

Before We Were Free Study Guide

Before We Were Free by Julia Álvarez

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Plot Summary

"Before We Were Free" by Julia Alvarez tells the story of a young girl named Anita. She lives during a period of political unrest. Her father and uncle are involved in a plot to assassinate the dictator.

When the story begins, Anita is eleven years old and she lives in the Dominican Republic. Anita attends an American school and she is friends with the children of American Ambassadors and consulates. She lives on a compound with her parents, cousins, aunts, uncles, and her former nanny. While she is looking forward to turning twelve and becoming more grown up, there are other changes occurring in her life that make her twelfth birthday somewhat insignificant.

Her cousins suddenly leave for the United States of America and another uncle is missing. The secret police invade her family's compound and the children are restricted from their regular activities. Americans move in to an empty house on the compound, making things a bit better and the Americans hold a big party for their daughter's fifteenth birthday. Meanwhile, men gather and hold secret meetings. El Jefe shows up at the birthday party and shows interest in Anita's sister so her parents send her sister to the United States to keep her safe.

Everybody seems to have secrets and Anita's life keeps changing. Her school closes and Anita discovers that she has a hard time finding words to say what she thinks so she becomes more withdrawn. One evening she comes home to find her house swarming with men on a mission. They are planning to assassinate El Jefe that night.

They succeed in killing El Jefe, but the man who is supposed to announce that the dictator is dead never shows up so the general public isn't aware of their newfound freedom. This gives El Jefe's son time to rise in power, and he is even more cruel than his father. He is determined to seek revenge on those who killed his father, and his men tear through the compound, taking Anita's father and uncle away as prisoners.

Anita and her mother go into hiding in the home of their friend who works in the Italian Embassy. Anita's brother had left the compound earlier and he was at greater risk. He sought refuge in the Italian Embassy itself. Anita and her mother lived in a closet for several months, hiding from the secret police. During this time, Anita keeps a journal chronicling her experience.

One day, after months in the closet, she and her mother are rescued by paratroopers and helicopter. They leave the country and join their relatives in New York City, where they have to adapt to a very different culture. While she is in New York, she learns that her father and uncle were killed. Anita has to come to terms with the idea of what freedom really means. Her father told her that he wanted her to be free and to fly. As she thinks over all her family has been through, Anita discovers that freedom and the ability to fly lives within her.



Chapters 1-3

Chapters 1-3 Summary

"Before We Were Free" by Julia Alvarez tells the story of a young girl named Anita. She lives during a period of political unrest. Her father and uncle are involved in a plot to assassinate the dictator.

In Chapter 1, it is almost Thanksgiving, and the class is preparing to put on a Thanksgiving play. They attend school in the Dominican Republic, but it's an American school so they celebrate American holidays. It's hot outside, and it doesn't feel like Thanksgiving to the Americans. The main character in the book (Anita) is sitting next to her cousin, Carla. They are going to be Indians in the play.

The principal of the school comes into the classroom with Carla's mother. The mother looks very nervous. They talk with the teacher then step out of the room to talk in the hallway. This makes all the students very unsettled. The last time that happened, one of the students left and never came back.

The teacher comes back into the room and tells Carla that she needs to pack her belongings to leave. She tells Anita to help her cousin. When Carla packs just her necessities in the bag, the teacher tells her to pack absolutely everything. After they get home, Papi explains to Anita that Carla's family received permission to leave the country. They're leaving in a few hours to go to the United States of America. Anita's grandparents had already left to go to New York at the beginning of September, and she already had many other aunts and uncles there. She had one uncle, Tio Tony, who was missing. Now her family would be the only family left from all of the families who had lived on the compound. Her father says that they have to stay to mind the store.

Carla and her siblings are sent to change their clothes and collect one item to bring with them on the trip. Anita helps Carla choose a jewelry box to pack since it holds several items. It's difficult for the cousins to leave each other, and Mami comforts them by telling them that they will be together soon.

After they leave, Anita is sent over to help Chucha move in. The old woman helped take care of every baby in the family since Anita's father was born. She always wore purple, and she slept in her coffin. She often had dreams wherein she could see the future. Anita feels safer now that she is moving in. When Anita asks her if she will see her cousins again, the woman responds that she will see them before they come back, but only after she is free. Anita doesn't understand what this means, and she scared to ask.

In Chapter 2, the next day, Anita's father goes off to work early, bringing along her brother. She notices a half dozen black Volkswagens coming up the driveway. Men with dark glasses pour out of the car and start searching the property. Mami comes to talk with them, looking terrified. It's the secret police, according to Chucha. They search



through everything, even plunging their bayonets under the beds. Mami tells Lucinda (Anita's older sister) and Anita to stay together in the room as she walks around with the police. Anita doesn't want her to leave. She is worried the police are going to hurt her mother. The police say that they are looking for Anita's cousins, but Lucinda says that they already know where the family is. They are just using this as an excuse to search the compound.

When Papi comes home from work, he tells the family to pretend that the SIM (secret police) are not staying at the top of the driveway. They have to live life as normally as possible. However, it isn't normal that they whisper when they talk, and the family sleeps together in one room. The police stay at the edge of the property for many days. Anita asked questions about what is going on, but nobody really answers her. She overhears her father talking about butterflies when he is on the telephone, but that makes her even more confused.

Finally, Lucinda talks to her a bit. She takes her outside, explaining to Anita that the police have most likely hidden microphones in the house so that they can monitor the family members' conversations. Lucinda tells her it's about their uncle. A few months before, he and his friends were involved in a plot to get rid of the dictator. This confuses Anita who got the dictator was a good man. Her family won't leave, they want to be there to protect Tio Tony if he comes home.

Two weeks later, Mr. Washburn comes over and tells them that they are going to move in next door. This makes any family very happy. Mr. Washburn is from the United States Embassy, and she hopes that the same may not bother them anymore. Anita is happy because Mr. Washburn has a wife and two children. His son is 12, and Anita is going to turn 12 the next week. Anita meets Sam, the son, and the two get along very well. They explore the property and make plans to get together again the next day. As they explore the next day, Anita notices that Tio Tony's door is open a crack. When she and Sam go to investigate, they notice that somebody is moving around inside. They run away, and decide not to talk about it to anybody.

In Chapter 3, the children were told that they could go back to school. However, their mother warned them that they shouldn't talk to their friends about what was going on. Anita doesn't know what to tell her friends when she goes back because she has been missing for two weeks. Her sister tells her to tell the others that she had chickenpox. While she is talking with Lucinda, Anita tells her about the phone conversation she overheard. Her sister explains that Papi and their friends are upset, and even the Americans are protesting a car accident that was really a murder.

Now that the Washburn's are next door, Mami is much more relaxed. She started a canasta group so that Mrs. Washburn can meet the other Dominican ladies and practice her Spanish. They had to hire a new maid, and Mami warns the children to be careful what they say. Anita and Sammy still kept their secret, and Anita realizes that she's quite good at keeping secrets. At school, she discovers that Sammy is joining her class. This makes Anita very happy. She likes Sam a lot, not as a boyfriend, just as a friend.



The teacher tells the class that they will get to play a special game for Christmas. It is a Secret Santa game. They get to leave gifts and notes for the person whose name they drew. Anita thinks the game will be fun. Unfortunately, she picked Oscar's name, and she doesn't feel like giving him gifts. Still, she doesn't want to be mean since it is Christmas. It doesn't really matter, anyway, because the next day they find out that some parents had complained, and the Secret Santa idea was called off. The parents felt that there were too many secrets in the world as it was. The teacher tells the students about the embargo. She says it's somewhat like having a timeout for poor behavior.

Back at the compound, Anita and Sam continue to spend time together. She is tempted to tell him some things, but then she remembers to keep her mouth shut. She realizes that the parents were right, there are too many secrets in the world already. That year, the family is on a very tight budget for Christmas, but they still had a wonderful time. They receive a special call from New York so they get to talk with their cousins. Carla asks Anita if she received her card yet, but she hadn't. It takes a long time to get a letter since it has to go through sensors first.

Chapters 1-3 Analysis

In Chapter 1, the reader meets Anita and learns about her world. Although she lives in the Dominican Republic, there is a very strong American influence in her upbringing. She goes to an American school with the children of international diplomats. Anita is very close to her cousins, and she lives on a compound with her extended relatives. At the beginning of the book, Anita is 11 years old. There are strange happenings in her life that she doesn't understand. Children disappear from her class, and relatives leave unexpectedly. Still, she has a mother, father, and a woman in her life who cared for her when she was young who loves her and supports her. Still, she wonders why her relatives had to leave so quickly. She also wonders what happened to an uncle who disappeared months before. Her family won't leave until they know the uncle is safe.

In Chapter 2, Anita becomes even more unsettled after her cousins leave when she sees the black Volkswagens coming up the driveway. Her mother is scared, and Anita goes to Chucha to find out what's going on. She doesn't understand why the secret police are invading her compound. The adults try to act as if things are normal in their lives, but it's obvious to the children that things are not normal. Nobody will tell Anita what is going on, but even her older siblings show signs of distress. Lucinda has a rash and her brother won't stop chewing his nails. Lucinda doesn't spend much time with her younger sister, but she is the one who finally takes the time to explain some things to Anita. Anita is right on the verge of becoming a young woman, and she is changing mentally as well. The security of her world in the past fades away as she learns more about the politics in their country. Once she derived strength from El Jefe, and now she is finding out that he is a cruel man.

Mr. Washburn and his family move into the compound, and it is a relief to Anita and her family. This shows how the two cultures (American and Dominican Republican) work



together instead of clashing. When Sam and Anita find someone in Tony's house, both of the children decide to keep it a secret. The parents have their own secrets, and now the children do as well.

In Chapter 3, even though they are trying to live life as normally as possible, the political situation of the country invades every area of their existence. Anita's parents don't have money to celebrate Christmas as they used to, family is missing, and they can't even play simple games at school because there are too many secrets in their reality. Lucinda explains to Anita that the Americans are their friends so for the time being they are safe. This shows that she is very aware that the situation might change, and Anita picks up on this.

In this chapter, a boy in Anita's class is highlighted. His name is Oscar, and Anita doesn't appreciate him very much. However, she does admit that he is smart and he asks very good questions.

In Chapter 3, Anita feels free when she is given the opportunity to write. She keeps a journal and writes in pencil so that she can erase her thoughts. Writing helps her come to terms with her own feelings. She realizes that she is falling in love with Sam.

In her regular life, Anita is often puzzled by conversations that the adults have. They say things that just don't make sense to her and they don't answer many of her questions. Anita notices that the adults regularly remind each other to keep quiet around the children.



Chapters 4-5

Chapters 4-5 Summary

In Chapter 4, Anita finds that writing in a diary she received for Christmas makes her think a lot more. As she writes, she realizes that she wants Sam to be her boyfriend. When Anita writes in her journal, she only uses a pencil so that she can quickly erase everything she has written. She doesn't want her family discovering what she has written. School was supposed to begin again on January 9, but the students were notified that it wouldn't open until later that month because many Americans were traveling to Washington to see John F. Kennedy's inauguration. Anita compares the American elections to the ones in her own country. They have had the same leader for 31 years. She asks the adults in her life why this is so, and they keep brushing off her questions.

Anita begins spending more time in the bathroom. She wants to be attractive for Sammy. When Oscar comes over, and he spends time with Sammy, Anita feels excluded and Oscar understands why. Anita is upset that Sam didn't figure it out himself. The children talk about community and politics. Oscar talks about freeing the country, and Anita doesn't understand. She is inclined to say that they are free, but as she thinks about the way the secret police came through their compound and the way she has to erase everything in her diary, and she knows that they really are not free.

As with Anita listens to Oscar's stories about their leader, and as she talks with Lucinda, she begins to see their leader in a different light. She finds out that he is a cruel man. Anita wonders about the things that she sees in her uncle's house and goes to check it out. She talks with Chucha about what she sees, and together they look at the housing, and Anita recognizes her uncle. Chucha tells the children to pretend they haven't seen him.

Anita is writing in her diary when her mother comes in to talk with her. For the first time, her mother talks with her about growing up and about what is going on with the family. She tells Anita that they are going to stay to fight against the things that are wrong. She asks her daughter not to tell anyone about her uncle hiding on the compound, and she asks Anita not to write in her diary anymore. She can bring it out someday when they are free.

In Chapter 5, the children are not allowed to go out anymore except to school. They feel bored. Parents don't want their daughters to go out into public places because of someone called Mr. Smith. They say he likes young girls. Susie, Sam's sister, is turning 15 and Lucinda tells her how important the 15th birthday is in their country. They decide to have a huge party. The parents agree, and many people come to the compound to spruce it up for the party. Everyone is excited about it.



During the preparations, Anita finds out that their new housekeeper is a spy. On the night of the party, everyone is excited. A group of men have gathered together at Tio Tony's home. Anita is on the way over to the neighbors with her mom and some others when a line of black Volkswagen cars come into the driveway. Mami makes an excuse to stay back, pulls Anita aside, and asks her to run back to Tio Tony's house to tell the men that Mr. Smith's friends are there. She does so, and the men immediately disburse. At the party, they pretend nothing has happened. Anita wonders with the secret police are doing there, then Mr. Smith, El Jefe arrives.

Chapters 4-5 Analysis

In Chapter 4, even as Anita has to come to terms with the changes in her world and her parents' world, she is also trying to come to terms with changes in herself. She is beginning to care about how she looks, and she wants to attract boys. She does not want to spend time with Oscar, and she feels jealous about the time he spends with Sam. Not only is Oscar smart, but he also seems empathetic when he understands her predicament even though Sam seems oblivious to her jealous feelings.

Oscar answers many of the children's questions regarding politics because he knows what questions to ask the adults. The children talk about the people that disappear, and at the end of the chapter, when Anita's mother asks her to stop writing in her journal, it is symbolic of the disappearing of the humans. The political situation is taking away freedom in many arenas.

Chapter 5 shows a delicate balance between captivity and freedom. Although they aren't technically prisoners, the children are not allowed to run out and play as they used to. The parents are worried about someone called Mr. Smith. When they discuss Susie's birthday, everyone has the opportunity to relish some freedom. They have an excuse to celebrate together. This freedom is still tainted however as they discover spies amongst themselves and when Mr. Smith shows up at the party.



Summary and Analysis For Chapters 6-8

Summary and Analysis For Chapters 6-8 Summary

In Chapter 6, the family is in shock and the parents can't believe they let themselves get so careless. They also realize that they have to protect Lucinda somehow. The morning after the party, a limousine arrives with flowers for Lucinda. They are from El Jefe and it makes Lucinda cry. It scares her that she has caught El Jefe's eye. The family members and Susie tell Lucinda that they will protect her. Anita wonders where Sam is, and she is told that he has a hangover. Papi talks with the Washburn's, and they come up with a plan to protect Lucinda. She is going to go to the United states as a maid.

Anita overhears her father talking with the other men, and they are talking about murdering Trujillo, El Jefe. Her mother reminds everyone not to rush into things and to be careful. Anita goes into her sister's room and finds her sister packing. It's very hard on Anita. She decides that she doesn't like men anymore. Oscar and Sam are throwing up from drinking too much liquor, and the old man is going after her sister so she has to leave.

That night, Lucinda lets Anita sleep with her. They both end out crying. Lucinda shares her memories until they fall asleep. The next morning, Anita realizes that she has gotten her first period. She doesn't want her mother to know. She takes the sheets to Chucha who uses them to scare off the superstitious maid who was a spy.

In Chapter 7, Anita wants to stay with her sister until she leaves, but her father is calling her to go to school. Her mother insists that they need to make everything look as normal as possible. The girl say goodbye to each other. Anita and her brother drive to school with her father. Before he gets out of the car, her brother turns around and offers to take Anita for a ride in the afternoon. He is trying to be kind to her. In school, the teacher tells them that the school is going to be shut down temporarily. This upsets Anita, and she put her head down on the desk. The teacher thinks that she is sick and sends her to the nurse and calls her mother. Her mother is concerned that she told somebody about Lucinda. When her brother comes home, he tells them that the high school is shut down also.

Anita is beginning to have a hard time remembering words. She is worried that she is going insane. At night, her father talks with her and he tells her that he wants his children to be free. He wants them to spread their wings and fly.

The American school is closed, and the children gather together at the Mancini's house for lessons. They go in the consul's car so that they won't be stopped as frequently at all the new checkpoints. There are more curfews now as well. They see protesters in dark garb along the streets and fear that more people are getting arrested. Anita knows that there is a pill that can be taken so that you will die immediately if the police catch you.



She checks her uncle's and her father's pockets for these pills. She doesn't want them taking them, but she wants one for herself in case she is taken away.

Anita overhears her father and uncle talking, and she realizes that the Washburns are going to have to go back to Washington. At night, Mami comes in to talk with Anita. She is concerned about her. Mami realizes that Anita can hear the conversations the men hold in their a secret meetings.

Mrs. Washburn invites Anita and her family to come visit them in Washington. Anita wants to respond to her, but the words won't come out. Mr. Washburn is driving a car with the children on the way to the supermarket. They're stuck in traffic, and a car rams into them, popping the trunk open. A policeman comes over to help them, and Mr. Washburn tries to fend him off. The trunk is filled with guns on their way to a drop off point. The policeman tells them to get everything fixed and leaves them alone. Anita wants to say a prayer of thanks, but she can think of the words.

In Chapter 8, Anita is with Oscar and his sisters as they watch El Jefe and his men march by the house. Today is different from other days. He is wearing his khakis instead of his normal white garments with his medals. When they are alone, Oscar talks to Anita and reassures her. He seems to understand what she is truly feeling. He leaned forward and gets her a kiss on the cheek. It's her first kiss.

In the car, her father is very distracted. At home, there are many people and everybody seems very busy and tense. The men go out with weapons. Anita talks with Chucha who tells her that it is very close to the time for her to fly. She wishes the old woman wouldn't speak in riddles. The men come home, celebrating. They are saying that they are free for the first time in 31 years, then they realize that Pupo is missing. Anita doesn't know what that means. However, it makes everybody tense and upset. They all leave, and Mami realizes that Mundin is missing. Chucha tells her that the boy is a man, and he has flown the nest. Anita, Mami, and Chucha are the only ones that remain on the compound.

Summary and Analysis For Chapters 6-8 Analysis

In Chapter 6, the adults are upset with themselves because they let their guard slip. They almost get caught, and they put their children at risk. Now, they have to send Lucinda away so that she wouldn't get taken by El Jefe. Chucha reassures Anita telling her about a dream in which Lucinda flew away and Anita sprouted wings and flew. This was Lucinda's time to fly. With all the tension around them, the sisters have been getting close, and this makes their time of saying goodbye excruciating. They spend the night together, and in the morning Anita gets her period for the first time. Lucinda is there to congratulate her, and it's symbolic of her new life where she is no longer a child. Anita doesn't want her mother to know about her period, and this shows that they lack a true closeness.



In Chapter 7, when Lucinda leaves it's a reminder that they had secrets to keep. The family has to act as if everything is normal even though young Lucinda is heading off by herself to New York. Mordin tries to take Lucinda's place as Anita's comforter. At school, the teacher says that the school will be closed, and it's a breaking point for Anita. Her brother chews nails, her sister gets a rash, and now she struggles to come up with words. The politics are getting more intense around them. There are more police than ever, and there are checkpoints and curfews. Although she is young, Anita has a keen grasp of what is now going on. She is no longer the naïve child she was several months before. She wants to be brave, but she is still scared.

When Anita is in the car with Mr. Washburn, the policeman sees the guns in their trunk and lets them go. Anita realizes that the fear isn't only in her mind. The adults are also terrified.

In Chapter 8, when Oscar was together with Anita and Sam at the compound, he showed that he really understood Anita as he recognized her jealousy. He shows this once again as they see the dictator walk down the street. He talks with Anita even though she is silent in return. He tells her that it is impossible to be brave if you're not scared. She really appreciates this understanding, and she is overwhelmed when he reaches out and kisses her. This should be a big moment in her life, but the political situation makes the moment seem minor.

Something big is going on, and there is a lot of activity back at the compound. Everyone looks very serious and frightened. Mami is still trying to protect Anita from things she might hear. Mordin wants to be treated as one of the adults, but he is not allowed to join the men when they go out. Papi wants the boy to stay behind in case anything happens to him. When the men come home, it seems as if there should be a celebration, but instead of a celebration, the night turns to disaster. Chucha is there once again to remind Anita that soon she is going to fly. It is reassuring amidst the chaos.



Summary and Analysis For Chapters 9-11

Summary and Analysis For Chapters 9-11 Summary

In Chapter 9, they waited for Papi to come back to them. Mami sleeps with Anita, and she knows that her mother is terrified. She asks her mother who Pupo is, and the mother tells her that he is the head of the Army who was supposed to announce the liberation, but it looks like he failed them. The next morning, Chucha wakes Anita up just as men storm into the room throwing things around as they search. They find El Jefe's body in the trunk of the Chevrolet and arrest Papi and Tio Tony. The soldiers tell Mami that they are going to take her husband where they took El Jefe.

Mami tries to call friends for help, but almost everyone is missing. Mr. Mancini comes over to help them and tells them to pack. When Anita goes to get her belongings, she looks at the chaos and can't move. Chucha begins stuffing her clothes in the laundry bag and also packs her diary. She tells Anita that it is time to fly. Anita finds her legs gaining strength as she runs out to the waiting car.

Anita's diary entry for June 3, 1961, tells that she is allowed to write in her diary as much as she wants as they are already in trouble. On June 5, she writes that she and her mother are living in a closet in the Mancini's bedroom.

In other entries, Anita writes about the fact that Mrs. Mancini didn't trust people, and she had made her master bedroom a haven of privacy. This is why it is such a good hiding place. Many people in the town were arrested since El Jefe's son was determined to punish anyone involved with the assassination of his father.

As Anita writes more in her diary, her words come back to her. On the second Sunday they were in hiding, Anita's mother talked about her father and Tio Tony. Mother said that they were alive, but she started crying. Later, in her diary, Anita writes about the night that they were rescued from the compound. When they reached the Italian Embassy they found Mundo. He had to stay at the Italian Embassy for safety. Anita finds out later that Chucha is doing well. She got a job at Wimpy's.

In her journal, Anita writes some of her life as a movie script. She and her mother communicate with her brother by mail, and he asks about his girlfriend, which Anita thinks is funny since she is thinking about Oscar. One Sunday, she is peeking out the window in the bathroom, and she sees Oscar. He seems older and very handsome. After talking with Tio Pepe, Anita comes up with a schedule so she doesn't go crazy. After she makes the schedule, they have the big scare. The secret police come to the door, and the family dogs are shot. Another time they are almost discovered by the daughters of the household. Oscar comes to get his sisters, and he seems very



interested in something in the closet. Later, Anita notices that when he is outside, he looks up at the window near her. She wonders if he knows she is there.

Tia Mari brings Anita a book, and with it, Anita realizes that she has a way of communicating with Oscar. One day, they receive good news. Mundin is going to be evacuated. Anita and her mother share stories and memories as they remain in hiding. They hear the radio and know that the prisoners are tortured. One evening, guests are coming to the house, so Mami and Anita go into hiding. Tia Mari tells them a girl wants to see them. When they look closely, they realize that it was Mundin.

Tia Mari gives Anita a message from Chucha who tells them to get ready to use their wings again. There is a very small chance that they might be able to get on a private plane that would take them to Florida. Anita is extremely bored. A huge noise in the backyard startles Anita and she thinks people are coming to the house.

In Chapter 10, it's a month and a half later and Anita is in New York City with her mother. They keep checking in with Mr. Washburn to find out news of her father and uncle, but there is no news. Anita remembers the day that she was rescued. Paratroopers and an unmarked helicopter came to pick them up. Their family was waiting for them in New York City. Anita is enrolled in a school, and the teacher announces to the other students that she is a refugee from a dictatorship. She's in America to be free.

Anita wants to write to Oscar, but she gets homesick every time she starts writing. Now, she decides to really make an effort to write him and tell about her life in New York. She knows that whatever she writes has to get past the censors. After she writes the letter, she finds out that no mail is getting through because the country is closed up. Later, Mr. Washburn is in their home. He is there to tell them that Papi and Tio Toni are dead.

In Chapter 11, it's Thanksgiving day, and Anita is in Queens with the Garcias. The extended family is gathered to celebrate the holiday, and the children are outside looking for snow. The radio predicted a white Thanksgiving, which the cousins say is very unusual. The parents call the children in for dinner, and although the grandparents call it the day of the turkey, Anita knows what it's really about. The American school has taught her about the way the Pilgrims survived the first year and how Thanksgiving with the celebration of that day.

After learning that her father was dead, Anita's mother enrolled the children in a Catholic school. Anita was put back into sixth grade because of all the schooling she missed when she was back home. However, she was told that if she made progress, she could join Carla in her grade by the spring. The family still mourned for the men who were killed. It's difficult for them to adjust to the new country, and celebrating the holiday without their loved ones is very difficult. Still, they face the grief together as a family unit. They support each other.

Earlier that day Mrs. Washburn called, and Sam talked with Anita on the phone. She felt it was nice talking with him, but it wasn't very exciting. After the Thanksgiving dinner, the family sang Happy Birthday to Anita who would turn 13 the next week. The adults began



reminiscing and telling stories about life back in the other country. A few days before, Tio Pepe was in New York City and came to visit them. He expressed his gratitude to the family who sacrificed their father and husband to liberate the country. He also gave Anita a letter from Oscar. Anita has felt so many emotions in the past year, she doesn't know how she feels about Oscar. She feels numb inside. Oscar tells her that the dictator has fled and now everyone will get to vote thanks to her father, her uncle, and their friends. He says she must feel so proud. He also tells her that he has seen Chucha, who wants Oscar to remind Anita that she has wings.

The children go outside and Anita finds that snow really is magical. She and her cousins make angels in the snow. As they are playing, Anita thinks about her father and death. She realizes there is no point in being free if you are imprisoned inside yourself. Later, when Anita looks out the window, their snow angels remind her of butterflies. She realizes her father wanted her to really feel free, and she begins to feel once again. Now, instead of emptiness, she is filled with love and pride.

Summary and Analysis For Chapters 9-11 Analysis

In Chapter 9, the beginning of the chapter is an overview of the night of the assassination of El Jefe. Everything that Anita once feared is now coming to fruition. Her father and uncle are arrested, her brother is missing, and she and her mother have to go into hiding. She is also separated from her beloved nanny. The next part of the chapter is very long and is written in a diary format. Mami and Anita are in hiding, rescued by Oscar's family. They have several close calls where they think they are going to be discovered, and Oscar and Anita find a way to communicate with each other non-verbally. It helps Anita survive her long, tedious days in hiding. While they are in hiding, Mami shares political stories with her daughter, recognizing that her daughter is no longer a young child to be protected. This shows a change in their relationship. Once they were so distant, Anita didn't want to tell her mother she got her period, now they are in hiding together and they have heavy conversations.

In Chapter 10, they are rescued and taken to New York, but even their freedom there has its own limitations. They have to be careful not to be too obvious because they shouldn't be in the apartment that is already overcrowded. Anita is enrolled in a school, and all the months that she spent writing in her diary pay off as she hands him her writing assignments. She wants to get back in touch with Oscar, but the political situation back in the Dominican Republic is so terrible that they can't even get mail through. They live in the hope that Papi and Tio Toni are all right, but they get news that they were shot and dumped into the ocean. The rest of the family gathers together and circles in a hug, around the symbolic empty space in the center of their circle, the center of their family.

In Chapter 11, Anita is settling into a new life in a new world. Her family is spread out around the New York City area instead of living together on a compound, but they still gather together. Instead of abundant sunshine, she has to learn to live with some gray. Still, the gray can be beautiful, as she sees in the snowfall. Thanksgiving dinner is a new



tradition, and at the family gathering, they must all come to terms with the death of their family members. The family grieves together and also feels pride for the freedom gained by the death of their family members. Anita gets a message from Oscar with words from Chucha reminding her of her wings. She thinks about her father and how he made her promise to fly. She realizes that the wings and flight are symbols for the freedom that she can only find within herself. Once she realizes that, she is truly ready to fly.



Characters

Anita de la Torre

Anita is a girl who is almost twelve years old when the book opens and she is about to celebrate her 13th birthday when the book ends. Anita is looking forward to growing up, but she finds that the political situation in the country takes precedence over all other events.

She lives in the Dominican Republic and attends an American school. When the story begins, Anita is known for chattering too much, and she's constantly with her cousins. As the story progresses, Anita becomes more withdrawn, and she struggles to find the words to say what she is thinking. She is drawn to writing, and she finds that she is able to ask better self through her journal. This helps her organize her thoughts and gives her ideas. When she gets to the United States, she is able to tell her story in compositions that her teachers assign.

Mundo de la Torre

Also called Papi, this man is Anita's father. He is dedicated to his family and to his fight for freedom. Although there aren't many scenes in the book with him directly in them, the man is constantly involved with meetings, and he is a key character in the assassination El Jefe. He wants the best for his daughters as the reader sees when he sits down and talks with Anita about the way he wants her to grab her freedom and fly someday.

When Anita has a hard time talking, he accepts her situation without ridicule and he tries to comfort her. He is the one who links the fact that she can overhear the conversations from the secret meetings with her loss of words. He is so dedicated to his cause, he is willing to give up his life for it.

Carmen

This character is Anita's mother. She tries to protect her family by pretending that nothing is going wrong, but she is also strong enough to face up to adversity.

Trujillo Junior

This character made it his mission to seek revenge for those people who had assassinated his father.



El Jefe

This character was a dictator for 31 years. Anita's family was involved in a plot to assassinate him.

Lucinda

This character is Anita's sister. She can be very compassionate when she feels like it and she tells Anita what is going on when others won't tell her. She has to leave the country because she has captured the attention of Mr. Smith.

Carla

This character is Anita's cousin. They are very close and Anita is very sad when she has to leave to go to New York suddenly.

Tio Toni

This is Anita's relative who was missing for months after he and his friends hatched a plot to get rid of the dictator.

Chucha

This character is Anita's nanny. She has dreams in which he can see the future and she sleeps in the coffin. She always wears purple.

Mundin

This character is Anita's brother. He has a bad habit of biting his fingernails when he gets nervous.

Oscar Mancini

This character is a classmate of Anita's. He is very smart and asks many questions. He is half Dominican, and his father is from Italy and works at the Italian Embassy.

Mr. Washburn

This character is the American consul who represents the United States when Ambassador Farland is out of the country.

Sam

This character is the son of the American consul. He is almost the same age as Anita, and the two become friends. At one point she thinks that she is in love with him.



Objects/Places

Dominican Republic

This is the country where Anita is from and where she lives the first 12 years of her life.

American School

This is where Anita goes to school. She learns about American holidays here.

Construcciones de la Torre

This is the name of the business Anita's father runs. It lacks for business as the country becomes more politically unsettled.

Coffin

This is Chucha's bed. She says she wants to get ready for the next life.

Closet

This is where Anita lives with her mother while they are in hiding.

New York

This is where many of Anita's relatives live. She stays with them when she flees from her native home.

Queen of Hearts

This is a card that Anita and Oscar use as a personal connection while she is in hiding.

Flowers

This is what El Jefe sends to Lucinda, scaring her.

Wimpy's

This is the grocery store that is also a center for communication for the resistance.

Chevy

El Jefe's dead body is found in this.



Themes

Growing Up

When the story begins, Anita is nearly 12 years old. While many still look on her as a child, she realizes that she is growing up. She is beginning to identify with her older sister more, and she is physically changing. She is eager to appear older than she really is and when Sam moves in, she tells him that she is already twelve years old.

When one thinks of childhood, one thinks of innocence and naivety. Anita is clearly leaving her innocence and naivety behind her as the events in the book unfold. Her country is at war, and she is in the middle of all the chaos. She has to deal with her new feelings for boys, the onset of her first period, her physical changes, and her emotional changes in a time when others around her are fighting for survival.

Anita has to learn how to survive in a world where beloved relatives suddenly disappear and secrets have to be kept. If she blurts out secrets in a childish manner, it could lead to the death of somebody that she loves.

One of Anita's greatest outlets for focusing her thoughts and feelings is writing in her journal. Since she is growing up in a politically precarious country, even her writing can be dangerous. She is told to stop until her family is free. She only start writing again when her family is already in trouble and it can't do any more damage.

Fighting For Freedom

Since she goes to an American school, Anita is aware of the fact that people vote for a new ruler in America every four years. She also knows that no one can rule for more than eight years in a row. This is very different from her own country. They have had the same ruler, a dictator, for the past 31 years.

As the book opens, she thinks highly of their leader and even draws strength from him as she sees his image in her classroom and her home. As she listens to her family members talk, she begins to find out that he is not what she once thought. In fact, he is a cruel man. Three sisters tried to rise up against him, and they were murdered. Anita's uncle, her father, and many of their friends are deeply involved in a plot to assassinate the evil man.

The assassination occurs, but the liberation is not announced, and the leader's son comes to power. He is determined to seek revenge for his father. Because of this, Anita's father and uncle are taken away as prisoners, and the rest of the family must go into hiding. Still, the people continue fighting, and eventually the dictatorship is overthrown. Due to these people, Anita's uncle and her father, people have the freedom to vote. Anita's uncle and father die in the cause, but their actions are not taken for granted by those who survive and continue to live in freedom.



Psychological Ramifications of Trauma

At the beginning of the novel, Anita is a carefree 11-year-old child. There are some strange events happening in their household and she notices that her sister has developed a red rash on her neck that appears whenever she is upset. Anita also knows that her older brother has a bad habit of biting his nails when he is upset. He had once kicked the habit, but now she notices that his fingernails are bitten once again. There is a strong emphasis in the book on physical reactions to stressful situations, even if they are positive. For example, Oscar's sister gets nervous when she is around Anita's brother, who she eventually dates. In her nervousness, she constantly plays with her hair, braiding and unbraiding it.

As Anita begins to live under more oppression, her relatives leave, and her school closes, she begins to show signs of psychological trauma as well. She has a hard time finding the words to express herself. She has the words in her head, or at least the feelings, but she can't find the words to express them. She becomes very quiet. Her mother discovers, by accident, that Anita is able to hear all the conversations the men hold as they gather together to plan the assassination of El Jefe. Anita's father realizes how much this has stressed his daughter out. Once she begins writing in her journal, the words come back to her. As she expresses her thoughts, she is able to verbalize them once again.



Style

Point of View

"Before We Were Free" by Julia Alvarez is written in the first-person objective and present tense from a girl who is turning twelve years old. The young girl lives in the Dominican Republic, but she attends an American school. Hence she is familiar with both cultures. Since the story is written in an objective viewpoint, the reader sees events as they unfold. Since it is written in the first-person, the reader also gets insight into how it feels dealing with the different situations that arise at home and politically. This creates a personal connection between the reader and the main character. Events in the past are brought to light to the reader when the main character reminisces previous events. The only glimpse into what might occur in the future comes from prophecies from the nanny who has a knack for seeing the future. She talks in riddles, however, so upcoming events are not always obvious.

Setting

Most of this story takes place in the Dominican Republic. The compound that Anita lives in is diagrammed at the beginning of the book like the house in which she hides. However, descriptions of the school and other areas are not as detailed.

At the beginning of the book, the reader has a sense that Anita is in a very comfortable and secure world. She is surrounded by diplomats and family. This ideal existence quickly crumbles as relatives leave, houses become dilapidated, and soldiers encroach on their privacy. By the time Anita and her mother find themselves living in a closet, the reader realizes that they are fortunate to have some place where they are safe.

Life in New York is shown as a stark contrast to life in the Dominican Republic. Instead of a large compound for all the family members living in separate houses, the family members squeeze into a small apartment illegally. Instead of sunshine, they have to learn to live with cold and gray weather. This is their price for freedom.

Language and Meaning

The majority of this novel takes base in the Dominican Republic and the main character attends an American school. Due to this, Anita uses many Americanized words and is familiar with American holidays and traditions. However, there are many Spanish phrases interjected throughout the story. Sometimes a Spanish phrase is translated directly as somebody responds by repeating the phrase. Other times, the meaning of a phrase is inferred by another character's response to a question in Spanish. Political terms such as "embargo" are clearly defined. For example, Anita's family members talked about the embargo, and her teacher had a lesson in which she teaches the class about the meaning behind an embargo and how it affects their lives.

Structure

"Before We Were Free" by Julia Alvarez has a basic cover, a title page, and a Table of Contents at the beginning of the book. The Table of Contents shows that there is a title page, a dedication, then eleven chapters. Each chapter has a specific name that refers to an important incident that occurs within the chapter. The chapters vary in length, however Chapter 9 is extremely long. This is the chapter that covers Anita's time in hiding and it highlights her diary.

After the story has ended, there is a section about the author that shows how this book is based on experiences the author's family faced in reality. It's a fictionalized version of their own lives in her former country. There is detailed in the Author's Note, which occurs after the "About The Author" section. After the Author's Note there is a section on questions for discussion. This is followed by another section entitled "About The Author." Following this second "About The Author" section, there is a section highlighting similar books by other authors and section on Readers' Circle books.

Quotes

"Although the Pilgrims never came to the Dominican Republic, we are attending the American school, so we have to celebrate American holidays." (Chapter 1. Kindle Location 22).

"But something so unusual is going on that good manners seem beside the point" (Chapter 1. Kindle Location 101).

"I feel proud to be acting more mature than Lucinda, but the truth is, I'm just as sad even if I'm not showing it" (Chapter 1. Kindle Location 186).

"It doesn't make any sense. If the SIM are policemen, secret or not, shouldn't we trust them instead of being afraid of them?" (Chapter 2. Kindle Location 265).

"Now I'm really confused. I thought we liked El Jefe. His picture hangs in our front entryway with the saying below it: IN THIS HOUSE, TRUJILLO RULES" (Chapter 2. Kindle Location 300).

"It's like my whole world is coming undone, but when I write, my pencil is a needle and thread, and I'm stitching the scraps back together" (Chapter 4. Kindle Location 717).

"At first, your father didn't want to endanger his family. But sometimes life without freedom is no life at all" (Chapter 4. Kindle Location 780).

"I want my children to be free, no matter what. Promise me you'll spread your wings and fly" (Chapter 7. Kindle Location 1198).

"I wanted you to have a childhood,' Mami sniffs, wiping her tears" (Chapter 7. Kindle Location 255).

"You can't be brave if you're not scared" (Chapter 8. Kindle Location 1376).

"I just have to stay one step ahead of being scared. If it's just a small step, maybe I can do it" (Chapter 9. Kindle Location 1507).

"How I stroke a spot on my left cheek whenever I'm feeling scared or lonely?" (Chapter 9. Kindle Location 1672).

"What good is it to escape captivity only to be imprisoned in your own misery?" (Chapter 11. Kindle Location 2455).

"It is the responsibility of those who survive the struggle for freedom to give testimony. To tell the story in order to keep alive the memory of those who died" (Chapter 11. Kindle Location 2492).



Topics for Discussion

Why do Anita's cousins have to leave the country so quickly?

Anita attended an American school and noticed many differences between the United States of America and the Dominican Republic. Explain the differences that she noted.

Explain the concept of embargo and how it affected the people of the Dominican Republic.

Describe different ways people reacted to the stressful political situation in the country. Focus on the physiological and psychological reactions of Anita and her siblings.

Why did Anita's mother prevent her from writing in her journal?

How did Anita's journal help her?

Anita's father wanted her to discover freedom and fly. Why was this so difficult for her to do? How did she overcome her feelings so that she could be completely free?