

# **When I Was Puerto Rican Study Guide**

**When I Was Puerto Rican by Esmeralda Santiago**

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## Plot Summary

Esmeralda Santiago recalls her life as a youngster in Puerto Rico. As a child she lives with her mother Ramona, father Pablo, and younger sisters Delsa and Norma. She recalls the birth of her first younger brother, Hector, and then the other siblings, Alicia, Raymond and Edna. Her parents are often angry with each other and her mother sometimes takes the children and moves in order to escape the relationship.

Eventually, Ramona begins working at a factory and the children are left with a neighbor. When Gloria runs off to be married, Ramona is unable to work for several days until Gloria's return. Eventually, Ramona says that she can't really rely on anyone other than the family and tells Esmeralda that she's going to have to be more responsible with regard to helping with the children and the housework. Esmeralda chaffs under the load but does her best, hating the chores and the monotony but does a great deal of work. One day, Esmeralda's cousin Jenny gets a new bicycle and begins taking the children for rides. When Raymond, who is very young, insists and Jenny overrides Esmeralda's demand that her siblings come home, Jenny takes off with Raymond on her bike. Raymond's foot is mangled in the chain of the bike and he's taken to the hospital. Esmeralda feels responsible though everyone agrees that it's Jenny who was in the wrong.

Raymond's foot continues to be a problem and the doctors begin talking amputation which prompts Ramona to take him to New York in an effort to find better medical treatment. Esmeralda is left behind with cousins and is angry, not at being left but at being left out of her mother's plans. Ramona soon makes another trip to New York and this time returns with a new hairdo, new clothes and a new sense of confidence. Esmeralda's father soon tells her that Ramona is planning to move to New York. Ramona takes three of the children, Esmeralda, Raymond and Edna, and saves for plane fare for the remaining four. Ramona becomes involved with another man, Francisco, who fathers a child and dies of cancer.

Esmeralda hates her life in New York, saying that she misses the nature of Puerto Rico. She hates the fact that there is so much crime in the city that she is seldom allowed away from the house alone and that all the children are kept cooped up inside most of the time.

Esmeralda is asked by a school official what she wants to do and she gives it some thought, eventually gaining some help gaining admittance into a school for performing arts. In the Epilogue, Esmeralda reveals that she was admitted to that school, that she graduated there and was, at the time of the writing, preparing for graduation from Harvard.



# Jibara and Fighting Naked

## Jibara and Fighting Naked Summary and Analysis

The story begins with "Jibara." Esmeralda Santiago is four years old when she and her family - consisting of her father Pablito, her mother Ramona and her little sisters Delsa and Norma - move to Macun. They live in a house of tin and Esmeralda almost immediately burns her fingers. She is called Negi by her family and her mother tells her that almost everyone has a real name that is known to the government and a nickname known to family and friends. In Esmeralda's case, she is called Negi, short for Negrita because she is so dark. Esmeralda recalls her mother telling her to stay out of the way of her father's working on the house but her father says that she can stay and help. She picks up wood to be used as kindling for the kitchen fires and is covered with termites. The insects bite her and her mother washes her in the wash tub. Esmeralda believes the bites are punishment for disobeying her mother and wonders how the termites know that she'd disobeyed.

The children sleep in hammocks in the house and Esmeralda wakes one morning to find her mother moaning and crying. Neighbors come, some to care for Esmeralda and her younger sisters and some to care for her mother who is giving birth. In "Fighting Naked," Esmeralda says that she's certain her parents argued prior to the birth of her brother, Hector, but that it's not until after his birth that she recalls the fights being more severe. Her father goes often to town, leaving the family behind and her mother accuses him of seeing another woman while leaving the family to live in a hovel with barely enough food and clothing. One Sunday the fighting becomes intense when Pablo explains his lack of money for the family's food by saying that he'd given a worker an advance. Ramona doesn't believe him. During another argument, the name Margie comes up and when Esmeralda later asks about Margie, her father says that it's his daughter by another woman and that Margie is just a little older than Esmeralda.

Esmeralda starts school and soon learns that there are many kinds of families. As is typical of school children, there seem to be few secrets and she knows about classmates who have sisters who have "run away with traveling salesmen" and brothers who end up incarcerated. But she also learns about the classmates with more ideal homes where sisters teach their siblings to sew and brothers play with the younger siblings. One day Pablo doesn't return home at the end of the work day, nor at all for several days. When Esmeralda arrives home from school a few days later, her mother has all their possessions packed in pillowcases and their only dilapidated suitcase, and the family - without Pablo - heads for the city where Ramona believes their lives will be better. Esmeralda says that the neighbors are careful not to watch so that they don't have to offer help but that she sees the smirks on some of the faces.

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Esmeralda's discussions of her life with her family as a young child are written from the perspective of her youth but also from the perspective of looking back on a childhood that was less than idyllic. She knows, for example, that her father is cheating on her mother with another woman or women. It seems unlikely that a girl of four could understand the importance of this, but Esmeralda will later talk about her deep despair over her father's infidelity. It's interesting that the idea of an older sister intrigues Esmeralda. She imagines having someone she can play with more equally than her younger sisters who she seems to always feel responsible for. It seems that, at least at this young age, Esmeralda doesn't reconcile the idea of having a younger sister with the idea that her father had a relationship with another woman.

Esmeralda loves both her parents though there are some interesting family dynamics at work. She says that from a young age she is enthralled by anything that upsets Ramona and afraid of anything that interests Ramona. Pablo and Ramona are often at odds and Esmeralda often wants her father to intervene when her mother is directing her to do something. Esmeralda says that Ramona makes it clear that any unhappiness that exists in their household is because of Pablo so that Esmeralda's loyalty is torn. Esmeralda quickly learns that "men have no shame" and will act in ways that bring unhappiness to their families, though it seems that all these actions are tied up in "loose women." However, these women are also reviled by the good women, including Ramona.



# Someone Is Coming to Take Your Lap and American Invasion of Macun

## Someone Is Coming to Take Your Lap and American Invasion of Macun Summary and Analysis

In "Someone Is Coming to Take Your Mother's Lap," the family arrives in Santurce which is a suburb of San Juan and move into a house at La Parada #26, Stop 26, which is named for a former trolley station. The school is much larger and Esmeralda seems to have some trouble being accepted with the children laughing at her and calling her "jibara," a word that refers to a person from the rural areas of Puerto Rico. Here, Esmeralda overhears her mother talking to a neighbor about a woman named Rita who is the girlfriend of Ramona's brother. Ramona believes the woman to be of loose morals but the conversation stops abruptly when the neighbor spots Esmeralda. It's during this time that Esmeralda learns that her mother is again pregnant. When the baby comes it's a girl and she is named Alicia. After the birth of this daughter, Pablo begins coming more often to visit and doing nice things for Ramona such as leaving her the newspaper. Ramona begins cooking for Pablo and there are soon some intimate moments between them and the family moves back together to Macun. Esmeralda says she doesn't care about anything except that she's home.

In Macun, Esmeralda is soon best friends with a girl named Juanita. When Juanita's grandfather dies, Pablo plays a role in the funeral rites. Esmeralda and Juanita lead the funeral procession as it makes its way to the cemetery. Set against the backdrop of this death, Esmeralda and her father talk about the soul and her father tries to explain the meaning of the word. Esmeralda says that she is able to have her soul leave her body and considers doing so to meet up with Juanita's grandfather but fears he'll take her with him and she won't be able to return.

Esmeralda repeats rumors she's heard of electricity and a new hotel in the future for their town and Ramona says that those rumors have been circulating for many years. Ramona gives birth to yet another daughter, this one named Edna. One day there's a tremendous storm and Ramona has all the children play in the rain, getting as muddy as they want and washing it off in the downpour, saying that the first rain of May is lucky.

In "The American Invasion of Macun," Esmeralda says that the parents are invited to a meeting led by people from the United States where they are to be given information about proper nutrition and hygiene. There are only women and children who attend, the attitude being that food is in the woman's realm of responsibility. They are shown how to brush teeth and laugh freely when someone asks what should be done if a person has already lost all his or her teeth, prompting the demonstrator to say that it's just probably too late. They are also shown tables with examples of food that should be eaten in order to maintain proper nutrition. Asked what they should do if the foods on the examples are not available, one man says they can substitute but another says they should stick with



the examples. When they go home with the food, including peanut butter, Ramona says they will put the food away to eat at some time when they are hungry.

Esmeralda attends Macun Elementary School and is vaccinated against polio. She gets her shot at the same time as a boy who has jeered at the youngsters who cry and steels herself to keep from crying. The children are soon given breakfast every morning, foods that Esmeralda hates but that Juanita looks forward to, apparently only because it represents America. Esmeralda is told by a classmate that it's an election year and the American president is simply seeking support. As predicted, the program ends when the election is over.

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Esmeralda seems to be curious about many things. When she sees what she believes to be ribbons hanging from the trees at a neighbor's house, she asks her mother and learns that they are pig intestines waiting to be stuffed with sausages. Her mother tells her about blood pudding as well, a food Esmeralda likes but that she says she doesn't want to know how is made.

Esmeralda talks about the rain in May, saying that her mother calls it lucky and she and her siblings seem to have fun in the rain. However, Esmeralda says that the rain turns to torrents and washes great gouges in the earth. She says the cracks in the earth are baked in the summer heat and compares them to "wounds that never heal." It seems that she could also be talking about her parents and the fact that their love is suffering because of Pablo's infidelity and that the damage is irreversible.

One day Esmeralda, her mother and siblings are going through a box of hand-me-downs sent from their relatives who live in New York. Esmeralda says that these relatives must be very rich in order to give away such good clothes but her mother says that everyone in New York can afford nice things such as these clothes. There are two interesting points here. First, Esmeralda doesn't say that the family is rich in order to buy these clothes, but their ability and willingness to give away such nice things indicates prosperity. Her mother seems to truly believe that everyone in New York is well off.



# Why Women Remain Jamona and Mami Gets a Job

## Why Women Remain Jamona and Mami Gets a Job Summary and Analysis

In "Why Women Remain Jamona," Esmeralda is taken by her father to spend a week with her grandmother. She is soon involved in a conversation of women who are "jamona," or single past the traditional age of marriage. Esmeralda goes to church with her grandmother who warns her only to think good thoughts on the way to the service. She immediately thinks about a young boy who pushed her, prompting her to push him back though she knows that she's supposed to "turn the other cheek." She says that requiring one to turn the other cheek is "stupid" which makes her immediately realize that she's having another bad thought. When the day comes that her father is supposed to return, Esmeralda waits in her best clothing until it's obvious that he isn't going to show up. Finally, her mother comes to get her and Esmeralda tries to listen as Ramona and Esmeralda's grandmother, who is Ramona's mother-in-law, talk. Esmeralda believes they're talking about her father but can't be certain. While she is thinking about how badly she is hurting for herself, her mother and her family over her father's actions, Esmeralda comes to believe that being single - or "jamona" - couldn't possibly be any worse than this.

In "Mami Gets a Job," Esmeralda's mother has given birth to another son, this one named Raymond. One day, Ramona calls Esmeralda to help her get into her best dress which has become very tight so that she can go to a job interview. She says that she'll be leaving the children with a neighbor, Gloria, if she gets the job and explains that the family needs the money in order to buy food and other necessities. She gets the job and Esmeralda soon finds that she has a great deal of freedom because Gloria is so busy caring for the younger children. Esmeralda says that she's become tentative friends with the son of a neighbor, having found she has little in common with girls her age. It's this boy who convinces Esmeralda to show her vagina in return for a look at his penis. She is unimpressed, having seen her younger brother's, but also at least a little frightened by the encounter. Her mother seems to have a sixth sense with regard to the activities of Esmeralda and the young boy and sends Esmeralda home. Gloria, having left the family without a sitter for a while after running away with a young man, asks Esmeralda what she knows about being "senorita" and it's through her conversations with Gloria that Esmeralda learns about changes soon to occur in her body and how "babies are made."

There's a change in the way people look at the family after Ramona goes to work. They are no longer accepted by most who scorn the fact that Ramona would leave her family and work in a factory. One day Ramona tells Esmeralda that they are no longer going to have Gloria as a babysitter, but that Esmeralda will now be "more responsible" for herself and her siblings after school. She has tenuous control, her brothers and sisters





seldom heeding Esmeralda's instructions and Esmeralda herself hating the fact that she was the one who would be in trouble if her mother came home to find that the dishes weren't washed or homework uncompleted. They have a cousin named Jenny who is an only child and is spoiled. When Jenny gets a new bicycle, Esmeralda hears her siblings laughing and having fun as Jenny gives each of them rides. When Raymond wants a ride, Esmeralda says no but is overridden by Jenny and by Raymond's pleas. In frustration, Esmeralda turns to go home but Jenny's bike falls and Raymond's foot is mangled in the chain. He is taken to the hospital and their mother is called. Esmeralda believes it to be her fault but her mother doesn't gripe at her and the adults put the responsibility for the accident on Jenny. One day after that, Esmeralda is walking home from school when it starts to rain. She encounters her mother and siblings carrying baggage and her mother says that they are moving to the city. They arrive at the home of a friend, Dona Andrea.

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When Esmeralda's father is about to leave her at her grandmother's house, she suddenly realizes that he's leaving early so that he can go visit another woman. Esmeralda is angry and hurt and doesn't try to hide her knowledge from Pablo so that he knows that she is aware of his plans. Esmeralda takes the action as betrayal, not just toward Ramona but toward Esmeralda and her siblings as well. When her father doesn't return at the appointed time to pick her up, it seems possible that it's because he is ashamed and can't face Esmeralda, though it isn't mentioned as a possibility and it's left to the reader to decide. Esmeralda is crying but doesn't want her grandmother to think that she's homesick and doesn't want to explain her tears, so slams the door on her hands so that she has a reason to cry. When she's later in pain over the action, she says that she'll remember next time to slam the door with a little less strength. It's while she's visiting her grandmother that she realizes that her grandmother's crochet appears in every room of the house, providing little cozy accents that seem to point to her grandmother's love, except her grandfather's room.



# El Mangle and Letters From New York

## El Mangle and Letters From New York Summary and Analysis

In "El Mangle," Ramona and the children arrive in El Mangle at the home of Ramona's friend. The house is on a pier and there's a hole in the floor in the bathroom that serves as a commode. Esmeralda is terrified by the rushing water beneath her and the cold drafts and refuses to go there, urinating in her clothes when she and her mother have a heated argument over the situation. Dona Andrea watches the children while Ramona searches for a job. They aren't allowed outside because they are literally on a pier and have no place to play.

Ramona makes plans to rent the house next to Dona Andrea and Esmeralda starts school to find out that she's expected to know fractions and doesn't. She hates the teacher who likewise seems to dislike the children. Esmeralda comes to realize that her father probably doesn't know where they are. One day she is in her class working an essay using specific words when the teacher scolds her for her poor penmanship then asks why she isn't writing. Esmeralda says that she's thinking and the teacher responds that she shouldn't be thinking, she should be writing, which strikes Esmeralda as funny and she and some others begin to laugh. The teacher grows angry and yells, which makes the children laugh harder. The scene is interrupted by the appearance of Pable who takes Esmeralda out of the school.

In "Letters From New York," the family moves to the back of a bar where the jukebox is heard until all hours, drunks stop to vomit or urinate on their door as they walk to and from the bar, and the children hear curse words that Ramona warns them against using. Pablo is living with them again and things seem more even between Ramona and Pablo at times. Raymond's foot remains infected, sore and the doctors begin to talk about amputation. Ramona promises the child she won't let that happen. One day Ramona teaches Esmeralda how to iron, the chore she hates most, and Esmeralda savors the experience.

Esmeralda goes to visit her cousins, Gladys and Angie. When her mother is dropping her off, Esmeralda learns that Ramona is going to New York with Raymond to seek out a doctor who can heal Raymond's foot. Esmeralda presses her mother to tell her what day she'll return and is upset at the idea that she's not being left with her brothers and sisters. Esmeralda says that she believes her mother doesn't trust her with the siblings after Raymond's accident. Esmeralda learns from Gladys that she is to help Gladys peel potatoes each morning.

Angie and Gladys are very different from each other. Angie has pretty things in her room, records and is more outgoing than Gladys though she is also a snob. Gladys is more serious and Esmeralda initially fears that Gladys will spend all her time trying to convert Esmeralda to her faith but says that Gladys seems to have given her up as a



lost cause from the beginning. Ramona doesn't arrive on the appointed day and when she does, she takes Esmeralda to a new house and announces that the family has moved.

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There's an interesting story while the family lives over the pier in El Mangle. Ramona tells Esmeralda that Esmeralda has been chosen for a special duty, apparently trying to win Esmeralda's cooperation from the start. She then tells the story of a young baby who died and that the boy's eyes won't stay closed. Ramona says that a "curandera," or female healer, had seen Esmeralda and had picked her as the person who would be able to close the baby's eyes. Ramona apparently promised that Esmeralda would perform the act and it seems that she's grateful for the fact that Esmeralda has been "chosen," though Esmeralda is afraid. Ramona elicits sympathy for the plight of the baby and the mother and tells Esmeralda that the child won't go to heaven unless his eyes are closed. The entire story to this point is strange but when Esmeralda arrives at the home of the dead child, the curandera says that Esmeralda is protected by strong spirits and leads her through the ritual of closing the child's eyes, which are wide open as Esmeralda approaches but close at her touch. The story seems out of context and Esmeralda's apparent gift or spirituality is never mentioned again.



# Casi Seniorita and Dreams of a Better Life

## Casi Seniorita and Dreams of a Better Life Summary and Analysis

In "Casi Seniorita," Ramona begins sending the children to church after a neighbor points out that it gives Ramona a free morning without the children. Ramona diligently washes them all thoroughly and Esmeralda says that she's making certain that no one can say they're dirty though someone might say they are heathens. The children attend the Iglesia San Juan Bautista De Pay y Misericordia, Ramona is sent with the older children and she watches as the preacher calls to the congregation to "cast off evil and come to Jesus," prompting calm parishioners to rise and run to the altar, some doubling over in what resembles convulsions. Esmeralda says that she's tempted but can't bring herself to relinquish control of her soul.

It's about this time that Pablo agrees to exchange labor for piano lessons and Esmeralda goes to the home of a school principal, Don Luis, to learn to play. When he touches and acts inappropriately, Esmeralda is furious and attacks him. Her parents go to talk to him and Esmeralda says that Don Luis tries to avoid her from that point on at school.

The family lives at Calle Castro Vina and is near Esmeralda's grandmother's home. Her grandfather had died the previous year and Esmeralda misses his presence. Ramona travels again to New York, leaving the children behind this time in the care of Titi Generosa who is naïve to the ways of the children and easily manipulated. Esmeralda says that she has little control and can't seem to garner any against her younger siblings. Titi Generosa is equally outnumbered and gives in to whatever demands the children make which means Esmeralda has a great deal of time to herself. Her father is still living at home but is seldom at home. Esmeralda and the siblings come up with the idea that if they are uncontrollable, their father will call for their mother's return and they set out to do that. Esmeralda says that she does take a little time to consider her mother's wrath but feels it's worth it. One day her father takes her to the home of her cousins, Angie and Gladys, saying that the children are unmanageable. Esmeralda says that her days take on a routine that include peeling the pans full of potatoes everyday for the bakery run by Gladys and Angie's father.

In "Dreams of a Better Life," Ramona returns to find that Pablo has moved to Macun with the five children in his care while she was in New York. Esmeralda notes the changes in her mother, including a new hairdo. When they reunite with Pablo and the other children at their new house in Sabana Grande, Pablo has begun studying Nostradamus and Rosicrucian literature, a fact that seems to bother Esmeralda though she says only that the illustrations "give me the creeps."



Ramona and Pablo start a deli service from a truck but the costs are too high and the returns too low, so they let the truck go back. Esmeralda says that her mother and father fight frequently and many of these are over the fact that they have never married. Pablo says that he's always acknowledged his responsibility and that all the children have his last name, but Ramona says that her "status as a common-law wife" is "uncertain," and presses for a legal marriage.

It's about this time that a young boy named Johannes Velez "notifies" Esmeralda though Esmeralda cites girls her age who scorn her appearance and say that no one could like her. When Johannes asks to carry Esmeralda's books home one day from school, she is embarrassed and caught off guard, and refuses. She then wishes that she hadn't but days pass and the opportunity doesn't present itself again. One day she asks her mother what she should do if someone asks to carry her books and Ramona says Esmeralda should let him. Esmeralda says that her mother simply doesn't understand the situation and wishes she hadn't brought it up. Then one day Johannes arrives at her house unannounced. Esmeralda is embarrassed and upset and is initially rude until Ramona takes her to the kitchen and talks to her. Esmeralda learns that Johannes' father is in the military and that they'll be transferred again soon, this time to the United States.

Esmeralda attends Ramon Emererio Betances School and says that she tries to find an escape in school whenever her parents are fighting, which by now is almost constantly and ferociously. Just before her thirteenth birthday, Esmeralda and Pablo are sitting on the porch together and Pablo says that Esmeralda is soon to be a "teen-ayer," meaning teenager. He explains that this is an American term for a person who is thirteen to nineteen and says that since she and her siblings will be living in American, she will be officially a teenager. When Esmeralda acts confused, Pablo asks Ramona why she hasn't told the children that she's moving them to New York and it's only now that Esmeralda learns of her mother's plans. There's a horrible fight between her parents as all the children watch and Esmeralda says that the children fear leaving their parents alone together with their rage.

Esmeralda, Raymond and Edna go with Ramona to New York and she leaves Delsa, Norma, Hector and Alicia with Pablo. Ramona says that she'll send for the remaining children as soon as she can save enough money for the plane tickets. Her final conversation with her father occurs in the airport when he makes her promise that she'll write to him.

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Esmeralda's mother is often telling her that she should act in certain ways because she is "casi senorita," or almost a young woman. When Esmeralda discovers that mother is again traveling to New York, she is angry because she feels betrayed that her mother didn't tell her about the plans. Esmeralda says that being almost a young lady and being the oldest is a burden because it seems that she has less hold on her mother than the younger children. She notes that she hates the "blanket of responsibility" Ramona puts on Esmeralda as the oldest but also seems reluctant to share her feelings - her misery -



with her mother because she knows this will further burden her mother. It's ironic that Esmeralda is acting more maturely because she is almost a young woman but doesn't realize this.

It's when Ramona returns from New York for the second time that Esmeralda realizes her mother has undergone some dramatic changes. She has changed in appearance with a new hairdo, painted fingernails and clothes, but she has also gained a confidence that will change the lives of her children in a great way. For Ramona, the life she wants is not the life she's living and something happens during her time in New York that gives her the confidence to go after her dreams in an effort to achieve this life she seeks. As Esmeralda and Ramona are headed to the bus stop after leaving the home of Gladys and Angie, Esmeralda notices that several men notice Ramona and it seems likely that this attention accounts at least partly for the new confidence.

Esmeralda notes that her father seems tired as she and her mother depart for New York. She says that she believes the constant fighting and bickering between the husband and wife is responsible for this attitude and she's probably right. Pablo likely feels at this point that he can't hold Ramona without giving in to her demands, which he refuses to do. Though the reasons aren't detailed at this point, it will later be revealed that Pablo marries soon after Ramona departs for the United States and it seems that he's not willing to work at keeping the relationship with Ramona viable and that he really is relieved to have escaped.

There's a section of foreshadowing at the end of "Dreams of a Better Life." Esmeralda says that neither she nor her mother could possibly have known what their lives would be like in New York nor could they see ahead to understand that this would be more than a geographic move. Esmeralda says that her mother's life would take on twists and turns in unexpected ways that could not have been foreseen, and seems to contrast this against the life Ramona was destined to live in Puerto Rico where she and Pablo would likely continue their love-hate relationship for the rest of their lives. Esmeralda says that she personally would be reborn with the move and the Puerto Rican she had been would be forever "erased." She says that her first view of the plane reveals a "dead end" aisle and that this is what she'll come to realize New York is like. What's interesting is that she says she would never forgive that fact.

There's no discussion of how Ramona decides which of the children will go with her to New York and which will be left behind with Pablo. It's interesting that Esmeralda is almost always the first of the children to be farmed out to a family member but she is among the three chosen to go with Ramona. It could be that Ramona wants Esmeralda along as the most able to help settle into their new home, but it may also be that Ramona fears leaving Esmeralda behind because she fears Esmeralda will refuse to go to New York later and will choose to remain with her father.



# Angels on the Ceiling and You Don't Want to Know

## Angels on the Ceiling and You Don't Want to Know Summary and Analysis

In "Angels on the Ceiling," Esmeralda tells the story of their airplane trip to New York, their arrival in Brooklyn, and their first meeting with their mother's mother, who they call Tata, and her friend Don Julio. Ramona and the children soon move into an apartment of their own and there are angels painted on the ceiling. Esmeralda wonders how many people those angels have seen come and go through that apartment.

Esmeralda and her mother go to a place they call La Marketa where Esmeralda is amazed by the number of vendors and the way her mother deals for everything. When Esmeralda registers for school, she's told that she'll be going into seventh grade. She was in eighth in Puerto Rico is told that she'll have to be held back a year until she has a better grasp of English. She objects and makes a deal with the principal that she registers for eighth and if she's unable to keep up in six months, she will return to seventh without complaint. He agrees.

Esmeralda says that there are "two types" of Puerto Rican students - those who have just arrived and those born in America who have Puerto Rican parents. She says the two are divided and never make friends. The students who recently arrived are also divided with those like Esmeralda who long for home on one side and those who are relieved to be in America on the other. In October, Delsa, Norma, Hector and Alicia arrive at the airport, having been put on the plane in Puerto Rico with their father who left eleven-year-old Delsa in charge of the younger children. Esmeralda says Delsa is exhausted from the trip but she notes the looks of wonder on the faces of her newly-arrived siblings and says that she hopes that look is no longer on her own face.

Esmeralda spends a great deal of time checking out young children's books to help her learn the language faster and one night spins a fantasy taken from a book she'd read. This story attracts the entire family and begins a ritual in which Esmeralda tells stories that often include her own siblings as the various characters who always win against any odds. Tata usually cares for the children but is often drunk and belligerent.

Ramona begins seeing a man named Francisco and he spends a great deal of time with the children, playing and bringing small treats. Most importantly from Esmeralda's point of view is that Francisco makes her mother laugh. Tato derides Ramona for seeing a younger man and Ramona, Francisco and the children are soon living in an apartment of their own. In "You Don't Want to Know," Ramona becomes pregnant and Francisco is diagnosed with cancer. Francisco comes home briefly after the birth of his son, Franky, and then goes back into the hospital. Ramona and Francisco's family argue over where he should be when he's not in the hospital and he goes home to his parents after that





final hospital stay where he dies. For the next year, Ramona remains in mourning and keeps novena candles lit for Francisco.

Ramona calls on Esmeralda to translate whenever she is out of work and has to apply for public assistance. Esmeralda hates these situations, fearing that she'll say something wrong that will lead to a denial of their request for help. She also hates that others call on her as translators for others who speak little English, especially when she knows that she's translating for people who are lying. She's torn, as any child would be, and tries to decide whether it's worse to tell on the people needing help or to tell their lies as the truth.

Ramona fears for the family's safety and she and Esmeralda fight viciously one night. Esmeralda says she doesn't really know what she's done to provoke her mother and refuses to admit to anything until her mother makes a specific accusation. It's during this fight that Esmeralda says she hates America, hates the crime, and hates the fact that there are no green fields anywhere around.

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Esmeralda's first look at New York is a disappointment. Her grandmother and mother tease her, saying that she'd expected the streets to be paved with gold, but she says that she really just wanted something other than the dark, foreboding scene she found. An interesting point is that Esmeralda notes the broken suitcases and boxes that are unloaded on the plane ride from Puerto Rico and that there are ragged items of clothing and personal possessions hanging out of them. Ramona says "this" is why she left all her ragged clothing behind, bringing only the best of what they had for her and the children. She seems really caught up in the idea of a new and better life in America and is determined to do all she can to make that a reality.

One day Esmeralda is at the window of their apartment and she sees a man masturbating while he looks at her. She's confused and leaves the window but is curious enough to return and watch. After he ejaculates, she realizes that she's just had "a sexual experience" and says that the man is immediately uninterested in her, a fact that makes her believe that she'd been too easily involved in the situation.

Esmeralda finds out that her father had left the four children who remained in Puerto Rico with various family members and had married. Esmeralda confronts her father, asking why he didn't tell her and saying that she's never speaking to him again. Her mother chastises her, saying that Pablo is her father, that he loves the children and that they should never forget him. Esmeralda is obviously angry at having been left out of her father's life for these important events but probably also feels betrayed that their father wouldn't marry their mother but has now married someone else. For Ramona's part, she speaks only good about Pablo with regard to his being a father but Esmeralda says that she and her siblings don't believe their mother's words. Esmeralda also wonders about her mother's attitude and says that it's not possible that anyone could face as many disappointments and bad situations as her mother had without becoming angry and bitter, but that her mother doesn't do any of these things. The family moves



many times, always searching for better conditions, and Esmeralda believes that her mother is still searching for a better life only she's now searching in New York rather than in Puerto Rico.



# A Shot at It and Epilogue: One of These Days

## A Shot at It and Epilogue: One of These Days Summary and Analysis

In "A Shot at It," Esmeralda is called to the counselor's office of her school and asked what she wants to do when she grows up. He is looking for a school that would fit her needs and help further any aspirations she has. He suggests nursing which she casts aside. She tells him one day that she wants to be a model and when he suggests acting, she agrees. He sets up an audition and she spends hours with various teachers helping her prepare for the event. She's to perform a monologue at PA 66, a school for performing arts. Though she doesn't understand all the words, she practices until she can speak it perfectly, learning only the phonetics. She's so nervous that she rattles off her three-minute part in less than a minute and there are few intelligible words and fewer that are correct. She's asked to wait outside and then called on to perform a pantomime with another student already enrolled in the program. They are told to pretend to decorate a Christmas tree and Esmeralda, having never decorated a real tree, calls on her memories of her father once decorating an eggplant bush with colored lights. She is quickly lost in the pretending and is called back to the present by the audition judges thanking her for her time. Esmeralda is certain that she failed and is miserable all the way home with Ramona continually asking what happened.

In "Epilogue, One of These Days," Esmeralda returns to PS 66 ten years after her graduation from that school. She talks to one of the judges, who is also a teacher at the school. The woman says that Esmeralda was asked to leave the room so that the judges could laugh. Despite the poor performance during the monologue, they'd been impressed that she'd had the guts to perform at all and Esmeralda laughs at the thought that it wasn't her talent that had earned her the spot at the school after all. She tells this teacher that she's the only one of her siblings to attend college so far and that she had eleven siblings by the time she graduated high school. The teacher points out that Esmeralda is now about to graduate from Harvard and asks if she's thought about how far she's come to reach this point in her life. Esmeralda says she tries not to think about it, fearing it will stop the flow.

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The teacher who talks to Esmeralda on her return visit to PA 66 confides that she'd called Esmeralda's house on the first day Esmeralda was supposed to attend the performing arts school because Esmeralda hadn't shown up that day. The teacher says that Esmeralda had initially said she had nothing to wear but then admitted that she was going to the welfare office as a translator for her mother. Esmeralda says she's glad the teacher called and reassured her that there were other children whose families were poor and who received public assistance.



# Characters

## Esmeralda Santiago

The author of the book, she is called Negi by her family and friends and says that she doesn't realize this is a nickname for many years. The name Negi is short for Negrita which is what she was initially called because of her dark coloring. Esmeralda is born in Puerto Rico to Pablo and Ramona. Her life as a child is caught up in the arguments of her parents and her relationship with her siblings. There are only two as the story begins, sisters Delsa and Norma, but the family is soon expanded with the birth of four more children. Esmeralda chafes under the responsibility of being the oldest and she says that she believes her relationship with her mother suffers because of her status as the oldest. When her mother goes to work, Esmeralda's responsibility is increased and when she's left in charge of her siblings, she finds that she has little control. When her younger brother Raymond is injured in an accident, Esmeralda feels that she's let down her mother and her brother. In America, Esmeralda is determined to succeed and convinces a school official that she should be placed in her correct grade - eighth - though she cannot speak English well with the agreement that she will go to seventh grade if she can't keep up.

## Ramona

Called Monin by friends and family, she is Esmeralda's mother. Ramona is also mother to Delsa, Norma, Hector, Alicia, Raymond and Edna prior to the family's move to New York and gives birth to Franky while in New York. Ramona is something of a dreamer and wishes desperately for a better life for herself and her family. She is, however, not expecting a handout and is willing to work hard to achieve these dreams. For example, she takes a job in Puerto Rico though it carries a stigma and pressure. Esmeralda notes that her mother rises very early, cooking and cleaning in preparation for the day, and comes home tired but faced with more chores and demands. When Ramona is faced with the possibility of Raymond's foot being amputated, she determines that it won't happen and travels with him to New York for better medical care. She soon decides that she has to take her family to New York in order to better their lives and does so, despite the fact that the father of her children refuses to go. This means she's moving to a strange city with her children to be dependent on extended family and her own ability to work. Ramona is a strong-willed woman who sometimes steam-rolls over the wishes of others in order to gain her own way.

## Pablito

Esmeralda's father, he is called Pablo by friends and family. Pablo is a strong-willed man who seems the less responsible than Ramona. He says that he has given his name to all his children but refuses to marry their mother, then marries soon after the



family leaves for New York. Pablo and Ramona have a volatile relationship. Pablo has a good relationship with Esmeralda until she moves to New York but Esmeralda comes to hate him for having married someone else without telling her of this event. After Ramona goes to New York, Pablo farms out the four children left with him with various family members, another aspect of his irresponsibility.

## **Delsa**

Second oldest of the children, Delsa is not the focus of many of Esmeralda's stories except that it is Delsa who is left in charge of three of the younger siblings on their trip to join Esmeralda and Ramona in New York. Delsa, who had sometimes seemed to resent Esmeralda for being in charge, is apparently overwhelmed when the responsibility is placed on her during that trip. Esmeralda notes that Delsa's face is pinched and she looks exhausted.

## **Raymond**

The youngest son born while the family lives in Puerto Rico. Raymond is left in Esmeralda's care while their mother works and it's during an afternoon when Ramona is working that Raymond insists on riding a cousin's bicycle. An accident mangles Raymond's foot and he is taken to the hospital but the injury refuses to heal for a long time and he is eventually taken to New York for medical care. It's this trip that prompts the family's move to New York.

## **Francisco**

A man who meets Ramona after her move to New York and who eventually comes to be involved in the lives of Ramona and the children. Francisco is somewhat younger than Ramona and is not accepted by Ramona's mother, Tata. Francisco is diagnosed with cancer about the same time Ramona becomes pregnant with their child, Franky. Esmeralda notes that Francisco plays games with the children and that he is often brings small gifts, but that the most important aspect of his life is that he brings her mother happiness. Francisco dies shortly after the birth of their son.

## **Tata**

Ramona's mother, Tata lives in New York and greets the family at the airport when they arrive at the airport. Tata takes responsibility for the children sometimes, helping care for them while Ramona works. When Ramona becomes involved with Francisco, Tata objects on the basis that he is younger and that people will talk.



## **Margie**

Daughter of Pablito by a woman other than Esmeralda's mother, she is about a year older than Esmeralda. Margie's very existence is a problem for Ramona though Esmeralda is enthralled by the idea of an older sister.

## **Dona Andrea**

Ramona's friend who allows Ramona and the children to stay with her in El Mangle. Her house is on a pier and the bathroom consists of a hole in the floor. Dona Andrea watches the children while Ramona searches for a job.

## **Gloria**

The young woman who takes care of Esmeralda and the other children after Ramona gets a job in Puerto Rico. It's Gloria who tells Esmeralda about changes that will soon occur to her body.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Macun**

Where Esmeralda and her family lives when she is four.

### **Santurce**

Where Esmeralda's mother moves with the children with the fighting between her parents grows too heated.

### **La Parada #26, Stop 26**

The address of Esmeralda's family in Santurce.

### **Macun Elementary School**

Where Esmeralda attends.

### **El Mangle**

Where the Ramona and the children move after Raymond's accident, this is where they live over the water.

### **Calle Castro Vina**

Where the family lives when Ramona makes her second trip to New York, leaving the children behind with their father.

### **Sabana Grande**

Where the family moves after Ramona's second trip to New York.

### **Ramon Emererio Betances School**

Where Ramona attends when the family lives at Sabana Grande.

## **Brooklyn**

Where Ramona, Esmeralda and the younger children arrive to begin their new lives in New York.

## **PA 66**

The performing arts school where Esmeralda is accepted in New York.



# Themes

## Coming of Age

Esmeralda ages both physically and emotionally over the course of the book, making this an example of a coming of age book. One example of Esmeralda's coming of age is seen when she is faced with the deep disappointment of realizing that she doesn't have her mother to herself but must share with her siblings. Esmeralda believes that she has a lesser share than the younger ones. While she wants to be angry with her mother, she realizes that there is no way to express that anger because it would add weight to that already on her mother. Esmeralda bemoans her lack of maturity while making a very mature decision, a sure sign of maturity. Another point in the maturing process is evident when Esmeralda realizes that her father is not the loving family man she'd believed him to be. Esmeralda is at her grandmother's house when she realizes that her father is going to see another woman. This knowledge makes it obvious that her mother's anger over her father's infidelity is warranted. Ramona also matures over the course of the story and eventually comes to find that she has to find a way to seek a better life for her family, and that no one is going to do this for her.

## The Importance of Dreams

Ramona loves her family but is always in search of a better life for herself and her family. It's important for the reader to realize that these dreams are focused on Ramona's happiness but what is best for her children is never completely out of the equation. When Ramona is working a good job in New York, she still tells her children that they have to do better and that she wants a better life for each of them. Ramona's desire for this better life is such that she's willing to leave all she knows behind, including the man who has fathered her seven children. Esmeralda is happy in Puerto Rico but is taken away to New York by her mother's dreams of a better life. Once there, however, she becomes caught up in excelling in school to the point of working very hard to learn the language, a necessity for remaining in the eighth grade rather than being sent back a grade. She does this so well that she's promoted with her class and put near the head of her grade. The epilogue of the book reveals that she'd done so well that she was about to graduate from Harvard about a decade after graduating her high school.

## Responsibility for Family

Esmeralda feels a heightened sense of responsibility because she is the oldest and feels the weight of this responsibility more keenly than many children her age might have. She believes that she has let down her family when her brother Raymond is hurt on a bicycle though her parents and others blame Jenny, the cousin who insisted that Raymond be allowed to ride. When later Esmeralda is sent to stay with relatives, she





believes it to be because she has been unable to fulfill her role as the responsible oldest child. This sense of responsibility is something that Esmeralda has trouble balancing with her desires to be a child. Likewise, Ramona seems to feel an equal weight of responsibility for her large family and she seems to also have trouble meeting these responsibilities without losing herself. It's likely the fact that she is able to have some attention for herself among her family members in New York that makes Ramona feel that moving to New York will provide a better life for herself while allowing her to support her family. An interesting point is that Ramona takes a job when doing so earns her the scorn of the others in her Puerto Rican village. Despite this, she works at a factory, ostensibly to provide money for the family but also apparently an effort to make a better life in the long-term for her family.



# Style

## Perspective

The story is written in first person from Esmeralda's point of view. Esmeralda tells the story of her life, apparently from some of her earliest memories at the age of four. The perspective is written from Esmeralda's memory years after the event. The reader should keep in mind that the story is likely skewed somewhat by Esmeralda's memory over the passage of years. For examples, Esmeralda recalls that having her father's infidelity pointed out by her mother was not enough to matter until the day she realized the truth of the accusations. At that point, she feels bitter and betrayed. These feelings may have been amplified by the fact that her father later allows the family to leave the country and then marries another woman. This hurts Esmeralda and it seems possible that her memories of this earlier hurt is amplified by the more recent feelings of betrayal. The perspective is greatly limited and the reader is left to decide the catalysts behind some of the events. For example, Ramona arrives from a trip to New York seeking medical help for Raymond. Upon her return, Ramona looks different and has apparently made up her mind to move the family there. It's not clear what happened there to prompt this decision but Esmeralda notes that her mother looks different and has a new sense of confidence that had not been evident before the trip.

## Tone

The story is overall written in a hopeful tone though there are aspects of the story that are filled with despair. The hopeful tone may be at least partly attributed to the fact of Esmeralda's youth. There are some Spanish words and phrases used throughout the book. Most are explained though some explanations are somewhat vague. There is a glossary included to explain some of the words that are not obvious by context. An interesting point is that the back of the book details Esmeralda's life as she survives her move to New York, becomes accepted into a performing arts school and graduates from Harvard. However, the majority of the book is about her life in Puerto Rico and only the final few chapters are focused on the family's life in New York. Esmeralda's life is filled with problems. Her parents fight constantly and there is never really enough money for the family to do anything more than survive. Infidelity is a problem that plagues the family. Esmeralda feels an incredible weight of responsibility as an adult and comes to hate that responsibility as well as the fact that she lets them down when her younger brother is injured during a time she's supposed to be watching them. Esmeralda seems to never get over this but it seems that she's never really left again with that responsibility. It's not clear whether the adults, including Esmeralda's mother, never again trust her or simply realize that she's too young for the responsibility.



## Structure

The story is divided into thirteen chapters and an epilogue. The chapters are not numbered but are merely named. The names are Jibara, Fighting Naked, Someone Is Coming to Take Your Lap, The American Invasion of Macun, Why Women Remain Jamona, Mami Gets a Job, El Mangle, Letters from New York, Casi Seniorita, Dreams of a Better Life, Angels on the Ceiling, You Don't Want to Know and A Shot at It. There is also a prologue and an epilogue. The prologue is titled How to Eat a Guava and the epilogue is titled One of These Days. The chapters vary from about fifteen to about twenty-five pages. The title of each chapter is on a page of its own and the chapters each begin on the page after. The chapter begins with a quote, first in Spanish and then translated into English. The quotes are very interesting though some of them may make little sense to the readers. For example, in The American Invasion of Macun, the children of Esmeralda's school are given food through an American program. The quote at the beginning of this chapter is "What doesn't kill you, makes you fat." In Letters from New York, the idea of the family moving to New York is first introduced and the quote is "I ran from the thunder and hit the lightening." This quote seems to be a foreshadowing of the fact that the family is going to run from their lives in Puerto Rico and will run into different troubles in New York, with Esmeralda believing that these problems are greater than what they faced in New York.



## Quotes

"I lay on my pillow, whimpering, wondering how the termites knew I'd disobeyed my mother." Jibara, Page 11

"Mami will be alright.' But none of us were comforted that easily, although by now we had learned not to make a fuss." Someone is Coming to Take Your Lap, Page 58

"That's part of being an imperialist. They expect us to do things their way, even in our country." The American Invasion of Macun, Page 73

"I'd never been to church and had never stopped to classify my thoughts into good ones and bad ones. But when she said that, I knew what she meant and also knew bad thoughts would be the only things on my mind all the way there and bad." Why Women Remain Jamona, Page 97

"Mami chuckled, her eyes twinkling at me to see if I understood what Dona Lola meant by 'when hens learn to pee.' I'd been around enough hens to know they never would." Mami Gets a Job, Page 111

"Besides, you're old enough to be more responsible. And with those words, Mami sealed a pact she had designed, written, and signed for me." Mami Gets and Job, Page 123

"But after that, whenever I wanted to feel close to Mami, I stacked wrinkled clothes into a basket, and, one by one, ironed them straight, savoring the afternoon when she taught me to do the one thing she most hated." Letters from New York, Page 160

"I was keenly aware that she wasn't my mother: I had to share her with Delsa, Norma, Hector, Alicia, Edna, and Raymond. But it seemed that somehow my share was smaller because I was the oldest, because I was casi senorita, because I ought to know better." Casi Senorita, Page 181

"I disappeared into my room the minute the air tensed and wrapped myself in a thin sheet that didn't silence their insults but made me invisible to the hate that clouded their eyes." Dreams of a Better Life, Page 195

"For me, the person I was becoming when we left was erased, and another one was created. The Puerto Rican jibara who longed for the green quiet of a tropical afternoon was to become a hybrid who would never forgive the uprooting." Dreams of a Better Life, Page 209

"I ran into Mami's arms, unable to admit that a part of me was looking forward to the morning, to the newness of our life, and afraid to let the other part show, the part that was scared." Angels on the Ceiling, Page 220



"Francisco came to visit every day. He could be counted on to play gin rummy and dominoes, to bring us candy and soda, and to make Mami smile like she hadn't done in a long time." Angels on the Ceiling, Page 238



## Topics for Discussion

Describe Esmeralda's life as a child. What are the high points of her childhood? The low points?

Esmeralda feels there are some definite drawbacks to being the oldest child. What are these? Who are her younger siblings?

What is the act involving Raymond that prompts the family's move to New York? Describe the event, the months between and the event and the move, and Esmeralda's reactions.

Who are Gladys and Angie? What is it about Esmeralda's visit with these girls that makes her angry? There are deeper emotions at work here. What are they?

Who moves with Ramona to New York initially? Why are all the children not taken with Ramona for the move? Why do you think Esmeralda is chosen to go with Ramona?

Esmeralda hates many things about her life in New York. What are some of the things she dislikes? What are some of the things she longs for?

When Esmeralda is sent to school in America she's told she'll be put back a grade. What is her reaction? What does she eventually choose to do and how does she accomplish the first steps toward this goal?

How does Esmeralda's relationship with her father change over the course of her lifetime? Why?