

Dreaming in Cuban Study Guide

Dreaming in Cuban by Cristina Garcia

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Plot Summary

Dreaming in Cuba is the story of four Cuban women in one family dealing with the repercussions of the Cuban Revolution. Throughout the novel, the impact of the political situation and their relationships with one another are vastly affected by the Revolution and what the future holds for each of the women involved.

There are two main characters — Pilar and Celia. Celia is the matriarch of the family, the grandmother of Pilar. She believes that although Pilar lives in New York and Celia lives in Cuba, Pilar will remember and continue on with Celia's thoughts and memories. The relationship between Celia and Pilar is vastly influenced by the Cuban Revolution. Lourdes, Pilar's mother, takes the family from Cuba when Pilar is two years old. For this reason, Pilar doesn't really feel at home in Cuba or in New York. Pilar and Celia communicate telepathically for years late at night until Pilar grows too old to hear Celia anymore.

Celia fell in love with a man named Gustavo when she was young. Although a married man living in Spain, the affair with Gustavo impacts Celia the rest of her life. After he leaves Cuba to return to Spain, Celia despairs. She does not get out of bed for eight months. When a young man named Jorge del Pino comes to visit her in her housebound state, he urges her to write Gustavo. If Gustavo does not return her letters, she will marry Jorge. She agrees and writes Gustavo a letter. She continues to write him a letter every month on the 11th, although she never sends the others to him, but instead stores them in a chest for her granddaughter one day.

Jorge and Celia marry, but to punish her, he leaves her alone with his mother and sister — Berta and Ofelia. These two horrid women treat Celia so poorly that they eventually break her spirit. She prays for a son to save her, dreaming of escaping to Spain to meet up with Gustavo and getting away from this awful marriage. She gives birth to Lourdes and, hanging the child by one leg, swears to never remember Lourdes' name. She spends some time in the mental asylum afterwards. Lourdes and Jorge always remain close, but Lourdes never forgives her mother for these thoughts and is never close to Celia.

Felicia and Javier are Celia's next two children after she leaves the mental asylum and Jorge moves them into a place by the coast.

All of the women in Celia's family are blessed with gifts. All of them can foresee the future and telepathically speak to one another, although it is not something they talk about. No one seems surprised when the spirit of Jorge visits them, although only Lourdes is close enough to him in life to communicate with him in death.

Pilar lives in New York, but is a lost individual. She does not feel that she really belongs in America, yet knows too little about Cuba to know if that is where she belongs. She and Lourdes, her mother, constant fight, which adds to Pilar's feelings of displacement, since it is her grandmother, Celia — with whom she never verbally talks — that she



feels closest. When Lourdes opens her second bakery, she asks Pilar to paint a mural on the wall. Pilar agrees, but produces a very controversial piece on the Statue of Liberty. When a man tries to physically attack the piece, Lourdes knocks him with her purse, which temporarily makes Pilar adore her mother. Lourdes's violent reaction, however, has less to do with protecting her daughter or her freedom of speech and more to do with not allowing anyone to tell her what she can do with her own bakery because it reminds her of the Cuban Revolution's beginnings.

Lourdes and Pilar will finally spend six days in Cuba in April. While there, Celia is thrilled that Pilar has remembered her and returned home. She is convinced that Pilar will carry on her future, although in the end, Pilar betrays her and her Cuban origins. After this happens, Celia swims off the coast of Cuba to never return again.



Ordinary Seductions: Ocean Blue

Ordinary Seductions: Ocean Blue Summary

Celia del Pino takes her job seriously as a watcher for any potential invaders for the Revolution and El Lider. She has a vision of her husband, Jorge, emerging from the light of a shooting star. He looks younger and speaks to her slowly; Celia runs to the beach telling him that she couldn't hear him. Celia now knows Jorge is dead, but does not grieve as they spent most of their marriage apart. When first married, they buy a piano and she plays Debussy whenever he leaves, as he forbid it. She dove into the water and swims all night.

Celia tells Felicia, her younger daughter, that Jorge stopped by to say goodbye, Felicia is upset that his spirit had not also stopped by to see her and the children. Felicia thinks about picking up shells after a tidal wave, but her mother said they were bad luck. Felicia and Herminia, her friend, sacrifice a goat in her father's memory.

Ordinary Seductions: Ocean Blue Analysis

Celia and Pilar share the role of main character in the novel, although they do not interact with each other until the end of the book. Celia's dedication to the Revolution is an integral part of her life and it is fitting that the vision of her husband appears during her nightly watch of the coast. After her husband dies, she places a picture of El Lider over her husband's face in the picture frame beside her bed. Also fitting is the fact that Celia cannot understand what Jorge's vision tells her, although later, his conversations with his daughter, Lourdes, is clear.

Celia reacts to the news of her husband's death by swimming fully clothed into the sea. Unlike her finale at the end of the novel, however, Celia returns to the coast.

Felicia's reaction to her father's death is also fitting. She reluctantly goes with Herminia to visit La Madrina, who is a religious figure representing the Santera, or Yoruban religion that permeates the Cuban culture. This act also ties to Felicia's end as a participant and leader in the Santera religion.



Ordinary Seductions: Going South

Ordinary Seductions: Going South Summary

At four a.m., Lourdes goes to her bakery and begins preparations by preparing pastries and doughs. The nuns call and say her father's spirit thanked them for his care. Lourdes tries to call Celia, but cannot get through. When her father moved to New York, Lourdes gained 118 pounds from the stress. She goes to view her father then looks for her daughter, Pilar, who Lourdes cannot find, so is frantic. Pilar sees her father with another woman and decides to go to Cuba again.

Pilar can recall everything that has happened to her, including the moment that she left her Abuela Celia when she was two years old. She buys a ticket to Miami, hoping she'll be able to get to Cuba from there and escape life in New York.

Ordinary Seductions: Going South Analysis

The relationship between Lourdes and her family is analyzed in this chapter. Lourdes is an irritating force within the novel, dealing only in black-and-white and who aggressively tries to control every member of her family. She and Pilar do not get along and in fact, she and Rufino do not communicate well. The only time Lourdes connects with her husband is to satisfy her need for sex during periods of high stress. Other than that, Rufino and Pilar are close, seeing beauty in "junk" and talking about their various projects.

Interestingly, Jorge could talk to a nun after his death to thank her for her treatment towards him, but could not make sense to his own wife. These visions themselves do not seem like something out of the ordinary and the gift of seeing the deceased is accepted as a somewhat normal occurrence.

Pilar reacts to her father's betrayal of her mother by wanting to escape New York. Her escape has less to do with her parents' relationship and more to do with her own weak sense of identity. Pilar's gifts are revealed here, including her ability to recall everything that has happened to her and her ability to talk with Celia. Pilar talks to a woman on the bus ride to Miami about her family life, indicating that she has so few people to talk with in her life that a stranger on the bus becomes an appropriate outlet for communication to Pilar.



Ordinary Seductions: The House on Palmas Street

Ordinary Seductions: The House on Palmas Street Summary

Celia is waiting for her two granddaughters, Luz and Milagro and reflects on the spring before she met Jorge. She fell in love with a married Spanish lawyer, Gustavo Sierra de Armas from Granada. He visits her often where she worked, but finally left Cuba, after which Celia went into a deep depression, though she still wears the pearl earrings he gave her. Her great aunt calls a santera, who predicts she will survive the hard times and will live by the water. Jorge is fourteen years older than Celia, who has known him her whole life. He tells her to write Gustavo and if he does not respond, she will marry Jorge instead. He does not respond, but Celia writes Jorge every month on the 11th for the next 25 years. Jorge's sister and mother terrorize Celia. When pregnant, she decides if it is a boy, she will escape to Spain, but it is a girl. Celia says "I will not remember her name." Jorge checks Celia into the mental asylum and names the little girl Lourdes.

Celia makes the solemn promise as a widow, she will devote her life to the Revolution and El Lider. Felicia's mental condition deteriorates and Celia takes the twins away, but Felicia keeps Ivanito. The children's father had abused Celia and finally giving her syphilis, the cause of her present insanity. As Celia feeds the twins, she remembers her husband's fastidiousness.

Ordinary Seductions: The House on Palmas Street Analysis

As Celia is waiting for her granddaughters, she thinks to herself that she has spent her entire life waiting for others or for something to happen. Her relationship with Gustavo Sierra de Armas is a passing fancy on his side, but significantly impacts the rest of Celia's life. Her relationship with Gustavo will evolve to an idealized love that is not marred by real life or the deterioration of the quotidian. Later, Jorge will tell Lourdes about how he left Celia at home with his sister and mother to punish her for her devotion and love with Gustavo, which he was more successful at than even he had planned, since their treatment of Celia eventually puts her in the mental asylum.

Interestingly, even though Celia is not religious, she circles the ceiba tree and respects its significance. She later calls Felicia's religious convictions in the santera and Yoruban religion a negative influence, but she herself also dabbles in some of its superstitious beliefs.



Celia dedicates herself to El Lider much in the same way she dedicated herself to Gustavo for 25 years. In this way, she operates best in the world of idealized love, since it gives her a higher purpose, as though replacing her need for religious convictions.

Felicia most likely has the same gifts of telecommunication and visions as her mother and sister Lourdes, but the syphilis and mistreatment from Hugo, perverts her into a mentally unstable woman. Felicia's episodes are common that come and go with the seasons and weather, affecting her children.



Ordinary Seductions: Celia's Letters: 1935 - 1940

Ordinary Seductions: Celia's Letters: 1935 - 1940 Summary

Celia writes Gustavo about what is happening in her life; the poor treatment from in-laws; the pregnancy, and the fact that she will come find Gustavo if she births a boy. Celia feels Jorge betrayed her by putting her in the asylum.

She believes the hospital murdered a woman who befriended her there. Out of the asylum, she vacations with her family. Her last letter of this era to Gustavo says Jorge was in a terrible accident and she races to take the girls to see him, also realizing she cares for him.

Ordinary Seductions: Celia's Letters: 1935 - 1940 Analysis

According to Celia, Lourdes is created in her womb amidst an environment of hatred and "poison." It is little wonder, then, that Celia would want nothing to do with her daughter once she is born and the mental asylum seems to be a refuge from the horrible marriage situation in which she has found herself.

Interestingly, it seems that Celia names her second child after the Felicia that she meets in the mental asylum. Similar to the woman that Celia meets in the mental ward, Felicia will also treat her husband, Hugo, in a similar manner, which is an odd parallel in Celia's life. Celia does not have any affection or care for Jorge until he gets into an accident and is so pathetic that Celia feels sorry for him. From then on, she loves him in her own way. While writing Gustavo, Celia mentions that she is essentially an insomniac, who relates more to other insomniacs, anarchists, thieves, women whose children have died and other individuals on the fringe of society who are negative people. Her unhappiness is pronounced in these years.



Ordinary Seductions: A Grove of Lemons

Ordinary Seductions: A Grove of Lemons Summary

In Miami, Pilar goes to her cousin Blanquito's home stopping at a church until dusk so she can sneak in and just see Blanquito. Pilar climbs into a lounge chair by their pool, falls asleep, and is awakened by her Tia Rosario.

Lourdes hears her father Jorge voice in her head. Her husband, Rufino, says she is just tired. She hires a new woman in the bakery, who steals from her, so she fires her. While working, she thinks of her father and recalls when Rufino and she first left Cuba. She wanted to live someplace cold, so they traveled to New York. She is pregnant with her second child when soldiers came to their ranch, and she stands in between the soldiers and Rufino, screaming at them to leave. When Rufino is out of town, they return and rape her causing a miscarriage. While the soldier is raping her, she foresees his eventual death. A full week after Jorge speaks to Lourdes on her walk home from the bakery, he returns to resume their talks, telling her that Pilar does not hate her, but has not yet learned how to love her.

Ordinary Seductions: A Grove of Lemons Analysis

Lourdes seems to be so different from both Celia, her mother, and Pilar, her daughter. Yet with the background knowledge of her rape, it is more understandable that she has edges and anger in her voice. She, too, has visions of the future and also benefits from the visitations by her father's spirit, which continues throughout much of the novel.

Also, the wealth of the Puente family is something that Lourdes rejects. This is an interesting concept because Lourdes is obsessed with money and success, but only when she gains it herself. She is not interested in milking from her husband's family, but appreciates individuals who garner success on their own, such as her hero du Pont.



Ordinary Seductions: The Fire between Them

Ordinary Seductions: The Fire between Them Summary

Felicia's delusions are full-scale now, but she's never sure why they arrive when they do. She plays Beny More songs and teaches Ivanito, her son, how to dance. She recalls meeting Hugo when waiting tables. She takes off her apron and follows him to the Hotel Inglaterra. When Felicia sees Hugo next, she is seven months pregnant. He is forced to marry her in the City Hall and says if she comes near him, he will kill her. He leaves and misses the birth of the twins. Felicia's delusions become worse, and she is constantly confused. She decides to kill Hugo when pregnant again. Without hesitation, she takes a rag and places it in the hot oil, holding it with tongs, she lights a match to it. She drops it on him and tells him never to come back. Ivanito soothes her mother as her condition worsens. Felicia serves nothing but meringues and coconuts, believing these foods will purify them. When Celia brings Ivanito other foods, he refuses it.

Felicia tells them they will go to the beach after they rest. They have a full meal and Felicia smashes up some pills and they eat them mixed with the cake icing. Ivanito looks like his father and Celia worries how that will affect Felicia. Celia believes summer and Felicia's madness have both broken. She thinks of her father and how he had two families for a time. When her parents got a divorce, Celia went to Tia Alicia's and never saw her mother again.

Celia and the twins have a fun evening despite the loss of power. Celia wakes in a panic and wants to go to Havana right away. She repeats "my child, my child, my child" as if her words can save Felicia from so far away and Celia smells the ocean all the way into Havana.

Ordinary Seductions: The Fire between Them Analysis

Later referred to as the summer of coconuts, these delusions that Felicia has are the worst of her life. Whether Felicia has always been this mad or the syphilis increases her insanity, she is definitely unwell at this point in the novel. With Celia's history of mental instability, it can be assumed that Felicia has at least some portions of her madness in her genes. However, due to the harsh treatment of Hugo and the syphilis, she is pushed over the edge during the summer of coconuts and attempts to kill herself and Ivanito.

During this summer, Ivanito looks more and more like Hugo, which worries Celia. Felicia dances and sings with Ivanito, feeling as though she is in love. It makes sense, then, that she would want to kill herself and Ivanito after a long purification process as a way to rid herself of all the pain she has felt throughout her marriage.

The ocean becomes a symbol of madness and upheaval here in the novel. Its scent follows Celia as she rushes to save Felicia, just as she ran to it after being released from the mental asylum all those years ago.



Ordinary Seductions: Celia's Letters: 1942 - 1949

Ordinary Seductions: Celia's Letters: 1942 - 1949 Summary

Celia continues writing to Gustavo but only out of habit. Celia is worried about her piano after a tidal wave and vows to play Debussy. Celia's son is born with a caul, which is a sign of good luck. She thinks that her son will look like her father when he grows up, so she names him after her father. She tells Gustavo that Jorge says her smile frightens him. She is now practicing the smiles of her youth to fix the problem. She is reading the plays of Moliere and wonders what separates suffering from imagination?

Ordinary Seductions: Celia's Letters: 1942 - 1949 Analysis

Throughout these letters, Celia's reflection on her then-current situation is shown clearly. She questions why pieces of land are arbitrarily being given up and delegated to different political hands. She says that just to survive is an act of hope. The desperation that she feels for humans who just aspire to be nothing more than comfortable is painful to read. In this way, Celia's darker side is shown through the words in these letters to Gustavo, and the reader gets the feeling that it is only in these letters that she shows this side, allowing these feelings to escape free. This is why Celia says that she feels she must write him, although their love is no more than a habit for her now. It is the only way that she can release these inner feelings.

Celia remembers her parents through the birth of her son. She recalls how her father is finally killed by other men in their town, who attack her father for having relations with their wives. Her mother abandon Celia when she is young, putting her on the train to never see her again. This abandonment resurfaces for Celia now that she is unhappy in her daily life.

Obviously, Celia is depressed. Her smile scares her husband, indicating it is a not an expression of warmth and happiness. She reads sad, contemplative poems as she writes to her ex-lover. Celia is not satisfied or happy in her life at this stage. These letters let the reader understand her pain more acutely.



Imagining Winter: The Meaning of Shells

Imagining Winter: The Meaning of Shells Summary

Felicia is marching through Sierra Maestra with a group considered social misfits in one way or another. Felicia does not remember trying to kill herself or Ivanito. Ivanito is in a boarding school because Felicia is an "unfit" mother. She is told that she needs to find meaning in her life outside of her son, so she is enrolled in the Revolution full-time. Felicia volunteers for night duty in the camp because she feels more comfortable at night. Felicia considers El Lider to be a common tyrant. She realizes that her mother's attraction to El Lider is somewhat sexual and it is with this thought that she satisfies herself during her night watch.

The first Thursday in December 1975, nearly 300 people come to the Santa Teresa del Mar's only movie theater to hear the civil trial of two women. Ester Ugarte, is accusing another woman, Loli Regalado, of trying to seduce her husband. Celia is the presiding judge in the matter, her third year in this position. the husband confesses and Celia pronounces a sentence. That evening, Celia contemplates how she could be so successful with these civil trials, yet so ineffective helping her own family. She feels her children are all desolate and blind to each other and the things around them. Celia closes her eyes that evening and falls asleep, thinking of how she used to talk with Pilar late at night before falling asleep.

Felicia's daughter, Luz recalls how carefully her father's hands could hold the smallest threads. She feels that her mother destroyed her father without good reason. Both of the twins plan to escape and live together somewhere else one day. Luz and Milagro get their first postcard from Papi and plan to meet him. They are initially scared by his looks but calm down once they hear their father call their names. They see him for months and he asks to see Ivanito. When they return with him, they walk in on him having sex in a mask with a prostitute.

The twins are afraid they will never get to leave the boarding school.

Imagining Winter: The Meaning of Shells Analysis

Felicia is a lost woman, being forced into "voluntary" labor for the Revolution because society is not sure where else to put her. Felicia rebels against the Revolution. Her forced participation with the troops sexually, makes El Lider become an equal to her as she imagines him pleasing her instead of her participating in his Revolution. Through this imagination sequence, Felicia can subjugate the leader and take control of the situation. Her control over her own sexuality is an important aspect of Felicia's character and will impact her life in the future. She has found herself married with three children because of her love of sex, and she will continue to act in ways that satisfy her sexually in the future as well.



It appears that Celia's satisfaction with life and general happiness is contingent upon El Lider and the Revolution. Celia operates in a world of idealized love, both with Gustavo and in the next progression of that love in her obsession with El Lider. Celia does have a kind of sensual love for the Revolution, but the Revolution also gives her a chance to be more productive within her society and give her a reason to keep moving, keep living, keep breathing. The cases that she presides over provide an escape for both her and the rest of the local people, letting them complain about other peripheral complaints in the society, neighborhood and families. These cases hold important societal significance, but they are also used as a kind of perverse entertainment akin to a soap opera, where the other members of society are vicariously living through their neighbors' issues. After the case is over, even Celia accepts peanuts from the peanut vendor, who comes into the theater. The presence of this peanut vendor demeans the importance of the civil case, but even Celia does not refuse his peanuts once she leaves the theater. The element of entertainment cannot be stripped from these cases or their importance to the community and to fight that idea — or the peanut vendor who represents this concept — would be futile.

Celia can successfully help her neighbors, yet cannot communicate well with her children. The history and emotions tied with her family cloud and block her perspective so much that she cannot give them the advice or words to pull them all together happily. Celia does not understand why her solution to life — participating vehemently in the Revolution to have a purpose outside her own meager life — does not translate into success for Felicia as well. In her eyes, Lourdes' entire life is built on waste and excess, just like her eclairs, and this confuses and frustrates Celia immensely. Celia falls asleep that evening realizing how lonely she is, despite all her activities. She is lonely from an inability to share her joy with anyone and it is here that the reader realizes Celia has suffered from this loneliness for the majority of her life.

With Luz's story, the reader understands how the twins feel towards their mother. Luz remembers the story of their birthday party when Felicia filled up a pinata full of eggs, showering the children with yolk when they split it open. The twins are embarrassed and distressed by their mother's behavior. They try to reunite with their father — to disastrous results — and are once again flung out on their own to a boarding school. Ivanito is sensitive and seeing his father in that way upsets him greatly. He believes that his mother can be influenced by his actions or thoughts, but is still too young to understand how serious is her mental illness.



Imagining Winter: Enough Attitude

Imagining Winter: Enough Attitude Summary

Lourdes is walking around her new section of town as an auxiliary policewoman. She patrols on Tuesdays and Thursdays. She thinks about how nothing is important to Pilar, so it was hard to punish her. Lourdes believes equality is just an abstraction. She vows to live in a world of black and white. Lourdes dreams about what her son would be doing right now, if he had survived. She thinks about Rufino and how she realized he would never fit in with American life. She rejected the Puente lifestyle that Cuban women above a certain age do not work. She went to work on the Puente ranch shortly after marrying Rufino. She found a cheating accountant and redecorated the entire structure, making it more modern and fresh. Rufino's mother put the home back the way it was, but Lourdes redid it again and never spoke to the woman. Rufino does not confide in Lourdes anymore about his projects.

The only person Lourdes can talk to is the spirit of her father Jorge, who still comes to visit her. Although Jorge encourages her to become an auxiliary, Pilar makes fun of her and gives her a book on Socialism, which Lourdes soaks in scalding hot water and gives back with a note saying Pilar should move to Russia if she thinks it's so wonderful. Her mother's actions do not ruffle Pilar.

Lourdes yells "Stop!" to someone, but the figure jumps into the water. She jumps in and survives, but the Navarro boy with whom she had compared her dead son, does not. Pilar is dating a Max who has a band. She loves the singer Lou Reed, Iggy Pop and a new band called the Ramones. She loves their general indifference with society and says that it's the only thing she has in common with her mother — if she dislikes someone, she tells them immediately.

Pilar's a little worried about her mother and knows her father feels lost in Brooklyn and only looks happy when talking about Cuba. Pilar hasn't forgiven him for the other blonde woman, although they have never addressed the issue. Lourdes wants Pilar to paint a mural on the new bakery, but Pilar sees art as the ultimate rebellion. She paints Lady Liberty with a bit of a rebellious touch with thorny scars behind the statue and the message "I'm a Mess" at the base. The biggest controversy, however, is the safety pin that Pilar paints through the nose of the Statue of Liberty. Lourdes unveils the painting much to general disagreement from the crowd. When one man charges the painting with a pocketknife, however, Lourdes swings her handbag and clubs the guy inches from the painting. It is in that instant that Pilar loves her mother very much.

Imagining Winter: Enough Attitude Analysis

Lourdes' contemplation on equality is important in respect to her mother's views. Socialism, after all, operates on the idea of equality for all people no matter what. For



Lourdes, however, equality is a dreamy abstraction and a concept she detests. She wants things to be clean-cut and precise, which is something she shares with Celia. Although both women have vastly different views, they are alike in their absolute convictions that their beliefs are the best with no room for debate. Interestingly, in their families, it is the fathers who have a closer relationship with the daughters instead of the mothers. The women cannot communicate with one another and are close only to their sons.

Lourdes's response to the Puente women and their life of privilege is an admirable one. Similar to her mother before her, Lourdes does not get along with the women in her husband's family. Rather than be bullied by them, however, she stands strong and acts as she believes she should. Although she appreciates the luxuries while she has them in Cuba, it does not prevent her from being practical and getting a job to support her family unlike her own husband, who cannot seem to hold a regular job. This headstrong quality is extremely beneficial to her family, although it seems neither Rufino nor Pilar acknowledge or appreciate it since Lourdes is such a difficult person to love and communicate with.

The fights between Lourdes and Pilar stem from a lack of communication. Because Lourdes cannot accept a view different from her own, Pilar easily attacks and ridicules Lourdes. It is doubtful that Pilar really cares about Socialism, but gives her mother the book just to anger her. Lourdes' suggestion that Pilar go to Russia parallels what her own brother Javier did due to his approval and love of the Revolution. Pilar, however, is only trying to rile her mother and challenge her views, which are so rigid.

Lourdes gives Pilar the opportunity to show her artistry to the world. For Lourdes, it is a chance for Pilar's work to be recognized and seen by many important people. But Pilar does not paint in the hopes of recognition and financial success, which Lourdes does not understand. Pilar paints as an emotional response and rebellion to her life. It is her way of expressing her perspective. In this way, the painting at the bakery is the ideal representation of how Lourdes and Pilar do not communicate or understand the other's perspective. Nevertheless, Lourdes does not allow someone else to tell her what she can and cannot display in her shop, since such control reminds her of socialist Cuba; this is why Lourdes clubs the man attacking the painting. Pilar loves her mother at that moment for seemingly defending her painting, but Lourdes' aggression is actually a refusal to be told what to do in general and has little to do with her daughter.



Imagining Winter: Baskets of Water

Imagining Winter: Baskets of Water Summary

Ivanito learns English from Jorge's textbooks. At school, most have to learn Russian. Ivanito has a strong affinity for languages and his teacher, Sergey Mikoyan, praises him highly. One day, Sergey stands close to Ivanito, saying that he has to return to Russia and that vile things will be said about him. Sergey tries to hug Ivanito, who runs away and is later teased by classmates. Felicia wants a new husband, and the santera tells Felicia she must follow a number of steps. On the way home, she falls in love with Ernesto Brito. Ernesto moves in and they marry. However, Ernesto dies in a tragic fire while doing his job. Felicia writes a letter to El Lider to investigate Ernesto's death. She is convinced a woman named Graciela Moriera is responsible. At the beauty shop, Felicia pours lye on Graciela's scalp and screams at her for killing Ernesto. This will be the last thing Felicia remembers for months.

When Felicia wakes up again, she is lying on her back in a bed that she doesn't recognize. Felicia wonders where her clothes are and he tells her they are at the laundry, promising to return them to her. For the next week, Felicia puts pieces together of what happened to get her to this place. While her new husband Otto is making love to her one evening, she pictures her son Ivanito asking her when she is coming home again. Felicia urges Otto to take her on the roller coaster. The roller coaster car moves forward and Otto jumps in next to Felicia. He starts to stand up as the car climbs higher and higher, pulling down his pants to coerce Felicia, but as the car reaches its highest peak, Felicia closes her eyes as it soars down the track and when she opens them again, her husband is gone.

Javier returns from Czechoslovakia the day after Felicia burns Graciela's scalp. His wife left him for a mathematics professor from Minsk. Javier's anguish attracts the women in the town as Celia tries to take care of him. After two months of sleeping, Javier takes a bottle of rum and finishes it completely in one afternoon. He will continue to do this night after night. Because of this, Celia does not have time to worry about Felicia or anyone else in her family.

Celia finds the santera in East Havana that helped her when she was suffering from depression about Gustavo; she recognizes Celia. With the santera's help, Celia goes to Santa Teresa del Mar and stands outside Celia's home. As Celia watches, the santera disappears. Celia knows Javier has already left to plant coffee. Celia feels a lump in her chest. She will have her left breast removed a week later.

Imagining Winter: Baskets of Water Analysis

Ivanito has no one with whom to talk and cannot connect with anyone but his mother, who is crazy. A positive person in Ivanito's life, Sergey becomes the ultimate



disappointment for Ivanito as he is later mocked for having a relationship with an improper teacher. His mother, meanwhile, is having another strong delusion after the heavy rains of summer. Although she wanders off after Ernesto's death, it is never clear as to whether anyone in her life even know about Ernesto. They will not find out about these husbands until years later when Felicia tells Herminia about both men. She will say that Otto Cruz's ashes blew away in the wind and he was never seen again. Here again, we can see how sexuality dictates and heavily influences Felicia's actions, particularly when she is close to experiencing a delusion or fully involved in one.

Due to Javier's sudden appearance and unhealthy state, Celia drops everything to nurse him. Had Javier not appeared when he did, it is possible that Celia could have saved Felicia earlier. However, she feels that if she does not save Javier, she will not be able to save Felicia, herself or anyone else in her life. It is questionable as to whether or not Celia saves Javier, but he does move on to the next step in his life. Shortly after, Celia herself averts death when she gets her left breast removed.



Imagining Winter: Celia's Letters: 1950 - 1955

Imagining Winter: Celia's Letters: 1950 - 1955 Summary

Celia's mother-in-law's curses Celia for taking Jorge away from her. Jorge forces Javier to learn accounting when he is five years old. Jorge lives in fear because he thinks Javier will ruin the family if Javier cannot manage their funds. Javier grows cold to both his parents.

Celia campaigns against Batista's politics. When Jorge returns from a business trip, Lourdes betrays Celia and tells her father Celia is at a campaign, which enrages Jorge. She questions why Lourdes dislikes her so much. Celia knows that Lourdes is punishing her still for how Celia treated Lourdes when she was first born.

Felicia, meanwhile, gets a job in Havana selling stationary, despite her mother's worries. Javier wins a national science prize and often goes to the library to read more scientific texts. Celia writes her last letter of this set cheering the Revolution, ridding Batista from the country permanently.

Imagining Winter: Celia's Letters: 1950 - 1955 Analysis

Celia's growing obsession with politics is shown here. With this growing passion, she finds a higher interest in her children. She is still confused by the every day lives of her children, however. When her teachers tell her that Javier is a genius, she says she is proud of him, but for what, she's not sure. In this way, Celia's letters demonstrate her lack of a connection with Javier and his interests.

Celia meets Herminia's father, the santera, to learn more about Batista's fate. She does not wholly respect his prediction, but it shows that Celia dabbles in this Yoruban religion and acknowledges it.



Imagining Winter: A Matrix Light

Imagining Winter: A Matrix Light Summary

Lourdes stops eating to purify herself, losing 34 pounds in a month. She walks for miles, not eating solid foods, which suddenly disgust her. Lourdes is a virgin when she marries. Pilar has a general disregard for rules, religion and "everything meaningful." She calls Pilar at five in the morning, demanding to know which man is in her bed, which infuriates Pilar. Lourdes did not plan to stop eating; it just happens. Now she longs to be profoundly empty. Now she's lost eight-two pounds. Jorge advises continually. He tells her to put her name on the sign as well. She does not allow people to tell her what to do in her bakery because she and her father know that is how things started in Cuba. Lourdes looks at Pilar's lady liberty regularly and is convinced there is something pathological in Pilar similar to Celia. By Thanksgiving, Lourdes loses 118 pounds and then starts eating vigorously at the table. Lourdes continues to eat everything in sight.

Pilar finds photographs of Celia in her mother's hosiery drawer. Pilar thinks the right side of Celia's face will let her understand Celia's sadness. Pilar feels much closer to Celia than her own mother. Celia gives Pilar confidence to believe in her own perceptions. Lourdes's bakery has become a meeting place for counter-revolutionaries, who threaten El Lider and call bomb threats to the Cuban ballerinas that come to the Metropolitan Opera House. Pilar moves from location to location and dating a man named Ruben, who she finds cheating on her. While reading through the personals, she sees a bass for sale. She purchase the bass and puts on "The Velvet Underground and Nico" and starts playing until she feels her life begin.

Imagining Winter: A Matrix Light Analysis

Lourdes has an obsession with food that is unhealthy. In periods of stress, she over-eats to compensate for her emotions. Rather than talk, she eats to soothe herself. She suddenly stops eating to "purify" herself and then just as suddenly begins to eat in Pilar's presence. There is little rationale for these actions, but the madness of it ties her to the rest of the females in her family. They each show it in a different way, but all of these women display mad tendencies to vent the deep emotions that lie within them.

Similar to Celia, Pilar cannot get over the feeling that she is waiting for her life to begin. She's not sure why, but she does not finish anything and feels incomplete. Pilar feels close to Celia, which is unusual for the family since the women of the family do not typically feel connected. Pilar and Celia break the tradition of only communicating well with a man in their family by talking clearly with each other. Unlike Celia, however, Pilar has nothing to live for and no Revolution to fight with. She is still searching for the thing that will inspire her and fulfill her, which is what the bass finally achieves for her after Ruben rejects her.



Imagining Winter: God's Will

Imagining Winter: God's Will Summary

Herminia and Felicia met when they were both six years old. They were on the shore and Felicia was collecting seashells and arranging them on the beach because Celia would not allow seashells in the house. Herminia tells Felicia that she has many shells in her house and they all represent the future and of the goddess of the seas, Yernaya. Without hesitation, Felicia asks Herminia to save her, which Herminia willingly agrees to do. Felicia's parents are afraid of Herminia's father, who is a high priest of santera. The other townspeople tell lies about him, and although Felicia is forbidden to go to Herminia's home, she does anyway. One day while Felicia is at Herminia's house, her father uses the divining coconut to answer his godchild's questions. It is from then on that Felicia is fascinated with coconuts.

Felicia and Herminia are very close and Herminia has never doubted Felicia's love or loyalty. When Herminia's son dies, Felicia stays by Herminia's side for a month until Herminia was better again. Felicia returns to Herminia and the Yoruban religion after her strange disappearance in 1978. She shows up one afternoon looking tan and slim, asking to see La Madrina. While in a holy trance, she relays to Herminia everything that had happened to her, including the two marriages and both husbands' deaths. She gets her old job back at the beauty parlor and at night, attends the religious ceremonies of the santeras. Celia discourages Felicia's strong devotion to the gods, but Felicia has a true vocation to the supernatural.

La Madrina eventually initiates Felicia and finally, Felicia is given the final rite of passage. She relays all of the details to Herminia, including her final act of being possessed by Obatala, the highest god. When she returns home in her goddess attire, she is serene and full of peace. She wants her mother and children to greet her, but they all stay away. They are frightened of her and fear another summer like the summer of the coconuts. Only Herminia stays by her side, which Felicia acknowledges and thanks her for saving her just as she promised on the beach all those years ago. Over the next weeks, Felicia starts to fade away. Her fortune is cast and it shows imminent death.

In the final hours of her death, Celia suddenly races into the room and screams at all of the religious attendees trying to soothe Felicia, telling them they are witch-doctors and to leave immediately. She smashes the figure of Obatala onto the floor and dances on the shells fragments in her bare feet, arms thrown in the air in a wild dance. Just as suddenly as she starts, she stops and swoops down to kiss her daughter, pulling her into her lap and rocking her until she dies. Ivanito receives a radio from his father after his mother's funeral and he now dreams of having his own radio show as he tries to listen to his mother's spirit in case she returns to speak to him.



Imagining Winter: God's Will Analysis

Felicia's death is as confusing as her life. She finally searches for and discovers peace and serenity, yet inexplicably, her family does not come to see her. This rejection will ultimately kill her. Interestingly, Celia believes that the santera religion is the cause of her final demise. She stamps on the shells barefoot, symbolically crushing their power under her heel. Since we know of Celia's special talents and abilities to see into the future, it is possible that Celia did not think seashells were bad, but instead foresaw that her child's death would be tied to a shell. Thus, she inadvertently encouraged an obsession with shells in Felicia by forbidding them in her house. Like any other child, Felicia became enamored with shells and what they represented, leading her to the Yoruban religion, which ultimately kills her.

Celia herself does not dabble with any of the religions seriously. Her religions are the idealized love of Gustavo and El Lider. With Felicia's death, it brings the question that Celia does not work with specific religions because she does not want to suffer the same fate as Felicia. Felicia has a great talent for the supernatural, but these gifts are inherent within her because she is Celia's daughter. By mixing a religion and honing these abilities, she loses her life completely.



Imagining Winter: Daughters of Chango

Imagining Winter: Daughters of Chango Summary

Jorge del Pino is speaking less and less to Lourdes. He is starting to lose his time in limbo. He admits that in death, there is no extra knowledge gained, but only the perspective of not being caught up in the trials of day-to-day, which lends a greater amount of truth. Lourdes asks him why he left Cuba, to which he tells her that he was sick, but it was also to escape from Celia who thought only of the Revolution. Lourdes asks if he loves Celia and if she loves him, to which he says that he thinks she loved him in her own way throughout their marriage.

After a month goes by, Lourdes believes that her father has left her for good. However, he suddenly re-appears to have one of the most important conversations in Lourdes' life. He tells her that Celia loves her and Jorge gives Lourdes a background story of what happened in the early years of their marriage. Jorge tells Lourdes that he left Celia alone with his mother and sister in order to break her for being in love with Gustavo. When Jorge comes back from his trip, he realizes that he went too far with Celia and that is why she held Lourdes by one leg and refused to remember her name. He leaves Celia in an asylum, where they feed her pills and use electric treatment process on her. Upon her release from the asylum, Jorge buys Celia a piano and buys her a house by the sea on the advice of the doctors to encourage her total forgetting. To get back at Celia for her kind indifference, he tells Lourdes that he wanted Lourdes to be all his — and Lourdes has always been her father's child with no relationship with Celia.

Finally, Jorge tells Celia he knows about the soliders that raped her all those years ago, causing Lourdes to fall on the ground and bleed deeply. Jorge's last request is to ask Lourdes to return to Cuba to tell Celia everything that Jorge has told Lourdes and to tell Celia that he's sorry. Lourdes suddenly remembers that it is April and her favorite month is April.

Pilar is searching through old records when she finds an old Beny Moore album. She buys it for fifty cents and chats with the cashier. Pilar is lost and has midterms in only a week, but all she wants to do is play her bass guitar. She leaves the record shop and goes into a botanica with its rustic, religious accouterments. This kind of religion makes more sense to her than the "more abstract" forms of worship inorganized religion. Pilar sees another woman in there who has an intense desire to have a certain man, and Pilar envies her determination, reflecting that the only time she was truly determined was during her trip to Miami to return to Cuba. Now, she has no determination or drive to do anything. The elderly man in charge of the botanica gives Pilar herbs, telling her to bathe in them for nine consecutive nights and on the last day, she will know what to do. He gives her the herbs and a special necklace for free, calling her a daughter of Chango.



Walking back home, Pilar takes a shortcut through Morningside Park when she is suddenly surrounded by three young men no older than 11 years old. The tallest one puts a knife to her throat, throwing her record away. Since it doesn't scratch, Pilar keeps hope and the boys just pull off her sweater and molest her breasts like children. They smoke some of her herbs, but she leans against the tree, feeling its pulse in the roots and closing her eyes. When she opens her eyes again, the boys are gone so she gathers her herbs and record and runs back to the university.

After nine days of her herbal baths, Pilar calls her mother, telling her they are returning to Cuba.

Imagining Winter: Daughters of Chango Analysis

Jorge's revelation to Lourdes is integral to her life, although it is too little too late. Lourdes will never establish a good relationship with her mother as the past is too etched into her memory. Jorge's apology has to be given to Lourdes since Celia can no longer understand his spirit. Only Lourdes had a strong enough relationship with him while he was living to understand his spirit. It is fitting then, that Jorge's actions when he was living establish his inability to communicate with anyone else in his family after his death. His past actions can never be forgiven because Lourdes will never tell her mother what Jorge says because she herself does not have a strong enough relationship with Celia to tell her about her conversations with Jorge after his death.

Pilar's choice of walking into the botanica seems fortuitous. She has walked by the same boutique a number of times but on this singular afternoon, she is drawn to it. The elderly man behind the counter detects Pilar has special abilities and hands her a necklace of Chango and herbs to direct her along the path to her next period in her life.

Pilar nearly becomes raped like her mother was at roughly the same age. This instance parallels her mother and in combination with the herbs and inevitable contemplation that went along with these long soaks in the tub, Pilar comes to the conclusion to embark upon a trip to Cuba. This decision comes at the same time that Jorge urges Lourdes to go to Cuba to talk with Celia, so the timing is ideal.



Imagining Winter: Celia's Letters: 1956 - 1958

Imagining Winter: Celia's Letters: 1956 - 1958 Summary

Celia tells Gustavo that Lourdes is seeing a new man named Rufino Puente, who comes from one of the wealthiest families in Cuba. Jorge is very jealous that he is losing his daughter to another man, yet Lourdes continues to see Rufino. Celia is amazed at how much of a woman her first daughter has become.

Spring has arrived and Celia contemplates the last time that she saw Gustavo. She wonders if her relationship with him through letters is better than watching him grow old and indifferent next to her. She recalls how the other men tried to talk "sweet nonsense" to her, but Gustavo was different. Gustavo expected more from her and this is why Celia loved him so much.

Lourdes is going to marry Rufino in three months. Jorge blames all of his frequent business trips. Although they are wealthy, Celia knows that the Mafia runs his casinos and that Rufino's mother, Dona Zaida, locks her mother in the room upstairs because she is an Indian from Costa Rica. Celia wonders how Rufino came from such awful parents. Zaida will change all of Celia's plans for Lourdes wedding because she feels that she must keep up the right image since they are one of the richest families. Celia's letters show a rare amount of strong anger towards Zaida.

The Revolution starts and Celia is sure Dona Zaida will be one of the first to hang. Lourdes' wedding is a circus, but fortunately, Lourdes and Rufino are too happy to notice or care. Celia is walking along the beach in the late afternoon with the shells singing a song in her bones. She realizes that she will become a grandmother soon.

Imagining Winter: Celia's Letters: 1956 - 1958 Analysis

Celia's dislike for Dona Zaida is an important factor. Celia may not have a strong relationship with Lourdes, but they are similar in some regards. They both share strong opinions about the Revolution — albeit in opposite directions — and they both do not hold wealth in any esteem. Neither Lourdes nor Celia cares for the wealth of Rufino's family, although their dislike is for different reasons. Celia holds no value to the traditionally important things, while Lourdes does not appreciate wealth unless it is made by the individual's own hands and motivation. It seems that Celia is proud of Lourdes for standing up to Jorge for the first time in her life and marrying Rufino, who is a good boy from a good family.

Celia is nostalgic for Gustavo again, questioning whether this love would have been better than their actual quotidian relationship. Unfortunately, Celia will never know the answer to that question, despite all the recent happiness in her life.



The Languages Lost: Six Days in April

The Languages Lost: Six Days in April Summary

Celia searches through Felicia's old belongings and finds her old black bathing suit. She recalls her daughter searching for and arranging the shells on the beach.

The day before, Celia goes to Felicia's house and collects all of her things, finding a note that requests she is buried as a santera. They bury her with seashells on her breast and other items important to her religion. After they are finished with the body, the terrible ailments that had plagued her — the wrinkled skin, blind eyes, lumpy skull — have disappeared. A block before the church, Felicia's car breaks down and the pallbearers have to carry her coffin the rest of the way. Remembering all of this, Celia undresses, looking at herself in the mirror. There is nothing on her body that she recognizes as her own. She puts on Felicia's bathing suit and starts off to the beach.

Pilar and Lourdes have arrived in Cuba. They drive onto Palmas Street and the taxi driver stops in front of Felicia's old house. Glancing at the house from the car, Lourdes tells the driver to go to Santa Teresa del Mar and closes her eyes for the rest of the trip. Once they arrive at Celia's house, Lourdes runs from the cab and into the house. She sees the bedroom she once shared with Felicia, glances into Celia's bedroom to see the picture of El Lider by the bedside instead of her father and goes to the porch to see Celia sitting on her worn, wicker swing.

Lourdes is immediately upset at how Celia looks, including her missing left breast. Lourdes washes Celia's hair and takes care of her. When Lourdes isn't paying attention, Celia tells Pilar that she went for a swim last night and is very happy that Pilar remembered her past. They feed Celia and give her Vitamin C, after which she takes a long, deep sleep. Pilar knows the nightmares that her grandmother has while sleeping.

While Celia is sleeping, Lourdes takes Pilar to the street corner where Lourdes used to tell tourists that her mother was dead, so they would buy food from her. They eat sugar cane, but Lourdes says it's not as sweet as she remembers it. Suddenly, Pilar wants to know how she is going to die. While thinking about this, she pictures Celia underwater, eyes open, talking to her as her hair floats above her head languidly. As she is seeing this, Lourdes starts to yell about the conditions in Cuba. She gathers five people near her as she laments about the state of the cars put together by paper clips and the brainwashed people. They laugh at her because they cannot understand her, which infuriates Lourdes all the more.

When they return to Celia's house, Celia is swinging on the porch. Pilar can feel Celia's life flowing into her in a steady rhythm. Celia tells her that Jorge told Celia to stop remembering the future and when Pilar left, Celia felt hopeless. Now that Pilar has returned, however, Celia's future can live through Pilar. She says that only granddaughters can save their grandmothers.



Lourdes is horrified by how her family is living in Cuba. She feels a great deal of pity for her nephew Ivanito, who she feels has no dreams and nothing to live for in Cuba. She feels that her mother is a complete stranger to her and Lourdes has nothing to say to her, that her father was very wrong in their discussions together in New York. The family dances together and Pilar looks awful in Lourdes's eyes, while Ivanito moves so gracefully she cannot help but meet him on the dance floor. He will later tell her that their dancing reminded him of his mother, which is a compliment from him, but horrifies Lourdes.

Lourdes visits some of her old favorite spots, but sees only ruin and deterioration now. She drives by the old ranch where she lived with Rufino's family. She lost a baby here and was raped here, but her biggest fear is that these momentous occasions will remain silent and have no more meaning than the everyday occurrence of falling leaves.

Ivanito feels a lot of division among his family members. Lourdes pays plenty of attention to him, but doesn't listen to his dreams. She prefers to tell him what he should achieve, what her dreams for him are. Pilar reads a book of predictions one night and Celia asks whether Celia should follow her passions. The answer Pilar finds tells Celia that Celia will need to act alone and without worry of the consequences, which satisfies Celia, who goes to take a nap shortly after. Pilar approaches Ivanito and asks to be taken to Herminia's house. When they arrive, Herminia smiles as though she expected them and hugs both of them to her.

Pilar paints Celia while she sits on the swing. Together, they talk as Pilar paints her as a flamenco dancer or as she is now. Celia's only response is to ask if she really looks that sad. Celia tells Pilar about her history and about the Revolution. As they talk, Lourdes will eavesdrop and then come out to lecture them until the heat drives her inside again for another shower. Celia gives Pilar a box of letters that she wrote to Gustavo but never sent. She gives Pilar the poems by Garcia Lorca as well.

Pilar starts to dream in Spanish, which she has never done before. She loves Havana, particularly its balconies, noise and decay. She knows that sooner or later she will need to return to New York, however, because she belongs in New York now more than in Cuba.

Lourdes rushes to the Peruvian embassy in Havana when she learns that numerous people have gone there to take refuge and escape the country. She sees El Lider walk by her and screams "Assassin!" which is met by utter silence. In its wake, El Lider looks at the defectors and tells them they can emigrate to whatever country they would like, that he is not holding them hostage. Lourdes returns to the house and packs a bag for Ivanito. They race to the embassy and Lourdes gives him a piece of paper, telling him that Lourdes will sponsor him in the United States. Ivanito is worried about his grandmother, but agrees to fly to Peru to later join Lourdes in America. Celia and Pilar realize that Lourdes is gone, taking Ivanito with her. They rush to the embassy.

On the drive over, Celia laments that the family has no loyalty to their origins. She knows that the sea gave her great comfort, but made her children restless. She



wonders what the point of all the years of separation were about if it will just cause a bigger betrayal. At the embassy, there is mass confusion. Pilar leaves Celia to go find Ivanito. She finds him, but she can tell that he wants to have the opportunity to go to America. When she returns to Celia, she tells her that she could not find Ivanito, betraying and lying to her.

That evening, Celia walks down the steps of her house and starts towards the beach. She remembers her life in pieces. It occurs to Celia that she has never been more than 100 yards off the coast of Cuba. She steps into the water and starts her brisk strokes. She lets the water submerge her and slowly removes the pearl earrings in her left earlobe, feeling its absence with her thumb and finger. Next, she releases the one in her right ear and imagines them drifting along in the current of the sea, their brightness slowly extinguishing. Celia's final letter to Gustavo tells him that she is fifty and the Revolution is 11 years old. She will not write to him anymore since she now has a granddaughter who will remember everything.

The Languages Lost: Six Days in April Analysis

The final chapter of the book leaves a number of questions, but it also gives birth to the idea that these women will continue on with the next stages of their lives. While talking with Pilar, Celia tells her that a mother who lives longer than her daughters is an orphan. The loss of Felicia kills the last parts of Celia because Felicia is the only child with whom she had a relationship. She is a stranger to Lourdes and Javier disappeared into the mountains to die.

Celia places a great deal of hope in Pilar. They have a connection, but as much as Pilar loves and respects her grandmother, she will not carry on Celia's ideas completely. Pilar loves Havana and adores Cuba, but after living there for a few days, it is clear to her that she belongs more in New York than in Cuba. Celia detects this sentiment and possibly foresees Pilar's betrayal. While riding in the car to find Ivanito, she questions why they came back at all if they were just going to give her a more significant and bigger betrayal in the end? Celia laments that the families no longer stay in the place of their origin, re-living the same "disillusions" and dying side by side. After all, this was her choice in life. She did not leave Cuba to take a chance and find Gustavo. Instead, she stayed in Cuba to live a life of questioning and wondering, never being truly involved in her family or her own personal being. She cared for little other than the abstract idea of the Revolution, which in itself is a huge disillusionment. After all, Celia works for and praises the Revolution and its various "successes," when in reality, Cuba is sinking deeper and deeper into despair and poverty, which Lourdes sees clearly and lambastes throughout her visit.

Pilar may not follow in Celia's exact footsteps, but she will take Celia's letters, feelings and sentiments about Cuba and translate them into a more productive life while in New York. Although Celia considers this a betrayal, it is more of an aggressive embrace of life by Pilar — which is a much-needed move from the girl who does not know herself and cannot finish the projects she begins.



Lourdes's act of betrayal to Celia is more personal. Here, in Cuba, she loses her son. Upon her return, however, she finds another replacement when she looks at Ivanito. He can be the respectful son with whom she can build a strong relationship, taking the place of the son she lost. She pushes Ivanito to go to Peru and eventually meet up with Lourdes in the United States, which causes Celia a lot of pain, but it is a selfish act of closure for Lourdes.

It isn't until Pilar returns and Celia receives two subsequent betrayals by the women in her family that she finally decides to swim out into the sea for good. She follows her passion, as foreshadowed when Pilar reads to her from the Chinese chart of horoscopes. In the end, Celia swims and leaves her own country behind, leaving her disillusion and disappointments on the shore. She finally gains her wish to live underwater in the hopes that the sea's consoling silence will soothe her.



Characters

Celia del Pino

The matriarch in the novel, Celia del Pino lives in a house by the coast in Cuba. She has two daughters — Lourdes and Felicia — and a son, Javier. Throughout the novel, her past is examined in relation to present-day events. Her husband dies at the beginning of the novel, and although he is living in New York City at the time, she immediately knows he's dead because she sees him as she gazes over the water while swinging in her chair on her porch. She helps her daughter Felicia with her mental illness and tries to help Felicia's children, Luz, Milagro and Ivanito to shield them from Felicia's odd behavior. She helps Felicia until Felicia's death at the end of the novel.

Celia is an active member of the revolution of El Lider and works tirelessly to help it achieve its greatness. Her other daughter, Lourdes, however, is vehemently against the Revolution and is at odds with Celia. Celia can communicate with Lourdes' daughter, Pilar through telepathy and knows that with Pilar's return to Cuba, Celia's story will continue through Pilar. It is with this knowledge that Celia puts on Felicia's old bathing suit and swims out in the sea, presumably to die.

Pilar Puente

Growing up in New York City, Pilar Puente feels neither American nor Cuban. She is born in Cuba, but leaves against her will with her mother at the age of two. Pilar has the same gifts as her grandmother, Celia, and can hear others' thoughts, see the future and visions of the dead. In this way, Pilar can recall everything that happens to her from the time she is born, including the idea that she was a cursed child that terrorized her nannies from her crib. After seeing her father, Rufino, with another woman other than her mother, Pilar decides to run away to Miami so that she can fly to Cuba. She spends all her money to get a bus ticket to Miami, but rather than sneak into her cousin's house, one of her aunts finds her and they call Lourdes to come pick her up, thwarting her dreams of Cuba.

Pilar is an artist, specializing in more abstract paintings. She does not get along with Lourdes, her mother, and feels strongly connected to Celia. If she and Celia had not had extended conversations through telepathy late at night, Pilar feels she would be more confused and intimidated by her mother, but through these unique conversations, Pilar develops a general disdain for Lourdes and understands that Pilar is more like her grandmother, Celia.

Pilar wanders through her life rarely finishing anything, relating with the punk rock scene and its rebellion. She feels Art is the best form of rebellion and revolution, and it is through artistic expression that she best conveys her emotions. Pilar and Lourdes



eventually return to Cuba for a week to see their family, finally reuniting with Celia, who bequeaths the memories of Celia's life to her possession.

Lourdes Puente

Celia's daughter and Pilar's mother, Lourdes lives in New York. Headstrong and determined, Lourdes is the main breadwinner of her family. She appreciates people who make their own wealth and is fiercely against socialism and the Cuban Revolution. Lourdes is not easily intimidated, as evidenced by her strong stance against her mother-in-law Zaida Puente and her reaction to the man who dislikes Pilar's painting outside her bakery. Lourdes and Pilar do not get along.

Felicia del Pino

Celia's younger daughter, Felicia has three children by her first husband, Hugo Villaverde — Luz and Milagro (twins) and Ivanito. The twins are conceived the first time Hugo and Felicia meet one another, as he leads her away from her job as a waitress to the Hotel Inglaterra down the road. When Hugo returns to town seven months later, he is forced to marry Felicia, a marriage he abhors. Ivanito is conceived during one of Hugo's last returns to see Felicia, when Hugo gives her both syphilis and her youngest son. Shortly after her nausea dissipates, Felicia pours boiling oil on Hugo's face, telling him to never return.

When Ivanito is a young boy, Felicia has a bad summer filled with madness. Later referred to as the summer of the coconuts, Felicia is convinced that only eating coconuts and white meringues will purify her and her son as they spend the afternoons dancing to Beny Moore with the shutters closed. Although Celia tries to save Ivanito, he refuses to leave his mother, but Celia takes the twins to her house during the long summer. After they eat all the coconuts towards the end of the summer, Felicia makes a huge feast for her and her son, topping it off with drugs in an attempt to kill them both. She does not succeed.

Felicia marries two more times during a short span of time. After each of their deaths, she turns to the religion of her best friend Herminia and becomes a santera. Once she is initiated, Felicia's health quickly deteriorates and she dies in Celia's arms.

Jorge del Pino

The husband of Celia, Jorge del Pino visits his family after his death. He has the closest relationship with his oldest daughter, Lourdes, and after his death, has the most meaningful conversations with her.



Javier del Pino

Celia and Jorge's son, Javier leaves for Czechoslovakia after school. He returns after his wife takes his little girl and leaves him for another man. Staying home for a few weeks, Javier eventually leaves to grow coffee in the mountains.

Rufino Puente

Lourdes' husband, Rufino, comes from one of the wealthiest families in Cuba. When Lourdes and Rufino immigrate to America, they spend a few days in Miami. After Rufino's extended family drives Lourdes crazy, she demands that Rufino drive north until she finds cold weather. They end up in New York, but once there, Lourdes realizes Rufino will never be able to get a job and work like a regular person due to his privileged upbringing, so she becomes the main breadwinner.

Luz and Milagro

The twins of Felicia, they dislike their mother, calling her "non-Mama." They re-establish a relationship with their father after Felicia burns him, although it is short-lived. They isolate themselves from everyone else, speaking a language only the other can understand.

Ivanito

Luz and Milagro's brother and Felicia and Hugo's son, Ivanito is a sensitive child who is close to his mother. After the summer of coconuts, he is sent to a boarding school, along with his sisters, and cries nearly every night. He has few prospects until Lourdes and Pilar come to visit. Lourdes takes him under her wing and will sponsor his escape from Cuba to give him a new life in America.

Herminia

Felicia's best friend, they meet one day at age six while Felicia is picking up seashells on the beach. Upon hearing that Herminia has shells in her house that signify the future, Felicia, who has been forbidden to bring shells in her house at all, begs Herminia to save her. Herminia eventually does and they remain true friends for the rest of their lives.

Gustavo Sierra de Armas

A married man from Spain, Gustavo comes to Cuba to document the crimes committed in Cuba for future use. He has an affair with Celia, handing her pearl earrings she will wear for the rest of her life.



Objects/Places

Santa Teresa del Mar

The home that Celia, Jorge and Lourdes move into after Celia leaves the mental asylum

Yankee Doodle Bakery

Lourdes's bakery in New York; the bakery signifies freedom and financial freedom to Lourdes, while it represents waste and excess to Celia from the vantage point of her support of the Cuban Revolution.

Sugar Cane Fields

To support the Revolution and keep herself productive and busy, Celia works in the sugar cane fields shortly after Jorge's death. She decides to spend her time supporting the Cuban Revolution and its principles.

The Movie Theater of Santa Teresa del Mar

The only movie theater in the town, Celia is the presiding judge over the civil complaint hearings held here each month. With the town as witness, common civil trials are held here with Celia's punishment as the final word.

Pearl Earrings

The pearl earrings that Gustavo gives her and which she wears for the rest of her life, despite her marriage to another man. These earrings represent her love for another man and dream of another life other than the one she lives.

Coconuts

Felicia becomes enticed with the power of coconuts when she sees Herminia's father, a santera, divine his grandson's future through the breaking of a coconut shell. Later in life, Felicia forces her son, Ivanito, along with Felicia to eat only coconuts and meringue in an effort to purify themselves before a suicide attempt.



Bass Guitar

Pilar has trouble finishing anything she starts and feels lost because she cannot determine if she is Cuban or American. After finding her boyfriend cheating on her, she buys a bass guitar and loves the instrument, finding a piece of herself while she plays.

Statue of Liberty Mural

Painted by Pilar outside the second Yankee Doodle Bakery, the mural of the Statue of Liberty is a personal aesthetic remark on what Pilar feels. When the painting is unveiled, the crowd is generally aghast, but when one man starts to physically attack the painting, Lourdes hits him with her purse. In this instant, Pilar loves her mother, but Lourdes defends the painting not out of love for her daughter's work, but because she refuses to let someone tell her what she can or cannot do with her bakery because that is how Socialism took hold in Cuba.

Peruvian Embassy

The site of Ivanito's escape from Cuba and Pilar's betrayal to Celia. Lourdes brings Ivanito to the Peruvian Embassy despite its chaos when she learns that a number of Cubans will be able to escape through this embassy.

Seashells

All her life, Felicia is obsessed with seashells. She spends many happy hours on the beach collecting and arranging them in the sand since Celia will not allow her to keep them in the house. It is Celia's stricture against seashells that leads Felicia to a strong relationship with Herminia, who can keep seashells in her home. Moments before Felicia dies, Celia takes all of the seashells that have been brought into the now-adult Felicia's house and smashes them, dancing on their shells barefoot until her feet bleed.



Themes

Idealized Love

Celia lives in a world filled with waiting for something else to happen. She has a single affair with a married man as a young woman and never relinquishes her feelings towards him. At her future husband Jorge's insistence, she writes the first letter to Gustavo Sierra de Armas. Although he does not reply, she continues to write him a letter each month on the 11th until she is fifty years old. At some point, even she acknowledges that her love for him is habitual. She writes because she feels she must, but the letters become less of a means for communicating to Gustavo and more of a way for her to write and analyze her own feelings during different points in her life.

The love Celia has for Gustavo becomes an idealized love. Since they do not see each other again and cannot become indifferent to one another through frequent contact, Celia never sees Gustavo's faults or mistakes. In this way, her new husband Jorge cannot possibly compare to the "perfect" love that Gustavo once held for her during their short time together.

After her fiftieth birthday, Celia starts to replace her idealized love for Gustavo into a love for the Cuban Revolution. She takes all of her energies and places them on the hopes and principles of El Lider. Once Jorge dies, she vows to spend all of her time on the Revolution. She cuts down sugar cane in the field and takes on the role of civil trial judge in her local community. Finally, she replaces the picture of Jorge beside her bed with a picture of El Lider, much to the disgust of her daughter Lourdes. Since her everyday relationship with Jorge does not reach her expectations, Celia achieves a more fulfilling life and fights her sadness and depression through the idealized relationships of both Gustavo and El Lider. Nevertheless, because she stays in this world of idealized love so often, Celia feels that another woman has spent her time sitting on the porch, swinging the hours away, waiting for something else to happen because she is inherently lonely and unsatisfied.

The Revolution

The Cuban Revolution has an enormous impact on a number of characters in the novel. Immediately, the Revolution separates families. When Pilar is two years old, she is taken from her grandmother, Celia, who is the only woman with whom she has a strong relationship in her life. Lourdes and Rufino move to America to escape Socialism.

For Celia, the Cuban Revolution is a productive way for her to spend her time. She replaces her idealized love with Gustavo to the love for El Lider and his principles for the Revolution. Celia becomes a model citizen for the Revolution. She actively supports the political impacts that are happening on her island. She will use the Revolution as a way to help her neighbors as a presiding judge in civil trials. She cuts sugar cane as a



way to help the people. She appreciates and lives by the Socialist principles advocated on the island.

For Lourdes, the Cuban Revolution is a symbol of everything bad. Lourdes personally condones success through motivation and hard work, preferring capitalism and freedom to the ideas of Socialism. For this reason, she and Rufino move to America. She will open two bakeries while in New York, working hard for commercial success. When Pilar's painting is attacked, Lourdes refuses to allow others to tell her what to do with her bakery because this is how the "cancer" of Socialism began in Cuba. She will use the second bakery as a meeting place for Americans who are against the Cuban Revolution and plan various counter-revolutionary activities, including a fake bomb scare at the recital of a Cuban ballerina who comes to dance in New York City.

Finally, for Pilar, the Cuban Revolution is a political policy made by a collection of men that has negatively impacted her life. Because of the decisions by some men she never meets, Pilar sees herself separated from Celia and away from the country of her origins. She does not feel either American nor Cuban while growing up. She constantly questions what her life would have been like if she could have stayed in Cuba. When she is a teenager, she escapes New York to go to Miami in the hopes of catching a fishing boat to Cuba. Her escape plan fails and ever after, she doesn't finish anything she starts, feeling lost and indifferent to everything in her life. Pilar does not have any political feelings about the Revolution one way or another, which makes her very much unlike her mother and grandmother. Instead, Pilar has to live with the repercussions of the political situation and the loss of a sense of identity from being exiled out of Cuba.

Betrayal

Celia feels betrayed throughout her life. The impact of each betrayal leads her into deeper and deeper sadness.

After her first love affair, Gustavo Sierra de Armas leaves her. He never returns, despite her letter petitioning him to understand her deep affections for him. Out of this betrayal comes Celia's next betrayal. Jorge tries to break Celia and punish her for her unrelenting love of Gustavo, despite his shortcomings. He leaves her alone with his terrible mother and sister, knowing they will break her. Jorge succeeds too well and when Celia has a little girl, she vows to never care for it. Jorge will betray her next by checking her into a mental asylum instead of helping his wife and encouraging her love again.

When Lourdes leaves Cuba, Celia is again betrayed. The coastline that has helped her in her adult life make her children restless, but Lourdes's conviction in freedom and capitalism is a direct attack on Celia's political beliefs. When Lourdes sends pictures of her bakery, Celia can only see how each pastry demonstrates the waste and excess of a life in America when there are daily shortages and rations in Cuba.



For Celia, it is important that her family stay in the same place, re-living the same disillusionments over and over again until they die next to each other. This statement by Celia might be an acknowledgment that her Revolution might not be everything she had hoped, but nevertheless, the fact that her extended family does not live under the same principles as she does is a betrayal to Celia. In this vein, Pilar's final betrayal is connected to the idea that the family needs to stay together and remain in Cuba. When Pilar lies to Celia, she is betraying not only this idea, but directly lying to the single person in her life with whom she has a relationship. Ivanito escapes to Peru through the help of both Lourdes and, indirectly, Pilar's lies. It is with this final betrayal that Celia probably commits suicide by swimming too far out in the ocean (it is not made absolutely clear that Celia drowns).

Style

Point of View

The point of view changes throughout the novel. In each chapter, a variety of different characters speak. In this way, the reader gains access to different viewpoints of the same event. For example, Lourdes frequently mentions that Pilar runs away from her in the airport during their exodus from Cuba. Pilar, however, distinctly remembers what really happens. Lourdes left Pilar alone in the airport when she thought she heard her father's voice and runs off to find him.

By getting the point of view from a variety of characters, the story is richer and the full story unfolds completely. However, despite the number of other characters in the novel, the focus remains on Celia and Pilar in particular. These stories help to demonstrate the strong relationship between Celia and Pilar despite their separation. Although their two worlds are separate, their family members help to have their stories overlap between each other.

Setting

The setting of the novel takes place in both New York and in Cuba. Since there are two main characters in the novel, the plot is divided between Pilar's New York and Celia's Cuba.

The plot takes place in a variety of locales in Cuba. Specifically, most of the action occurs in one of two houses — Santa Teresa del Mar and the House on Palmas Street. The House on Palmas Street is a home filled with misfortune for Celia. It is the home where she first lives after her marriage with Jorge and where Ofelia and Berta terrorize her as a young bride. After Berta's death, Felicia inherits the home and lives there with her three children. It is here that she burns her husband's face with hot oil and tries to kill her youngest son in a suicide attempt. Felicia finally perishes in this house after becoming a santera and allowing the bad luck of seashells into her home. Santa Teresa del Mar is where Celia, Lourdes and Jorge move after Celia's release from the mental ward. Celia spends the rest of her life swinging on the porch here, watching the seaside change and wishing something else would happen to her.

In New York City, Lourdes's world takes place in the Yankee Doodle bakeries. For Pilar, Lourdes is a lost soul. They live together in a home that was once a warehouse, which is physically compartmentalized just like their familial relationship itself. Pilar finds herself in the punk music she hears in the neighborhood, but she has trouble feeling at home anywhere within the boundaries of New York itself.



Language and Meaning

The language of the story consists of both English and Spanish words, although it is mostly told in English. The story is told with a kind of lyricism that produces a distinct rhythm within the novel. Although the language is told in English, the story is written in such a way that the reader feels as though they are reading it in Spanish. There is a feeling of poetry within each of the character's stories and in their perspectives.

Throughout each perspective, the characters are reflective, but are rarely analytical. The only time that poetry and analysis are attempted are through the introverted questions Celia asks in her letters to Gustavo. In this way, Celia's inner feelings and contemplations are fully shown, while the reader must assume what the other characters are feeling and thinking based on their actions and occasional comments.

Structure

The story is written in three main sections — "Ordinary Seductions," "Imagining Winters" and "Languages Lost." Within each of these sections, there are a number of chapters. Within each of the chapters, the story takes the perspective of a number of characters living in Cuba or America at the time.

The plot is fairly straightforward with occasional memory trips to the past to better explain the person or circumstances surrounding the event. In between the chapters, some of Celia's letters are shown during the time period covered. In this way, Celia's inner thoughts and other events are better described, such as Lourdes and Rufino's marriage. Also through Celia's letters, her sadness and unhappiness are more clearly explained.



Quotes

"Celia cannot decide which is worse, separation or death. Separation is familiar, too familiar, but Celia is uncertain she can reconcile it with permanence." p.6

"It seems to Celia that another woman entirely sat for years on those weathered cushions, drawn by the pull of the tides." p.8

"It seems to her that she has spent her entire life waiting for others, for something or other to happen." p.35

"She would not abandon a daughter to this life, but train her to read the columns of blood and numbers in men's eyes, to understand the morphology of survival." p.42

"I think of our afternoons in those measured shafts of light, that spent light, and I wish I could live underwater. Maybe then my skin would absorb the sea's consoling silence." p.49

"I think of everyone who might be awake with me — insomniacs, thieves, anarchists, women with children who drowned in their baths. These are my companions." p.52

"She smelled his face on his wedding day, his tears when his son drowned at the park. She smelled his rotting leg in Africa, where it would be blown off his body on a moonless savanna night. She smelled him when he was old and unbathed and the flies blackened his eyes." p.72

"I still love you, Gustavo, but it's a habitual love, a wound in the knee that predicts rain." p.97

"If I was born to live on an island, then I'm grateful for one thing: that the tides rearrange the borders. At least I have the illusion of change, of possibility." p.99

"Felicia del Pino cannot remember why she is marching in the Sierra Maestra this hot October afternoon." p.105

"Felicia volunteers again for night duty. In the dark, in the moonless jungle, the fissures are not so visible, the hypocrisies and lies less disturbing. Her eyes, she decides, could get accustomed to this darkness." p.109

"The fight between Loli Regalado and Ester Ugarte is an excuse for everyone to unleash frustrations at family members, neighbors, the system, their lives. Old wounds are reopened, new ones inflicted." p.114

"Each glistening éclair is a grenade aimed at Celia's political beliefs, each strawberry shortcake proof — in butter, cream, and eggs — of Lourdes's success in America, and a reminder of the ongoing shortages in Cuba." p.117



'Celia closes her eyes. She doesn't like to admit to herself that, despite all her activities, she sometimes feels lonely. Not the loneliness of previous years, of a reluctant life by the sea, but a loneliness borne of the inability to share her joy.' p.119

"Our father's face was hung with slack ugly folds that dragged down his eyes until the rims showed red, that dragged down the stump of his nose and his misshapen ears, dragged them down until his skull was taut and bare." p.123

"I resent the hell out of the politicians and the generals who force events on us that structure our lives, that dictate the memories we'll have when we're old." p.138

"I felt I was meant to live in this colder world, a world that preserved history. In Cuba, everything seemed temporal, distorted by the sun." p.146

"When I visited Felicia the following day, she was dressed in her coronation gown, her crown, and all her necklaces. She sat on a throne surrounded by gardenias, her face serene as a goddess's. I believe to this day that she'd finally found her peace." p.188

"Women who outlive their daughters are orphans, Abuela tells me. Only their granddaughters can save them, guard their knowledge like the first fire." p.222

"What she fears most is this: that her rape, her baby's death were absorbed quietly by the earth, that they are ultimately no more meaningful than falling leaves on an autumn day. She hungers for a violence of nature, terrible and permanent, to record the evil. Nothing less would satisfy her." p.227

"I've started dreaming in Spanish, which has never happened before. I wake up feeling different, like something inside me is changing, something chemical and irreversible." p.235

"It occurs to Celia that she has never been farther than a hundred yards off the coast of Cuba. She considers her dream of sailing to Spain, to Granada, of striding through the night with nothing but a tambourine and too many carnations." p.243



Topics for Discussion

What impact does the Cuban Revolution have on the women in the novel? In particular, how does the Cuban Revolution affect the physical distance between family members and how does belief for or against the Revolution's principles affect the family?

Celia writes letters to Gustavo throughout the novel. What role do these letters play and why does Celia continue to write him long after seeing him?

Explain the role that the Yoruban religion and its santeras play in the novel, including some of the rites explained in different chapters.

Define Celia's political beliefs in relation to Lourdes' political beliefs and how this influences their relationship.

What motivates Felicia's actions and how does this affect her life overall?

Pick three characters and discuss the role that an unfulfilled desire plays in their lives.

What is the significant betrayal that Celia foresees in the end of the novel?

How does the theme of "exile" affect the various characters in the novel?