfort of her mother. Mami says that this is what happens when Negi doesn't listen to her, and Negi curls up in shame. She wonders how the termites knew she'd disobeyed Mami.

Negi tells the reader that as children, she and her siblings slept in hammocks hung from the ceiling, and a curtain separated the children's side of the house from Mami and Papi's bed. When Papi works, he leaves before dawn, but when he doesn't work, he and Mami stay in bed and Negi tries to listen to their murmurs. Negi isn't allowed out of bed until the sun rises.

The morning after the termite incident, Negi gets out of bed and runs to her parents, who are sitting behind the shed drinking coffee. Mami inspects Negi's termite bites and instructs her to stay out of the sun. Papi hums to the radio, which plays romantic ballads and the news. Negi says that every morning, they listen to "The Day Breaker's Club," which plays traditional "jíbaro" music and poetry. Negi wants desperately to be a jíbaro, but Mami says she can't be a jíbaro because she was born in the city, where jíbaros are mocked. She scolded Negi once for wanting to be a jíbaro.

Negi wonders why her family lives like jíbaros, but she can't call herself a jíbaro. Negi says that jíbaro stories and poems are required reading in school, and her grandparents are real jíbaros. She recognizes the hypocrisy of looking down on real jíbaros while celebrating the jíbaro arts, but says that there's no arguing with Mami.

Mami evidently isn't charmed by the natural world, while Negi is. This creates distance between them even at Negi's young age. Papi finally challenges Mami and Mami gives in, which shows that Papi seems to have the final say in this family.



Again, Negi wants to obey, be good, and earn praise from both Mami and Papi, but the way that Mami speaks to Negi sets Negi up to be consistently unsuccessful in this endeavor. This creates a very bittersweet experience for Negi—her "disobedience" creates the opportunity for her to get true comfort from Mami, but Mami also turns it into a teaching experience and makes Negi feel ashamed for "disobeying." Notice though the intensity of Negi's desire to please Papi: it's so great that she didn't even notice the termites.



Negi is very aware of the things that differentiate her as a child from her adult parents. This creates the sense that there's a huge gulf between children and adults, as well as a sort of puzzle to solve as Negi grows up. Her language here also shows her youth; she doesn't seem to understand that her parents are having sex on those mornings that Papi doesn't work.



Jíbaros (masculine singular jíbaro; feminine singular jíbara) exist throughout Latin America, and the term refers to poor country people, often farmers, with a distinctly nationalistic worldview. As a child, Negi's primary connection to the jíbaro way of life is through their music and poetry, which is revered throughout the country. However, even if their art is enjoyed by everyone, the people themselves are looked down upon as poor and provincial.



Even though Mami's insistence that Negi not aspire to be a jíbaro hurts now, it shows that Mami does want what she thinks is best for her children and wants Negi to succeed (and being a jíbaro isn't considered being successful). At this point, though, Negi's relationship to the jíbaro way of life is representative of her split identity.



Delsa and Norma come out for their oatmeal. Negi says that Mami calls Delsa "Muñequita" (little doll) and Norma "La Colorá" (colored one). She says she thought that she didn't have a nickname until the day Mami said that her real name is Esmeralda, and Negi is a nickname she got because as a baby, her skin was very dark. Mami told Negi that her nickname means that they love her. Negi asks about Mami, Papi, and other family members' nicknames. Mami explains that only people who don't know you well, such as the government, use a person's official name. Negi thinks it's very complicated that everyone has two names and seems to have two identities: one self that's loved, and an official self that isn't.

When Papi puts in the new floor, Mami asks Negi and Delsa to find stones to plug the holes in the dirt floor of the house. Delsa suggests that they check on the hen, and they begin to circle the hen to try to make her dizzy. The hen watches the girls and finally, Mami yells and asks what Delsa and Negi are doing. Delsa and Negi giggle and say they were checking on the hen, and Mami tells them to leave the hen alone.

Negi and Delsa creep past Mami, who looks very angry. As they pass her, Mami hits both girls on their heads. They go to Papi, but he tells them they know better. Negi wishes that Papi would scold Mami, but he continues working. Negi then screams in anger, pushes Delsa, and they wrestle until Mami and Papi separate them. Negi runs into the oregano bushes and cries, feeling alone.

Several days later, Negi wakes to Mami groaning. Negi gets up and asks Mami if she's okay, and Mami tells Negi she's going to have a baby. Negi asks Mami for breakfast, but is saved from Mami's anger by Papi arriving with two neighbor women, Doña Lola and Doña Zena. The women usher Negi, Delsa, and Norma up the road. Delsa and Norma wail.

Negi doesn't understand why they have to leave and thinks that she never put Mami's swollen belly together with babies. She realizes that another baby is going to put even more distance between her and her mother, and she fears that Mami will forget her. Negi sits on Doña Zena's steps and thinks of jíbaro poetry.

Negi learns that she's not the only one with a split identity, though she seems to be the only one bothered by it. The discovery that Negi has a "real" name creates a way for the reader to tell who loves Negi and who doesn't, depending on what they call her. Mami's careful explanation situates family (those who use nicknames) as safe and loving, and pits this idea of family against the rest of the world.



It's unclear whether Mami is upset because the girls didn't find stones or because they were pestering the hen, but it's clear that Mami is disappointed that they didn't follow her directions—her high standards of behavior apply to all her children, not just Negi. At the same time, this scene shows the sisters just having fun and being mischievous kids.



At this point, Negi would like Papi to use his power as a man very differently than the way he actually uses it. Negi wants Mami to suffer the same kind of scolding that she herself suffers, which indicates that what Negi really wants is for Mami to understand her pain.



Even though Negi often feels angry at Mami, she still cares deeply for Mami's wellbeing. Though Negi's sudden request for breakfast is somewhat humorous, it also suggests that Negi expresses her love for Mami through demands, and shows that they're not always met.



Negi realizes that her demands will be met even less with another baby to distract Mami. Multiple younger siblings so close in age essentially forces Negi to grow up and become independent very early in life.



2. FIGHTING NAKED

Negi explains to the reader that Mami and Papi surely argued before baby Héctor was born, but after his birth, the fights increased in frequency. One morning, Papi asks Mami for a particular shirt as she sits feeding Héctor. When Mami asks Papi where he's going and for how long, Papi tells her to not start with him. Mami gets up, angry, and walks out of the house with Héctor. Papi gathers his things and leaves without kissing anyone goodbye.

Negi goes to look for Mami and finds her behind the house crying. Negi tries to approach her, but Mami yells angrily for Negi to leave her alone. Negi stands by a nearby tree and pretends to ignore Mami whenever Mami looks her direction. Finally, Mami gets up, hands Héctor to Negi, and goes to make lunch for the children. She runs her fingers through Negi's hair as she walks by.

Papi doesn't come home for days. When he finally comes home, he sits at the table and Mami angrily serves him supper. Mami puts Negi and her sisters to bed, nurses Héctor, and then puts Héctor to bed. Negi falls asleep, has a bad dream, and wakes to the sound of her parents talking. Mami asks Papi for grocery money, and he explains that he gave a coworker an advance for job materials. Mami is incredulous, and Negi knows from the tones of their voices that a fight is starting. Papi tries to go to sleep, but Mami accuses him of leaving for days and coming home smelling like "that puta."

Papi gets up and tells Mami she'll wake the children, but Mami continues her tirade. She asks if Papi's friends and "putas" know he has children, and says she's not stupid. Héctor begins to cry and Mami roughly changes his diaper. Negi notices that Delsa and Norma are awake, and she listens to Mami say that she's sick of Papi being gone all the time. Papi replies that he's sick of hearing Mami complain, and he stomps out of the house.

Negi shrieks for Papi to not leave them and Delsa and Norma join the cry. Héctor begins wailing as Mami starts yelling and throwing Papi's clothes outside. She bolts the door, sits in the rocking chair, and cries, telling the children angrily to "shut up and go back to sleep." The next afternoon, Mami washes Papi's clothes and he comes home not long after that.

As Negi grows up, she becomes more attuned to her parents' relationship and begins to notice that it's not always good. We also see that Papi takes his frustrations with Mami out on his children by not telling them goodbye when he leaves. Everyone suffers when Mami and Papi fight, and Negi is punished by getting less love from both parents.



Once again, Mami's heightened emotional state and Negi's "disobedience" create the opportunity for Negi to experience a tender moment with Mami. Though Negi seems mostly stuck in her own misery, her narration still allows us to see that Mami feels Papi's anger and absences very deeply.



It's unclear exactly how much Negi actually understands, as she's still very young, but this fight sets up the idea that Papi is probably seeing other women (putas, or "whores"—at least in Mami's eyes) and makes the choice to give his money to coworkers rather than his family. Mami's request shows that she's very dependent on Papi's income to make ends meet, and the fact that Papi didn't bring this money home to her is a major betrayal.



It's important to note that Mami's dependence on Papi's income shows that Mami is relatively powerless in their relationship. It allows the reader to understand Mami's anger and violence another way—it's the one way that she can experience any power over Papi or her children and feel even a little bit in control.



Negi hasn't yet realized that Papi will inevitably come back when he leaves, so his departure here is a terrifying experience that has the potential to completely change her world and the makeup of her family. Mami and Papi make up, though it's unclear if they do so out of love or co-dependency.



Negi often hears Mami accuse Papi of seeing another woman when he says he's going to see his mother, Abuela. Negi hears them talk about Provi and Margie. One day, Negi asks Papi who Margie is, and he explains that she's his daughter. Negi thinks that it's bad enough she already has to share Papi with Mami's other children, but she sits down and asks Papi about Margie. She's thrilled when she hears that Margie is a year older than she is, and asks Papi to bring her to visit. Papi laughs and Negi continues to pepper him with questions.

Negi thinks about Margie at night and imagines the fun they could have together, since Margie could keep up with Negi's games unlike little Norma or Delsa. The next day, Negi asks Mami why she doesn't like Provi, and Mami tells her to never talk about "that woman." Another day, Negi asks Papi again to bring Margie. Mami hears Negi's question and yells at her to leave Papi alone. Papi asks Negi to bring him a cinderblock from the pile by the gate. Mami tells Papi that Negi isn't strong enough, but Papi insists. Negi manages to carry one and asks for permission to bring a second.

Papi tells Negi that Margie moved to New York, and Negi whines. Papi gets down and hugs her, and Negi thinks that she'd love for more people to leave Papi so that he comes to her for comfort.

Mami and Papi's fights continue, and Negi and her siblings tiptoe around their parents as to not make things worse. Negi is especially confused because she sometimes sees Mami and Papi embrace each other like they truly love each other. When Héctor begins to eat solid foods, Mami starts to look pregnant again.

Negi wonders how Papi manages to convince Mami to forgive him. Negi knows for certain that because Papi is a man, he's the cause of her family's unhappiness. She explains that she'd overheard Mami's conversations with friends and family members, saying that all men are "sinverguenzas," which means they have no shame and cause women to suffer. The worst thing men do is see other women, all of whom are putas (whores). Negi explains that she only has a fuzzy picture of these women, since none live in Macún. She decides that they all live in luxury and wear high heels, perfume, and hairspray, paid for with money from men like Papi. Negi longs to see a puta so she can understand how they're so powerful and cause women like Mami so much pain.

Negi operates under the assumption that there's only so much parental love to go around, and is truly afraid that Margie's existence means that Papi will love her less. Margie's age, however, means that Negi would have someone else to love like a parent and absolve her of some of her oldest-sister duties. Negi's youth is apparent, however; the reader understands that Mami would never allow Margie to visit.



Papi uses Negi to push Mami's buttons, though Negi isn't yet aware of this—getting to carry the cinderblock makes her feel seen, competent, and appreciated. It allows Negi to get positive attention from the parent she idolizes (Papi) and protects her momentarily from Mami's rage. Negi's daydreams show that Negi wants desperately to be able to just be a child, without responsibilities and anxieties. She wants an older sister to look up to, regardless of how that sister comes to her.



When Margie leaves, Negi gets more love and affection from Papi. She desperately craves this familial and parental love, and will take any opportunity she can to get it.



The love between Mami and Papi is confusing and unreliable, especially to a child spectator like Negi. The fact that Negi and her siblings try not to make things worse suggests that they feel some responsibility for their parents' poor relationship.



Negi describes a system in which men are nearly always expected to be unfaithful and women should expect their male partners to hurt and betray them. Negi betrays some of her youthful innocence here when she says that no putas live in Macún; this is almost certainly incorrect. She likely knows women who others refer to as putas, at least in a derogatory sense, and Mami may very well be one of them (especially because she and Papi aren't married, as we later learn). Negi, however, believes that her family is normal and correct, which means in her eyes, Mami occupies a similar moral high ground. At the same time, Negi is fascinated by the idea of a puta's power over men, something she hasn't seen in Mami.



Negi says that when she started school, her world grew bigger. However, she couldn't delve deeply into the ways her classmates differed from her because of "dignidad," which encompasses manners like not swearing, gossiping, or speaking until spoken to, as well as using formal speech and titles with adults. She says that she knew of these rules, but had never had to really use them before—her family fights, yells, and interrupts. Negi loves school and cherishes her uniform, as it's the only thing that she doesn't have to share with her sisters.

School also allows Negi the opportunity to compare her family to others in her neighborhood. Some classmates have "bad" mothers or brothers in prison, while others have electricity and running water at home. The fighting at school is particularly difficult for Negi to figure out, as someone can get beat up for anything. Negi tries to explain to Mami one day why her uniform is ripped, and Mami forbids Negi from fighting in school. Negi is confused because Mami has never told her to not fight before. After that, when Negi can't avoid fighting in school, she strips down to her underwear before defending herself.

One day, Papi leaves and doesn't return for three days. On the fourth day, Negi arrives at home to find her belongings bundled into pillowcases and a suitcase. Mami leads her children up the road, where they finally board a public car. Mami tells the children that they're moving to the city.

3. SOMEONE IS COMING TO TAKE YOUR LAP

Negi explains that whenever Mami gets fed up with Macún or with Papi, she runs away to Santurce. Santurce is a suburb of San Juan, and though it's very urban, it's decidedly not charming. As one of 15 children, Mami has a number of family members in the city, although by this time, her mother, Tata, had left for Brooklyn. Negi's new home in Santurce is one room, but with running water and electricity. They share a bathroom with another family and the children play in the bathroom every day.

The following day, Negi enrolls in first grade. Her new school is large with a real playground. Mami tells Negi to not look at or talk to anyone on her walk to or from school, but Negi notices as much as she can. Sometimes she sees Catholic schoolchildren, and she's jealous of how ordered their lives look. She wonders if those children eat or sleep the way she does, and realizes that she's different. Here in Santurce, Negi's classmates accuse her of being a "jíbara" when she appears particularly provincial or uneducated. Negi walks to and from school alone.

Negi has to begin "code switching" when she starts school, since school requires a different type of adherence to "dignidad" (dignity, or manners) than she's required to observe at home. Essentially, Negi must act as two different people: the Negi from home and the Negi in public, which adds to Negi's sense that her identity is split in two or more parts.



Again, Negi has to code switch when Mami forbids her from fighting in school but allows her to fight at home. Negi is caught between defending herself from her classmates and avoiding Mami's wrath. Removing her uniform, then, is a (rather amusing) way for her to shape Mami's code to fit her own needs. Because Negi technically obeys, Mami gets to keep her sense of power over Negi while Negi also keeps a sense of agency.



When Papi acts entirely unreliable, Mami retaliates by uprooting her family without notice and making herself similarly unreliable to Papi. When he does return, there won't be dinner on the table for him.



Mami has a vast web of siblings and other family members to call on for help, which suggests that her extended family is reliable when she needs it, unlike Papi. The house in Santurce seems like an upgrade, with indoor plumbing and electricity; for once, Negi's family isn't living like jíbaros.



Even though outwardly things are looking up for Negi (she has plumbing and a real playground), her identity is experiencing whiplash in her new urban setting. Negi finally begins to understand why Mami told her to not aspire to be a jíbara when she grows up, as Negi's rural upbringing makes her an outcast among her urban classmates.



Around Christmas, the songs Negi hears coming from jukeboxes change: they're still about women and alcohol, but they have Christmas elements added in. At home, Negi's family sings their own Christmas songs. Papi visits, and once he brings string lights and helps the children hang them. Mami spends most of her time in the kitchen cooking while relatives sit at their table. Delsa and Norma play with female cousins, while Negi runs with her male cousins.

One day, Negi's uncle, Tío Cucho, comes with a woman named Rita. Rita wears a low cut dress and lots of jewelry, as well as high heels. Mami doesn't like Rita, but Negi does. Negi hears Mami talking about Rita to her friends. They say that Rita has two children that she leaves alone while she parties and "bewitches men." Mami and the friend notice Negi listening, and Mami sends Negi to check on Héctor. Negi wonders if Rita is a puta. As she gets further away Mami and her friend laugh and keep talking, and Negi feels angry and left out.

One day, Negi asks Mami about the shiny "ribbons" strung up in the neighbor's yard, and Mami explains that they're pig guts for making sausage. Negi is disgusted, and Mami explains how sausage is made and what's in it. Horrified but curious, Negi asks Mami what's in morcillas, her favorite kind of sausage. Mami says it's mostly blood. Suddenly Mami winces, and Negi asks if she's okay. Mami explains that the baby in her stomach is swimming, and she lets Negi feel the baby move.

A few days later, Negi asks Papi what a sin is. He tells her it's something that makes God angry. Negi asks for an example, and he begins to explain the ten commandments to her. She asks question after question and learns that though her family is Catholic, they're not "good" ones. Papi can't explain all ten commandments because Negi asks so many questions.

That night, Negi worries that Mami's moans will keep the Three Magi from coming and filling her shoes with candy and presents, yet the Three Magi come despite Mami's moans. Papi sits outside with Negi and her siblings that afternoon, and Mami has another baby girl. They name her Alicia. After her birth, Papi visits more often. Mami ignores him, and he plays with the children instead. Eventually Mami starts to forgive him. One night, she invites him in for dinner. Later, as Negi lies in bed, she happily listens to them sit on the porch and talk.

The narrator continues to develop Negi's tomboy tendencies, which aren't yet a problem for Negi. In Santurce especially, her desire to run and roughhouse with her male cousins is in line with her love of the wild jíbaro lifestyle (as contrasted with the proper and uptight urban lifestyle, which aligns more closely with traditional feminine ideals).



Even though Negi professes herself to be more of a tomboy, she also desperately wants to experience the female communal experiences like Mami does talking with her friends about Rita. The fact that Negi likes Rita complicates her understanding of putas, as she's been led to believe that they're all horrible women who steal money and time from good men.



It seems as though Mami and Negi's relationship is beginning to improve. Mami is more willing to engage with Negi in Negi's incessant questions and begins to explain her physical aches and pains to Negi in a way that she hadn't been willing to before. Negi is also more perceptive of Mami's feelings and shows that she cares for Mami by not demanding things.



Negi and Papi also seem to be getting closer, as he too is willing to answer her questions. The idea that Catholics can be good or bad continues to complicate Negi's formation of her identity.



Times like these in Mami and Papi's relationship show Negi that it is possible for two people to love and be kind to each other in a romantic relationship. This provides Negi with a sense of security for the time being, as she feels she can trust both her parents to be there for her and care for her. But of course this sense of safety is tempered by her memories of past unreliability.



Negi and her family return to Macún. Negi is thrilled and wants to run all over the land, but Mami pulls her back down into her seat when she stands up. When they arrive, Negi thinks that she's home and never wants to leave. She describes their home, the trees, and the farm behind their property, where Negi is forbidden from going. Just over the fence on the farmland is a grove of grapefruit trees that Negi wishes she could pick from.

As Mami guts a chicken one afternoon, she calls Negi to come and look at the hen's unlaid eggs. Mami says that the eggs are delicious in soup, and Negi says she believes what Mami says about food. The soup that night is delicious.

Negi introduces the reader to her friend Juanita, who lives down the road and walks to school with Negi. Negi can tell Juanita about modern amenities in Santurce like running water, but Juanita has information about the underbelly of Macún, particularly the shortcuts through the woods to the next town where the putas live (according to the girls' mothers).

Juanita's grandfather, Don Berto, lives behind Juanita's house. He's an ancient man and spends his time sharpening a machete. Negi and Juanita sit with him often and listen to his jíbaro stories. One morning, Mami tells Negi that Juanita won't be at school that day because Don Berto died. Negi is annoyed when Mami won't tell her how she found out this information. Many of Negi's classmates aren't in school, and Negi's teacher says that if any children weren't nice to Don Berto, they'll never get a chance to be nice to him now that he's dead. Negi can't think of a time she was rude to him.

Mami spends her day at Juanita's house getting it and Don Berto's body ready for the wake. At the wake that night, Negi notes how strange it is to see Don Berto's hands holding a rosary and not his machete. When Papi arrives, he leads the gathered friends and family in a prayer. Negi falls asleep to the sounds of the prayer and wakes up next to Delsa at home the next morning. Mami snaps at Negi that she's not going to school today because she and Juanita are going to lead the procession to the cemetery.

Mami dresses Negi in her best dress and they go to Juanita's house. The adults give Negi and Juanita a heavy wreath to carry, and they lead the procession onto the highway. The walk is very long and Negi tries hard to not complain. Negi feels sad for Juanita and tries to imagine her friend's grief.

Even if Negi is discouraged from identifying as a jíbaro, her descriptions of her home and the land honor and consider nature in a way that's very much in line with jíbaro music, poetry, and beliefs. This suggests that this is one of the truest aspects of Negi's split identity, even if it's a forbidden aspect.



There are certain things that Negi can trust Mami on without question, food being one of them. Food then will become a way for Mami and Negi to connect and learn to trust each other, as they did previously with the sausages.



The girls deal in information. Juanita seems to be completely entranced by the non-jíbaro lifestyle Negi led in Santurce, while Negi is still interested in discovering what makes putas so special. Through this exchange of information, both girls can shape their identities and attempt to figure out how putas get and keep power.



Negi gets to work on fleshing out her jíbaro identity by listening to Don Berto's stories. With the mysterious news of Don Berto's death, Negi is becoming aware that the adult world is very different from the world she inhabits as a child. Though Negi has already grown up a lot over the last several chapters, these realizations are setting herself up to begin becoming more adult herself.



Don Berto has a split identity too now that he's dead—he has to hold a rosary instead of his machete. Though he's almost certainly a Catholic, for Negi in particular the rosary is indicative of the fact that in death, Don Berto has become something different than what he was in life. Similarly, even if Papi isn't a good Catholic, he still leads the prayers for Don Berto. This suggests that for many of these characters Catholicism is more of a cultural identity than a personal religious conviction.



Negi practices feeling empathetic by imagining Juanita's grief, which is very similar to the way that Negi engages with Mami's physical and emotional pain.



After dinner, Papi dresses in preparation to lead the novenas (nine days of prayer) for Don Berto. He asks Negi if she'd like to come, and Mami allows her to go with a sweater. As Negi and Papi walk, Negi asks what a soul is. Papi tries to explain what souls do. He says that souls feel and write poetry, but they don't come out of a person's body when a person is alive. Negi knows Papi is wrong about that: her soul walks beside her sometimes. At Juanita's house, Papi settles in a chair next to a picture of Don Berto. Negi wonders where Don Berto's soul is, and tries to send her soul to meet his.

Finally Negi has a simple way to conceptualize her split identity when Papi explains the soul to her—and this also allows her to reveal some of her mysterious inner life to the reader. Going forward Negi will use this idea of her soul to disassociate and avoid intense emotional situations, but for now it simply allows her to better understand how she fits into her world and make sense of her experiences. Mami shows that she cares for Negi's wellbeing by insisting on the sweater; this is one way that Mami demonstrates her reliability to the family.



As Doña Lola cuddles Alicia one day, she tells her, "someone is coming to take your lap." Negi is at Doña Lola's house to trade foodstuffs, and says that Papi told her they'd have electricity by the time the new baby arrives. Doña Lola tells Negi that the farm behind her house is owned by an American, and soon, the American is going to build a hotel on the land. Back at home, Negi asks Mami about the hotel. Mami says that people have been talking about the hotel and electricity forever, and says that Negi's children will be teenagers before any of that happens. Later, Negi asks Mami about New York. Mami says she's never been, but maybe someday she'll go.

Doña Lola's warning to Alicia suggests that Mami is pregnant again and that Alicia will have to give up her spot as the youngest. Negi is old enough now for her world to expand beyond her family and community and begin to encompass America, and New York specifically. These questions about the future begin to foreshadow Negi's own future and coming of age, specifically the possibility that Mami will go to New York.



Negi sits in the back yard with her siblings and listens to Mami scream as she labors. At dusk, their neighbor's daughter, Gloria, comes to get Negi and the children. The children are scared hearing Mami scream and Delsa tries to comfort everyone. Negi tells some of Don Berto's stories that night, and when she and her siblings return home the next morning, Mami is nursing the new baby, Edna, and Papi is installing a kerosene cookstove.

Even if Macún isn't getting electricity any time soon, progress isn't entirely unheard of, as represented by the new cookstove. Negi must take on a maternal role and comfort her siblings, even though Delsa tries to help in this endeavor. This is a lot of responsibility for a child, but at this point it's a one-off experience and Negi doesn't feel the strain yet.



The first week in May, it begins to rain and Mami yells at the children to take off their clothes. Mami steps out of her dress and carries days-old Edna to the door. She leads her children outside and stands in the rain, smiling. Norma, wide eyed, remarks that Mami is taking a bath. Mami explains that it's good luck to get wet in the first May rain, and she leads Delsa and Héctor into the rain. Finally Negi and Norma join, form a circle, and sing. The children chase each other and head inside when the thunder starts. Negi explains that it rained the entire rest of the month, and Papi couldn't work. He stays inside and reads magazines. If he goes to work and then it starts raining, he's gone for days.

For the children, this is a perplexing request from their normally uptight mother. It humanizes and complicates Mami for the reader, however. Even if she is difficult and exacting, she's not above simple pleasures like warm rainstorms, and she wants her children to have these experiences as well. Though the rest of the rainy month seems fine for Negi and the other children, it seems to make Papi restless. His absences remind the reader (and likely Mami) that he has other places to be and people, possibly women, to see and stay with.



4. THE AMERICAN INVASION OF MACÚN

The new teacher, Miss Jiménez, stands in front of Negi's class and they sing a song of English words. Negi says that according to one of the neighbors, Miss Jiménez has the most beautiful legs. Negi studies them and wishes for her own legs to be that beautiful when she grows up. Miss Jiménez arrives in Macún at the same time the community center does, and she tells her students that beginning the next week, they can get free breakfast there courtesy of the American government. She also tells her students that on Saturday, there will be a meeting for their parents where experts will speak to the parents about nutrition and hygiene. Mami assures Negi that they'll go to the meeting.

On Saturday, the community center fills with mothers and children. The "experts" there seem as though they didn't plan for the children, and they convince older girls to watch the younger children outside. Mami asks Negi to watch her siblings. Negi ushers the children outside but sits with Edna on the steps by the door so she can still watch the experts speak. The first expert has a huge model of a mouth and uses highly scientific Spanish to talk about proper oral hygiene. Women giggle at the thought of spending so much time on their teeth.

A red-haired American expert then speaks to the group about nutrition. All the foods he mentions don't grow in Puerto Rico, and he mentions no foods that are staples in Puerto Rico. He suggests several substitutions when women point this out, but looks uncomfortable. He says that each family will receive a bag of groceries that correspond to their nutrition plan. Finally, another expert tells the mothers how to rid their children of lice and how to prevent their children from getting tapeworms. The mothers are disgusted, and Negi is concerned that she has a tapeworm.

Finally, the experts give the mothers groceries and toothbrushes. Mami unpacks the groceries and remarks that if the experts had just given them a bag each of rice and beans, they'd feed the family for a month. She decides that they'll save the groceries for when they're especially hungry or short on food.

One morning, Negi wakes up and feels something wiggling in her panties. She sees that it's a worm and screams. Mami inspects Negi's bottom and sits her in a bath of warm salt water to draw out the worms. Negi is terrified. Mami gives all the children a "purgante" to rid them of worms, and they spend hours the next morning taking turns using the toilet.

Negi's goals for the future are changing. While she once wanted only to be a jíbara, now she longs for beautiful legs, which shows that Negi is beginning to grow up and change as she approaches puberty. Similarly, Negi's interest in the meeting and hearing the experts speak is part of her desire to learn as much as she can about the adult world so she can become a part of it. At this point, all of what's coming to Macún seems very exciting, though much like growing up, it won't actually be easy or necessarily fun.



Negi is denied the adult experience of getting to see the experts speak; instead Mami forces her to occupy a liminal space where she's a caregiver, but still very much a child. The experts don't seem well prepared for this meeting, which brings their level of "expertise" into question. The women are relatively polite but make sure that the experts know that their information is out of touch.



Remember that because Negi is Puerto Rican, she holds American citizenship and in theory shares similarities with these experts. The American experts, however, are so far out of touch with Puerto Rican life that it's simultaneously sad, perplexing, and funny. Negi's concern about having a tapeworm is a somewhat sinister question of her split identity, as she wonders if she has an actual other being inside of her that she has no control over.



The food from the Americans certainly serves a purpose for Negi's family, though not the intended purpose. Rather than supplementing a government-developed nutrition plan, it fills the gaps when there simply isn't food to speak of.



Negi's fears are confirmed, though this terrifying part of Negi's body and identity will in theory be eliminated by Mami's "purgante" (laxative). Mami acknowledges that the family is connected physically as well as emotionally by making sure everyone takes the purgante.



Another morning, Miss Jiménez tells her students that they'll be vaccinated for polio. When Mami fills out the consent forms for Negi and Delsa, she tells them how horrible polio is. On vaccination day, Negi is terrified, since every vaccinated student comes back crying. She's sent to the nurse with a boy who pretends he isn't scared. He tells her that the vaccines are happening because of politics. He whispers that his papá says that it's an election year, so the government is vaccinating and feeding children so their fathers will vote for them.

The boy insists that Negi knows nothing about politics, but she can name the governor of Puerto Rico as well as the president of the United States. The boy declares that the president is an imperialist and a gringo (derogatory term for white North Americans), which shocks Negi. She explains to the reader that she's not allowed to say things like that about adults, even if they're true. When Negi and the boy get their shots, neither of them cry.

Later, Negi asks Papi what an imperialist is. Papi looks spooked, and tells Negi to not repeat either "gringo" or "imperialist," particularly since calling an American a gringo is a horrible insult. Papi explains how the United States made Puerto Rico a colony and says that Puerto Ricans call the American imperialists because the Americans want to change Puerto Rican culture to be more American.

Negi declares that she's not going to learn English so she doesn't become American, and she and Papi discuss that culture isn't simply the language you speak. Papi introduces her to the derogatory term "spik," which is what Americans call Puerto Ricans who speak English with an accent. Negi points out that Americans speak funny Spanish, and Papi says that part of imperialism is expecting Puerto Ricans to do things the American way, even in Puerto Rico. Negi observes the unfairness of that, and Papi agrees that it's unfair. She asks if eating the food from the American experts will make her American, and Papi says that it'll make her American if she likes it better than Puerto Rican food.

On the first day that the community center serves breakfast, Negi and Juanita line up as the lunch matron asks them to. Inside, the walls are plastered with Dick and Jane posters, and Negi wonders what the smell is. She and Juanita line up to get their food: powdered eggs, margarine on bread, American sausage, and fruit juice. Negi thinks it tastes bland but is glad it doesn't taste good. She plays with her food instead of eating it.

Negi's classmate is probably partially correct about why they're being vaccinated and fed. Negi is stuck wondering then if the care she's receiving from the government now is worth being ignored the rest of the time. This basic question will be a recurring one, though later Negi will apply it to her relationship to Papi rather than the more abstract idea of the American government.



Regardless of what Negi says about how her family functions, the fact that she's not allowed to say things like this is an example of dignidad being upheld in her home, and she's shocked to see that not everyone is forced to be respectful like she is.



Negi has an idea of what American culture means thanks to the experts, but what she's seen is enough to impress upon her that American culture and Puerto Rican cultures are very different. Further, American culture isn't necessarily "good" for Puerto Rico, as evidenced by the experts' poorly thought out nutrition plan.



Negi is very protective of her Puerto Rican identity; at this point in her life, it's the one she identifies with most because it allows her to feel closer to her original dream of being a jíbara. Having this conversation with Papi also brings Negi closer to him and offers her a sense of security in her family life, particularly at this point when life outside her home is confusing and is potentially trying to change her to be something she doesn't want to be. Further, it adds some political commentary to the memoir, as America is portrayed as an imperialist state primarily concerned with Puerto Rico for reasons of economics and power.



It's important to note that the Dick and Jane posters would show characters and situations that are overwhelmingly white and suburban; in short, they don't show a way of life or people that Negi and Juanita will recognize as being like them. This confuses Negi's identity further, as the posters show a potential future that is not very Puerto Rican at all.



Miss Jiménez teaches her class English through songs, with varying degrees of success. She also teaches them the Puerto Rican national anthem, which Negi loves. One day she asks Papi about a particular verse that she finds sad, in which the man is sad to leave San Juan for New York.

Another day, Mami unpacks a box of hand-me-down clothes from Tata. Mami is pregnant again and she puts away some clothes for herself for later. She pulls out several items of beautiful, barely-worn clothing for Negi, Norma, and Delsa to try on. Norma remarks that their cousins must be rich, but Mami says that clothes like these aren't as expensive in America. Mami opens a letter with a ten-dollar bill in it and reads the letter to her children, and suggests that Negi write a letter back to Tata saying how much they love the clothes.

Negi loves writing letters and relishes the opportunity to write to Tata. When she finishes, Mami reads the letter out loud. She insists that Negi made a mistake by not starting with a proper salutation and tells her to write the letter over. Negi argues and Mami grabs her arm, slamming her against her chair. Negi wants to hurt Mami and starts crying. Mami stands over Negi and oversees the writing of the new letter.

Later that week, the community center offers a new breakfast food: a glass full of peanut butter and hot milk. Negi and Juanita sit and regard their breakfasts suspiciously. They stir their milk and Juanita tastes it. Negi takes a huge gulp, gags, and drops her glass. It shatters and sends milk and peanut butter all over the floor, and Negi vomits what she swallowed. The lunch matron scolds her as Negi tries to explain that the milk was sour. The matron suggests that Negi would rather go hungry in the mornings, and Negi screams that her parents can feed her without "disgusting gringo imperialist food."

Everyone in the community center gasps and the matron's mouth drops open. A child whispers that she'll trap flies with her mouth open, and the matron turns on the crowd and away from Negi. The matron grabs Negi, forces her out the door, and says she needs to tell Mami what happened. Negi trudges home and decides to lie to Mami about what happened. She tells Mami she threw up in the lunchroom and promptly faints. Negi spends several days sick in bed, the matron never speaks to Mami, and when Negi returns to school, the elections are over and the breakfasts cease.

Negi's affinity for the Puerto Rican anthem certainly comes from the fact that it's in Spanish and she therefore understands it, but she also seems to find a new national pride connected to her fear of becoming American. Singing in English while not understanding the words is another form of code switching.



Even though Tata lives far away in New York, she's still very much a part of Mami's web of helpful family members. As Negi grows, she hears more and more about America. This is indicative of Negi's coming of age through her world expanding, though it also plays into the formation of her identity. America sends many things to Negi, some good like these clothes, while other things like the breakfasts are less so.



Mami makes Negi feel powerless, which is how she asserts her dominance over her children. Whether Mami is right or wrong about how to properly start a letter, by insisting Negi write in this particular way she makes sure that Tata won't be offended and therefore insures that Tata's kindness will continue.



The milk and peanut butter are well outside of what Negi and Juanita are used to eating. The matron's scolding betrays how the American experts see Puerto Rico: as an exceptionally poor place where children are, without fail, underfed. When Negi screams back, she asserts her independence and insists on identifying very strongly with her Puerto Rican identity, albeit through a childish tantrum.



Negi's classmate turns out to be correct about the reason for the breakfasts and the vaccines, since they stop after the elections. This suggests that the question of Negi's ties to America will take a backseat in the narrative for a while.



5. WHY WOMEN REMAIN JAMONA

One Sunday, Mami dresses Negi in her best dress, packs some clothes for her, and tells her she's going to stay with Abuela for a week. She promises that Papi will retrieve her the following Sunday. Papi dresses in his best clothes and they take the bus to Santurce. They arrive at the station where they have to change buses early, so Papi leads Negi into a market to get something to eat.

Papi and Negi pass a woman arranging models of Jesus. Negi thinks the woman looks cold and horselike, and avoids walking close to her. They stop at a food stand and Papi orders them food. Negi spins on a bar stool and when she tries to stop herself with her foot, she's going too fast and falls off. Dizzy, Negi sees two of everything, including two of the cold woman who comes to investigate. The woman remarks that Jesus doesn't love children who misbehave, and the counterman yells at the woman and waves her away.

The counterman remarks that the woman is "jamona," and he and Papi laugh. Negi asks what a jamona is later when they leave the market, and he says it's a woman who's never married and is too old to marry. He says it's an insult, as it implies ugliness. Negi says she hopes it won't happen to her, and Papi assures her she won't become jamona. After they board their bus, Negi asks what you call a man who never marries. The bus driver says that man is lucky, and Negi feels angry and insulted.

At Abuela's house, Abuela greets Negi warmly and inspects her. She then leads Negi and Papi inside her house where she lives with Negi's grandfather, Abuelo. Everything is covered in crochet. Abuela serves her guests food and then Papi gets up to leave. Negi asks him to stay longer, and he snaps at her that he has people to see on the way home. Negi doesn't hug him back when he hugs her on his way out, and feels angry and used.

Abuela shows Negi where she'll sleep and tells her to change into comfortable clothes. Abuela settles in a rocking chair and crochets, and Negi sits on the sofa and watches. Later, Abuela goes to say her prayers and Negi sits on the porch to watch the people outside. When it begins to get dark, Negi smells the neighbors cooking dinner and listens to the radios coming from their houses. She wonders where Papi went and remembers Margie and Provi. She remembers Mami claiming that it's in a man's nature to not be faithful. Negi wonders if that's true, and if Papi doesn't love her family if he sees other women.

Being out with Papi is a happy time for Negi and allows her to feel loved and close to him. Notice that Mami's promise that Papi will return for Negi is meant to be taken as absolute truth. This shows that for now, Mami (and Negi) believe that Papi will keep his word, as a family member should.



Negi recognizes that the cold woman is very different from herself and the women she knows at home in Macún, which further shows that women can hold many different roles. Before Negi even knows the particulars of this woman, she also knows that she wants nothing to do with women like her. These comparisons help Negi formulate her identity as she grows up.



Remember that Negi believes the world of women is made up of wives, wives-to-be, and putas—all women who are defined by their relationships with men. Women who are jamona are defined by an absence of a relationship with a man, like it's a negative thing, while men who don't have a relationship with a woman are jokingly considered lucky, not defective.



Negi realizes that bringing her to Abuela's house was an excuse for Papi to see, possibly, another woman. This makes Negi complicit in Papi's infidelity. The fact that Negi is so angry at being made complicit shows that she no longer blindly idolizes Papi. Instead, she feels aligned with Mami in times like this.



Whereas prior to this, Negi felt the sting of Papi's infidelity by bearing witness to Mami's pain and anger, now she feels the pain firsthand. The fact that Papi is using Negi leads Negi to question whether what she's heard Mami say about men is correct in light of this new evidence. Again though, Negi believes that the amount of love a person has to give is finite, since she fears that Papi's infidelity means he doesn't love her as much.



Negi begins to cry, but doesn't want Abuela to think that she doesn't want to be with her. Negi can hear Abuela saying her rosary and wishes she knew how to pray so God could explain things to her. Negi decides to smash her fingers in the door so she has an excuse for her crying, but it hurts more than expected and Negi screams. Abuela comforts Negi and tends to her throbbing fingers. Later, as Negi lies in bed, she tries to distract herself from the pain. She doesn't hear Abuelo come in, eat, go to bed, and rise for work again before sunrise. She learns later that Abuelo sleeps in his own room, which is the only room that isn't covered in Abuela's crochet.

Negi describes Abuelo's sparsely furnished room and then Abuela's opulent room, decorated with Catholic imagery and crochet. One afternoon, Abuela asks Negi if she'd like to learn to crochet, and Negi is excited for the opportunity, as she'd spent the previous days entranced by watching Abuela crochet. Abuela sits Negi between her legs on the stoop so she can help position Negi's hands. Negi loves the focus and counting stitches and is amazed at what she's capable of making.

Abuelo speaks in the jíbaro dialect and sells oranges on a street corner every day. In the evenings when he comes home, Negi runs outside to meet him and he peels her an orange.

On Sunday morning, Abuela hands Negi her good dress and says that they're going to Mass. She hands Negi a veil and denies her breakfast. As they leave the house, Abuela tells Negi to think of nothing but good thoughts. Negi tries to look holy, but the veil tickles her neck. She thinks of all the people she loves and counts squares on the sidewalk, but has a "bad thought" when she purposefully bumps into a boy who bumped into her first. When they enter the church, Negi tastes the holy water and Abuela looks horrified. They settle into a pew.

Negi thinks the stained glass windows are beautiful and feels envious of the boys helping the priest. She tries to count things, but decides counting is a bad thought. Her foot begins to itch, and Negi pulls her shoe off to scratch it while she's kneeling. The congregation gets up and begins walking to the priest for communion, kicking Negi's shoe down the pew. Abuela tells Negi to stay put, and Negi begins to search for her shoe. She crawls under the pew and ends up a pew behind when Abuela returns. Abuela seems confused but accepts that she made a mistake, and Negi prays to Jesus for Abuela to not find out she moved (another bad thought).

Negi tries very hard to care for her family members' feelings and shelter them from unpleasant emotions, which is a mark of her growing emotional maturity. Though Negi doesn't make any judgments about her grandparents' relationship, their sleeping arrangement suggests that Negi's parents aren't the first generation in the family to experience marital unhappiness.



Negi begins to build her own familial relationships by allowing Abuela to share crochet with her. Crochet also allows Negi to achieve a degree of independence, as this is the first time Negi realizes that she's able to create something herself. Both of these things help push Negi closer to adulthood and closer to becoming truly her own person.



Negi develops her own relationship with her grandfather too, continuing the process of creating her own family web.



Negi's lack of religious education means that she has to come up with her own idea of what it means to "look holy." This is another time when an adult authority figure's high expectations set Negi up to fail. She's never been in a church before and has certainly never encountered a fountain of water that's not potable or otherwise useable.



This thought exercise forces Negi to consider the different parts of her identity and make value judgments about them. It doesn't seem particularly helpful, however, since Negi classifies most of her thoughts as possibly bad, therefore developing an overwhelmingly negative view of herself despite her attempts to be good.



That afternoon, Negi packs her bag and she and Abuela eat lunch. Abuela tells Negi to not change out of her dress in case Papi is in a hurry, but Papi doesn't come. They eat dinner and it gets dark. Finally, Abuela tells Negi to change. They sit together and crochet, unwilling to admit that Papi isn't coming. Negi thinks of all the nights that Mami kept food warm for Papi in case he arrived, washed his clothes, and ironed them. Negi wonders if Mami feels like Negi does now when Papi doesn't come home, and wonders if the moans she hears on those nights are actually Mami sobbing.

Abuela teaches Negi to pray and explains bits of the Lord's Prayer to her. She then teaches Negi to cross herself properly using her right hand, since the left hand is the hand of the devil. Negi wonders, but doesn't ask, if the devil has two left hands. Negi recites the entirety of the Lord's Prayer and crosses herself.

Finally, days later, Mami arrives at Abuela's house. Mami is so pregnant Negi can barely hug her. Abuela greets Mami and offers her a chair and lemonade. Mami says that she's come to get Negi, since she missed her. Abuela mentions that she was expecting Papi on Sunday. Mami's face flashes in anger, but then she tells Negi that they have electricity now. Negi leans into Mami and listens to her talk with Abuela, wondering how they sound like such good friends when they seldom see each other.

Mami rubs her belly and mentions that it's hard with Papi gone all the time. Abuela sternly tells Negi to shower and change. Negi doesn't want to leave Mami and Abuela. She tries to listen to the adults' conversation from the bathroom, but they raise their voices and ask why the water isn't running. After her shower, Negi notices that Mami and Abuela look sad and Mami has been crying.

Negi wonders if men ever talk about their sorrows like Mami and Abuela are doing now. The sadness and pain is tangible, and Negi thinks that remaining jamona must hurt less than this. She thinks that she hates Papi and wishes he'd die, but slaps herself for thinking it. When Negi comes into the kitchen where Mami and Abuela are sitting, she thinks they must all be thinking the same thing: that Negi would rather remain jamona than cry over a man.

Abuela doesn't seem surprised, which makes it appear as though Papi's absence is possibly something she expected. Her lack of emotion adds more credence to this possibility, and also adds to Mami's suggestion that men are expected to do things like this. Negi again shifts her sympathies from Papi to Mami now that she's better able to empathize with Mami's pain.



Even if Negi is doing a lot of growing up on this visit, she maintains her childlike curiosity and penchant for asking many questions. She is developing a filter for her questions, however. She's certainly not grown up yet, but she's definitely on her way.



Even though Abuela isn't Mami's blood (or even a relation through marriage, as we'll later find out), she still makes up a part of Mami's family network. Mami's anger shows that she's just as betrayed by Papi's absence as Negi is. The fact that Mami expects Papi to not come through doesn't change the fact that it still hurts.



Abuela reminds Negi that she's still a child by sending her away, even though Negi very much wants to be treated like an adult now that she's experienced pain and betrayal from Papi.



Even if Negi is extremely angry with Papi, she knows that it's still improper to wish he'd die. This shows the results of Abuela's lessons on good and bad thoughts: Negi continues to classify her thoughts as such. By realizing that she'd rather be jamona than cry over a man, Negi makes the mature and independent decision to trust herself for her happiness rather than someone else—no matter what society tells her to do.



6. MAMI GETS A JOB

Negi's family and neighbors prepare for Hurricane Santa Clara, which is supposed to be the worst hurricane since 1918. Negi asks Papi why they name hurricanes after saints, but he doesn't know. Mami tells Negi to take the kids to Doña Ana's house, and the kids solemnly accept Negi's authority. Mami hands Negi baby Raymond, who is now 30 days old.

Doña Ana's cement house is reinforced with plywood and filled with food. Nearly 30 people spend the hurricane in her house. The men play dominos, the women cook and tend babies, the teens separate by gender and giggle and the kids circulate among the groups. When the eye of the hurricane passes over them, Papi and one of Doña Ana's sons step outside to inspect the damage. The barn, filled with animals, still stands. A rainbow breaks through the clouds and the women point it out to the children.

After the hurricane, Mami talks with Doña Lola about the damage. Negi's family lost their kitchen shed and their latrine. Nobody in Macún died, but most families lost belongings, buildings, or animals. Papi and one of Negi's uncles repair the house and build a latrine that will one day be able to accommodate running water. For months after, people talk of little else but money. Even children look for glass bottles to exchange for pennies, and boys shine shoes. Mami tries to make school uniforms, but they're not profitable.

One day, Mami asks Negi to help hook her into a brassiere that's nearly too small. She already squeezed herself into a girdle. Negi tries to hook the brassiere and when Mami holds her breath, she's able to close it. She zips Mami into her dress and Mami explains that a new factory opened in a nearby city, and she's going to look for work. Mami says that she already made dinner and Gloria (the neighbor's daughter) will come to help. Mami puts on makeup, sprays her hair, and puts on high heels. Negi thinks Mami looks unnatural and is ashamed to look at her. When Negi begins to cry, Mami embraces her. Negi thinks that Mami feels unusually bony and doesn't smell right.

Mami begins rising before Papi, cooking dinner, dressing, and giving Negi instructions before leaving for work. Negi leaves for school before the rest of her siblings. Sometimes, Negi gets to school and realizes she doesn't remember the walk. One day, Negi takes advantage of Mami's absence and goes onto the farm to harvest grapefruits. Delsa tattles when Mami asks where they came from. Mami isn't angry; she just tells Negi to not go onto the farmland again.

Papi is back with his family to prepare for and weather the hurricane, but Negi knows now that his presence isn't reliable. The fact that the children accept Negi's authority speaks to the power and danger of the hurricane (it was one of the deadliest in Puerto Rico) as well as to Negi's age.



The group at Doña Ana's house shows the sense of community in Macún, as well as the age and gender divisions within that community. Notably, Negi doesn't mention where she specifically spends the hurricane; she's still adrift as she considers where she fits in and what groups she'd like to be a part of.



It's important to note here that Negi suggests that it's unfortunate but wholly socially acceptable for children to do odd jobs and for Mami to attempt to work from home as they try to support their families. Mami's decision that making uniforms isn't profitable speaks to her business sense and belief in her own worth and abilities—she knows she can do better than the school uniforms.



Mami must assume what seems to Negi like an entirely new identity once she decides to find work outside the home. Notice too that working outside the home doesn't mean that Mami will take on less at home; she's already done her evening's work. Though she might be getting some financial power by working outside the home, she's not necessarily getting any more power to dictate how her life looks at home because of it.



Things momentarily look up for Negi when Mami gets her job. It seems as though Mami feels less of a need to display her power to the children now that she has the purpose and power that comes from a job and a paycheck.



One day, Mami gets up to go to work and gets the children off to school, but when Negi returns, Mami is at home. Mami explains that Gloria "escaped," which means she eloped. Nobody knows who she ran off with. Mami can't go to work for weeks and complains to Doña Lola that she hates sitting around and doing nothing. Negi wonders how Mami can consider housework nothing.

Mami shows Negi and the reader that her responsibility is to her family first and foremost, even before the work she loves. Mami evidently values her work outside the home far more than she values her housework. Negi's wondering suggests that she truly admires Mami for what she does at home.



One day, Negi and Mami are at Doña Lola's house. Mami tells Doña Lola with pride that she enjoys her work in the factory. Doña Lola's son, Tato, comes in and asks for food. When he won't serve himself, Doña Lola grumbles and serves him. Negi tells the reader that Tato is a year older than she is, and is the dirtiest boy she's ever met. She and Tato are competitive friends. Mami doesn't approve of this and tells Negi that because she's almost señorita, she shouldn't play with boys.

Mami begins suggesting outright that Negi is growing up: though Negi doesn't know it yet, being señorita means a girl has begun menstruating. Negi's description of her friendship with Tato suggests that she still very much wants to be a child and play games, and therefore will resist Mami's requests for Negi to act more like a (traditionally feminine) adult.



Tato suggests that he and Negi go play outside. Mami suspiciously allows Negi to go, and Negi fears that Mami knows what they're actually going to do. Outside, they run a few circles and then sneak into the oregano bush. They decide that Tato will go first: he pulls his shorts down and back up again extremely fast and tells Negi it's her turn. She insists she didn't see anything, but tells the reader that she'd seen her little brothers' penises when she changed their diapers. She says that Tato has no sisters, and she's certain he's never seen a girl's private parts.

Negi is becoming curious about sex, but note that these first experiences with Tato are relatively consensual. Negi also feels that she has a leg up on Tato when it comes to knowledge of anatomy, which allows her to feel more adult and more in control despite the fact that she's younger. This turns this experience into something that has much lower stakes for Negi, as she doesn't conceptualize seeing Tato's penis as a major "first."



Tato refuses to pull his shorts down again. Negi insists she's seen enough of her brothers' penises and therefore doesn't need to see Tato's, but Tato insists that his is already big and hairy. Negi is disbelieving and Tato says his penis "can already go into a woman," and continues to taunt Negi. Negi calls him sick and runs away. She runs into Mami coming out of Doña Lola's house, and they head home. Mami asks what Negi and Tato were doing. Negi says they were playing, and takes a shortcut home.

Negi doesn't begin to feel uncomfortable until Tato starts taunting her with what his penis can do, not just what it looks like. Negi's not yet fully aware of the mechanics of human sex, but this begins to create a sense of fear and apprehension in her regarding men and sexual encounters.



On another day, Negi and Tato are behind a latrine, Tato crouched in front of Negi trying to get a good look at her genitals. Negi decides she's had enough and pulls her panties up, which Tato deems unfair. Negi tells Tato he lied about his penis being big and hairy, and he says that his penis gets big when you rub it. Negi says she doesn't want to touch Tato, and Tato starts rubbing his crotch and thrusting his hips at Negi. Negi thinks that men are pigs and calls Tato a pig. Tato looks shocked and then smiles and tries to grab at Negi. Angry, Negi kicks Tato between the legs and he crumples to the ground.

Finally, Negi and Tato's activities turn negative and Tato tries to use the power he has as a male and an older child to take what he wants without consent. This makes it clear to Negi that her body is vulnerable and something she needs to protect from male attention and advances, even if that male is a child and her friend. Notably, Negi's tomboy identity and tendencies give her the wherewithal to kick Tato and defend herself.



Doña Lola and Mami run to see what the fuss is about, and Tato tells them that Negi kicked him for no reason. Negi tries to explain what happened, but Mami drags Negi home and won't listen. Negi breaks free and runs into the house, Mami chasing her. Mami grabs a frying pan and begins to hit Negi with it, yelling at Negi to never do what she did again. Negi isn't sure if she's not supposed to kick a boy or isn't supposed to let a boy see her private parts. Negi's siblings watch the beating.

Gloria returns and lives with her new husband behind her mother's house. Mami goes back to work, and Negi and her siblings spend their days at Gloria's house. One day, Gloria hands Negi a small paper bag and asks her to throw it in the latrine. When Negi asks what it is, Gloria won't tell. Gloria finally agrees to tell Negi what's in the bag after it makes it into the latrine. Gloria explains that the bag contained a Kotex. Negi doesn't know what that is, and Gloria confirms Negi's age (ten) and asks if Mami hasn't yet told Negi about being a señorita. Negi says that Mami has said only to stop playing with boys and keep her legs closed when she sits. Gloria laughs.

Gloria asks Negi if she knows where babies come from and how they're made. Negi thinks that she's seen plenty of animals have sex and give birth, but she's never realized that humans have to do the same thing in order to have babies. She shudders and tells Gloria she knows how babies are made. Gloria explains menstruation, and Negi seems scared. Gloria tries to comfort her, but Negi thinks that she's not scared about starting her period—she's disturbed imagining Papi performing sex on Mami, and thinks about Tato's comment about being able to stick his penis in a woman.

As one of the first mothers in Macún to get a job outside the home, Mami's family begins to attract gossip and resentment. Negi understands that Mami is breaking a taboo, but she doesn't understand it. Mami says that other people are jealous and tells Negi to ignore it, but Negi's friends abandon her and she can't ignore this. Papi seems to feel the same way as the rest of the neighbors, but Mami insists that the family needs the money she earns.

At first, Mami working outside the home makes things easier: Mami is proud and happy with her work, though her days are very long. Eventually, Mami tells Negi that she's old enough to help out and be responsible. Negi tries to get her siblings to help with chores, but they don't want to do them. Negi doesn't want to do them either, but only Negi gets in trouble when the chores are undone at the end of the day. Negi wonders why she's so bad and listens to Mami tell her nightly how she's failing at being female.

The disturbing beating from Mami and particularly the fact that Mami doesn't confirm what exactly the beating is for only heightens Negi's sense that her body is vulnerable, and not just to the advances of neighbor boys. Negi is learning that she has little power to protect her body from harm, either before or during the violence.



It's possible that Mami is trying to protect Negi and keep up the façade that Negi is still a child by keeping this information from her, but in this situation Negi's lack of knowledge is embarrassing for her. This suggests that there are consequences for trying to stall the process of growing up, regardless of what the reason might be.



Notice the language Negi uses to talk about sex here: it's something that men do to women, not something that men and women do together. Negi has the firsthand evidence of Tato trying to grab her to support this theory, which gives Negi the sense that she's again not in control of what happens to her body, and especially her sexual body. Tato too talks about sex as though it's something he'll do to women, rather than something he'll do with them.



When the community ostracizes Mami, it stands in stark contrast to the way that they weathered the hurricane together. This shows that in many ways, Mami has a split identity like Negi does. Though she wants to be a part of her community, she also wants to support her family and take on the identity of a working woman.



Mami seems to find more fulfillment in her identity as a woman with a job than as just another wife in the community. Because Negi is still very much a child, Mami's request is a lot to ask. Negi doesn't yet have the emotional maturity to exert the kind of power and control over the children that Mami does, and further, Negi's relationship with them is not necessarily one that afforded her power in the first place.



Negi wishes she could trade places with Jenny, a cousin who's an only child and therefore spoiled. Jenny is so badly behaved that Negi and her siblings aren't allowed to play with her. Even though Jenny is a year younger, Negi hears that Jenny is already *señorita*. She envies Jenny for having no chores or siblings, and parents who don't beat her for misbehaving. Negi wants desperately to beat Jenny up so that Jenny will know what it's like to hurt.

One day, Delsa comes home and says that Jenny got a bike and is giving everyone a ride. Negi drops her mop and runs after Delsa. Jenny is showing off her bike as Negi tries to gather her siblings to go home. Jenny accuses Negi of acting like an adult who thinks she can control the younger kids, and Negi's siblings join in this cry. Negi wants to cry at the unfairness of it: she wants to ride the bike and definitely doesn't think she's a grownup. Finally, Negi yells to Delsa and Norma that they can ride, but Raymond wails that he wants to ride too.

Jenny lifts Raymond onto the handlebars. Negi tries to tell Jenny that Raymond is too young, but Jenny insists. Negi yells at Delsa and Norma that they should know better, but they laugh and chase after Jenny and Raymond. Negi goes home alone and cries. When Negi reaches her yard, she hears a scream and knows that Jenny and Raymond fell. The screams are screams of terror and pain though, and Negi runs back to the bike. Raymond's toes are caught in the chain and his foot is twisted.

Two women shoo the crowd away from Raymond and Negi gathers the rest of her siblings. Someone tears the bike apart and pulls out Raymond's foot, and others take Raymond to the hospital and fetch Mami and Papi. Negi feeds her siblings dinner and fears what will happen when Mami returns. Mami does nothing however; she believes Jenny is to blame. Negi is furious that Jenny gets so much attention, even though it's actually Negi's fault. Mami quits her job to care for Raymond, whose foot refuses to heal. Papi becomes distant, the fighting gets worse, and soon Negi starts to think that anything would be better than living with her hateful parents.

After school one day, Negi tries to take shelter from the rain under a tree. Negi finally runs home, but runs into Mami and the children at the public car stop. Mami says she almost left Negi behind, and that they're moving to Santurce. Negi is scared as she sits with her siblings in the back seat of the car. It takes them three hours to get to Santurce. The air is foul. They reach Doña Andrea's house and Mami, Negi, and the children fall asleep immediately upon getting into bed.

Negi feels the pain and injustice of her current lot in life very deeply. For now, this is her identity: the oldest child with far too much responsibility for her maturity level. However, Negi dreams of a life where she's not in as much emotional pain; this is one way that she thinks about and considers positive family relationships.



Though Negi is trying very hard to behave in a way that will make Mami happy, she betrays her youth when she's just as excited to ride the bike as her younger siblings. In this situation, Negi's family isn't particularly helpful or reliable; her siblings are in no way making this easier for Negi, even if they know that they should. They fear Mami's power, not Negi's.



Giving up on being an adult has disastrous consequences for Negi's family, though it could also be said that Negi's lack of power in the first place created the situation. Even if the family needs the money that Mami earns working outside the home, and even if Mami feels she can only count on family members, this shows that even family isn't foolproof.



The community shows that it's still willing to help when crisis strikes, even if they don't approve of Mami's job. Negi suggests that what she truly wants from her parents is attention, and that even negative attention is better than no attention. This is indicative of Negi's status as the oldest child, as she's asked to put her needs and desires aside for the sake of her younger siblings.



Once again, Mami takes matters into her own hands and moves the children without Papi's help or, it seems, input. The fact that Mami considered leaving Negi shows that Mami very much views Negi as almost an adult who doesn't need constant maternal care. Negi never clearly says who Doña Andrea is, but she's evidently one of Mami's network of friends and family members.



7. EL MANGLE

Negi tells the reader that her new neighborhood floats on a lagoon filled with sewage. On her first morning there, Negi wakes early and tells Mami she has to use the bathroom. Mami leads Negi to the bathroom, which is a room with a bare bulb and a hole cut into the floor. Mami offers to go first and tells Negi to aim carefully. Negi is afraid to use the toilet, and Mami offers to hold Negi's shoulders to steady her. Mami tells Negi to take her panties off when she finds she can't squat over the wide hole, and Negi fears that there's a body down there that will see her genitals or possibly pull her down into the sewage. Mami tries to soothe Negi, but Negi panics, screams, and jumps back.

Doña Andrea appears at the door and asks what's going on. Mami explains that Negi is afraid of the bathroom, and she and Doña Andrea laugh. Negi cries uncontrollably and yells at them to not laugh at her. She punches Mami in the stomach, and Mami angrily grabs Negi's hands and growls at her to stop. Mami tells Negi to use the bathroom, but Negi refuses. Mami tells Negi she'll have to hold it. Negi feels far away as she urinates where she stands.

Later, as Doña Andrea feeds Negi, Norma, and Delsa, she tells them that if you hit your mother, you can't be buried, because your hand will stick out in front of you and you won't fit in a coffin. Doña Andrea says that God punishes bad children this way, and though Negi fears that Doña Andrea is right, she tells Delsa and Norma that they could just build a bigger coffin.

Negi describes Doña Andrea. She's short and round, and Raymond is scared of her. Her house floats at the end of a pier, and she makes the children stay inside so they don't fall into the lagoon. Negi is bored with nothing to do, since Mami won't sign them up for school until she finds work. Mami wants to rent the house next door. One day, Negi asks Mami when Papi is going to visit, and Mami's sharp reply makes Negi think that Papi doesn't know where they are. Negi explains that Papi hates places like this that smell so strongly.

When Negi finally gets to go to school, the uniform is ugly and the school is made of stone. Negi's teacher, Señora Leona, uses only Spanish and is angry and mean. Señora Leona's class is studying fractions, which Negi hasn't covered yet. One day, Señora Leona calls Negi to solve a problem on the board. Negi walks slowly to the board and tries to solve the problem in her head, but she can't make it make sense.

Once again, Mami and Negi have the potential for a bonding moment as Mami shows Negi how to use the toilet and offers to help her. Negi's reaction shows how much of a child she still truly is, as well as how unsafe she feels as a result of moving and being uprooted. The specific fear that something in the sewage might see her genitals alludes to Negi's sexual coming of age, as she's aware now that it's her duty to keep her genitals private and therefore safe.



Negi's coming of age is becoming more apparent: this is the first time she acts on the anger she feels towards Mami. This plants the seed early on that Negi's true coming of age will be tied to how she deals with her relationship to Mami's violence towards her.



Negi is confronted again with the possibility that she's bad. This takes Abuela's "think good thoughts" to a new extreme, as now Negi herself is bad, not just her thoughts. This contributes to Negi's fear that she's failing at being the responsible oldest sibling and being female in general.



Negi's suspicion suggests that Mami had previously told Papi where she was going, but this time is somehow different. Mami has been doing this for many years at this point and it's possible she's decided that Papi is simply too unreliable to include in her plans. This seems to be a direct result of Mami's job, as it gives her power and purpose to make these decisions alone and not rely only on Papi's income.



Even if Negi didn't have great experiences during the American "invasion" of Macún, she finds that the complete rejection of American culture is almost worse. This suggests that Negi herself inhabits some space in the middle between Puerto Rican and American cultures.



Negi stands at the board thinking until Señora Leona asks if she needs help. Finally, Señora Leona asks if Negi learned fractions "in that school for jíbaros." The students laugh and Señora Leona calls Negi ignorant. She grabs the chalk and makes Negi stand and watch her solve the problem. Negi sends her soul outside to sit in a tree until Señora Leona sends her back to her seat.

Negi escapes Señora Leona's cruelty by engaging with the secret wandering part of her identity. This shows that Negi can code switch within herself and adopt different personas to create more comfortable situations within her own mind, not just for people around her.



The walk home from school is very long. Negi passes cement houses and wishes she lived in one of them. She watches mothers greet their daughters, but when she gets to her own house, nobody greets Negi. She helps her sisters with their homework and draws pictures of flowers and birds.

Negi seems to deeply feel the absence of a warm relationship with Mami, particularly compared to her female classmates. She compensates by taking on more of a maternal role with Delsa and Norma.



One day, Mami takes Negi by the hand and points out the pipe connected to the faucet. She leads Negi along the pier, following the pipe. She points out that the pipes don't ever draw water from the disgusting lagoon, and after that, Negi doesn't mind bathing or drinking the water.

Even if Negi fears that Mami isn't there for her, this experience shows that Mami does indeed care about Negi's emotional wellbeing and is willing to help Negi understand that she's safe.



Sometimes Mami lets Negi sit on a boat beside Doña Andrea's house. Negi sits in the boat and watches the water and the faraway mountains. She thinks of sitting with Papi and starts to cry, but knows that Mami would be angry if she knew why she was crying. Negi swallows her pain.

Negi still hopes to have a good relationship with Papi, but is learning from Mami that such a thing probably won't happen. It's a mark of Negi's growing maturity that she's learning to swallow her pain, just as Mami does when Papi hurts her.



One day, Mami asks Negi to do something very special. She tells Negi that a woman's baby boy died, and when he died, his eyes didn't close. She explains that he can't be buried with his eyes open, and asks Negi if she'd close the baby's eyes. Negi refuses but Mami offers her ice cream. Negi wonders if Mami already said that she'd do it. They argue a little more, and Negi finally agrees. Mami pulls out Negi's good white dress, and Negi wonders if she'll be able to see the baby's soul trapped in its head.

It's obvious that Mami has already offered Negi for this task. This shows that Mami still has the power to control Negi, and Negi agrees in part because she's aware of this power dynamic. Negi's curiosity about other people's souls continues; she construes this as an opportunity for her to learn more about how souls function.



Negi gets dressed and comments that she looks like she's going to make communion. Mami chuckles, and Negi wonders if the Virgin Mary won't protect her like she does Catholic children. Mami ignores Negi's questions, fixes Negi's bow, and leads her out of the house. They walk too quickly for Negi, but when Negi asks to slow down, Mami only tells her she looks pretty. Mami points out the house and gets down to straighten Negi's dress. Negi sees that Mami is scared.

It's unclear exactly why Negi must perform this task, but it's possibly connected to Mami's attempts to create a community for herself in El Mangle (or the belief that only another child can close a dead child's eyes). Negi continues to consider how and where she exists as a sub-par Catholic as she works on piecing together her identity.



Negi is so scared she feels like she's floating when they reach the house. Two women greet them, and one gets down on Negi's level and introduces herself and the baby's mother. The woman blesses Negi and gives her a rosary to hold. They stand over the baby's coffin. The woman dips Negi's fingers in holy water and tells Negi what to do. When she's told, Negi puts her fingers on the baby's eyelids to close them while the women pray. Then Negi takes her hand away and rubs her fingers against her dress. She runs to Mami and tells her she wants to go home.

Mami speaks to the women for a minute as Negi keeps saying she wants to go home. Negi then hallucinates that a seagull tells her to leave. Negi backs out of the house and Mami soon joins her. They walk quickly back to their house where Negi desperately rips off her dress and pulls off her shoes and undergarments. She runs into the shower and scrubs herself, particularly the fingers that touched the dead baby.

Negi tells the reader that she'd never hated going to school before, but she and Señora Leona hate each other and everyone makes fun of her. One day, Señora Leona assigns the class to write a composition using as many vocabulary words as possible. Negi thinks the assignment is stupid, and Señora Leona tells Negi to use neater handwriting. Negi vows to use all ten words, just because Señora Leona said using all ten would be impossible. Señora Leona continues to call attention to Negi and tells her to stop thinking. Negi laughs. When Señora Leona raps her pointer it breaks, and the entire class bursts out laughing. Finally, she curses at her class and, embarrassed, turns to the door.

Papi appears at the door and Negi runs into his arms. They sit outside and Negi tells him about how mean Señora Leona is. Papi goes inside and talks to Señora Leona. She hears them both laugh. Papi leads Negi away, and as Negi looks back, Señora Leona pretends to spit at her.

8. LETTERS FROM NEW YORK

Negi listens to a song about a man having trouble in love. She thinks that the man will go on loving the woman he's singing about even if he says his heart is closed, just like Mami and Papi do.

Negi's separates her soul from her body in this highly emotional, fantastical, and frightening situation. This gives Negi two separate identities: one that's capable of leaving the house, and one that's good and follows directions. Negi gets none of the satisfaction of seeing the baby's soul, which suggests that Negi's conception of the soul is very personal and not shared by others.



Negi is so afraid she truly begins to disassociate from herself, though the hallucination can also be seen as an attempt by Negi's mind to protect her from trauma. This entire experience shows Negi yet again that she doesn't have control or power over her body and what she does with it.



Negi tries very hard to use the appropriate code of conduct with Señora Leona, but she recognizes the ridiculousness of being told to not think in school. The class's reaction suggests that they might have similar problems with Señora Leona even if they're not from rural hometowns. This robs Señora Leona of her power and gives the children a win when she tries to leave.



Papi comes, though it wasn't expected. This shows that even though Papi does care for Negi and will save her at times, a rescue by him isn't something to count on, even if it's successful when it happens.



Negi finally realizes that her parents cycle through periods of good times and bad times but keep coming back to each other.



After Papi found Mami and the children, he convinced Mami to forgive him and the family moved to a busy avenue in Santurce. Their home is now a two-room apartment behind a noisy bar. Mami tells the children to never go in the bar or talk to anyone. Negi again walks to school alone. At night Negi's family sleeps in the crowded space and listens to the noise from the bar. When they hear women in the bar, Mami explains that those women aren't good women. Every morning, Negi and her siblings jump over vomit and urine stains.

Raymond's foot still won't heal. He occasionally develops a fever and blisters on his foot. Doctors want to amputate his foot, but Mami won't let them. She comforts Raymond one night and vows to find a specialist for him. Negi wishes she could go back in time and never let Raymond ride Jenny's bike.

One day, Mami receives a letter from Tata. She gives Negi a personal note from Tata, which is unusual. Negi takes the letter outside to read it. Tata compliments the story Negi sent, but says she had a hard time reading Negi's handwriting. Negi crumples her letter and throws it down, collapsing in Mami's lap. Héctor brings Mami the balled-up letter and Mami reads it. She comforts Negi and then tells her to print when she writes to Tata.

Negi hears her parents murmuring in bed one night. Papi sounds angry and gets out of bed. He doesn't return for days. Mami can't work regularly since she has to care for Raymond, but she makes a deal with her landlord to do some cooking for the bar. Some days Mami leaves the house dressed nicely, and Negi says she didn't learn until years later that Mami was going to clean other people's houses.

One day, Negi comes home to see laundry strung up in their front room. Mami explains that she's ironing for the laundry down the street, and Negi notes that ironing is Mami's least favorite chore. Negi asks to iron, and Mami incredulously agrees to teach her. She finds one of Papi's shirts and teaches her how to set the temperature and create steam. Mami guides Negi around the shirt and praises Negi's work. Negi declares that ironing is fun and Mami laughs. Mami never asks Negi to iron after that, but Negi sometimes irons to feel close to Mami.

In December, the landlord fences the backyard and leads a pig into the enclosure. Right before Christmas, Mami, Papi, the landlord, and the neighbors all help slaughter the pig. The entire neighborhood gathers to celebrate Christmas and eats and dances together.

The fact that Papi agrees to live in Santurce suggests that he may be trying to honor Mami's desire to live anywhere but Macún. Mami shows that she cares for her children by trying to protect them from the patrons of the bar. Again, women are divided into different categories based upon their relationships to men.



Mami is fiercely loyal to her children and shows it by protecting Raymond from amputation. Negi keeps it to herself that she feels responsible for the accident in the first place.



Negi doesn't get the same sense of security that Mami does from the extended family after receiving the letter from Tata. This shows that though Negi is undeniably a part of the family, she still has to build her own relationships with these family members. Negi's mood swings might indicate that she's approaching puberty.



Mami continues to build her identity as the primary caregiver and provider for her family in Papi's absence. Notice that while both she and Papi keep secrets from the rest of the family, Mami's secrets help the family while Papi's secret lovers do not.



Negi and Mami continue to bond as Negi takes more of an interest in Mami's happiness. This allows them to build a stronger mother-daughter relationship and creates a greater sense of trust. Negi's desire to do this in the first place is connected to her growing up, as she's beginning to see Mami as a whole person and not just a mother.



Christmas dinner creates the sense that there's a real community and a sense of family among the neighbors.



Several weeks later, Mami tells Negi that she's taking her to spend a few days with her cousins, Gladys and Angie. Gladys and Angie are Negi's age, and their mother, Angelina, greets Mami and Negi. Gladys is tall and timid and Negi likes her, though she understands that Gladys will remain *jamona*. Angie, however, is pretty and spoiled. The cousins take Negi to show her their rooms. Gladys' room is narrow and sparse. Angie's room is pink and covered in ruffles and posters of American movie stars. Angie tells Negi that she can't come in without permission, and Negi backs out of the room. She sits with Gladys and Gladys mutters that Angie is spoiled.

Negi asks Gladys if she has a radio, and Gladys explains that her mother is Evangelical and doesn't like the radio. Negi is concerned that her aunt and uncle are going to convert her to be dull like other Evangelicals she's met. Negi goes downstairs and asks Mami if they can leave, and Mami reminds Negi that she's staying for a few days. Angelina then leads Negi into Tío Lalo's store to choose a dessert for dinner. The store is evidently Tío Lalo's domain, and Negi hurriedly chooses a candy bar and runs back into the house.

They pray before dinner and then Tío Lalo asks Mami how long she'll be in New York. Negi is in disbelief that Mami didn't tell her she was going to New York. Mami explains that Tata made Raymond an appointment to see a foot specialist. She promises to come back for Negi as soon as she returns, but won't give Negi an exact day. Finally, she tells Negi she'll return in two Sundays in the afternoon.

As Negi lies in bed with Gladys that night, Gladys tells Negi about how her parents beat her, but Negi won't engage. She wonders where her siblings are, and figures that Mami has probably moved to New York permanently and given Negi away. Finally when Gladys starts talking about potatoes, Negi takes interest. Gladys explains that Negi is here to peel potatoes for Tío Lalo's famous stuffed potato balls. Negi cries and thinks that this is an intense punishment for letting Raymond get hurt.

When Negi and Gladys finish eating the next morning, Tío Lalo presents them with boiled potatoes and Gladys shows Negi how to properly peel them. Two weeks later, on Sunday, Negi wakes up, peels her potatoes, and then dresses nicely. She sits in the living room and reads a religious magazine while she waits for Mami. Mami never comes. When Tío Lalo closes his store and comes inside, he tells her that Mami sent a letter and isn't coming until the following Friday. Negi knows he's lying and feels humiliated.

*Negi finally gets to experience a nuclear family other than hers up close. Gladys and Angie's family shows Negi that it's possible for children to still be deeply unhappy even when they're afforded the things that financial privilege can buy, like a room of one's own. It also allows Negi to begin building her own familial relationships with Gladys, who is much more pleasant even if she probably is going to be *jamona*.*



Negi is very afraid that religion has exceptional power to change her identity. Her fear of Angelina converting her to be Evangelical also suggests that Negi now identifies with being a "bad" and non-practicing Catholic, even if the identification is in name only. This shows that parts of Negi's identity are beginning to solidify into one and not be quite so fragmented.



Though Mami is doing something to help her family by taking Raymond to specialists, Negi sees her departure as a betrayal. Mami's unwillingness to tell Negi exactly when she's returning creates even more tension, as it's suggested that Mami is only giving Negi a date to make her stop asking.



Negi is still fixated on her belief that this whole situation is her fault. In her anger and pain she feels Mami's betrayal even more deeply, but she doesn't recognize yet that by staying with family members, she's still reaping the rewards of Mami's well-connected extended family.



Negi takes Mami at her word and makes preparations to leave with her. Tío Lalo then makes the betrayal even worse for Negi by not telling her sooner that Mami wasn't going to come today. He doesn't behave as Negi believes a family member should; he allows her to feel betrayed and alone even though she's technically surrounded by family.



Mami finally returns with presents. Negi gets a yellow handbag with a mirror. Mami gives Angie, Gladys, and their parents presents and goes on about New York and the doctors who saw Raymond. Negi and Mami finally leave and get on a bus. When Mami pulls Negi off at a different stop than usual, she explains that they've moved.

Negi doesn't say when Mami returns, and therefore never confirms if Tío Lalo was indeed lying. However, the fact that Mami does return shows that Negi was dramatizing her departure; Mami still cares for all her children and will always return for them.



9. CASI SEÑORITA

Negi begins babysitting, but stops quickly: an old lady looking in the window catches her sliding nickels out of a baby's piggy bank. Negi is angry that nobody asked why the lady was snooping. A neighbor suggests that Mami send the children to church, and Mami agrees. She bathes everyone and buttons them into their best clothes as she reminds them of their manners.

Negi has a very distinct sense of justice here and feels that she was wrongly accused. Beginning to babysit other people's children for money is a marker of Negi's impending entry into adulthood, though here she shows she's not yet ready to handle the responsibility.



The church is up the street from the house. Though it was once a private home, it was refurbished with pews. When Negi and her siblings enter the churchyard, the ladies declare that Negi is old enough to attend the service. Negi sits in the back with other older children. The preacher works himself into a frenzy and the congregation joins him in rapture and frantic prayer. Negi is entranced and wants to join in, but she's too afraid.

Even if Negi isn't truly coming of age yet, she's old enough for some people to consider her an adult. Negi is unwilling to allow her soul to take part in the religious devotion she sees during the service. This begins to suggest that Negi's soul is staying inside her body more as she gets older.



Negi mentions her dreams of playing piano to Papi. He and Mami fight over whether she should—Mami objects to the cost and Negi's prospective teacher, Don Luis. Negi begins lessons on a Sunday afternoon. Don Luis greets Negi and Papi and sits Negi at the piano while Papi works on his porch to pay for the lesson. At the end of the hour, Don Luis suggests that Negi come when Papi isn't working, since Papi's hammering interferes with Negi's timing.

Papi wins this argument and asserts his power and dominance over Mami and the family. Papi evidently wants to connect with Negi over something, hence the emotional and financial support for the lessons. Mami's concerns about Don Luis, however, indicate that Negi is becoming precariously mature (at least physically) and is at risk because of that.



Mami begins walking Negi to her lessons. She only insists that Negi wear clean clothes, but Don Luis often compliments Negi on particular pieces of clothing. When Negi tells Mami about it, Mami mutters to Papi about Don Luis being a "dirty old man." Negi finds the whole thing exciting and likes that her teacher sees her as more than a student, so one day she wears a dress he'd previously complimented.

Negi continues to suggest that Mami was right to worry about Negi's lessons with Don Luis. Though Negi finds the attention interesting at this point, the reader is led to agree with Mami that Don Luis's attentions are likely inappropriate. Negi's reaction to her teacher's interest shows that she's becoming more curious and less afraid of relationships of a sexual nature.



Don Luis compliments Negi's dress and Negi begins her scales. Don Luis puts his arms around Negi to reposition her hands. Negi pretends to accidentally bump him and he moves away, but minutes later he slaps her fingers for making a mistake. Negi jumps away, surprised and humiliated. She sits back down as far away from Don Luis as possible, but he stands behind her and holds her elbows in the correct position. Negi realizes that this stance affords him a view down the front of her dress. She jumps up and yells at him. Feeling ashamed, angry, and dirty, Negi runs home. When she tells Mami and Papi, they stop the lessons immediately. Mami goes to speak with Don Luis herself, and he avoids Negi for the rest of the school year.

Negi's new home is minutes away from Abuela's house. Negi often visits to eat guanimes, a food that Mami refuses to make because they're labor intensive. Abuelo died the year before, and one day Negi stands in Abuelo's room. Abuela comes up behind Negi and leads her back to the kitchen, where she tells her that Mami is going to New York again. Negi thinks that Raymond's pain means that he gets to spend more time with Mami than anyone else. Negi begins crying on Abuela's shoulder, saying that she hates it when Mami leaves. She tells the reader that she couldn't say something like that to Mami, as it would put an even bigger burden on her. Negi feels as though she's wrapped in a blanket of responsibility.

After Mami leaves, Titi Generosa comes to stay with Negi and her siblings. Negi likes her a lot: she speaks openly about taboo subjects with a foul mouth and allows the children to do as they please. They call her "Titi Avena" (Auntie Oatmeal) behind her back because that's all she ever feeds the children. Papi is suspicious of this, and one day tells the children that they have to behave or Titi Generosa won't watch them anymore. Negi and her siblings take this to mean that if they make Titi Generosa miserable, Mami will return from New York to watch them herself.

Papi allows this to go on for a while, but one morning he takes Negi to Tío Lalo's house to stay. When Negi asks when Mami is coming home, Papi answers as if he doesn't care when she returns. Negi falls into the same rhythm as she did previously in her cousins' house. She peels potatoes every morning with Gladys and silently seethes.

This experience makes it clear to the reader, Negi, and Negi's parents that Negi is undeniably growing up and becoming an object of male attention. Negi's instinct to protect herself from unwanted male attention still exists, though unlike with Tato, Negi feels fear here rather than just a sense of righteousness and anger—Don Luis is not a peer, but is in a position of power over her. As she comes of age and deals with these unwanted sexual advances, Negi has to balance dignidad and the necessity of remaining respectful with her desire to protect her body.



Some things have changed very little for Negi: she still desires Mami's love more than anything. However, it shows that Negi is coming of age when she understands that she shouldn't burden Mami by asking her to stay. She understands now that Mami is only human and this can't be easy for her either. This means that in Mami's absence, Negi will again have to take on more responsibility than she's prepared to handle at her maturity level. Coming of age is a long and messy process.



The logic that Negi and her siblings use shows just how young they really are, as it's apparent to the reader that this logic is exceptionally flawed. Note though that Papi doesn't seem particularly interested in making things easier for the person taking care of his children. This suggests that this situation is also hard for him, though it also indicates that he's unwilling to perform Mami's role in her absence.



Papi seems totally disengaged from his family when he drops off Negi. This is terrifying for Negi and brings up her prior questions of whether or not Papi truly loves her and her family. This attitude foreshadows the family's impending breakup.



10. DREAMS OF A BETTER LIFE

When Mami returns for Negi at Tío Lalo's house, she tells Negi and Angelina that when she returned from New York, she found the house locked and learned from the neighbor that Papi "packed off the kids" and went back to Macún. Negi thinks that there's something different about Mami. She came back from New York with painted nails and a haircut, but she also seems prouder and more confident now. Negi is simultaneously frightened and enthralled. She thinks Mami looks more beautiful than ever.

As Mami and Negi walk to the bus, men stare, whistle, and catcall Mami. Mami ignores them. Negi is both proud and afraid: she's afraid that Mami has become public property and that one of the men is going to take Mami from her forever. Negi wants to punch the men and spends the entire bus ride miserable.

Their new home is near a golf course and next door to an aunt and uncle with a television set. Negi and her siblings watch Tom and Jerry, Mickey Mouse, Superman, and Tarzan. Rather than watch television, Papi spends his time in a shed reading. He becomes withdrawn and morose. Negi sneaks into Papi's shed one day and studies the books written in formal Spanish. She sees a bottle of amber liquid and a bowl with ashes, and leaves the shed scared and chilled.

Negi gets her own room in the new house, which she's allowed to decorate with cut pictures from food packaging. The first night, Negi struggles to sleep totally alone for the first time. She gets up when she hears the rooster crow and tiptoes to Mami and Papi's room. She walks in to find her parents sitting in bed naked, and they blush, pull their covers up, and send Negi back to bed. Negi sleeps on the couch and falls asleep to the sounds of her parents having sex.

Negi tells the reader that love makes people do crazy things, and lists some violent newspaper headlines. The radio, however, is different: the men are decent and the women, though often downtrodden, are optimistic and cheerful. Negi comes home from school daily to sit and listen to romantic radio programs. She imagines that she looks like the heroines. At night she daydreams her own fantasies of being rescued by an **Armando or Ricardo**. According to these soap operas, Negi will fall in love at first sight and will have to suffer, and she dreams of the suffering road to happiness every night.

Papi truly did disconnect from his family entirely. Negi doesn't offer her perspective, but Mami seems wholly betrayed by this. This continues to build the sense that the family is struggling to stay together. Mami seems to be creating a new identity for herself in New York, notably one that's entirely separate from her relationship to Papi.



Negi realizes here that Mami is sexually attractive to men other than her father. This is terrifying, as Papi's relationship with Mami is relatively predictable (if heartbreaking and difficult), while these men represent a complete unknown.



Papi continues his process of separating himself from the family and their lives. Negi is disturbed to see that Papi is turning to substances and solitude, as this suggests that he's not getting any happiness or fulfillment from Mami or his children with her. Though the cartoons are in Spanish, they introduce Negi and her siblings to American characters.



Though Negi is old enough now to get the privacy of her own room, she's still enough of a child to not be entirely ready to accept it. She still needs parental comfort. Sleeping on the couch where she can hear her parents recalls how she and her family lived in Macún with only a sheet separating the adults from the children, though now Negi knows what she's hearing.



*Rather than look to Papi for an idea of what men should be like, Negi begins to look outside her family and to media to give her an idea of what relationships can be. This allows Negi to learn that not all men are *sinverguëznas*; Armando and Ricardo certainly aren't (though whether men like them exist in the real world is yet to be determined). This also gives Negi a way to think about her own suffering and provides a script for the end of that pain.*



As Negi dreams these fantasies, Mami and Papi's relationship gets even worse. Though they've been together 14 years, they're not married. After returning from New York, Mami began insisting that they get married, and they fight about it constantly. When the fights start, Negi goes to her room and imagines that men and women can be gentle, kind, and loving to each other.

One day, a boy named Johannes Vélez offers to carry Negi's books for her. Negi snaps at him, even though she likes when he looks at her and wants to give him her books. She fears that letting him carry her books will mean giving him more, even though she's not sure what "more" is. She tells him he can carry her books tomorrow and walks home angry that she didn't let him carry them today.

Negi asks Mami what to do if a boy offers to carry her books. Mami says to let him, and asks who wants to carry Negi's books. When Negi mentions Johannes, Delsa, Norma, and Alicia taunt Negi about having a boyfriend. Mami doesn't recognize Johannes' last name and Edna and Raymond join to taunt Negi even more. Finally, Mami sends the children away and turns to Negi, who's embarrassed and confused.

Mami tells Negi to invite Johannes to the house, but Negi starts to cry when Mami mentions that Negi is "casi señorita" (almost a woman) and needs to make boys respect her. Negi asks when she's going to be a real señorita, and why she should do all these things because she's casi señorita. She breaks into heaving sobs. Mami comforts Negi and sends her to her room to lie down instead of go to school. Negi undresses and feels as though the world is cruel and horrible, and Mami asks God to help her get through her children's puberties.

Negi describes the space under the house, which she and her siblings divide up into clearly defined play areas for each of them. Negi spends a lot of time there and takes special interest in a nearby gardenia bush that has never flowered. She asks Papi and Mami how to help the gardenia flower, and she begins pruning and watering the bush. One day, while Negi waters the gardenia, Johannes appears at the gate and greets Negi. Negi is furious he came uninvited.

The fact that Negi waits until now to tell the reader that her parents aren't married indicates that it either wasn't a problem before, or she simply wasn't aware (remember Negi's early assertion that only wives and future wives lived in Macún).



After Negi's previous sexual experiences, she's understandably afraid to engage a boy in romance as she's very protective of herself and her body, and has learned to see men as aggressors.



Negi's coming of age is novel and strange for everyone in her family. Mami sending the children away, however, shows that she cares for Negi's comfort and wellbeing during this confusing time. This strengthens the relationship between Mami and Negi.



This liminal space between girl and woman is supremely confusing for Negi, particularly when Mami links it to how Negi interacts with boys. This shows that even if Negi's identity is in many ways solidifying, the primary split now is between child and adult. Negi continues to humanize Mami, too. This isn't just hard for Negi; Mami has to parent a sensitive preteen and that presents its own set of challenges.



When Negi has something to care for, she's calmer and feels far more adult, perhaps because of her early childhood experiences mothering her younger siblings. Johannes sets Negi entirely off balance, then. Notably, his sudden appearance exists in a similar realm as Papi's unexplained disappearances and appearances, though Negi is unable to formulate a response when the person appearing is her peer and not her parent.



Mami appears with the rest of Negi's siblings and greets Johannes. Negi is embarrassed and, at Mami's prodding, asks Johannes in. He sits on the sofa while Negi's siblings arrange themselves so they can watch Negi and Johannes. Negi asks Johannes where his "funny name" came from. He blushes and says he was born in Kentucky. Negi persists in this line of questioning until Mami calls her into the kitchen and tells her she's being rude. She suggests Negi take Johannes outside.

Negi reenters the living room and asks Johannes if he'd like to "see a tree." Mami rolls her eyes, but Johannes follows Negi outside. She asks Johannes what he's doing at her house. They stand by the creek and Johannes talks about his father. Negi feels that she can't compare Johannes to her adult male soap opera lovers and doesn't want to listen to him. Negi steps towards the creek and falls in. She emerges, covered in mud and crying, and tells Johannes to go home. He leaves laughing.

One day Mami leaves Negi at home to watch the children while she takes Edna and Raymond shopping. Negi reads a romance novel instead of doing what Mami asked. A man comes out of a nearby house wearing a straw sombrero. Negi thinks he looks like a Mexican movie star and thinks his name must be **Ricardo**. Her heart skips a beat. She wills the man to look at her and fall in love, but he sits by the stream and stares into it. Negi goes inside, brushes her hair, and unbuttons a button on her dress to show off her not-yet-developed cleavage.

When Negi goes back outside, the man is lying down with his sombrero over his face. Negi cuts a flower from her budding gardenia bush and buries her face in it. The man stands up and looks at Negi, and Negi feels older and bold and stares back. The man tips his hat at her, and she puts the gardenia flower in her open buttonhole. The man laughs and Negi moves the flower to behind her ear. She leans against a mango tree and puffs her chest out as the man watches, until Mami interrupts Negi's reverie.

Negi buttons her blouse and the man walks back towards a rich man's house. Mami asks who the man is and Negi feigns ignorance. Mami sends Negi inside, telling her the romance novels are trash.

Again, Negi simply has no formula to go off of as she tries to interact with Johannes. Armando and Ricardo are poor role models at this point because neither Negi nor Johannes are particularly suave with their interactions, making this whole situation both awkward and amusing.



Negi is entirely disenchanted with this whole flirting and romance business when it doesn't fit the idea she has in her head. However, trying to separate from the present and daydream has disastrous and embarrassing consequences here, which shows that Negi splitting her identity as she did when she was a child isn't as useful now that she's growing up.



When confronted with a real-life Armando or Ricardo, Negi feels far older and more mature than she actually is. This muddies the state of Negi's identity even further: though she's still very childish and Mami wants Negi to act like an adult, sometimes Negi feels particularly (and hilariously) adult. This is indicative of her sexual coming of age as well.



The man sees the humor in 12-year-old Negi's flirtations, though Negi is entirely blind to how silly she looks. The way that Negi moves her body shows that she's learning from and internalizing what she's seen on TV of female movie stars. Negi can experiment with being adult by copying their movements.



Mami is still protective of Negi and sees this man as a threat to Negi's safety. She understands that Negi feels the way she does about the man because of what she's learning in the media.



The fighting between Mami and Papi escalates even further. Negi hears them breaking things as they yell, but she finds no broken pieces when she wakes in the mornings. She begins spending time in the library to avoid being at home. One day, as Negi helps Mami butcher a chicken, she sobs that nobody loves her, and laments that Mami and Papi keep fighting. Mami wrestles with the chicken as Negi keeps whining, and Mami finally tells Negi that her relationship with Papi isn't Negi's business. Negi cries that life isn't fair, and Mami finally comforts her on the steps. Negi notices that Mami is both crying and laughing, but Mami won't explain why she's laughing or crying.

Papi tells Negi that she'll be a teenager next week and explains how Americans came up with the word "teenager." He tells Negi that she'll like rock and roll, even though Negi insists that she doesn't like it. Papi seems happy and Negi pouts. Papi tells Negi that Mami is talking about moving to New York, shocking Negi. Papi calls to Mami to confirm. Mami tells Papi she has no choice and he's cruel for what he's doing.

Papi insists that he doesn't know what Mami wants. Mami says she wants him to marry her, but Papi insists that he's done everything he should. Their fight gets louder and angrier. Negi crouches against the wall and watches them fight. Her siblings join her and watch their parents. Negi says that in this moment, her parents were only real to each other.

Mami begins to prepare for the move to New York. She buys suitcases and decides that Negi, Raymond, and Edna will go with her, while Delsa, Norma, Héctor, and Alicia will stay until Mami can afford to send for them. Mami and Papi both refuse to talk to Negi about what's happening, but Papi does tell her that he'll never go to New York. Negi doesn't see how Mami can think that Papi is a good man when he won't fight for them.

Papi drives Negi, Mami, Raymond, and Edna to the airport. He unloads their bags and kisses them goodbye. He tells Negi to write and Negi follows Mami to the plane. She turns around to look at Papi and her remaining siblings, but Mami ushers her onto the plane. Negi tells the reader that for Mami, New York would be a twisting adventure. For Negi, the move created a hybrid, and she'd never fully forgive this move.

Being as old as she is now, Negi can escape her parents' disagreements simply by removing herself from the vicinity. Mami demands that Negi treat her as an adult and respect that she's not a part of Mami and Papi's relationship. She asks Negi to keep doing what Negi has already begun doing, and treat Mami as an independent person and not just a mother. It's apparent, however, that Mami and Negi are becoming closer as Negi gets older.



Papi's emotions and motives as he talks to Negi are very unclear, though it seems he's using her to provoke a fight with Mami. This is a betrayal of his family, as he's destroying Negi's sense of security and trust in her parents. Mami tells him this.



Mami wants Papi to acknowledge and legitimize their relationship with a marriage license. This suggests that Mami is insecure in the foundation of her relationship with Papi and that she may indeed be an "other woman."



Negi sees this as a major betrayal on Papi's part, which will work to turn Negi even more towards Mami's side in this argument. Both parents refuse to engage with Negi as an adult and instead force her to remain a passive and powerless child as the family breaks apart.



Negi's identity had just begun to solidify prior to the move, but she suggests that being in New York undoes or alters much of the work she'd already done—she now must become a "hybrid" again in a new and foreign environment. Papi continues to act as though he's not particularly emotional about the situation, which drives home the fact that he's fully checked out from the family.



11. ANGELS ON THE CEILING

Mami admires the airplane stewardesses and suggests that Negi might want to be a stewardess one day and travel the world for free. Negi thinks that she'd like to go places where she can't pronounce anything, and asks Mami if planes ever fall from the sky. A woman in front of Mami tells Negi that talking like that is bad luck. The stewardesses bring dinner and after she eats, Negi falls in and out of sleep.

In Brooklyn, Negi's plane lands. Mami gathers her children and they join the exiting passengers. Mami points them towards a tall woman in the terminal, whom Negi learns is Tata. Raymond runs to her, and Mami introduces Edna and Negi. Mami introduces the man with Tata, Don Julio, as Tata's friend. Mami collects her baggage, and Don Julio tries to hail a taxi. Several drivers turn down the group, which Don Julio says is technically illegal.

Don Julio finally gets a taxi. The driver doesn't speak Spanish and keeps asking questions in English. Mami tells him they're from Puerto Rico, and the driver begins a long speech that Negi doesn't understand. Negi presses her face to the window and looks out while Tata and Mami tease her. Negi thought New York was going to be clean and lively, but finds that the streets are dark and empty.

They arrive at a brick building and unload their belongings. Tata leads them into a hallway and into a small room. She introduces Negi to Chico, her brother. He met Negi when she was a child, but she doesn't remember him. He smells of beer. Don Julio and Chico unload Mami's belongings while Tata opens a beer and gets Negi something to eat. Don Julio and Chico return and tell Negi about Mami's apartment upstairs, her school, and the marketplace down the street. Negi is excited and afraid.

Negi describes waking up in their apartment on her first morning in Brooklyn. The ceiling is decorated with cherubs, and the building is the nicest Negi has ever lived in. Later, Mami takes Negi with her to the market. When Negi stares at two Jewish men in the street, Mami tells her not to. Most of the vendors in the market are Jewish too, though they speak Spanish. Mami barter for everything, and it takes them most of the day to buy half the things they need. They do the same thing the next day and buy Negi school clothes and a coat. Tata describes how cold the winters are and tells Mami how good Raymond and Edna were while Mami was at the market: they spent the day in front of the television eating chocolate.

Mami's comment shows that she believes in the American dream that promises that Negi can be whatever she wants to be when she grows up. It's worth noting that in general, Mami's departure from her relationship with Papi is indicative of her growing independence and sense of purpose.



Negi is finally introduced to the extent of Mami's network of family members. Raymond has evidently already built a relationship with Tata; Negi still will have to do that. That Don Julio is a "friend" rather than a husband or a boyfriend suggests that familial relationships can take different labels in New York.



Negi is already disillusioned with New York within an hour of landing. This suggests that what Negi thought would happen to her in New York will take a different path than expected as she works to create an identity in a dark and empty place.



The experience of being in New York mirrors Negi's coming of age experience, in that it's entirely unknown. Negi has no idea what New York holds for her and similarly doesn't know what she'll look like or think about in the future. It's a scary proposition, though Negi's excitement suggests she's ready to move forward and learn new things.



New York introduces Negi to identities that are entirely different from her own or her idea of what Americans are like. This begins to crystallize and solidify Negi's own identity, as she seems to not identify at all with the Jewish merchants in the market. Mami seems to relish the experience of shopping and bartering; it allows her to feel competent and in charge. We also get a glimpse of Tata's childcare methods, which leave something to be desired.



Mami takes Negi to Williamsburg. Negi wonders what "kosher" means, and Mami buys Negi pizza. She tells her that the Italians are more like the Puerto Ricans than the Jewish people are, and tells Negi about the morenos: black Americans. Mami says the morenos don't like Puerto Ricans because they think they're taking all the jobs, but Mami insists that there's enough work for everyone.

Mami takes Negi to school on her first day. Negi has her report card and Mami has Negi's birth certificate. They fill out forms and Mr. Grant writes on the top that Negi will go into seventh grade. Negi asks Mr. Grant about this and insists she belongs in eighth grade. Mami is suspicious about Negi's backtalk, but Negi tells Mami that she's not stupid and won't go back to seventh grade. Negi negotiates a deal with Mr. Grant that says that if she learns English by Christmas, she can stay in eighth grade.

Mami is impressed with Negi. Negi proudly tells Mami that she can walk home from school by herself later, but is nervous as she leaves Mami in the school hallway. Negi is placed in Miss Brown's class, which she quickly learns is the class for students with learning disabilities and is possibly the equivalent of sixth or seventh grade. Unlike her classmates, Negi desperately wants to learn, and she loves the way Miss Brown teaches.

Negi's school is huge and loud, with a confusing social structure. There are Americanos, who are the smart kids; the Italian students who dress provocatively and smoke; and the black girls (morenas) who wear short skirts and heavy boots. The fights between the different groups are brutal, and Negi avoids any involvement. There are two kinds of Puerto Rican students as well: those who were born in America and those who arrived recently. Negi feels disloyal for wanting to learn English and wanting to look like the Italians or the morenas, and she doesn't feel comfortable with either group of Puerto Ricans either.

Negi comes home from school one day to find Mami packed and waiting. Tata helps Mami and Negi load their things into a cab to move to a larger apartment, as Negi's remaining siblings are going to come to New York. The new apartment is across the projects, and Tata is going to live with them. The children arrive in October. Negi notices that Delsa, whom Papi had put in charge, looks like a tired adult woman.

Again, Mami insists that she believes in the American dream that says that America is the land of opportunity. This is how Mami forms her own identity in New York, as she'll identify very strongly with the work she does and the fact that it allows her to support her family.



Negi takes a page out of Mami's book here and barter with Mr. Grant. Negi has been learning English in school in Puerto Rico, though obviously not enough to be considered fluent. Mami's unwillingness to check Negi's backtalk suggests that she's seeing Negi as a competent quasi-adult in this situation, in part because of Negi's grasp of the English language.



Though Negi has consistently implied that she was good at school and liked it, this is the first time that the person she is at school truly becomes an intrinsic part of her identity. Negi knows that her success in New York depends on her ability to learn the language and impress the adults in charge at school.



Even though Negi still definitely identifies herself as being Puerto Rican, she feels alienated from the other Puerto Rican students because of her desire to understand and experience the other groups at school. This is a product of Negi's split identity as well as her lifelong curiosity. It recalls her assertion that the move to New York created a hybrid; we begin to see how this happens.



Negi's family is reunited thanks to Mami's hard work and her newfound independence. Negi suggests that in her absence, Delsa had to come of age and parent the younger children just like Negi used to have to do. She sees that it's hard on anyone, not just on her.



The children are all sent back a grade in school to learn English, so Negi is the only one attending junior high. She disobeys Mami once and cuts across the projects to get there and doesn't understand all the graffiti. When she tries out bad words at home, Mami scolds her.

One day, Negi asks Mami for a **bra**. Mami laughs and says she can have one when she's señorita. A few weeks later, Negi tells Mami that she started her period. Mami is disappointed that Negi already had a class in school that taught her how to handle it, but shows her where she keeps her Kotex hidden. Mami tells Tata and they celebrate. The next day, Mami brings Negi white bras from the factory where she works.

While Mami works in Manhattan, Tata watches the children after school. Tata begins drinking wine or beer early in the day, though she still cooks supper and makes the children eat. When it gets colder, Tata begins lighting the oven and leaving the door open. One evening, Negi tells a story as she sits by the oven with her siblings, Tata, Mami, and Don Julio. It's fantastical and absurd, and when she's done, the children demand another. Don Julio offers Negi a dime to tell another, and Mami starts some hot chocolate. Every night that winter, Negi tells her family stories that star characters named after her siblings.

After school, Negi goes to the library and checks out children's books to teach herself to read. She soon moves from picture books to chapter books. By her fourth month in Brooklyn, Negi has learned enough English to score well on her school tests. In January, Mr. Grant calls Negi's name during an assembly to announce the students who did particularly well on their midterms.

Mami falls in love with Francisco, a younger man who lives across the street. He buys Mami flowers and brings the children candy, but Tata doesn't like him. Mami visits Francisco nightly and always comes home happy. One night, when Tata and Don Julio had spent the afternoon drinking, Francisco comes to visit. When Tata sees Francisco, she starts insulting him. Mami shows Francisco out and ignores her distraught mother. Tata continues to berate Mami for not setting a good example, and a week later, Mami moves her children to an apartment down the street. Francisco comes to live with them.

Negi continues to experiment with different identities and elements she experiences in New York. Mami tries to keep Negi on the straight and narrow path by checking Negi's language, even if Negi doesn't understand what it means.



The American school system robbed Mami of the chance to truly bond with Negi by explaining menstruation to her. Mami rewards Negi's adulthood with the bras, which are symbolic of Negi's new status as an adult. Negi is also symbolically independent now, though she's definitely still dependent on Mami and Tata for practical matters.



Negi's night of storytelling recalls the stories she told her siblings while Mami was in labor in Puerto Rico. It allows Negi to assume the identity of a storyteller, which gives her a great deal of power and foreshadows her role as the writer of this memoir. The fact that she uses her siblings' names shows that Negi cares deeply for them and their happiness. Using their names allows Negi to continue to develop a sense of family and positive dependency in New York.



Negi fully steps into her identity as a stellar student, which gives her pride and purpose. Mr. Grant recognizes Negi's independence and hard work. All of this makes Negi feel powerful and competent and helps her see herself as a person who belongs in New York.



Finally Negi sees Mami in a happy romantic relationship. Tata's reaction perhaps explains where Mami learned to behave as she has in the past, though in the present, Mami asserts her independence by moving. This suggests that New York is having a similar effect on Mami as it is on Negi. Mami is becoming more independent and self-sufficient.



Marilyn Monroe kills herself that summer. One day Negi sits at her window, watching the activity at the soft drink warehouse across the street and listening to the radio talk about Marilyn. A truck pulls up across the street. The driver waves at Negi and when she looks, he begins masturbating openly. Wide-eyed, Negi watches for a while and then moves away, but soon returns to the window. The man starts masturbating again and smiles at her. Negi is confused: she hadn't acted provocatively, dressed up, or even smiled, but now she understands why Mami always tells her to pretend she isn't interested when people approach her.

Negi thinks that she's grown up knowing that men want one thing, and it's up to Negi to give it to them. She thinks that what happened with the truck driver happened even though she didn't mean to give him anything. Negi goes to find Mami, who asks Negi what's wrong. Negi doesn't tell Mami what happened but feels like it was her fault. She goes back to the window and openly watches the man, simultaneously scared, curious, and embarrassed. Negi suddenly smiles at the man, who looks immediately suspicious, stops masturbating, and ignores Negi. Negi thinks he stopped because she'd been too willing to play along.

This experience teaches Negi that she's truly not in control of how men use her body. Further, it shows that Negi isn't even safe when there's distance between her and the man who wants her; this man gets satisfaction from her from several stories and a brick building away. Negi is still extremely curious as to how this happened, as it goes against what she's been taught to do when confronted with a man who wants her sexually.



Negi struggles to understand that there's nothing she could've done to truly stop the man from taking advantage of her except to move away where he can't see her. The man's reaction when Negi smiles suggests he was excited by the knowledge that Negi certainly didn't want his advances. This shows that he feels powerful by making women feel completely powerless. Like many victims of some sort of sexual violation, Negi unfortunately feels that she is to blame, and so she doesn't share her experience with Mami.



12. YOU DON'T WANT TO KNOW

Mami's belly starts getting bigger around the same time that Francisco is diagnosed with cancer. Mami moves her children again so that both Tata and Francisco can live with them. Tata is nice to Francisco when he's home, but is still mean when she drinks. Francisco and Mami's baby, Franky, is born in March. When Francisco is hospitalized again, Mami goes to visit him and he tells her he saw an angel the night before. A few days later, the hospital releases Francisco to go home to his parents' apartment, and he dies the next day. Mami mourns for the next year.

Negi tells the reader that she wrote to Papi for several weeks after arriving in Brooklyn. When Negi's siblings arrived, however, they told Negi that Papi married another woman after Mami left Puerto Rico and sent the children to live with other relatives. Negi confirms this story with Mami and then confronts Papi in a letter about it, telling him that he's as good as dead to her. Papi and Mami write letters and fight over this, though Mami insists that Negi and her siblings stay in touch with Papi. Negi agrees grudgingly, though she realizes that Mami is becoming both mother and father to her children, and they can count on her to always be there.

In Francisco's last months, Tata allows Mami to present the façade that they're one big happy family, though she insists that Mami not forget that it's indeed just a façade. Mami continues to grow her family but notably doesn't push for Francisco to marry her (that we know of). This suggests that her desire for Papi to marry her came from her insecurity about their relationship in particular.



Papi's actions after Mami left suggest that it's true that Mami wasn't his primary partner. This distances Papi even further from his children, despite Mami's insistence that they keep in touch. Insisting that, however, means that the children show Papi the same low level of performative love that he showed them. Mami, on the other hand, makes it clear to Negi and her siblings that she's reliable and will always be there to care for them, unlike Papi.



Mami leaves the house every morning to work in **bra** factories in Manhattan. She works her way up quickly from being a thread cutter to sewing the bras, and carries special scissors and a special handbag. Mami is happy when she works and is proud of what she makes, though she tells her children that they need to do better in life than she is. She asks them to translate their report cards for her and praises them when they receive good marks. Negi soon becomes suspicious that Mami's optimism is all for show. She fears that whatever Mami came looking for in Brooklyn doesn't exist anywhere.

Though Chico doesn't live with Negi's family, he spends time in their apartment regularly. He drinks all the time and offers the children small change to do small favors for him. One morning, when Negi is on her way to school, Chico stops her in the hallway and offers her a quarter to open her blouse. Negi refuses and threatens to tell Mami. The following day, Chico pinches Negi's nipple as he walks behind her. He tells her not to tell anyone and throws a dollar at her. Negi buys herself her first sundae the next day.

One day, Mami tells Negi that she has to go with her to the welfare office the next day. Negi whines, but Mami insists. Negi speaks enough English to explain Mami's situation to the social workers. At the office, they sit for hours. They never know when their name will be called. Fights break out occasionally, and even Mami punches a social worker once, saying that they treat her like an animal.

Negi often translates for other women in the welfare office. These women are little different from Mami, though Negi can tell that some of them are lying about their situations. Other women who aren't Puerto Rican claim to be Puerto Rican so they can take advantage of American citizenship. Negi feels conflicted about these women and doesn't know whether to tell the interviewers the women are lying or not. She's afraid the women who lie about being Puerto Rican make all Puerto Ricans look bad.

When Negi arrives home one day with a stack of books, Mami screams at her for being out late and talking back. Tata tries to call Mami off of Negi, but Mami persists. Negi isn't sure what Mami is angry about. Mami comes at Negi with raised fists and Negi grabs Mami's wrists. She and Mami both realize she's now strong enough to fight back, and Negi yells at Mami to kill her. Mami backs down and sends Negi to her room, but never hits her again.

The bras continue to give Mami a sense of pride and purpose. The job allows Mami the ability to independently care for her family without having to rely on a man as she once relied on Papi, which turns the bras themselves into a symbol of self sufficiency and independence. Negi's fears about Mami's optimism suggest that Negi is beginning to feel hopeless about the trajectory of their lives in New York.



Negi is confronted with the horrible knowledge that Mami's extended family isn't always kind and trustworthy. Some of them see her as a female body to be consumed rather than a family member to be protected. This makes it clear that Negi is truly growing up, since her body is garnering this kind of attention. Buying the sundae is an attempt to regain control of the situation and make it more bearable.



In America, Negi's Puerto Rican identity means that she and Mami are sometimes treated as less-than. This recalls Mami's early warning that Negi not aspire to be a jíbara—here we see how jíbaras are treated by those in power, reflected in the racism of the social workers.



Despite the mistreatment and racism she experiences, Negi understands that her Puerto Rican identity does come with some privileges that other people would like to take advantage of. The welfare office workers recall the "experts" in that they can't recognize different accents and flatten all Latin Americans into one type of person.



This moment, perhaps more than any other, brings about Negi's coming of age, as it's the first time that both she and Mami acknowledge that Negi has the size and the guts of an adult and the desire to be treated accordingly. It brings about positive change in Negi's relationship with Mami when she puts an end to Mami's violence.



Negi's neighborhood is especially violent. One day, Don Julio comes home after being mugged in the subway. After that, Negi sits by the window every night and watches for Mami coming up the street. Negi lives in fear that someone is going to rape her on her way to or from school. In the winter, Mami doesn't allow the children to do anything but walk to and from school, and she doesn't allow them to play outside.

Negi realizes that though Mami had enforced similar rules in Puerto Rico to keep the children from hurting themselves, in New York, the rules are meant to keep others from hurting them. Negi can barely comprehend the way people live in New York with their doors bolted tight. She doesn't understand how the neighbors would ever be able to help if they needed it.

13. A SHOT AT IT

During Negi's first week of high school, she takes tests that show that she can write and read English at the tenth grade level, so they put her in a high-achieving class. One morning, Mr. Barone, a guidance counselor, calls Negi to his office to ask her what she wants to be when she grows up. Negi thinks that she's wanted to be a jíbara and a cartographer, but hadn't thought about it since moving to Brooklyn. She tells Mr. Barone that she reads as a hobby, and he looks disappointed. He suggests nursing or teaching, neither of which interest Negi. He tells Negi she's smart and should try to get into an academic school so she can go to college.

Negi walks home with another Puerto Rican ninth grader who knows just a little English. They talk about Mr. Barone's "counseling," and Negi mentions that she doesn't like people much. The girl stops talking to Negi after that. Several days later, Mr. Barone calls Negi back to his office. Negi remembers watching a beauty pageant with Mami the night before and the way that Mami commented on the contestants' beauty. Negi tells Mr. Barone that she'd like to be a model, and he steers her towards training to be an actress. He sounds unimpressed, but says there's one school that trains actresses.

Mr. Barone reads the write up for the Performing Arts school, which says that Negi must audition. Negi mentions that she performed in a school show and read poetry in Puerto Rico. Mr. Barone says he'll call the school, and Negi leaves his office happy and aware that something good just happened.

Negi cares deeply for Mami and Mami's safety, and Mami cares for her children's safety in return. Negi's knowledge that men can and will take advantage of her whether she accepts their advances or not creates a sense of fear in her as she grapples with the knowledge that her power is limited.



In New York, Negi's family is forced to rely fully on family to help; there are no Doña Ana or Doña Lola figures to trade food with or care for the children in Mami's absence. Family is truly the only thing that Negi can rely on.



The fact that Negi hasn't considered her future since moving to Brooklyn is indicative of the fact that she's been simply trying to survive and not flounder. Negi does know, however, that caring for others isn't what she wants to do—that's what she's spent her entire life doing for her siblings. She is finally identified as a high-achieving student, which continues to develop Negi's identity as one of the "smart kids."



Negi's reasoning suggests that what she still really wants hasn't changed since her childhood: she wants Mami to notice her and be proud of her. Mr. Barone shows that he's a caring individual by agreeing to help Negi figure out where to train as an actress, his own thoughts on the matter aside.



Negi now has something else to work towards, which gives her a sense of purpose that mirrors the way Mami's job makes Mami feel. Negi is gaining power by setting her mind to completing this task.



Every day, Negi walks home telling herself that she's not afraid. She decides one day that she has to get out of Brooklyn; she's done following Mami. When she cries at Mami that she hates her life, Mami yells at her to do something about it.

Mr. Barone tells Negi how she'll prepare for her audition: he selects a monologue for her and assigns two teachers to coach her monologue and teach her how to properly dress and carry herself. The monologue is from a play set in 1905, spoken by a young married woman. The teachers drill Negi and practice asking her questions like the panel at the Performing Arts school might ask, and instruct her to buy a simple, dark dress for the audition.

Mami buys Negi a red plaid jumper. The night before the audition, she curls Negi's hair, and Negi is allowed to wear makeup. In the morning, Negi and Mami get on a train to Manhattan and Mami grumbles about how far away the school is, though she seems proud of Negi nonetheless.

In the classroom where auditions are held, three women sit at a table. They greet Negi as she carefully seats herself in front of them. Suddenly flustered, Negi immediately forgets her English and struggles to answer their questions. One woman suggests that Negi start her monologue and Negi knocks her chair over standing up. Her monologue takes one minute instead of three and is barely comprehensible. Eyes wide, the interviewers ask Negi to step out for a moment.

Mami asks Negi what happened. Negi tries not to cry. She studies a bulletin board full of newspaper clippings about successful former students, and she tries to imagine herself on the board one day. An interviewer calls Negi back in and introduces her to a student who will help Negi perform a pantomime of decorating a Christmas tree. Negi becomes fully engrossed in the pantomime and remembers Papi helping her string lights on an eggplant bush in Puerto Rico. One of the interviewers thanks Negi for her audition and says they'll notify her in a few weeks. Mami keeps asking Negi what happened on the train ride home, but Negi refuses to talk about it. She feels ashamed that she failed her audition, and fears she'll never get out of Brooklyn.

Negi is beginning to demand her independence from Mami and Mami's dreams and simultaneously develop her own. This is a marker of Negi's coming of age.



The monologue is an interesting choice for a 14-year-old girl with only a tenuous grasp of spoken English. It will require Negi to code switch and take on a role that's very different from the person she actually is. Similarly, her teacher's coaching seeks to make Negi seem very American and distance her from her Puerto Rican identity and past.



This is going to be Negi's jump into adulthood, and Mami treats it as such by allowing Negi to dress like an adult. The red jumper, however, shows that Mami is still not connected to American culture and the requirements of dark clothing.



Negi exists in a complete state of limbo throughout her audition: she tries desperately to be as American as she possibly can, but in her nervousness she's stuck seeming exceptionally Puerto Rican. The code switching is only somewhat successful, as she remains more in the middle rather than on one end or the other.



Negi finally sees what her future might look like and imagines truly being an adult who's good enough to exist on the school's bulletin board. Negi begins to piece her identity back together during the pantomime, as the silence allows her to connect with and lose herself in memories of Puerto Rico. Negi's fears that she didn't get in mimic her split identity: she fears she's not good enough or American enough, though as we'll soon learn, it's actually Negi's Puerto Rican identity that made her special to the interviewers.



EPILOGUE: ONE OF THESE DAYS

A decade after Negi graduated from the Performing Arts High School, she returns to visit her mentor, one of the women who conducted her audition. Negi's mentor smiles and remembers Negi's audition out loud, saying that they asked Negi to leave so they could laugh at the absurdity of a 14-year-old Puerto Rican girl reciting an incomprehensible monologue about a possessive mother-in-law. She tells Negi that they admired her courage.

Negi is now a scholarship student at Harvard. She tells her mentor that she's the only one of her siblings at school, and says Mami had 11 children by the time Negi graduated. Her mentor asks Negi if she ever thinks about how far she's come, and Negi replies that she fears it'll jinx her luck to think about it.

Negi's mentor tells Negi a story: on Negi's first day at Performing Arts, she was absent and the school called her house. Negi had told them that she had nothing to wear, and they asked to speak to Mami. Negi, in tears, interpreted for Mami that Negi had to go to the welfare office to translate. The mentor assured Negi that several students at the school received public assistance, and Negi came to school the next day. Negi tells her mentor that she's glad she made the phone call.

Negi's mentor says she has to teach a class, hugs Negi, and tells her to take care. Negi watches her walk away and wanders through the hallways of the school. She finds the bulletin board of successful students and studies it. She says "one of these days" to herself.

A decade plus later, Negi's fluctuating identity as a teenager is a source of humor and the reason Negi was accepted to the school. This shows that Negi's code switching was a positive thing despite the pain and confusion it caused her at the time. Negi also seems to have found a strong community outside of her family.



Negi has experienced great success since moving to New York and specifically since getting into the Performing Arts school. This shows that her acceptance was truly a turning point in her life.



Even when Negi had the opportunity to go to a prestigious school, she still remained loyal and reliable to her family by accompanying Mami to the welfare office. The mentor's actions show that she occupies a very familial role in Negi's life—it seems she truly found support and stability in the school.



Negi's identity is still changing, even now that she's in her twenties. She's still a hybrid of identities and still has goals to accomplish even though she's no longer a confused teenager. The process of forming one's identity and "coming of age" continues into adulthood.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Brock, Zoë. "When I Was Puerto Rican." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 3 Nov 2017. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Brock, Zoë. "When I Was Puerto Rican." LitCharts LLC, November 3, 2017. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/when-i-was-puerto-rican>.

To cite any of the quotes from *When I Was Puerto Rican* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Santiago, Esmeralda. *When I Was Puerto Rican*. Da Capo Press. 2006.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Santiago, Esmeralda. *When I Was Puerto Rican*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press. 2006.