

Make Your Home Among Strangers: A Novel Study Guide

Make Your Home Among Strangers: A Novel by Jennine Capó Crucet

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Crucet, Jennine Capó. *Make Your Home Among Strangers*. Macmillan, 2015.

Make Your Home Among Strangers is the story of a first generation Cuban-American student, Lizet Ramirez, as she manages the expectations of her family and her school in her first year of college. Her struggles are compounded by her mother, Lourdes', increasing involvement with the case of Ariel Hernandez, a young Cuban boy who has arrived in Miami after being rescued, and the way that that case further increases the spotlight on her as a minority student in a predominantly wealthy, white, educational institution.

Lizet commences telling her story from the present day, in which she is a manager of a research laboratory studying coral reefs, and amuses and shocks members of her lab by telling stories of her upbringing by the canals of Miami. The majority of her story, however, takes place in 1999-2000, in the first year of her degree at Rawlings College.

Lizet decides to fly home for Thanksgiving to surprise her mother and sister, but when she arrives they appear more annoyed that she did not tell them than happy to see her, and her mother is distracted by a story on the news about Ariel Hernandez, who has just arrived in Miami after being rescued by the coastguard when his mother and everyone else on board the raft died trying to get to America. Lourdes spends much of the weekend at a rally for Ariel, leaving Lizet at home with her sister, Leidy, and nephew, Dante, and when she is at home, they discuss Ariel's case. Lizet's questions about the evidence for the information Lourdes has heard at the rally create friction between her and her family.

Returning to school, Lizet must find out the results of an academic integrity hearing she is facing as a result of an allegation of plagiarism. The allegation is upheld, but her academic background at the "underserved" Hialeah Lakes high school is also taken into consideration, and Lizet is placed on academic probation. She makes use of the college's support services in order to avoid failing her courses, as that would mean taking remedial courses in the following semester and would impact on her financial aid package. Through a lot of hard work, she is able to pass all of her courses, but tells her family, who do not know about the integrity hearing, that her grades are better than those she actually received.

As the academic year progresses and she finds a routine in communicating with her family, Lizet finds herself performing better in her studies and is nominated for a paid summer internship in California. The professor nominating her is also the person hosting the internship, so her earlier academic performance is dismissed as unimportant. Before she is able to accept the position, however, the extent of her mother's involvement with the Ariel Hernandez case becomes apparent when Lizet sees her on national television, representing a group called *Madres Para Justicia* (Mothers for Justice). Lizet believes that Leidy and her boyfriend, Omar, have been hiding this



from her, and that they should have done more to stop Lourdes from getting involved. She returns to Miami, calls her relationship off with Omar, and is equally unsuccessful at drawing her mother away from the group. During her visit, however, a raid is carried out on the Hernandez home, and Ariel is taken away, to be returned to his father in Cuba.

Initially, Lizet believes herself to be needed at home, to look after her family, and so she turns down the internship offer. Her professor, Dr. Kaufmann does not understand her reasoning, however, and holds the position open for her. After three weeks at home during the summer, looking after Dante and taking Lourdes to further protests, Lizet comes to the decision to pursue her own path and, despite disappointing her family, takes up the position in California.



Chapter 1 - 2

Summary

Chapter 1. The novel opens with the narrator, Lizet, reflecting on the canals of Miami, and the ways that her family had thrown all sorts of trash into them when she was a child. As she now works in a research lab, trying to understand the destruction of coral reefs around the world, her family's environmental pollution is a long-running joke. Other, less funny, parts of her history remain untold. Lizet also thinks of the time, years earlier, when she fell in a different canal and had to be treated with intravenous antibiotics. This reminds her another family story, in which she was three years old and found her floaties, then blew them up and jumped into the canal across the street from their house. On both occasions, her family said, there had been no need to worry, because she was fine.

Chapter 2. The second chapter is set in 1999, when most of the novel's story takes place. Lizet is returning home from college for Thanksgiving, but her connecting flight from Pittsburgh has been over-booked and she is forced to spend the night. The flight itself had been outside of her regular budget, but she had decided to go, in order to have something to talk about with the other girls living in her building. Needing an aid package to pay her tuition, received only after her parents separated, it had taken all of her savings from her work-study job to do it. Arriving in Miami, she catches a ride-share with an older white couple and a young Latina woman, who looks like a professor. As she sits in the ride-share, Lizet reflects on her troubles at school. She is struggling in her classes and failing chemistry, and is subject to an academic hearing in relation to plagiarism. At both the beginning and end of the chapter, Lizet's relationship, or lack thereof at that point, to Ariel Hernandez, a Cuban refugee child, is mentioned.

Analysis

In opening the novel several years after the main events of the story, the reader is provided a glimpse of what the outcome will be for Lizet. Irrespective of anything else that happens during the narrative, it has already been noted that she manages a research lab on the West Coast. This is far from her home in Hialeah, Miami, and appears at odds with her description of struggling academically and facing allegations of academic misconduct. In providing the end before the beginning, the author sets up a scenario where the events of the story are less important than the themes and lessons that will be explored.

The first two chapters also start to give the reader an image of Lizet and her family. The discussion of her aid package indicates that they are not financially well off, but the need for an appeal of the decision following her parents' separation suggests that their combined income had been too high for an aid package to be provided. The reader is also made aware that Lizet has an older sister, who, it seems, has not gone to college,



as the aid application process appears to have been new ground when Lizet applied. Through the description of her family's attitude toward throwing trash in the canals, and their response to her falling in, it can further be seen that they take a relatively carefree approach to life, unless there is an immediate and serious threat to someone's safety.

Beyond the importance of these opening events, there are also hints at the themes that will be explored in the remainder of the book. In Lizet's choice to only tell funny stories from her childhood, there is a suggestion that not all of her experiences would be acceptable in a professional environment. In describing the white couple's response to sharing a seat with a Latina woman, expressions of racism are highlighted. In choosing to go home for a holiday her family does not celebrate, Lizet's desire for acceptance and inclusion become noticeable. Her experience of being from an immigrant family already shows subtle signs of being at odds with a mainstream American narrative, and this is a central topic of discussion in the remainder of the novel.

Discussion Question 1

What effect does it have on the reader when Lizet describes falling into the canal as an adult? How is this effect achieved?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of the canals in Chapter 1? Why are they used to bring together Lizet's memories?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the author choose to describe Lizet's financial arrangements for school so early in the story? What does that tell the reader about her?

Vocabulary

whorls, demise, transmission, verifiable, parasitologist, contaminated, intravenous, embroidering, mandating, defunct, euphemisms, astronomically, arbitrary, semblance, mildew, plagiarized



Chapter 3 - 4

Summary

Chapter 3. During her ride from the airport, once they are the only two passengers left, Lizet notices that the woman she thinks is a professor is crying, so asks if she is alright. After adjusting her makeup, the woman reassures her that she was just being "weird" and they begin talking. They are both from Hialeah, but went to different high schools. Neither school has many graduates who go on to college, and when Lizet tells the woman, who turns out to be a postdoctoral fellow, that she attends Rawlings College, the woman is impressed by the caliber of Lizet's school. When she asks how Lizet is getting on, Lizet confesses her struggles, only for the woman to correct her speech instead of empathizing. She gives Lizet her business card and tells her to email, but Lizet tears up the card as soon as the woman leaves.

Chapter 4. Lizet arrives at her mother and sister's apartment, but when she knocks on the door they turn off the TV and pretend not to be home. When she calls out to them, they are surprised and excited that she is there. As she goes into the apartment, she can see the news on the television showing images of Ariel Hernandez, who had just been rescued from the Florida Straits and brought to Miami. His mother, and all of the other people fleeing Cuba on the raft, had died during the crossing. Lizet's mother is distracted by the news and disappointed that Lizet did not tell them she was coming home. Lizet makes up a story about a prostitute in the room next to her during her layover in Pittsburgh to gain her mother's attention. Her sister, Leidy, also wishes that Lizet had let someone know and teases her about the new patterns of language she has acquired at school, and Lizet feels like she should not have come.

Analysis

There is a sense of foreshadowing in Lizet's interaction with the woman she thinks is a professor. Having come from the same area of Miami and both gone away to school, this woman is a representation of the future Lizet could work towards. Her tears suggest that this life is not necessarily going to be easy or entirely fulfilling, however. Her style of dress and her language mark her as foreign to the world in which Lizet has grown up, but by the end of Chapter 4, Leidy has noticed differences in Lizet's speech too, suggesting that she is already changing after a semester away.

The woman in the van also acts as a sounding board for Lizet to confess her fears about her studies, something that she is afraid to tell her family. Although the woman should, hypothetically, provide Lizet with support, having been in a similar position herself, it is apparent that the journey she has had since being a freshman from Hialeah has taken her too far from Lizet's experience for her to connect on an emotional level. Instead of comforting Lizet, this encounter leaves her even more emotionally fragile than she had been prior to making her confession.



Upon arrival at home, Lizet's surprise is not as unequivocally positive as she had expected, and she is left believing that it would have been better if she had not come home. Given that much of her motivation to return had been linked to the other students' excitement about going home for Thanksgiving, a holiday her family does not particularly celebrate, there is a sense that she has missed her family more than earlier chapters have suggested and is therefore upset by their lack of excitement. Her mother and sister both show concern for her though, in that they are worried that no one knew where she was for the time she was in transit, and her story about the prostitute makes them afraid for her safety. This suggests that the excitement Lizet was expecting may have been a product of her roommates' lives, rather than the reality in her family. She has applied the norm for the majority of her peers to her own family, but found them lacking.

Chapter 4 also introduces the essential conflict between Lizet and the child, Ariel Hernandez, whose arrival from Cuba has so entranced her mother. Throughout the book, Lourdes becomes more and more focused on Ariel's plight, leaving her increasingly inattentive to her own daughters. Her focus in this chapter is primarily on the television, even quietening her daughters when they talk over the news broadcast. This is the beginning of their mother's obsession, but they do not realize it yet.

Discussion Question 1

What effect does it have on the reader that woman in the van thinks Hialeah Lakes is a bad high school and Rawlings College is a great university? What difference would it have made if Lizet's conversation had been with the older white couple who had also been in the van?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Leidy and Lourdes pretend they aren't home when Lizet knocks on the door?

Discussion Question 3

How does Lizet's surprise trip home compare with Ariel Hernandez's journey from Cuba? In what ways does Lourdes' reaction to the refugee child relate to her own daughter?

Vocabulary

illicit, sprawling, corralled, ruddy, dominate, postdoc, semester, liberal, theorem, precision, seeping, barricade, rhythmic, humidity, vinyl, materialized, collaborative, snippet, convert, processed



Chapter 5 - 6

Summary

Chapter 5. There is a rally for Ariel Hernandez the next morning, so Lizet spends the time with her nephew, Dante, and Leidy while her mother attends the rally. Lizet reflects on the circumstances that led them to this point. Leidy had intentionally stopped taking her birth control pills in order to get her boyfriend to marry her. It hadn't worked, however, and Roly had broken up with her instead. He now has little to do with either her or Dante. In the midst of Leidy's pregnancy, Lizet had applied to out of state schools without telling her parents. When she was accepted to Rawlings College and finally confessed, her impending departure was seen as a betrayal, and led to her parents' separation.

Chapter 6. Outside the apartment, the heat in Florida reminds Lizet of earlier in the month when she had first seen snow. Her roommate had pulled her out of bed, and she had run downstairs in her pajamas and flip flops to experience it. After a snowball fight with the others in her building, she had sat with them and drunk hot chocolate. Lizet finds it difficult to make small talk with Leidy, but is also unable to bring herself to ask about their father, who has not called Lizet since she left for college. After he moved out, he had sold their family home, causing Leidy and Lourdes to move to this new apartment. Eventually Lizet asks about him, and about Roly, both of whom have been in infrequent contact. Leidy is still angry with Roly, and Lourdes hangs up whenever their father calls. Leidy confesses that Lourdes is unhappy but does not want to worry Lizet, and Lizet is about to tell Leidy of her own troubles, but as she goes to speak Leidy sees their mother on TV and they drop everything to join her.

Analysis

Chapters 5 and 6 are predominantly demonstrations of the differences between Lizet and her home life, and the distance that has created in her relationship with her sister. The two have little in common now, as Leidy does not understand Lizet's studies, and life at home has changed, with them living in a new apartment and Dante getting bigger and learning more every day. Leidy is having to manage the difficult relationship between their parents, as well as facing up to the result of her actions in her own relationship with Roly. Away from home, Lizet is not involved in any of the conflicts, but her knowledge of them makes her reluctant to ask anything that might be controversial. It is only at the end of the chapter, when Lourdes' face appears on the television that their differences are set aside and they become just two young women, hurrying to try to appear on television.

The differences between Leidy and Lizet are also apparent in the decisions they made about their lives. Each wanted to take action that would influence the outcome of their lives, suggesting a strength of character that they share. Leidy's decision sees her



following in her mother's path, wanting a husband and child, whereas Lizet aims to pursue something beyond that. She is uncertain whether she will be accepted to anywhere she applied, but she has stepped beyond the normal expectations in her community to pursue her academic dreams.

In addition to highlighting differences between Lizet and Leidy, Chapter 6 also demonstrates the developing relationship between Lizet and her roommates. It is clear that she has not yet made close friendships with the girls on her floor, often knowing them only by their first names. In taking part in the snowball fight, and the hot chocolates afterward, however, it is possible to see a bonding experience that brings them closer together while simultaneously distancing her further from her family, who have never seen snow.

Discussion Question 1

What are the differences between Lizet and Leidy that lead them to make such different decisions about their futures?

Discussion Question 2

Why do Lizet's parents view her decision to apply for tertiary education in a negative light? What would have been different if she had applied to schools in Florida?

Discussion Question 3

After reading Leidy's descriptions of her father and Roly's interactions with the family, what is your impression of the two men? What has given you that impression?

Vocabulary

heft, irrefutable, buoyed, waivers, intervening, betrayal, impending, communist, inescapable, theoretical, sonogram, visualized, rollicking, collectively, uttered, recoiling, sliver, inevitably, integrity, chapped



Chapter 7 - 8

Summary

Chapter 7. The girls don't make it to the cameras in time, but Ariel's situation dominates their dinner conversation. They talk about his legal standing as an asylum seeker, considering his young age and the fact that he has to be rescued by the coastguard. Lourdes has cooked Lize's favorite meal, so Lize knows she has been forgiven, but thoughts of her academic integrity hearing lead her to ask about sources for stories they have heard on the street. This threatens to start a new round of arguments. The crisis is averted and conversation turns to Lize's boyfriend, Omar, whom she had originally intended to also surprise. Following an argument about her academic integrity hearing, however, she has decided to end their relationship, but does not want to say anything to her mother so tries to evade the question.

Chapter 8. Lize's relationship has been going on since her sophomore year, and they had talked about getting engaged but not made any promises. After she leaves for college, he is the only person to whom she confesses her fears, but she then decides to break up with him when he uses those fears to try to persuade her that being expelled would not be the worst thing in the world. She thinks of their last night together, before she left for New York, when they drove to a golf course to have sex in the back seat of his car. When they went to leave, they found themselves stuck and had to call a tow truck to get them out. Lize reflects that, since going to college, she has started vilifying Omar to the other students, describing him as a gangster, the way she thinks they expect him to be.

Once she is at the airport, Lize calls Omar and tells him she has been home, setting him challenges in her head that he needs to meet if he is to continue being her boyfriend. He does not fail, but also does not definitely pass. She finds herself getting irritated with him, and tells him that her flight is being called. He wishes her luck in getting the result of her hearing.

Analysis

Chapters 7 and 8 are full of conflict for Lize, highlighting the growing differences between her school world and her home life. Facing potentially serious consequences for failing to cite her sources correctly, Lize no longer accepts gossip heard in the street as fact; however, having not been told anything about Lize's school worries, Lourdes only hears Lize's questions as doubts about her own honesty. Without anything else with which to explain the change in her daughter, Lourdes' maternal fears that going away to school would take Lize away from the family would be compounded by this argument.



In addition to the argument about Ariel Hernandez, Lizet also argues with her mother and sister about her relationship with Omar. Again, Lizet has reasons for her attitude, but chooses not to share them with her family. Talking about her argument with Omar would require her to talk about her academic hearing, and she is unable to summon the courage to do that. With her family and her boyfriend all seemingly opposed to her academic endeavors, she finds herself in a position of having to defend herself and her school instead of receiving unconditional support. She is also struggling with the idea of trying to explain the subtleties of the academic misconduct of which she has been accused, and this is also a burden. As a result, Lizet finds herself at the airport after a weekend at home, having received no support from anyone about her biggest fears.

Lizet's last conflict in Chapter 8 is with Omar directly. Despite having decided to break up with him, she finds herself becoming frustrated, but does not make any move to end the relationship. Instead, she mentally sets him challenges to meet that will tell her whether or not to continue with their relationship. None of these tests is conclusive, leading her to set more tests, never coming any closer to making a final call. This suggests that she is ambivalent about their break up, and that she is not as decided as she has told herself. Omar himself has not realized that their fight had been anything more than a disagreement, and it is therefore unlikely that he has contemplated the possibility that Lizet would break up with him. It is possible to see the differences in their perspectives through the course of this conversation, and issues that appear later in the book, when Lizet thinks more deeply about how her identity is affected by attending Rawlings, are seen in their infancy here.

Discussion Question 1

In Chapter 7, whose thoughts on the Ariel Hernandez case are more convincing; Lizet's or Lourdes'? What brings you to that conclusion?

Discussion Question 2

What role does Omar's declaration that it wouldn't be the worst thing if Lizet was expelled play in her decision to break off their relationship?

Discussion Question 3

What is your perception of Omar, based on Lizet's memories of him, and her conversation with him on the phone at the airport? How do the two versions of Omar align?

Vocabulary

seductively, linoleum, sinewy, asylum, citation, bewildered, lockdown, violations, exaggerating, gawking, indecency, perceived, snarky, plagued, accurate, default, dramatic



Chapter 9 - 10

Summary

Chapter 9. Arriving back at Rawlings, Lizet checks the mail and finds a letter relating to her academic integrity hearing. As she is about to call and cancel the scheduled meeting, Omar calls and they have another argument. Lizet slams down the phone and starts unpacking while waiting for Omar to call back. He doesn't, and she climbs into Jillian's bed to watch a movie. She chooses Monty Python but doesn't understand it and has to watch it multiple times.

In a flashback, Lizet remembers attending a mandatory meeting for students of color, where she met a wealthy Argentinian student, Dana, who couldn't see the purpose of the meeting, and Jaquelin Medina, whose mother could not help her to move into her accommodation because she does not have legal immigration papers. The meeting is to provide them with information about support that is available on campus and tells them that the graduation rate for low income minority students is approximately 20%. Later, in Jillian's bed, Lizet consoles herself with the idea that Jaquelin is probably worse off than her.

Chapter 10. Upon returning from Thanksgiving, Jillian asks Lizet about Ariel Hernandez's arrival in Miami. At first Lizet tries to distance herself from the situation, but when Jillian starts to argue that he should be returned to Cuba, Lizet finds herself taking her mother's position and insisting that he should be permitted to stay. As the conversation becomes heated, Jillian accuses Lizet of being racist and Lizet feels uncomfortable with a number of the statements Jillian has made.

Analysis

As Lizet has predicted, there is a letter for her from the academic integrity committee awaiting her return from Thanksgiving break. This brings all of her worries to the forefront of her mind and, as such, she is not in a positive frame of mind when Omar calls. They have only recently finished their previous fight, and having another one is more than Lizet is able to manage.

In climbing into Jillian's bed, she is symbolically cocooning herself in the world of Rawlings and distancing herself from Omar and her problems in her relationships at home. She is not just returning to her own life at college, but is literally putting herself into Jillian's position as someone who feels that she belongs there. Lizet's choice of movie presents her with problems in understanding the actors' accents, but also in not finding the jokes funny. This suggests that she is unable to fully immerse herself into a white role at the school and in the world, and shows her more ways that she does not fit in. This would likely have had the effect of disheartening her further, rather than consoling her.



Attending the Diversity Affairs meeting, Lizet is faced with two contrasting images of the life of a minority student at Rawlings College. In Dana and Ruben, she sees the affluent student who has already experienced life within private schools and has adjusted to an Anglo-centric world view, such as they will find at Rawlings College. On the other hand, Jaquelin Medina represents a brand of Latina life that is more similar to her own, in that the college world is new to them, and to their families. Jaquelin is very aware of the opportunity that she is receiving in attending a school like Rawlings College, and takes notes throughout the meeting so as not to waste it, and she is also aware of the responsibility she has to her family to ensure that she makes the best of the opportunity. Lizet, on the other hand, appears to be unaware of the kind of school she is attending, and comfortable in relying on her own previous record of academic achievement to get her through. As is evidenced by her impending integrity hearing, she has not made the most of the services that are on offer to her.

Lizet's argument with Jaquelin about Ariel provides the first external example of her internal struggle with her cultural identity. Although she has not previously spent a lot of time contemplating what it means to be from a Cuban background, she is forced into the role of Cuba's representative, despite her efforts to distance herself from the news story. When she finally does acknowledge that all of the events are taking place near her house, which should give her some level of authority on the matter, Jillian uses her emotional connection to the case to dismiss her viewpoint, even though she had pressed her to provide it in the first place.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Lizet's impressions of Dana and Jaquelin Medina. With whom did she appear to feel more comfortable? Whose approach does she appear more likely to emulate?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Lizet find herself arguing in defense of her mother's point of view when discussing Ariel Hernandez with Jillian?

Discussion Question 3

How did you feel when Jillian told Lizet that she was being racist? Did you agree with her? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

miraculous, post-apocalyptic, bursar, proactive, premise, legacy, exquisitely, contraption, unassisted, retention, rigorous, disheveled, deadpan, intramural, hysterical, articulate, burgundy



Chapter 11 - 12

Summary

Chapter 11. Lizet attends her academic integrity hearing and is informed that, although her actions did constitute plagiarism, the committee is convinced that she had not intended to cheat and would therefore be placing her on probation, rather than expelling her. Despite not fully understanding the conditions of her probation, she signs the document and then, outside the meeting, asks Linda, the committee's assistant, to clarify what had happened. After reading the contract in the library later, she has a better understanding, but is not confident that she will be able to meet its requirements. She is so deeply focused on reading that she gets a fright when the library scanner goes off and she has to check the student - Ethan's - bag.

Chapter 12. In an attempt to improve her grades, Lizet visits the chemistry learning labs to find out about support and, when she finds out that she is able to sign up for unlimited free sessions, she makes appointments multiple times a week for all of her subjects. On her way to one of the sessions, she meets Jaquelin Medina, who reveals that she has been going to the learning labs since early in the semester. Jaquelin invites her to go to a dance party and she agrees.

On the night of the party, as Lizet is flat-ironing her hair, she discovers that Jillian and the other girls on her floor are going to the same party and they ask her to drive. Fearing that she will be left to park the car and walk by herself, she declines. When she is ready to go, she finds that her concerns were warranted, as the others have left for the party without her.

Analysis

Despite not understanding the majority of what happens in the conference room during the second integrity committee hearing, that meeting marks a significant turning point in her career at Rawlings College, and indeed her academic future. The school is also given the opportunity to look at the way it manages the transition for its students from other schools, as Lizet highlights when she wonders why she was not given assistance earlier, when she starting doing poorly in classes; however, it seems that they are more interested in asking her to address what they see as the deficiencies in her education than clearly conveying the ways in which she could do that. In discussing the document she has already signed with Linda, the committee's assistant, Linda's frustrated glance at the door to the conference room suggests that she is in a better position to help Lizet, and to understand what the students actually need in order to succeed.

On the plus side of that encounter, being placed on academic probation prompts Lizet to make the most of the additional support services that are available at Rawlings. That she does not realize these are included as part of her fees, despite attending the



Diversity Affairs meeting, further suggests that there are important issues for financial aid students that are not being clearly conveyed during orientation. Jaquelin's established presence at the study labs somewhat negates Lizet's earlier conclusion that her own life would be more stable than Jaquelin's, and it is likely that this would further have prompted her to make the most of the additional help.

In preparing for the dance party, there is a surface appearance that Lizet is starting to fit in with the other girls in the dorm. They invite her to drive with (or for) them, and then to come with them even when she declines to drive. By leaving without her, however, they continue to demonstrate that their relationship with her is still only superficial, and their complaints about the smell of her flat iron and instructions in how to do her hair better, provide yet another example of the way that learning is only passed from white majority to Latina minority at Rawlings.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think the members of the academic integrity committee would have been thinking during their second meeting with Lizet? How confident in her ability to complete her degree would they be, following that meeting?

Discussion Question 2

What effect does it have on the reader when a discussion of Lizet's attempts to catch up her school work is interrupted with news stories about Ariel Hernandez?

Discussion Question 3

Why is there an emphasis on the smell of burning hair when Lizet and the other girls are getting ready to go to the party?

Vocabulary

levitated, ornately, regal, lacquered, phlegmy, egregious, mitigated, probation, tamp, empowered, nuanced, wincing, deficiencies, remedial, proceedings, culprit, yesteryear, grueling, pandemonium, pulverized, devoid, bodice, daubed



Chapter 13 - 14

Summary

Chapter 13. When Lizet arrives at the party, Jaquelin is not there, so she goes in alone. Ethan sees her and comes over to talk. He finally learns her name when Jillian also comes to talk to her. Ethan is about to leave the party, but invites Lizet to go ice skating with a group of residents from the Hall where he is an RA. She is non-committal. After he leaves, Lizet finds Jaquelin on the dance floor and they start to dance together. Lizet notices that the other people dancing are all slightly out of time with the music. When Jaquelin goes to the bathroom, the DJ pulls Lizet up on stage where she continues to dance.

Chapter 14. Lizet goes to Donald Hall to join the ice skating group, and on the walk to the rink Ethan tells them facts about the campus and other scientific trivia. This makes Lizet want to make the most of her time at Rawlings, even if she only makes it through one year. After falling over three times while skating, Lizet decides to give up and sits at the edge of the rink. Ethan comes to sit with her, but through a series of misunderstandings, the conversation ends up making them both feel uncomfortable.

With exams quickly approaching, all of the Rawlings students are spending a lot of time studying. Although she is generally avoiding the outside world, Lizet is overcome by a desire to talk to her dad. She calls him briefly and he is excited to hear from her. After they hang up, she continues studying until midnight, when she decides to confront her dad about his decision to sell their family home out from under them, as soon as she gets home from college.

Analysis

In a conversation that is refreshingly devoid of references to Lizet's differences from her surroundings, it is possible to see the beginnings of a friendship forming between Lizet and Ethan. When he asks her where she is from, he genuinely means which American city. He learns her name from a drunken Jillian, who includes the second syllable in a way that would not have, had she been sober. Ethan is unconnected with her academic studies, her dorm, the Diversity Affairs office, or her home, making him perfectly neutral in all ways. He even states that he is perfectly understanding that Lizet has a boyfriend, and takes himself out of the picture romantically.

Ethan's position as an RA at Donald Hall provides him with the opportunity to invite Lizet to events, giving her a chance to explore an unbiased version of Rawlings campus life that is not affected by her relationships with the girls in her dorm or the pressures of her probation. In taking part in activities like the ice skating trip, she is able to experience her freshman year with someone who has the potential to be a genuine friend, in the way that the majority of the other students would have taken for granted.



With so many issues in her life relating to her cultural identity and background in a lower class neighborhood, it is ironic that her argument with Ethan at the ice skating rink springs from him mistakenly thinking that she is rich and therefore does not need his help or friendship. Even though the opposite is true, Lizet decides not to clarify the situation with him at that time, leaving the conflict open for another time. This pattern of leaving things unspoken and failing to resolve conflict is also apparent in her relationship with Omar, suggesting that it is part of Lizet's characteristic style of communication.

Discussion Question 1

What impression does Ethan and Lizet's conversation at the party give you as a reader? Why does Lizet seem unwilling to divulge too much to him?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the ice skating trip in terms of Ethan's stated motives and the way the author has presented the event. How does Lizet interact with the other freshman taking part in the activity?

Discussion Question 3

What does Lizet's desire to talk to her father on the eve of her exams suggest about their relationship?

Vocabulary

tittered, gauntlet, substantial, surveyed, merengue, innocuous, pollutants, proximity, hallucinating, naturalized



Chapter 15 - 16

Summary

Chapter 15. Lourdes collects Lizet from the airport and on the drive home asks her a lot of questions, none of which are about school. Lizet reflects on her impression of her mother in the airport and does not like the way she viewed her, or the fact that she does not want to be like her. She wonders what her mother had seen when she saw her coming off the plane and told her she looked "smart". When they arrive home, Leidy welcomes Lizet, who notices the difference between her mother's and her sister's greetings, and knows that something is wrong with her mother. This is made even more apparent when, after giving Lizet a welcome home gift, Lourdes goes to her room before Lizet even has a chance to thank her.

Chapter 16. Ricky phones Lizet, but as Lourdes is nearby their conversation is brief. Three days later, Lizet decides to find him so that she can confront him. She goes to see his brother first, and is met by her cousins who don't realize that she has been at college out of state. When she reveals that she doesn't know where her father lives, her cousin Weasel gets angry with her and she feels afraid of him. Armed with her father's address, Lizet leaves and drives to his house, where she meets his roommate, Rafael. Rafael is very excited to meet her, and tells her that her father is very proud of her, but he is at work so she is unable to see him. Over the course of the conversation, Lizet becomes emotional and leaves abruptly.

Analysis

Chapters 15 and 16 provide a marked contrast between Lizet's parents in their approaches to her schooling. Lourdes collects Lizet from the airport herself, but hurries her to the car instead of stopping to ask her anything about how she has been. Although she shows an interest in parts of Lizet's life (for example, the flight and the weather in New York), she does not pay any attention to her daughter's college experience, classes or her friends. Almost immediately after reaching home, Lourdes retreats into her bedroom, avoiding further contact with Lizet.

In contrast, Lizet has very little direct contact with her father in Chapter 16, but the difference between his perspective and Lourdes' is apparent as soon as she visits his house. His roommate, Rafael, whom Lizet has never met before, knows all about her school and how she is the "smart one" of Ricky's daughters. This suggests that, despite initially being against Lizet's decision to attend college out of state, he is proud of her achievements and speaks openly about her to people in his life. Although this may be apparent to the reader, it does not appear to be so to Lizet, who initially does not believe Rafael when he tells her that Ricky is at work.



Lizet has believed her father to be avoiding her, having not made any contact with her in the time that she has been away. Upon questioning from Weasel, however, she begins to realize that she has never given him her contact details at school or asked him for his new address, and therefore that the fault might be on both sides for their lack of communication. This revelation shakes her resolve to confront him, and finding Rafael so enthusiastic about seeing her would also have shaken her perception of the situation, leading her to leave, upset.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think Lourdes saw when she looked at her daughter coming towards her in the airport? What did she mean by saying she looked smart?

Discussion Question 2

How does Lizet's attitude toward her father change after meeting with her cousins? Why?

Discussion Question 3

What is your impression of Rafael? How do you think your impression would differ from Lizet's?

Vocabulary

askew, slew, retaliation, grout, ricocheted, ingesting, etiquette, deportation, preponderance, wafting, morphed, uniformly, sparse, artifact, fulfillment



Chapter 17 - 18

Summary

Chapter 17. At dinner, Leidy reveals that Omar has rung three times that evening, but had hung up without saying anything. Pressured by her mother and sister to call him back, Lizet takes the phone into her room and calls her father, assuming, correctly, that it had been him calling. After a brief conversation in which he, unlike anyone else in her family, asks how the semester had gone at school, Ricky invites Lizet to breakfast the next day, and she agrees to meet him. In the morning, having told Leidy and Lourdes that she is meeting Omar, Lizet leaves for breakfast.

Chapter 18. Lizet arrives to meet her father half an hour early, but then feels uncomfortable sitting alone waiting for him. Her discomfort continues once he has arrived. Ricky asks about her time at school, and Lizet holds back from revealing everything about her struggles during the semester as she does not want to ruin his pride in her. They talk about Lourdes' involvement with Ariel Hernandez, which has been making Ricky uncomfortable when he has seen her on TV. Lizet tries to defend her mother, as she sees it as her father's fault that they are in that neighborhood in the first place. Ricky gives Lizet envelopes containing money as Noche Buena gifts for herself, Leidy and Dante. She tries to encourage him to give them to the others himself, but he declines. On the way home, Lizet drives past their old house, hoping that a talking parrot or iguana will spring out and solve her problems, but that doesn't give her any answers either.

Analysis

Continuing with the pattern of familial responses to her return from school, Chapters 17 and 18 give Lizet the chance to communicate directly with her father and determine whether or not the new messages she has been receiving about him are grounded in reality. In her first real conversation with him, having been limited by her mother's presence previously, Ricky immediately asks her about her school work and how the semester had progressed. This is in stark contrast with her mother and sister who have still shown little to no interest in anything that has taken place outside of Miami. Similarly, when she meets him the following morning, his line of questioning is repeated.

In meeting Ricky for breakfast, Lizet finds that she is unsure how to act. This is likely a combination of the fact that her perception of him is being forced to change, making it harder for her to be confrontational in the way she had initially intended, and her growing discomfort in social situations where the discrepancy between her two worlds is making it difficult for her to know how to act. Her relationship with Ricky has also grown more distant since she last saw him in person, on the night before she left for Rawlings College, as a result of neither of them making an effort to remain in contact. Even



though this is acknowledged early in their breakfast conversation, there is still some distance between them.

The strain on the relationship between father and daughter is apparent through their conversation and non-verbal interactions, but Ricky's decision to ask Lizet to give Leidy and Dante their Noche Buena gifts from him increases Lizet's emotional turmoil even further. As he now has little contact with either of his daughters, Ricky is in a difficult position when it comes to the giving of gifts. By asking Lizet to do this for him, however, he places her in the position of go between, making her appear to be on his side when no one else in the family will talk to him.

Discussion Question 1

How does Lizet know that the phone calls were from her father, rather than Omar? Why doesn't she want to tell her mother and sister?

Discussion Question 2

What prevents Lizet from confronting her father, and saying all the things she plans to say when he is not there?

Discussion Question 3

What is magical realism? Why would Lizet's tutor have referred to it as her literary tradition?

Vocabulary

onslaught, entailed, demarcating, vulgar, shellac, groggy, dingy, inflecting, maneuvers, procured, abruptly, obligatory, vindicated, explicit



Chapter 19 - 20

Summary

Chapter 19. Lizet gives Leidy the envelopes from their father when she gets home, confessing that she has seen him and not Omar. Ricky has given them each \$50, but a note concealed inside Lizet's envelope reveals that he had intended to give her more, forgetting about Dante's existence. In the note, Lizet is able to see her father's unspoken pride in her, and feels sorry for Leidy, as all she received from him is money. Together, they play with Dante and make him laugh, not speaking of anything else that might have been in their thoughts.

Chapter 20. When they arrive at Zoila's house for Noche Buena, Zoila and Lourdes greet each other loudly, presenting a false level of closeness. Lizet and Leidy's cousin, Neyda, comes over to ask if she can hold Dante and to ask whether Omar will be coming. Lizet tells her that they have broken up, and Leidy tells Neyda that Omar was a loser. Despite her intention to break up with him, and her own stories about him to the girls at Rawlings, Lizet is uncomfortable with Leidy referring to him in that way. When Lizet sees a name card and place setting for Omar at the table, she becomes angry and confronts her mother, who is in the midst of an argument with Zoila about Ariel Hernandez. Lizet and Lourdes argue and their confrontation becomes physical, with Lourdes accusing Lizet of thinking herself too good for Omar. After the argument, Lizet tells people that Omar is working but will be there next year.

Analysis

After several chapters of events that have given her cause to reconsider her opinion of her father, it appears that Lizet is more disposed to be kind to him than previously. In giving the envelopes to Leidy, she notices that the ink used to write Dante's name is different to the light pencil used to mark the other two envelopes for her and her sister, suggesting that Ricky's grandson's gift had not initially been planned. In her complaint that Ricky has given her money to give to an infant, instead of buying something necessary or fun for the child himself, it is possible that Leidy has also made the connection.

The realization that Dante had been forgotten makes Lizet feel sad, but does not bring about a return of her previous anger. Indeed, even when she realizes that her father had intended to give her more than her sister or nephew, she shows restraint in her decision not to call him, in the belief that he would think her phone call driven by a desire for the additional money. This, however, is likely motivated by her acceptance that his offer to give her more reflects an acknowledgement of her success and his pride in her for achieving that success.



Even if she does not want the additional money, by not becoming angry on Leidy's behalf Lizet is buying into the perception that she is the "smart one", as Rafael had put it. She is implicitly agreeing that she has achieved more, works harder, and is worth more than Leidy, who is working part time while raising her son and trying to manage their mother's involvement with Ariel Hernandez. By acknowledging and supporting the work that Leidy contributes to the family, she would have been more likely to find an ally in her pursuit of academic success, rather than someone else who does not appear to value her achievements.

The scene at Noche Buena provides both a crisis point in Lizet's relationship with her mother, and a precursor of bigger things yet to come. In arguing with Zoila, the apathy of most of the community about Ariel's asylum case is contrasted with the passionate fervor of the protesters. There is nearly a physical altercation between Zoila and Lourdes; however, their fight is interrupted by Lizet's own complaint with her mother. The unresolved conflict between the two women suggests an ongoing tension between Ariel Hernandez and the American government that is still to reach its conclusion. In contrast, however, Lourdes' apparent indifference to her daughter's return is prevented from continuing by Lizet's insistence on speaking to her. Omar's place card acts as a catalyst for Lourdes to accuse Lizet of thinking herself too good for Omar and, by implication, for her and their family. This is likely the crux of her problems with Lizet but, having spoken them aloud and become the physically dominant person in the dispute, there remains no resolution for either of them.

Discussion Question 1

What impact does it have on you, as a reader, that Ricky intended to give Lizet more money than Leidy, and had only remembered Dante as an afterthought?

Discussion Question 2

The reader is told that Lizet and Leidy don't speak about their thoughts as they tickle Dante. What might Leidy be avoiding saying, based on what you know of her experience while Lizet is away at school?

Discussion Question 3

What does Lizet and Lourdes' argument about Omar mean in the larger context of their relationship? Why hasn't Lourdes told Zoila that Omar wouldn't be attending?

Vocabulary

flail, cinched, accordion, evoking, wary, dissipate, piercing, profanity, obscuring, inebriation, siphoning, stifled, sequestering



Chapter 21 - 22

Summary

Chapter 21. After the Noche Buena party, which Lourdes forced them to leave immediately after dinner, Lizet calls Omar, who is happy to hear from her and appears unconcerned about her lack of contact, telling her that he understands her. Lizet tells Omar that he was missed at Noche Buena, and mentions her fight with her mother, but he doesn't push her for details, for which she is grateful. She asks him to come over as early as possible the following morning. He does so, enthusiastically fitting back into the family environment with ease. Omar takes Lizet for a drive to the beach, and then gives her a commitment ring, telling her that he wants them to get married one day. Despite Lizet's promise to herself that she would not sleep with Omar, the ring changes her mind, and they have sex in the old lifeguard tower.

Chapter 22. Lizet checks the mail every day, awaiting her grades. They arrive on December 31st, and she has earned B-minuses in all subjects except PE, for which she got an A. Knowing that her family will not understand what it cost her to achieve seemingly low grades, she tells Omar that she received all As, except for one B. To celebrate, Leidy loans Lizet some of her clubbing clothes, and Omar takes her out to a club to see in the new year. They start drinking and Omar reminds Lizet that she will need to come and visit his mother or she will think there's "something wrong with [her] too" (220). After they have entered the club, Lizet asks what he meant by "too" and when he reveals that his mother does not like the way Lourdes has been acting on TV, Lizet gets angry and wants to leave. As they have sex in the back seat of Omar's car, Lizet decides that she will go to the Ariel Hernandez rally in the morning, to see for herself what her mother has been doing.

Analysis

Lourdes' accusations have not resolved anything between her and Lizet. They have, however, prompted her daughter to make the phone call she has been avoiding since returning home. To her surprise, Omar does not appear angry, and instead says that he understands her and has been waiting for her to call. Given that he has not seen her in person for several months, they have been arguing frequently when they do talk, and he had the details of her flight to Miami, his patience with her appears to be unwarranted. In Chapter 22, when he gives her the commitment ring, his confidence that her silence is insignificant in the grand scheme of their relationship is explained. The reader, however, has a deeper understanding of Lizet's internal conflict surrounding their relationship, and her physical, rather than verbal, response to his proposal does not provide any more certainty than existed beforehand.

One of the reasons that Lizet puts forward, in her own mind, to explain her reluctance to commit to any firm plans for the new year (or beyond) is her inability to be certain what



the future will bring. This seems to suggest that the potential for her to be forced to take on more loans for her tuition, and to take remedial classes may be linked to her acceptance of Omar's ring. If her exam results are not sufficient for her to continue at Rawlings, she may be forced to consider returning home. In that case, perhaps marrying Omar would not be an impossibility; however, if she has the option to remain in college and pursue her degree, his proposal may be less appealing.

On the way to the club, Lizet receives her second hint that all is not right in her mother's interactions with Ariel Hernandez and the fight to keep him in America. At breakfast, Ricky had alluded to his concern about the way she has been acting on the television, although he would not be pressed for details, and Omar now concedes that his mother does not like the way Lourdes has been behaving. Lourdes and Blanca have known each other a long time, so it would perhaps have been in Lizet's best interests to give her opinion some weight. Instead, she becomes upset with Omar, insisting on leaving the club before midnight, and then deciding from the back seat of his car that she will go to the next day's rally and see for herself.

Discussion Question 1

How do you think Lizet expects her conversation with Omar to progress? Does reality align with her expectations? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

How do you think Lizet feels, having to change her grades to tell her family, knowing that they would be disappointed with her real grades? Why does she choose to lie, rather than telling them the whole story?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Lizet find herself defending her mother to Omar? How does her defense align with her own experience of Lourdes' behavior since Thanksgiving?

Vocabulary

sarcastically, dinette, orifice, registrar, counteracted, mercy, authentic, subtext, parallel, singeing, churning, hazardous, overzealous, exiles, reabsorbed



Chapter 23 - 24

Summary

Chapter 23. Lizet wakes up Leidy to wish her a happy New Year, before leaving for the rally with Lourdes. Leidy tries to stop her, revealing that she has done the same thing and saw Lourdes making up stories about her past for the cameras. Before they leave, Lourdes gives Lizet a t-shirt, covered in slogans and a picture of Ariel Hernandez, to wear to the rally. She has made it herself.

At the rally, Lourdes meets up with her friends, but does not introduce them to Lizet. In watching her, Lizet recognizes her own actions at Rawlings, as someone trying to fit in to a new group. When Ariel and his uncle first come out of the house, Lizet is as enchanted by them as the other people there; however, she soon realizes how the situation could get out of hand, and the spell is broken. As Ariel's uncle explains that they will know more on Tuesday, Lizet notices that her mother's smile is fixed but she looks bored. It is only when Caridaylis comes out that she is truly happy to be there. Caridaylis appears to Lizet to be just an ordinary young woman, and she tells her mother so. This causes an argument. When the camera crews arrive, Lizet does not see anything of concern, and thinks that Leidy and Omar just don't understand Lourdes. She admits, from the future, that her conclusion was based on little evidence.

Chapter 24. The following Tuesday, Lizet and Lourdes return to the Hernandez's house, to find out the result of their court battle. The news is not good, and Lourdes' friend, Myra, tells Lizet that the decision granted custody of Ariel to his father, meaning his American family cannot claim asylum for him. He will be returning to Cuba in two weeks. Lourdes wails loudly at this news, and collapses in front of the cameras. Lizet tries to get close to her but is pushed out of the way by Myra, who has no idea that she is Lourdes' daughter.

Analysis

Chapters 23 and 24 are dedicated to Lizet's experience of the New Year's Day rally for Ariel Hernandez. Although she has been warned that her mother's behavior has been peculiar of late, Lizet appears keen to attend the rally, and even when Leidy's experiences are added to the evidence, she does not appear to believe her sister, her father, or Omar. At best, Lizet remains curious about what she will see at the rally and, after finding herself temporarily enraptured with the young Cuban boy, she reports being able to understand how all of the people at the rally had become involved. Similarly, in watching her mother interact with her friends at the rally, Lizet is able to understand, given her own recent experience of being an outsider, why she might have exaggerated the truth when talking about her own arrival in America.



As the rally progresses and the news that Ariel is going to be deported reaches the attendees, Lizet has the opportunity to see her mother's reaction to the news. Like the other supporters, Lourdes is shocked and disappointed by the news; however, unlike the others she screams and wails, then collapses to the ground. Lizet, seemingly motivated to see her mother in a positive light, does not appear to be shocked by the extent of this reaction, merely concerned for her mother's well being. At this point, her inability to be concerned about her mother's actions appears to be almost wilful, and even her future self admits that the conclusions she drew were ill-conceived.

Among the evidence Lizet fails to understand is a brief moment that goes to the heart of Lourdes' behavior. It is not Ariel with whom she is enamored, but his cousin Caridaylis. Taken alongside Lizet's realization that her mother has not told the other rally goers any version of her life in which her daughters could be there with her, or old enough to be the young woman trying to reach her when she collapsed, Lourdes' attachment to Caridaylis suggests that she is seeking a daughter with whom she can connect and whom she can admire. Perhaps if Lizet had come to this conclusion upon seeing the smile on her mother's face, she would have been in a better position to work with Leidy to combat it. Instead, she comes to the conclusion that Omar and Leidy do not understand, which sees her working in parallel, rather than in partnership with them.

Discussion Question 1

How might Lizet's ability to empathize with her mother in relation to the women supporting Ariel Hernandez influence their relationship? Does their relationship change in the ways you would expect?

Discussion Question 2

What effect is caused by having present day Lizet comment on the conclusion that she made upon first seeing Lourdes' interactions with the Hernandez family and the media?

Discussion Question 3

When Myra pushes her away, Lizet realizes that Myra does not understand she is Lourdes' daughter. How does this knowledge impact on Lizet's perception of Lourdes and her involvement with Ariel Hernandez? What evidence has brought you to this conclusion?

Vocabulary

motives, octave, co-opting, slogan, informative, density, inexplicable, inverse, compelled, wielded, generic, quintessential, bequeathing, retrofitted, wherewithal, anticipation, intuited, preemptive, technicality, searing



Chapter 25 - 26

Summary

Chapter 25. As Lizet returns to Rawlings College, the legal battle for Ariel Hernandez continues. Lizet tries to avoid knowing anything about it. In her class schedule, she has signed up for a course in laboratory research with Dr. Kaufmann - chosen because she is the only immigrant professor (from Germany) and loves the beach. In the first class, Lizet pays very careful attention and does exactly as she is told, and is the only student in the class to carry out the assigned task perfectly.

Bumping into Ethan in the library, he invites her to lunch and they tell each other about their holidays. Ethan notices her ring and asks if she is engaged. After an awkward conversation, Lizet says that she was joking and moves her ring to her right hand. She tells him instead that her mother gave it to her for Christmas. Ethan invites her to a study group at Donald Hall, and then encourages her to attend Dr. Kaufmann's office hour.

Chapter 26. Despite it still being winter, Jillian asks Lizet what she will be doing with the summer, telling her that her work experience then will have a significant impact on her future career. Lizet is concerned that all she will be able to do is make posters for Ariel Hernandez. Jillian also tells Lizet that she saw Ethan at a campus event and thinks he is cute. Despite saying that she is not interested, Lizet is uncomfortable with the idea of Jillian and Ethan as a couple.

Lizet decides to go to the study group Ethan runs, but when she arrives he is the only other person there. In the course of their conversation, she finally reveals that she is not as wealthy as she has inadvertently presented, but still avoids confirming her engagement to Omar. As the weeks progress, she finds a routine in her life at Rawlings, and feels comfortable that Leidy and Omar are managing the situation with her mother and Ariel Hernandez.

Analysis

In her return to school, the focus of Lizet's attention moves away from the political situation with Ariel Hernandez and her mother, and back toward her school work. Having received satisfactory passing grades in all of her subjects, she is able to take on a full course load, but chooses to make adjustments to her schedule so as not to put undue pressure on herself for another semester. The fact that Lizet chooses her laboratory class on the grounds that the professor is not American suggests that she is continuing to experience a cultural divide between her and the other students, even though she has been born and raised in America, and therefore is not like her professor at all, in that respect.



Ostensibly to further improve her education, Lizet also commences taking part in a study group that Ethan organizes for the students in his dorm. As with the ice skating afternoon, however, there is little mention of any other attendees - in fact, there are no others on this first occasion - and the focus for the reader is directly on the relationship between Ethan and Lizet. Lizet's reluctance to disclose her engagement to Omar (despite confessing that she had, in other ways, misled Ethan), coupled with her discomfort at the idea of Jillian being interested in dating Ethan lead to the idea that she is, in fact, more romantically attached to Ethan than she is even willing to admit to herself. It is also possible that Lizet does not want Jillian to become closer to Ethan as that would encroach on the culturally neutral space she has found in their light-hearted banter. In a place where she does not often feel comfortable being herself, it is likely that Lizet would be unwilling to share her friend with someone who regularly, if unintentionally, continues to make her question her own identity and experience.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways is Lizet able to avoid the Ariel Hernandez situation? Why can she not avoid it completely? How could she have handled it differently?

Discussion Question 2

How do you think Lizet's challenges in the first semester impacted on her performance in Dr. Kaufmann's laboratory? Would she have done as well if she had found the first semester easy?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think Ethan will be telling himself about Lizet's ring, after she has confessed that she is not financially well off?

Vocabulary

nullified, implicitly, ignorant, feigned, proficiency, perfunctory, ecology, enthralled, simultaneously, validated, enzyme, sterile, laminar, centrifuge, pipette, immersion, syllabus, endorsement, viscosity, aforementioned, inventory, antidote, coerced, parametric, stilted, convoluted



Chapter 27 - 28

Summary

Chapter 27. Lizet receives an email from Dr. Kaufmann, asking to meet with her outside of class. This makes Lizet nervous, wondering what she has done wrong. When the meeting comes around, however, Dr. Kaufmann invites her to take part in a summer research program in California. There is a scholarship that means she will be paid a stipend, on top of her expenses. When Lizet sees the requirement to submit her official transcript, she is concerned about her grades and tries to use Ariel Hernandez as an excuse for her poor performance to date. Dr. Kaufmann misunderstands what she is saying, thinking she is talking about relationship problems, and dismisses the problem as something from the past. Knowing that her parents will not approve, Lizet decides to put off telling them for a day.

Chapter 28. As she is coming back from Spanish the next morning, Lizet sees her mother's face on the TV in her dorm. She doesn't understand how this could have happened without her knowing about it. The other girls who are watching it, including Caroline and Tracy, start to talk behind her as she watches the news report. Lizet gets really angry with them and becomes physically aggressive. Caroline attempts to calm her down, and then holds her back when Tracy starts to make comments implying that Ariel Hernandez, and therefore Lizet, who has followed in her mother's footsteps and claimed that she left Cuba on a raft, should not have come to America. Returning to her room, Lizet is unable to get in contact with her family, and decides to book flights home to sort out the situation with her mother.

Analysis

Chapters 27 and 28 provide a contrast between what would have been one of the highest points in Lizet's academic career to date, and one of her personal lows. Having worked hard at a subject she enjoys, Lizet is rewarded by being offered a position in Dr. Kaufmann's research laboratory for the summer. Although, at first, she is skeptical of the offer, thinking that she has done something wrong or that the position is something offered only to minority students, she is excited to realize that Dr. Kaufmann has genuinely chosen her as the most worthy student from all of the freshmen at Rawlings College that year. She has a strong desire to share her happiness and good news with someone close to her but experience has shown her that her academic pursuits have been given little acclaim within her family. It is interesting that Lizet applies this logic to her father, as well as to her mother and sister, even though Ricky has shown himself to be proud of her achievements.

In contrast to this very private high point, Lizet's dismay and anger at her mother's appearance on national TV is a public spectacle. Aside from the fact that the news story is being broadcast all over the country, and Ariel Hernandez's case has become high



profile news, Lizet is in the communal TV room in her dorm when she sees Lourdes speaking in front of the cameras. The interaction that ensues between Lizet and the other Rawlings students sees Lizet adopting the false stories that Leidy has told her Lourdes tells the media. When she saw Lourdes interacting with Ariel's other supporters at the New Year rally, Lizet could understand the purpose of the false stories, in that Lourdes was trying to make herself appear more like them, creating a shared narrative that would bind them together. When Lizet uses the same narratives, she too is aiming to align herself more closely with the stories of the protesters, but not in the same way as Lourdes. Where Lourdes aimed to make friends, Lizet is attempting to have her perspectives on a situation that is truly very close to her own experience validated by women with whom she has very little interest in developing a friendship.

It is also of note that Lizet becomes physically aggressive in defending her Hispanic culture, in much the same way that Weasel had become aggressive toward her when she arrived at his house and appeared to have lost some of her younger self. At that time, she tried to reflect on his behavior toward her, but there is no discussion of her reflections in light of her own behavior. Instead, she turns to action.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Lizet assume that the email from Dr. Kaufmann will be for something bad? What other evidence can you find of Lizet's tendency to assume the worst?

Discussion Question 2

What stops Lizet from telling Dr. Kaufmann the truth about her grades? What makes her think that Ariel Hernandez or a failed romance would be a better reason for her struggle?

Discussion Question 3

How does Lizet come to tell the same version of events that Lourdes has been criticized for telling? In what ways are their experiences similar?

Vocabulary

fondling, autoclave, incinerating, impropriety, cryptic, saline, accosted, incriminate, stipend, extracurricular, incompetence, mediocre, obliterated, unencumbered, phenomenon, reckoning, spawn, spectacle, propaganda, liability, karmic, segue, frivolous



Chapter 29 - 30

Summary

Chapter 29. Feeling that her support options at Rawlings College are limited, following her argument with Tracy and Caroline, Lizet decides to confide in Ethan. Although they have always kept their conversations neutral, she feels confident that he will understand. When she arrives early at the study group, however, he rushes into the room, full of excitement at the news that he has been accepted to graduate study at Berkeley. Realizing that he has not told her about his worry over his applications, Lizet feels that she is no longer able to discuss her problems with him, and is unable to be enthusiastic about his success. She avoids contact with Dr. Kaufmann and has limited other social support left.

Chapter 30. Omar picks Lizet up from the airport and goes to take her to her mother's house, but she tells him she wants to go to her father's instead. He is confused by her anger with him, and tries to get her to get back in the car when they arrive and he doesn't think anyone is home. Lizet insists and her father comes outside, ordering her into the house and telling Omar that he should leave. When Omar finally realizes why Lizet is upset, he tells her that there was nothing she could do from New York. This does not placate her. Ricky is also unhappy to see her, as he does not have anywhere for her to stay and does not understand why she is getting involved in Lourdes' mess. When she tries to explain, he tells her that she is not Cuban or Latina, but American. He allows her to stay the night, but takes her to her mother's in the morning and refuses to get involved himself. Lourdes has already left by the time she arrives at the house, but Leidy is there and they also have an argument.

Analysis

Where Chapters 27 and 28 have brought about critical points in her academic career and interpersonal relationships with her peers, Chapters 29 and 30 follow suit with her relationship with Ethan, and then with Omar and her family. By deciding to confide in Ethan and ask his advice, Lizet is aware that she is breaking the carefully neutral boundaries that they have held in their relationship, and that there could be repercussions for that that she had not so far anticipated. This indicates that if Ethan were to suggest that their relationship become more than friends, she would be willing to agree to that too. The fact that she has not yet spoken to Omar makes it seem that she has finally reached a point where she will be willing to call off their engagement and end their relationship. Her return home proves this to be the case, irrespective of what has happened with Ethan.

Lizet goes to Donald Hall early to wait for Ethan before their study group. He, too, arrives early in order to talk to Lizet but in telling her his good news first, a situation is created where Lizet feels it is impossible for her to confide in him any longer. Her



ungracious response to his acceptance to Berkeley is likely a combination of a range of factors, including an emotion that is characteristic of her family - betrayal. In a situation that parallels her own applications to out of state colleges, Ethan has applied to graduate schools but not told her about it in case he is not accepted. When he finds out he has been successful, he is unabashed in his excitement, whereas Lizet knew that her parents would be disappointed and hurt. Her negative reaction to him then can be seen as her own version of the experience her family went through when she announced that she was going to college. Unlike her family, however, there are no bonds connecting her to Ethan, and this interchange marks the beginning of the end for their relationship.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the range of emotions that Lizet and Ethan experience in relation to Ethan's acceptance to Berkeley. How do those emotions present in their interactions with each other?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Ricky tell Lizet that she's not Cuban?

Discussion Question 3

Lizet narrates that following her fight with Leidy, they stood together "one thinking the worst of the fighting was over, the other glad to have the opening act out of her way" (321). Which sister is which? What brings you to that conclusion?

Vocabulary

rosaries, somberly, abstractions, pinnacle, infuriating, accentuated, vigil, resurrected, saturated, traitor, proclamations, rebuttals



Chapter 31 - 32

Summary

Chapter 31. Leidy fills in the missing details for Lizet, explaining that Lourdes has been spending very little time at home and using her leave to avoid going to work as well. She also gives Lizet an envelope that arrived for her, containing all of the application forms for her internship with Dr. Kaufmann's research program in California. Her relief is evident when Lizet promises that she will not be going away for the summer.

Lizet and Leidy go to see Lourdes at Ariel Hernandez's house and Lourdes is ecstatic to see her younger daughter. Leidy is upset at this response, given that her mother generally ignores her when she visits their vigil. Upon her return home, Lourdes asks Lizet to spend the night at the vigil with her and, unable to think of a response, Lizet agrees. She and Leidy argue while Lourdes is in the shower, and Leidy leaves the apartment with Dante.

Chapter 32. Lizet and Lourdes arrive at the vigil and go inside the house because Lizet has not worn black and therefore cannot take part in the prayers outside. They get some food from a table inside, and Lizet starts talking to a guy, Victor, who says he knows her from high school. Although the conversation starts mildly, Lizet's comment that she is home for a visit causes Victor to ask her more pointed questions about her perspective on Ariel's case and to treat her like an unwelcome outsider and a sellout. Victor leaves soon after their conversation, but his words remain with her as she spends the night on the couch, and beyond, into her future.

Analysis

Without anyone with whom she feels able to discuss the relative merits of returning home to help Leidy manage Lourdes versus going to California to take part in the research program, Lizet has decided to put her family first. Understandably, her sister, who has been at home, trying not to bother Lizet knowing she could not do anything and attempting to contain Lourdes' involvement with the Hernandez family, is relieved by the news. With Lourdes taking so much time off work, Leidy is likely concerned about the financial consequences for their lives, as well as the implications for Lourdes' well being.

Chapter 31 also demonstrates the way in which Lourdes' behavior has been affecting Leidy's well being. Her emotional response to Lourdes' unexpected excitement at seeing Lizet is one of jealousy. Lizet sees this reaction as foolish; however, it also provides the reader of some idea of the extent of the problem in Leidy's everyday life. By dismissing Leidy out of hand, Lizet demonstrates that she still does not fully appreciate what it has been costing Leidy not to speak out and ask for her support, in order to allow her to focus on her studies.



In attending the vigil, Lizet still holds onto some hope that she will be able to remove her mother from the situation; however, it is unclear what she intends to do to make that happen. She has come rushing home from college to deal with the situation, but appears to be going along with Lourdes' suggestions, against Leidy's advice, and does not appear to have an actual strategy of her own. Even on the occasions when she does speak up against her mother's stated intentions to go to the vigil, she is easily persuaded to agree with her.

Even in attending the vigil itself, it is clear that Lourdes is in her element, whereas Lizet is uncomfortable and out of place. She has not formulated her own views on the situation clearly enough that she can speak strongly about her beliefs, and instead talks around the subject when confronted by Victor. He also has some physical similarities to Ethan that would likely have distracted her from the subtext to the conversation; however, she is also caught unawares by the question, which appears to be a logical inquiry, given her presence at a vigil in support of Ariel Hernandez.

Discussion Question 1

What makes Lizet promise not to go to summer school? What would Leidy have assumed was her reason for promising? What differs between the two perspectives?

Discussion Question 2

What causes Lourdes to respond to Lizet's appearance when she has previously ignored Leidy?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Lizet's conversation with Victor have such a big impact on her self-esteem?

Vocabulary

coaxing, perpetual, punctuated, expedite, deflate, radiated, beatific, reprieve, chaos, infiltrate, brink, tines, tumult, venom



Chapter 33 - 34

Summary

Chapter 33. Lizet is awoken the following morning by an unfamiliar woman dressed in black, telling her that there is a raid taking place across the street. As she goes out onto the street, amidst screaming, sirens and the beginnings of a riot, she sees Ariel Hernandez being carried into the back of a van by a stranger. She runs after the van, but then turns back and goes into the Hernandez house in search of her mother. She finds her in a bedroom, comforting Caridaylis like she is her daughter. Although Lizet imagines the scene differently in the years that follow, in the moment she turns and leaves the house, then tells Leidy that Lourdes was involved in the riot, instead of with the girl who replaced them as her daughter. As a result, Leidy is too angry to take her to the airport, Lourdes is taking part in a sit in, and Lizet is too proud to accept help from her father. Instead she asks Omar to take her to airport and, when he asks, finally admits that their relationship is over.

Chapter 34. Lizet has a shift at the library the day she returns to campus, but is still too upset to care about her job. Ethan comes to visit her, trying to repair the damage to their relationship. Having decided that she needs to return to Miami rather than to pursue her academic dreams, however, Lizet rebuffs his concern and tells him to leave. When Dr. Kaufmann asks her for the internship paperwork after class, she tries to explain why she can no longer go to California. Dr. Kaufmann does not understand and asks her to keep thinking about it.

Analysis

There is a qualitatively different style to the language used in reporting the raid of Ariel Hernandez's home than in the rest of the book. Between rushing outside to see what is happening and finding her mother consoling Caridaylis, Lizet's experience is described as if she were reporting from a war zone. The reader is presented with a disjointed image of what is taking place, with flashes of an impending riot, a kidnapping, screams, pepper spray dripping from the walls. As Ariel is taken from his home and placed in the van, there is a sense of time slowing down as he and Lizet see each other and she realizes that she will be a part of his memory of that day. Then time again moves on and he is gone. By the time she finds her mother, a riot is building in the street, but the inside of the house is quiet, except for Caridaylis' sobs. This quiet allows Lizet's perception of the situation to return to normal, and following the drama of the raid there is almost a sense that she has been numbed by her realization that Caridaylis has taken her and Leidy's place in their mother's life.

Following the raid, there is little room left in Lizet's mind for anything else, and this leads her to permanently end her relationship with Omar who, despite everything that has gone before, is still willing to pick her up and take her to the airport when everyone else



in her family is unavailable or unwilling to do so. Similarly, when she returns to campus, Ethan makes an effort to seek her out and try to repair their friendship. This is despite the fact that it was she who had behaved badly at their last meeting, in being unable to be excited for him in his acceptance to Berkeley. This pattern continues to demonstrate the egocentric adolescent worldview that has been holding Lizet back from appreciating her sister's experience and understanding both her and Omar's attempts to protect her. Instead, she has been focused on her own sense of entitlement and the potential harm that could come to her.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Leidy not present in any of Lizet's future fantasies about the morning of the raid at Ariel Hernandez's house?

Discussion Question 2

What is your impression of Lizet when she thinks that Omar has been crying over Ariel Hernandez, instead of his fear that their relationship is over? How do you feel about the character of Omar in general?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think that Dr. Kaufmann truly does not understand what Lizet is trying to tell her? What alternative explanations might there be for her response?

Vocabulary

evaporated, careening, splayed, partitions, aftermath, redemption, interrogation, desolate, basest, quip, integral, swagger



Chapter 35 - 36

Summary

Chapter 35. Lizet returns home for the summer, and is picked up from the airport by Leidy and her new partner, David. Lourdes is still involved with Madres Para Justicia, and has been known to leave Dante home alone to do things for the organization. It is Lizet's job to keep an eye on her nephew and her mother. One day she receives an email relating to the arrangements for the summer internship in California, even though she withdrew her name. The same day, she takes Dante and Lourdes to a protest, and while Lourdes is marching, she and Dante witness another protest, suggesting that all Cuban immigrants should leave America. The next morning, she books a flight to California to take part in the internship. When she tells them, Leidy and Lourdes are angry, but Lourdes quickly withdraws and tells her to leave the house. She spends the days before her flight with her father and Rafael, who support her decision. Ricky finally gets the opportunity to see her off at the airport.

Chapter 36. In the present day, there is a possibility that Lizet will be sent to explore the coral reefs around the shores of Cuba, but is conflicted about telling her parents. She knows that they will have expectations of her that she may not be able to fulfill, but also wants to share with them a return to their homeland if it happens. Leidy and David have married and returned to Hialeah, had more children and moved Lourdes into the other half of their duplex. Ethan withdrew from his doctorate and has become a regional union organizer. Lizet, too, withdrew from graduate school and found a job as a lab manager, realizing that she cares more about field work than academics.

Looking back at her return to Rawlings College following her summer internship, Lizet reflects on the way that her mother continued to shape her life around Ariel Hernandez, claiming that she would support George W. Bush in the election, because she had heard that Al Gore had ordered the raid on Ariel's house. In making the decision which way to cast her own absentee ballot, Lizet is torn in the knowledge that she will be betraying someone, whichever way she votes.

Analysis

In Chapter 35, there is a sense of resolution building. When Lizet returns home for the summer, Ariel's case has largely been concluded and he is deported back to Cuba. Lourdes is still unreliable as a mother and grandmother, having both lost her job and left Dante home alone in order to pursue her own interests, but there is less urgency and force in her actions now. Taking care of her nephew and her mother become routine for Lizet, with a defeated sort of heaviness that suggests it is not truly her heart's desire to be there. In contrast, Leidy has a new partner and her life appears to be improving. When Lizet decides to again leave Miami unexpectedly, this time to take up her research internship in California, this poses a threat to Leidy's newfound peace and



stability and it is likely this, as well as a feeling of being abandoned, that lead her to become so angry with Lizet when she announces her new change of plans.

In angering her mother to the point where she is thrown out of the house, Lizet gets a further opportunity to reconnect with her father. He and Rafael are unperturbed by Lizet's sudden departure from Miami, possibly due to not having been in close contact or relying on her anyway, and support her decision to go to California. In allowing Ricky to take her to the airport, Lizet finally gets the proud farewell to college that she had been hoping for when she first left at the beginning of her freshman year. This provides a resolution to the conflict that had been creating a barrier between them, which seems to be the only damage that has been able to be repaired.

The final chapter of the book provides a form of epilogue to the narrative in which it is possible to see that over the longer term there have been improvements in her relationships with Lourdes and Leidy, but that they are still not as close as they had once been. Ethan, too, is mentioned with a somewhat wistful way, as if acknowledging that the conclusion of their friendship left something to be desired. There is a sense, in closing, that Lizet's life has become something that she is happy to have attained, but also that there is something incomplete and unresolved that she will continue to work towards in the future.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the anti-Cuban protest prompt Lizet to reconsider declining the internship?

Discussion Question 2

How do you feel about the contrasting approaches of Lizet's family members to her news about the internship? How might things have been different if she had remained closer with her father than her mother following their divorce?

Discussion Question 3

The author located her story in Miami, Florida in the year 2000. Why do you think she chose that specific time and place? What is the significance of the upcoming election and terrorist attacks in the broader meaning of the novel?

Vocabulary

vacillated, chaperone, debauchery, nocturnal, subdued, anemones, brigade, flimsy, reallocated, pristine, industrialization, inadvertently, reminiscing, evangelical, ludicrous, affixed



Characters

Lizet

Lizet is the youngest daughter of Lourdes and Ricky, and the younger sister of Leidy. She is the first in her family to attend college, the fact of which was a surprise to her family as she sent in her applications without telling them. When she is accepted to the prestigious Rawlings College, she moves away from her home in Miami to attend school in New York.

Despite being an excellent student at Hialeah Lakes high school, Lizet struggles with her academic work at Rawlings, and is accused of plagiarism as a result of incorrectly citing a section of a writing assignment. Facing an academic integrity hearing, she is afraid of being expelled, but the committee factors in the standard set by her high school and places her on academic probation instead. With a lot of hard work, and assistance from campus support services, she is able to pass her courses and, in her second semester, is recommended for a paid summer internship at a research laboratory in California.

As one of only a handful of minority students at Rawlings College, Lizet becomes caught up in the national interest in Ariel Hernandez, but her perspective is minimized by her predominantly white peers, and her consideration of both sides of the case sees her ostracized by the Cuban community in Miami, including her family. She therefore attempts to avoid any knowledge of the case, but feels betrayed when she discovers the extent of her mother's involvement that has been left out of conversations with her sister and boyfriend.

Lizet is in a relationship with her high school boyfriend, Omar, for the majority of the novel, despite stating early on that she had decided to break up with him. Their relationship finally reaches breaking point when she realizes he has not told her about Lourdes and Ariel Hernandez, despite her accepting a commitment ring from him in the intervening period. She also develops a friendship with Ethan, a senior at Rawlings, that has the potential to become more, but always remains neutral. That relationship also ends when Lizet distances herself from Ethan.

Lourdes (Mami)

Lourdes is Lizet and Leidy's mother, and the ex-wife of Ricky. She has had a number of major changes take place in her life over the previous year, with the birth of her grandson, Dante, after her eldest daughter, Leidy, intentionally decided to get pregnant directly out of high school, and the departure of her youngest daughter, Lizet, to an out of state college to which she did not tell anyone she had applied. Following those revelations, Ricky announced his intention to leave their marriage, and then subsequently sold the family home out from under her without any warning.



Living in a new suburb, and adjusting to her new life, Lourdes attaches herself to Ariel Hernandez's cause, fighting to keep him in America as a political refugee. She becomes increasingly involved with the Hernandez family, particularly Caridaylis, Ariel's cousin, who is roughly the same age as Leidy and Lizet and has taken on the care of her cousin. Lourdes has also become increasingly distant from her own family, stopped attending work, and been seen talking to television news crews, telling fictional stories about her own struggle as a single mother after arriving with her babies on a raft from Cuba. Although Lizet is able to see how Lourdes could become caught up in her own stories, in an attempt to belong, this does not stop her from being hurt by her mother's attachment to Caridaylis, whom it appears Lourdes sees as a kind of substitute daughter, replacing the ones she does not understand.

Leidy

Leidy is the eldest daughter of Lourdes and Ricky, elder sister to Lizet and mother to Dante. After completing high school without her boyfriend, Roly, proposing to her, she decided to take matters into her own hands and intentionally stopped using birth control. When Roly found out what she had done, however, he abandoned her and Dante, and continues to have little to do with either of them. As such, Leidy still lives at home with her mother, working part time at a hair salon, and spending much of her income on daycare for Dante.

Although she and Lizet are close, there is tension between them as a result of the differing decisions they have made in their lives, and a sense that Leidy is resentful of the freedom afforded to Lizet by her physical distance from all of the problems caused by Lourdes' involvement with Ariel Hernandez.

Ricky (Papi)

Ricky is Leidy and Lizet's father. He married Lourdes out of high school when she found out that she was pregnant with Leidy, but their relationship has been emotionally volatile and neither Leidy nor Lizet is surprised when they separate. This decision comes in response to Lizet's decision to go to college out of state and the revelation that Leidy is also pregnant, just out of high school.

For the majority of the book, Ricky is estranged from the family unit, having sold the family home out from under them following his separation from Lourdes. He later explains this decision to Lizet in light of his belief that she would be away at college the majority of the time and that Leidy's boyfriend would eventually marry her, and so his actions would only hurt his ex-wife. When Lizet does reach out to her father, however, she discovers, through his roommate Rafael, that her father is proud of her and her education at Rawlings College.

For Christmas, Ricky gives each of his daughters and his grandson \$50, but writes a note to Lizet, telling her that he had intended to give her more.



Ariel Hernandez

Ariel Hernandez is a young Cuban boy who attempts to immigrate to America with his mother on board a raft from Cuba. After his mother, and everyone else on board the raft, die at sea, and the raft is intercepted by the coast guard, Ariel becomes the center of a national news story. He is taken in by his uncle, who claims political asylum on his behalf, and cared for by his cousin, Caridaylis. In Cuba, his father claims custody of him, and a legal battle ensues to determine where he will reside.

After seeing him on the news and being drawn by the loss of his mother, Lourdes begins to take part in rallies on his behalf and to become closer to his family than to her own.

Eventually, it is decided that Ariel will be returned to Cuba and, during an early morning raid, he is removed from his uncle's home and deported. Regular updates on his progress are provided to America by the Cuban government.

Omar

Omar is Lizet's high school boyfriend, with whom she remains in a relationship for much of the novel. Despite long periods in which he does not hear from her, Omar maintains a calm acceptance of the way in which Lizet tends to manage stress, and is comfortable with their relationship. Even when she comes home for Thanksgiving and does not visit him, he is still confident that they are meant to be together, and he gives her a commitment ring at Christmas.

There is little to suggest that any of what Lizet tells her roommate about him, suggesting that he is some sort of violent gangster, has any basis in truth.

Lizet and Omar's relationship finally comes to an end when she discovers that he has been hiding the extent of her mother's involvement with Ariel Hernandez from her, although she had been telling other people that the relationship was over for a number of months.

Dr. Kaufmann

Dr. Kaufmann is a professor at Rawlings College who teaches Lizet's second semester research course. Lizet chose to take her class because she is from Germany and loves the beach, but also finds her research interests fascinating.

Despite her poor first semester grades, Dr. Kaufmann identifies Lizet as a promising student and nominates her for a paid internship at her laboratory in California for the summer. When Lizet tries to explain why she cannot accept the position, Dr. Kaufmann does not appear to understand, but recommends that she continue to think about her



decision. She then ensures that Lizet receives an email about the arrangements for the internship, and allows her to accept the position at the last minute.

Jillian

Jillian is Lizet's roommate at Rawlings College. She has a tendency to introduce Lizet to people with reference to her as being Cuban, but Lizet notes that she avoids many of the other assumptions about Cubans that other people at the College espouse.

When Ariel Hernandez arrives in Miami, however, Jillian talks to Lizet about the case, expressing her opinion that he should return to Cuba and telling Lizet that, as a Cuban, she is too close to the situation and cannot be expected to be objective. She also accuses Lizet of being racist when she responds that her firsthand experience of the situation could make her better qualified to comment.

Jaquelin Medina

Jaquelin Medina is a half-Mexican, half-Honduran student at Rawlings College, whom Lizet meets at the start of year Office of Diversity Affairs meeting. Like Lizet, she is a first generation college student whose family had been unable to help her move into her dorm. Jaquelin's mother does not have immigration papers and so is unable to board a flight.

Jaquelin meets Lizet again later in the year outside the teaching labs where Lizet has just started to get help. Jaquelin reveals that she has been attending the labs since early in the semester. She invites Lizet to attend a party with her, and they both agree to wear their clubbing clothes and spend the night dancing.

Ethan

Ethan is a senior at Rawlings College and an RA at Donald Hall. He meets Lizet when she is working in the library and they become friends. Despite her repeated statements that she has a boyfriend, there is some romantic tension between them; however, this never eventuates into anything substantial.

In Ethan's conversations with Lizet it becomes apparent that he, like Lizet but unlike many of the other students, is not financially well off. Through a series of misunderstandings, however, Lizet gives him the impression that she is wealthy and this creates some further tension between them.

When Ethan is accepted to graduate school at Berkeley, he is excited to share the news with Lizet, but she had intended to ask his advice about her own problems on that day and does not respond well to his news. The next time he sees her she is also struggling emotionally, but she pushes him away and their relationship dwindles after that point.



Dante

Dante is Lizet's nephew, and the only child of Leidy and Rolando. He is only eight months old at the time most of the novel's plot takes place, but serves as a point upon which Leidy and Lizet can unite.

Lizet tells her roommate that Dante was named for the author, Dante Aligheri, but in reality Leidy chose the name because she thought it was "super original" (39).

Zoila

Zoila is Lourdes' cousin, whom Lizet and Leidy refer to as their aunt. Lourdes and Zoila have an artificially close relationship, characterized by gossip and calling each other derogatory names as terms of endearment. Traditionally, the family always have a Noche Buena celebration at Zoila's house, however during the party described in the novel, Zoila disagrees with Lourdes' attachment to, and involvement with, Ariel Hernandez and there is nearly a physical altercation between the two women.

Caridaylis

Caridaylis is Ariel Hernandez's cousin, who acts as a surrogate mother for him while he is in America. She is roughly the same age as Leidy and Lizet, and comes to be like a foster daughter to Lourdes as she becomes increasingly involved in Ariel's case.

Following the raid in which Ariel is removed from his family home, Lizet finds her mother comforting Caridaylis and sending other people away so that she can console her in peace. At that point, Lizet comes to the realization that Lourdes views Caridaylis as the daughter she wishes she had.

Victor

Victor is one of the people Lizet meets at the vigil for Ariel Hernandez. He knows her mother, in passing, and recognizes Lizet from high school, remembering that she was Omar's girlfriend and received a scholarship to go to college in New York. With red hair and green eyes, Victor reminds Lizet of Ethan, and when he starts talking to her she thinks that they are flirting. Instead, however, Victor treats her with contempt for having left Miami and for considering her answer when asked whether or not she believed Ariel should be permitted to remain in America. This interaction causes severe damage to Lizet's self-esteem.



Rafael

Rafael is Ricky's roommate at his apartment in the Villas. He is Dominican, and works with Ricky hanging drywall. Upon meeting Lizet, he is very excited to see her, as he has heard a lot about her from Ricky and knows that he is very proud of her achievements.

Weasel

Weasel is Fito's son, and Lizet and Leidy's cousin. He is at home with his father when Lizet arrives to get her father's address, and becomes angry with her for not knowing where her father lives, and for suggesting that it is too early in the morning for his father to be drunk.

Myra

Myra is one of the women who take part in the rallies outside Ariel Hernandez's house, and seems to be particularly good friends with Lourdes. When Lourdes collapses following the news that custody of Ariel has been awarded to his father, and he will therefore be returning to Cuba, Myra is next to her and helps her to get away from the crowds. She also pushes Lizet away when she calls out for her mother, telling her that she is not helping, leading Lizet to realize that her mother has not told her friends about her, and that Myra has no idea she is Lourdes' daughter.

Fito

Fito is Ricky's brother, and Leidy and Lizet's uncle. Ricky lived with him upon first arriving in the United States, and Lizet goes to his house when she is looking for her father. When she arrives at the house, she finds that he is already drunk, even though it is early in the day, and he mixes up the house number when giving her her father's address.

Tracy

Tracy is a student at Rawlings College who lives in the same dorm as Lizet. She is friends with Caroline and Jillian and took photos of Lizet's first experience in the snow. She did not ever offer those photos to Lizet though. When Lizet becomes angry after seeing her mother on TV, Tracy expresses the view that Ariel's mother should not have tried to take him out of Cuba and that he should return there. She does not stop expressing that opinion, even when recommended to do so by Caroline.



Linda

Linda is the administrative assistant responsible for handling the academic integrity committee at Rawlings College. She ushers Lizet into and out of her two hearings, and reassures her that she is fine when Lizet doesn't fully understand the result.

Caroline

Caroline is one of the Rawlings College students who lives in the same dorm as Lizet. She is friends with Tracy and Jillian and takes part in the snowfight the first time Lizet sees snow. Caroline is also present in the TV lounge when Lizet sees her mother on television, and tries to placate her when she becomes angry with Tracy and the other girls. It is Caroline who tries to stop Tracy from aggravating Lizet, and holds Lizet back when Tracy does not stop.

Rolando (Roly)

Rolando is Leidy's ex-boyfriend and Dante's father. He has little to do with either of them, and does not appear in the novel in person. After Leidy decided to get pregnant when he did not propose to her, Roly called off their relationship and largely disappeared from her life.

Neyda

Neyda is Lizet and Leidy's cousin. She talks to them at Zoila's Noche Buena party, asking to carry Dante (and returning him when she thinks he needs to be changed) and inquiring about whether Omar would be attending the party. Upon being told that they have broken up, Neyda refuses to believe that he is the loser Leidy declares him to be. Her boyfriend, Joe, also attends the party, and his presence causes Lizet to check the seating arrangements and find out that a place has been set for Omar.

Blanca

Blanca is Omar's mother, with whom Lizet and her family have a close relationship. It is even stated that she made three kinds of flan for Leidy's baby shower, despite not having a direct relationship to Dante. On New Year's Eve, Omar reminds Lizet that she should come to visit Blanca; however, her opinion that Lourdes' response to the Ariel Hernandez situation is crazy causes a fight between the pair.

Tony

Tony is Zoila's new, younger, husband. He tries to act like an uncle to Leidy and Lizet, but as he is closer to their age than Zoila's, this comes across as creepy.



Symbols and Symbolism

Professor

Upon arriving back in Miami for Thanksgiving, Lizet meets a woman whom she thinks is a professor, based on her dress and speech. The woman, however, reveals that she is a post-doctoral fellow, returning home to Hialeah, the same suburb in which Lizet grew up. This woman represents the academic world into which Lizet is moving, and demonstrates the changes that will potentially also happen to Lizet. Her presentation appears foreign to Lizet, as Lizet's already does to her family, upon her return home, and although Lizet is in awe of her, there is also a warning present. The woman inadvertently offends Lizet by correcting her grammar instead of offering emotional support, suggesting that her success in the academic world has come at the cost of her relationships in her home community.

Cold-damaged knuckles

The damage to Lizet's skin, caused by the transition between cold New York and hot Miami, represents in a physical way the conflict between the two worlds in which she now walks. Her body has not yet learned to manage the contrast in climates and temperatures, just as she has not learned to navigate the austere, scientific world of Rawlings, alongside the passionate, emotional climate of her home and family.

Snow

Lizet's first experience with snow sees her running outside in pajamas and flip flops, expecting it to be soft and fluffy, rather than cold and wet. It is an experience that her family have not shared and, even if she had tried to capture some in a cooler, they would not have been able to fully understand. This is symbolic of all the other experiences that Lizet is having in New York that are drawing her away from the life her family can understand and share. She is learning a new way of thinking and of being in the world, and, like snow, the people she loves cannot comprehend it without experiencing it.

Dana and Ruben

Dana is a wealthy Argentinian-American student and Ruben is a private school student from Miami. They are both from Hispanic families, and have therefore been instructed to attend the Diversity Affairs meeting, where they meet Lizet. The encounter between them is brief, but sufficient to highlight the difference between Dana and Ruben, who represent a different class of minority student - those with money, who have already attended prestigious schools, and Lizet and Jaquelin Medina, whose experience of



being a minority student in a predominantly white educational institution would be much more challenging.

The Rawlings scream

This tradition sees students across the Rawlings College campus leaning out of the nearest window at midnight on the night before the first day of exams and screaming. The timing of this tradition, of which Lizet is not aware, coincides with her contemplating her relationships with her family and the decision to confront her father about why he sold their family home. It is symbolic of the confusion and stress that is tormenting her and reaching its apex as she approaches exam time. The cessation of the scream at the moment of her decision further suggests that her mind is cleared by the decision, leaving her with more capacity to focus on her academic performance.

Ariel Hernandez's beach buggy

On New Year's Day, when Lizet attends a rally at the Hernandez house with her mother, Ariel is playing with a Christmas toy in his backyard. The toy is a beach buggy, with which he is described as "tramp[ing] every blade of grass" (241). This image acts as a metaphor for Lizet's home life, where Ariel's well being has become the utmost priority. The child himself is oblivious both to the grass and to the majority of what is happening around him, but in both cases, he is the central driving force behind the destruction of things around him.

Religion

Religion plays a key role in Lourdes' interactions with Ariel Hernandez's cause, despite playing little role in her regular life. The vigil is held over Easter, and much of what Madres Para Justicia does appears to involve praying for Ariel. This link between Ariel and religion suggests a divine authority to their work, and elevates their cause above the mundane bureaucracy of government decision making. It also gives Lourdes a level of piety with which to defend her decisions to spend more time praying for Ariel than with her own family.

The fruit cup

When Lizet arrives at her father's house at Easter, she is hungry, but the only food he has available is a container of fruit salad. These are among Ricky's favorite foods and have been present in their shared history, when Lizet, Leidy or Lourdes would get Ricky a fruit cup and ice cream almost every day. In this way, the fruit cup is a link between their past and present; however, Lizet's memory of putting tear-filled snot on her father's ice cream when he threatened to prevent her attending college also suggests that it has a symbolic representation of the rupture in the family, and in their relationship.



Cuba brooch

In visiting Lourdes at the vigil for Ariel Hernandez, Lizet notes a woman wearing a brooch shaped like the island of Cuba. The sun glints threateningly off the brooch, making it appear like a knife, and symbolizing both the looming threat of Ariel's deportation to Cuba, and the divisive nature of the campaign to keep him in America. Lourdes has had arguments with multiple members of her family over the issue, and is likely that the same thing would have happened for other protesters.

Lizet's cut

In searching for her mother following the raid on Ariel Hernandez's house, Lizet tears a cut in her hand by catching it on a nail in the wall. A sliver of skin is torn off, but left connected by a shred of skin. After seeing her mother embracing and consoling Caridaylis, Lizet bites through this remaining piece of skin. This action symbolizes the irreversible severing of Lizet and Lourdes' former relationship. Through her preferential attention to Ariel and Caridaylis, Lourdes has torn open a gaping wound between her and her real daughters, leaving Leidy feeling overwhelmed and Lizet ignored. In seeing her relationship with Caridaylis, Lizet realizes the extent of Lourdes' attachment to her, and in tearing the skin away from her cut, the relationship with her mother is changed forever.



Settings

Hialeah

Hialeah is the suburb of Miami in which Leidy and Lizet have grown up. They attended Hialeah Lakes high school, from where, it is noted, only a handful of students progress to college, and most of those do so on sporting scholarships. When Leidy becomes pregnant, she tells Lizet that it is the next step for her and her boyfriend, with them both having successfully completed high school. When Lizet is facing the academic integrity committee, the panel notes that she attended Hialeah Lakes, a school that has been identified in *The New Yorker* as "underserved" and take that into consideration in determining her punishment.

Little Havana

Little Havana is the suburb to which Lourdes, Leidy, Lizet and Dante move after Ricky sells their family home. Often referred to as "reffy" by Leidy, the community is strongly Cuban and evidence of this, such as the presence of an eternal flame monument to those who died in the Bay of Pigs Invasion, is visible in the streets. As someone who arrived in America as a child, Lourdes does not share the asylum experiences of her new neighbors and, until Ariel Hernandez's arrival, has little in common with them, upon which she could build a friendship.

Rawlings College

Rawlings College is a prestigious tertiary institution in New York state. Lizet is the first person from her high school in Miami to be admitted to the College and, although she is aware it is a good school, she does not initially seem to be aware of the extent of its prestige. In contrast to her high school, Rawlings has a strict academic honor code that Lizet unwittingly breaks within her first semester by failing to cite a source correctly. She has to face an academic integrity committee hearing in response to this breach, and that takes place in a room that she notes pre-dates the founding of Miami.

The Villas

Following his separation from Lourdes, Ricky finds himself a new apartment in an area of Hialeah known as the Villas. Hidden behind a fence to hide it from the rest of the neighborhood, Lizet describes the area as trashy, with a reputation for fighting. This suggests that, despite selling the family home, Ricky is still financially worse off than he had been when living with Lourdes. The Villas is also the area of Hialeah where the family had lived for a period when the girls were very young and they were saving for their house.

Dr. Kaufmann's laboratory

Dr. Kaufmann's teaching laboratory on the Rawlings campus is the place where Lizet finally finds her feet at the school. Although she struggles in many of her other classes, she is drawn to the research philosophy of noting mistakes and then moving on. She enjoys the step by step process of ensuring that her work is free from contamination, and the equipment that she uses to conduct her experiments. It is in this environment that Lizet begins to find her authentic self, rather than being a stereotype of a minority student working toward the same dream as everyone else.



Themes and Motifs

Expectations

The conflict between Lourdes and her two daughters, and then her subsequent de facto adoption of Caridaylis, essentially relates to a failure to meet expectations. Ironically, Leidy and Lizet have taken opposite approaches to the completion of high school, and yet still neither of them are able to live up to what their mother desires. Leidy has chosen to have a child, in order to persuade her boyfriend to marry her, but her plan did not succeed and she has been forced to live at home with Lourdes. In going to school out of state, not marrying (and then breaking up with) her high school boyfriend, Lizet is seen as having betrayed her family. When Lizet comes to the realization that Lourdes has formed such a strong attachment to Caridaylis because she views her as the daughter she doesn't have, it is her dedication to her cousin, Ariel, despite having no requirement to do so, that seems to be the determining factor. Lourdes sees both of her daughters as selfish in pursuing their own interests.

The concept of expectations is also highlighted in considering Leidy's relationship with Roly, the father of her child. Mirroring her own conception, Leidy is not married when she becomes pregnant with Dante, but her father did what was expected of him and married Lourdes, for the good of the family. With Leidy's pregnancy, however, the baby is the result of her decisions rather than an accident and Roly rejects any societal expectation that might be placed on him to marry Leidy, instead breaking off their relationship entirely. The existence of an ongoing expectation that they would get marry is inherent in Leidy's decision to get pregnant in the first place, along with the reactions of others, such as Omar, to the news. Ricky also makes his decision to sell the house, thinking that Leidy will be marrying Roly in the course of time.

Finally, Lizet faces the expectations placed upon her as a student at Rawlings College. Although the duty to family and continuity of relationships are expectations that have surrounded her as she has grown up, the integrity requirements of her new school far exceed what she had been taught to expect at Hialeah Lakes. As such, this is the area in which the greatest change is required in the shortest amount of time, and with the most limited amount of leniency. There may be room for Lizet to be a daughter who has disappointed her parents, but she would not long be a student of Rawlings without adherence to the academic honor code.

Culture

Placing Lizet right in the center of an unfolding political event, focused on the Cuban immigrant community, immediately tells the reader that cultural issues will be a predominant consideration in the text. As a minority student at a predominantly white school, Lizet's cultural background would likely have made her stand out from her classmates irrespective of anything happening on the national news. This is supported



by the frequent queries about where she is "from from", when she says she is from Miami. The extent to which her heritage is visible, however, is amplified by the appearance of Ariel Hernandez, not just on the news, but also in her city, and in her neighborhood.

Over the first two semesters of her education, Lizet is subjected to various subtle (e.g., asking where she is "from from" and shortening her name to Liz), as well as not so subtle (such as Jillian telling her not to be ghetto) forms of racism from her classmates. In addition, she is also accused of being white, or at least not Cuban enough, when she returns home to Miami. This places her in the unenviable position of not being 'enough' of anything in any environment, thereby removing her capacity to have her opinion heard and respected.

Rawlings College itself appears to be making an effort to accommodate the needs of its minority students; however, it is apparent from Lizet's response to their Diversity Affairs mandatory social event that their attempts are not connecting with the population they are intending to help. The allocation of Lizet's student advisor on the basis that he has a Cuban grandmother, even though his area of study is unrelated to Lizet's major, also appears misguided as it focuses on her point of difference from other students, rather than providing her the opportunity to engage fully with the student community.

In contrast to all of the circumstances that are pushing Lizet to identify increasingly strongly with her Cuban heritage, her father attempts to remind her that she is, in fact, American. She was born in America, holds an American passport, and has never set foot in Cuba. In this way, highlighting her similarities to the other students at her school, he appears to be trying to remind her of the perspective she held prior to commencing her studies, and prior to Ariel Hernandez's arrival in Miami.

Identity

The idea of identity as a theme in *Make Your Home Among Strangers* encapsulates the other themes apparent in the novel and personalizes them for Lizet. Not only is she managing the expectations that other people, whether Cuban or white, have about how people from the other group will or should respond to a situation, she is also being forced to consider how she, who has a foot in both worlds, will choose to respond while being authentic to herself. There is also a lot of talk about Lizet's betrayal of the family, but she does not immediately kowtow to her parents' desires. She is, instead, forced to find the balance between her commitment to familial expectations and her own wishes that will place her in a position that she can genuinely accept.

Additional to ideas of expectations and culture, discussions of success surround Ethan, Dr. Kaufmann and the 'professor' in the van. Dr. Kaufmann and the 'professor' have taken academic routes, completing doctoral studies and pursuing academic careers, but, it is revealed, Ethan decides to leave graduate school before completing his dissertation. Initially, Lizet struggles to view herself as capable of success in the form of passing grades in her first semester at Rawlings but, over time, she is able to broaden



her definition of success. In entering graduate school, she appears to have taken on a similar identity to that of Dr. Kaufmann; however, when her research topic is viewed as too limited and related to activism she chooses to focus on the path that she enjoys - field work - and identifies herself as a researcher rather than an academic. It is only through working through all of the other components of her identity as she starts college, however, that she is able to come to this conclusion and decide to pursue her interests rather than someone else's expectations.

Privilege

Although the issue of privilege is often associated with being white, *Make Your Home Among Strangers* also uses the image of Dana to consider the ways in which wealth can also impact on a person's privilege, even when they come from within a minority group.

In discussing the case of Ariel Hernandez, first with Jillian and then with the girls in the TV room, the girls' desire to talk more than to listen suggests that they are coming from a position of privilege, in which they view their own perspective as correct. Jillian accuses Lizet of being racist for suggesting that her firsthand experience within the community, and the actual events that they are discussing, might be of relevance to the conversation, and even that it might be more relevant than Jillian's detached intellectual perspective. Similarly, in arguing with Tracy, Lizet finds herself telling the same false stories of crossing from Cuba on a raft that she has criticized her mother for telling. She does so, because her perspective as a Cuban-American is not given any weight as she has not experienced the realities of life in Cuba firsthand. On both of these occasions, it is not the cultural difference between them that is causing the problem but Tracy and Jillian's assumption that their perspective is correct.

In meeting Dana and Ruben at the Diversity Affairs event, there is also an element of privilege in their conversation with Lizet. Coming from a wealthy background, in which she has been able to regularly travel to Argentina for holidays, Dana tells Lizet that she does not see the purpose of the meeting and that it is primarily for the black students, who tend to struggle. Aside from assuming that there would not be black students who, like her, have come from well off families, Dana's comment also makes the assumption that Lizet has had a similar life to her own, up until that point. In having experienced an easy life as a half-Hispanic person in America, Dana does not consider that Lizet, who is like her, in that she is Hispanic, might have come from a life that has been less privileged.

Heat and cold

The motif of heat and cold runs throughout the text, distinguishing the two worlds in which Lizet is trying to reside. For the majority of her life, Lizet has lived in sunny Miami, among her primarily Cuban-American friends and family. Recently, however, she has commenced her tertiary education at Rawlings College in New York state.



Lizet enjoys the sunshine and, when she returns from school looking pale and tired, this lack of color is evidence not just that she has been away from the literal sunshine, but that her attendance at college has drained her further of her connection to her community in Miami. In contrast, the cold is a representation of the time she spends in New York. Much of the action takes place during the colder months of the year, between Thanksgiving in November and Easter in April. Her first encounter with snow separates her from her friends and family further, in that the majority have still never experienced the phenomenon, and in describing it she is unable to help them fully understand.

In taking up her position in the research laboratory in California, Lizet finds a middle ground between the academic world and her home. She has her research pursuits, in which she develops her knowledge, skill and employment prospects, without spending her time in a cold place, draining herself of Vitamin D and energy. In returning to Rawlings College at the end of the summer, there is a suggestion that her battle to find her own identity will be ongoing; however, California provides her with a place separate from that struggle and suggests that she has hope.



Styles

Point of View

Make Your Home Among Strangers is written from the first person perspective of the main protagonist, Lizet Ramirez. As the novel is focused on Lizet's experiences in her first year of college, the use of the first person point of view gives the reader insight into her thoughts and feelings as she makes the transition into living away from home. This is an effective means of conveying Lizet's subjective experience, allowing the reader to trace her journey and have a full understanding of her emotional connection to events, rather than the objective, but more distant experience that a third person approach would provide.

Language and Meaning

The choice of language conveys a lot of subtle messages throughout this novel. Although predominantly written in English, there are parts of the dialogue that are presented only in Spanish, and there is little warning when these will occur and no glossary for the reader to translate the terms. This elevates the importance of the Spanish language in the novel, unapologetically assuming that the reader will have some competence with the language. In Lizet's interactions with her cousins, Weasel and Little Fito, it becomes apparent that she has, uncharacteristically, spoken English to them when she is asked if she has forgotten how to speak Spanish. This suggests that speaking Spanish is an integral part of her Miami life, but that being in the English-speaking world of Rawlings College has changed her use of language.

The idea that Lizet's language has changed is also apparent in her interactions with her sister, Leidy, who frequently tells her not to be so white. During her time at Rawlings, she has inadvertently adopted some of the language of her peers, and started using words like 'awesome' that she would not have used in the past. Although this change appears subtle to Lizet, it seems glaringly obvious to Leidy, who points out the changes right from Lizet's first visit home.

Structure

The novel is comprised of 36 chapters of approximately equal length. The main narrative, focusing on Lizet's first year as a student at Rawlings College during the 1999-2000 academic year, is book-ended by chapters set in the present day, informing the reader that, despite her struggles, Lizet has gone on to work in a research lab in the field of her choice. The final chapters also provide resolution for the reader in terms of the relationships that have been important to Lizet during that year.

Although there is an overarching linear progression through the narrative, as it takes place across the year, there are also chapters moving backward into the time before

Lizet left for college, and some chapters are concluded with Lizet's reflections as she looks back on the experience, reminding the reader of the wisdom that comes with hindsight, and the knowledge that life has changed for her since those times.



Quotes

They had carved their names and address on me, and I would come back.
-- Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* (Epigraph)

Importance: This epigraph speaks to the connection to home and to family that lays claim to the main protagonist, Lizet, throughout the novel. As she attempts to learn the expectations of her new academic world in New York, there are also pressures, expectations, concerns and relationships that draw her back to Miami. Even when she has established her career and found her place in the world, there are connections to Miami, and even to Cuba, that continue to call her.

Oh, they'd say, But where are you from from? I was from from Miami, but eventually I learned to say what they were trying to figure out: My parents are from Cuba. No, I've never been. Yes, I still have family there. No, we don't know Fidel Castro.
-- Lizet (chapter 2)

Importance: In arriving at Rawlings College, one of only a handful of minority students, Lizet is forced to respond to questions about her ethnicity. Throughout the novel it is possible to observe the changes in Lizet's cultural identity that come about in response to such questioning, making her identify more heavily with her Cuban heritage than she had when it was not a point of difference between her and her peers.

Lizet, I graduated from school. So did Roly. This makes sense, this is what's next for us.
-- Leidy (chapter 5)

Importance: In this quote, Leidy is speaking about her decision to get pregnant in order to force her high school boyfriend, Roly, to propose to her. The fact that she speaks so candidly about the topic, despite Lizet's concerns, suggests that marriage and babies is the normal and accepted path to adulthood in her peer group, if not, perhaps, in the coerced fashion she intends to pursue. That everyone else also expects Roly to propose, despite Leidy's role in bringing about the pregnancy, further supports that conclusion.

I know she's like happy for you now, for your new life or whatever, but it's hard. A lot's different for her, what's she supposed to do?
-- Leidy (chapter 6)

Importance: In this quote, Leidy is speaking to Lizet about their mother, Lourdes, and her unusually distant response to Lizet's surprise visit home. Lourdes' life has changed significantly in the recent past, with Leidy having a baby, Lizet going to college, and her husband, Ricky, leaving her and then selling the family home from under her. Leidy is highlighting that although there are positives in Lourdes' life, there has been a lot of change that she is having to manage. This sets up Lourdes' attachment to Ariel Hernandez as a way of coping with the changes in her own life.



When everyone around you thinks they already know what your life is like, it's easier to play in to that idea— it was easier for me to make Omar sound like a psycho papi chulo who wanted to control me. At the very least, it made trying to make friends simpler than it would've been had I tried to be a more accurate version of myself.

-- Lizet (chapter 8)

Importance: Lizet has been portraying her boyfriend, Omar, as some sort of gangster, and suggesting that there may have been violence between them. She knows that doing so is dishonest, and at times expresses remorse for describing him in such a way, but in this quote she justifies doing so, relating it back to her desire to fit in and make friends. In being surrounded by a majority white peer group, she is outside of her own cultural framework and trying to establish herself within her new environment.

Why did I feel like I'd tricked Rawlings into letting me in at all? How could I make that feeling go away?

-- Lizet (chapter 11)

Importance: Lizet is describing here an experience of Imposter Syndrome, believing herself to be unworthy of her position as a student at Rawlings College, despite having to overcome a number of obstacles to be there in the first place. The fact that she is interested in getting rid of that feeling, rather than succumbing to it, suggests that there is potential for Lizet to continue to overcome the obstacles with which she is being presented and to find a place for herself within the community at Rawlings.

I'd seen my mother in that moment as not my mother; I saw her as a tacky-looking woman, as the Cuban lady the girls on my floor would've seen, alone in an airport. And I did not like that I suddenly had this ability to see her that way, isolated from our shared history.

-- Lizet (chapter 15)

Importance: This quote demonstrates the changes that have taken place in Lizet's frame of thinking in the first semester of her degree. Through her studies, which have aimed to teach her to look with an objective, critical eye, and her predominantly white peer group, she has come home with a new way of looking at the world. She no longer sees her mother solely as the person who raised her, but also looks with an outsider's perspective and sees the way others might view her. With her love and dedication to her family, it is uncomfortable to see her mother in a less positive light.

My inability to get as upset as my mom about Ariel's possible deportation made me for the first time worry that Rawlings could change me in a way that was bad.

-- Lizet (chapter 16)

Importance: Although her sister has regularly been pointing out the changes in Lizet since she has gone away to college, Lizet herself has not noticed many of them. She has viewed her learning as positive growth, and seen the benefits of thinking in an academic way. It is only in taking a cultural perspective - something that has not been noted in her Rawlings education - that she is able to see the way that her schooling has



distanced her from her family and community, and perhaps taken from her something as important as what it has given.

Omar was lucky; he was still just one Omar— not broken like me, an El and a Liz trapped in one head. Omar didn't have to analyze what Omar would do.
-- Lizet (chapter 22)

Importance: Lizet's use of her two nicknames - El in Miami and Liz in New York - clearly highlights the identity conflict she is experiencing, and her comparison to Omar, who does not have these different competing worlds to navigate, shows the ways in which she has grown apart from him. Although Lizet envies Omar his wholeness, she also views it as a difference between them that makes their ongoing relationship untenable.

For so many people there, he was a mirror, some version or idea of yourself, some Baby You, fresh off a boat or a plane and alone but still hopeful that what's been set into motion around you is just fine.
-- Lizet (chapter 23)

Importance: In looking upon Ariel Hernandez in person for the first time, Lizet is able to see the reasons that so many people have become involved in the protests to allow him to stay in America, and the way that they look to him as a reflection of themselves. As a child, Ariel is a beacon of hope, and the potential for his life to be better than their own have become. He is at the beginning of his journey in America, and there is still the possibility for anything to happen for him. Ironically, Lizet's accomplishments are largely unrecognized by her community, despite being a fulfillment of the dreams they are now projecting onto Ariel.

You're not Cuban, he said.
-- Ricky (chapter 30)

Importance: Ricky's comment to Lizet that she is American, not Cuban, and followed up by an explanation that she is not Latino either, demonstrates the shift that has taken place in her thinking since starting school at Rawlings College. Although she initially did not hold her family's heritage to be a notable part of her own identity, the increased visibility brought about by Ariel Hernandez's situation has drawn her focus onto herself and her family, and her position as 'other' at Rawlings has led her to identify more strongly with the Cuban community. Her father's reminder that she is American demonstrates that he does not want his daughter to become involved with Cuban politics, but to pursue the future for which he came to America in the first place.

Because you left once, right? You're already a sellout, right? So what makes you think you can just come back like nothing? With no consequences?
-- Victor (chapter 32)

Importance: Victor's attack on Lizet at the Ariel Hernandez vigil draws the spotlight onto her internal conflict and speaks aloud the greatest fears she would have been having about herself. Indeed, this encounter, in which she is labelled, and then internalizes the



label of sellout, has far reaching consequences in her interactions with men far into the future. Initially she had thought that Victor was flirting with her; however, his words suggest to her disgust rather than attraction and the situation evokes a feeling of disgust in herself.

My leaving had allowed for someone new to come in, and I'd been wrong all that time in thinking it was Ariel. The real replacement was right there in my mom's arms: someone she could be proud of, someone whose decisions she understood and would've made herself had it been her life, a daughter who'd taken on more than anyone thought possible but who'd done it through no fault of her own, who was blameless.

-- Lizet (chapter 33)

Importance: In this quote, Lizet comes to the realization that Lourdes has become so attached to Caridaylis because, in the wake of discovering that none of her own family are the people she thought them to be, she has found a surrogate daughter whose actions align with her expectations of how a good daughter should act. It has not been the politics of asylum that has drawn Lourdes to Ariel Hernandez's case, but the pursuit of a relationship with the daughter she does not believe herself to have.

It was even a relief— to have removed the pressure of long-term success by accepting that it was just beyond me— one that led me to have the second-best semester I'd ever have at Rawlings.

-- Lizet (chapter 34)

Importance: This quote suggests that Lizet has given up on trying to pursue an academic career, and that she believes herself incapable of success. The happiness that was apparent in the earliest chapters of the book, when she is speaking from the present day, indicates that success has come to her, in any case. It is also revealing that her acceptance of what she sees as her fate - to not be successful - gave her only her second most successful semester at Rawlings. This demonstrates that it was not the pinnacle of her success and hints at greater potential than that of which she believes herself capable.