

Before We Were Free



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JULIA ALVAREZ

Alvarez was born in New York City, but she and her parents returned to the Dominican Republic when Alvarez was only three months old. There, she grew up surrounded by extended family members until 1960, when her family had to leave the Dominican Republic suddenly. This is because her father was involved in a failed plot to assassinate Rafael Trujillo, the dictator of the Dominican Republic. Moving to New York as a 10-year-old was traumatic and difficult for Alvarez: she faced discrimination and turned to reading and writing to cope. After graduating from a private boarding school, Alvarez earned a bachelor's degree from Middlebury University and a master's degree from Syracuse University. She published her first volume of poetry, *The Homecoming*, in 1984 and her first novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, in 1991. Since then, Alvarez has published a number of adult and middle-grade novels, many of which have won multiple awards. She also authored a series of children's picture books. She lives in Vermont with her husband and is a writer-in-residence at Middlebury College.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As a work of historical fiction, the political events that take place in *Before We Were Free* are true to life. Rafael Trujillo was elected president of the Dominican Republic in 1930 after becoming the leader of the military. He won with 99 percent of the vote in an unopposed, fraudulent election. For the next 30 years, Trujillo ruled for two terms as the president; the rest of the time, he ruled as a strongman behind figurehead presidents. He made a habit of courting women as mistresses and raping young girls. The three Mirabal sisters—the Butterflies in the novel, one of whom spurned Trujillo's advances as a young woman—were assassinated on Trujillo's orders in November 1960. They were important figures in the underground resistance movement. Their assassinations garnered international attention, and many believe that this created the political environment that led to Trujillo's assassination six months later. As Alvarez details in the novel, the assassination didn't go as planned—Trujillo's son returned from Paris to rule and punish everyone even remotely involved in his father's death. The final six prisoners, which include Papi and Tío Toni in the novel, were murdered on the beach in what's known as the Hacienda María Massacre. These events are personal for Alvarez—her family, like the García family in the novel, fled the Dominican Republic when her father's involvement in the resistance was discovered. Several of her

father's close friends were murdered by the Trujillo regime.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Anita's family, and the events surrounding Rafael Trujillo's assassination in the Dominican Republic, are subjects that Alvarez has written about multiple times. The García girls in *Before We Were Free* are the subjects of Alvarez's first adult novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. Alvarez followed that novel with *¡Yo!* and also wrote about the underground resistance movement against Trujillo in her novel [In the Time of the Butterflies](#). In interviews, Alvarez has criticized North American readers for being woefully uninformed about dictatorships and political unrest in Latin America. With *Before We Were Free*, she wanted to tell a story that was akin to [The Diary of Anne Frank](#), which is one of the most well-known accounts of the Holocaust. Other young adult novels that tackle Latin American dictatorships and political unrest include *The Disappeared* by Gloria Whelan and Edwidge Danticat's novel *Behind the Mountains*. It's possible to read *Before We Were Free* as a dictator novel, a genre unique to Latin America that, as the name implies, focuses on both real and fictional dictators. Critics herald Miguel Ángel Asturias's 1933 novel *El Señor Presidente* as the first dictator novel, but the most famous novels in the genre were published in the 1970s. Novels in the genre include *I, the Supreme* by Augusto Roa Bastos and *The Feast of the Goat* by Mario Vargas Llosa. *The Feast of the Goat*, like *Before We Were Free*, concerns Rafael Trujillo.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Before We Were Free
- **When Written:** 2001–2002
- **Where Written:** Vermont, United States
- **When Published:** 2002
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Historical Fiction; Young Adult Novel
- **Setting:** The Dominican Republic; 1960–1961
- **Climax:** After Papi helps assassinate Trujillo, Anita and Mami go into hiding in the Mancinis' closet.
- **Antagonist:** Trujillo/El Jefe/Mr. Smith
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Silent Treatment. When Alvarez published *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* in 1991, it didn't take long for it to become a highly acclaimed bestseller. However, because of the autobiographical elements of the book, Alvarez's mother

refused to speak to her for months after its publication.

Giving Back. To give back to the Dominican Republic, Alvarez and her husband purchased an organic coffee farm there in 1996. They set it up as a foundation and started a school on the premises to help raise literacy rates in the area, which were as low as 5 percent.



PLOT SUMMARY

Just before Thanksgiving in 1960, 11-year-old Anita's life turns upside down. Tía Laura, Carla, and the rest of Anita's cousins flee from the Dominican Republic to New York. Lots of Anita's family members have left recently—now, Anita's nuclear family (and their Haitian maid, Chucha) are the only ones left at the family compound.

The next morning, SIM (the Dominican secret police) agents search Anita's house for Carla's family but they don't find anything. Over the next few days, the SIM agents' cars stay parked outside. Nobody will tell Anita anything—Anita's older sister Lucinda says that nobody will talk because the SIM might be listening. She finally tells Anita that they live under a dictator, El Jefe, whom nobody likes, and that the SIM are after their missing uncle, Tío Toni. Anita is confused—she thought that everyone loved El Jefe.

A few days later, the American consul, Mr. Washburn, moves in next door. Anita befriends Mr. Washburn's son, Sam, while Lucinda befriends his daughter, Susie. The children return to school, where Anita learns that other countries have instituted an embargo (trade ban) against the Dominican Republic; her teacher won't explain why. Mysterious things continue to happen—for instance, Anita and Sam see that someone is living in Tío Toni's house.

Around Christmastime, Anita celebrates her 12th birthday. When she gets a diary for Christmas and starts writing in it, she realizes that she's in love with Sam. In January, school is postponed for several weeks because many of the American students are going home for President John F. Kennedy's inauguration. Around this time, Anita finds out that some people are hiding from the SIM in embassies, and that others are being tortured in El Jefe's prisons.

Soon after this, Mami finally talks to Anita like an adult, explaining that Papi is fighting for their freedom. She also tells Anita that Tío Toni has returned, but Anita needs to avoid drawing attention to him for his safety. Finally, Mami asks Anita to stop writing in her diary; they must be quiet and sneaky until they can escape.

Meanwhile, Susie's 15th birthday is coming up, and she talks her parents into throwing her a big *quinceañera* party. Around this time, Tío Toni begins eating meals with Anita's family and hosting groups of men at his house. On the night of the party, a

line of Volkswagens comes up the drive. Mami sends Anita to warn Tío Toni that Mr. Smith (a codename for El Jefe) is here, which makes Anita feel very grown up but also very afraid. Later, when she and Papi arrive at the party, they salute El Jefe.

The next morning, Lucinda receives roses from El Jefe—he often rapes young girls, and Lucinda seems to be his next target. Mr. Washburn devises a plan to get Lucinda out of the country, but Tío Toni doesn't think it'll work. He and Papi then discuss killing El Jefe, which Anita finds disturbing. However, Papi he tells her that they're not just killing El Jefe—they're carrying out justice. That night, Anita sleeps in Lucinda's bed; in the morning, she discovers that she's gotten her first period. She's a *señorita* now—but Anita doesn't want to grow up now that she knows what El Jefe does to *señoritas*.

On the day that Lucinda leaves the Dominican Republic, Anita is distraught and frightened. That same day, Anita's teacher announces that school is closing, and Anita spends the rest of the day in bed, feeling disoriented. That afternoon, Papi sits with Anita and tells her to be free and **fly**.

Men—including Papi, Tío Toni, and Mr. Washburn—soon begin meeting every night outside Anita's window. Anita can hear everything, and she finds out that the Washburns will be leaving the country. But when Mami finds out that Anita can hear the men talking outside, they start meeting at Tío Toni's house instead.

Anita feels like everything is changing. She seldom talks, she's afraid all the time, and she's no longer in love with Sam. One morning, as Mr. Washburn drives Anita, her friend Oscar Mancini, and her brother Mundín to go study, someone rear ends them and breaks the trunk—and in the trunk, Anita sees guns. When a policeman comes to help secure the trunk, he says nothing about the guns.

A few weeks later, Anita, Oscar, and Oscar's sisters watch El Jefe's afternoon parade. Once Anita and Oscar are alone, Oscar admits that he's afraid and kisses Anita. Soon after, Papi arrives to pick Anita and Mundín up. He seems nervous. Papi then goes out with his friends and comes home hours later with the news that they succeeded. Everyone is ecstatic until they realize that they can't find a man named Pupo. Papi goes back out. In the morning, when the SIM find El Jefe's body in the back of Papi's car, they arrest Papi and Tío Toni. The Mancinis come to take Anita and Mami to safety.

After this, Anita begins writing in her diary again. Now, she and Mami are living in the Mancinis' walk-in closet (unbeknownst to Oscar), while Mundín is hiding at the Italian embassy. Hiding is both boring and frightening. Anita learns that Trujillo Junior is in control of the country and is punishing everyone who was involved in his father's assassination.

As the weeks wear on, Mami and Anita continue to hide out, and Mami is constantly on edge. Anita, meanwhile, thinks more and more about Oscar. They have a couple of close calls: SIM

come to the house, and Oscar finds out that Anita and Mami are hiding in his house. Eventually, the Mancinis evacuate Mundín from the embassy by dressing him as a girl and sneaking him onto an Italian cruise ship. A week or so later, Anita hears rallies taking place outside. She hears a roar and goes to her hiding place—she’s afraid that the SIM are coming for her, but it’s actually fellow members of the resistance coming to airlift them to New York.

Six weeks later, in September of 1961, Anita and Mami are in New York living in a hotel with Anita’s grandparents. They wait for news about Papi and Tío Toni, who are still in prison. Anita sits in on classes at the local Catholic school and writes everything she remembers about the Dominican Republic for her assignments.

One afternoon in late October, Anita returns home to that find Mr. Washburn is there; everyone is crying. Papi and Tío Toni are dead—the SIM murdered them and four others after Trujillo Junior agreed to step down. In the weeks that follow, Anita gets a letter from Oscar. He tells her that because of her father, the Dominican Republic is going to have democratic elections for the first time in 30 years.

After this, Mami, Lucinda, Mundín, and Anita move in with Carla’s family in Queens. On Thanksgiving, after the main meal, Mami reveals a cake—they’re going to celebrate Anita’s 13th birthday early, while the extended family is together. Then, the children go outside to play in the snow. Anita feels like the snow is cleansing, and she joins her cousins in making snow angels. Later, when Anita looks out the window at the snow angels, she thinks that they look more like butterflies than angels. She decides that this is a sign and promises Papi that she’ll try to be free.

government, which is why her extended family had to flee. Papi keeps the immediately family in the Dominican Republic because he’s less implicated in the plot and he wants to keep fighting for freedom. Learning this disorienting information about her family, her country, and her government forces Anita to come of age; she learns to think critically about politics and morality, and she finds her voice and passion when she begins writing her thoughts and experiences in a diary. She also develops a crush on Mr. Washburn’s son, Sam—a feeling that helps her maintain normalcy when everything else seems to be falling apart. The family’s life changes completely when Trujillo appears at a local party and insinuates that he wants to rape Lucinda. Because of this, Papi decides to murder Trujillo and he and his friends assassinate the leader, but they fail to gain control of the military. Lucinda and Mundín escape the country separately, while Anita and Mami spend weeks in hiding at the home of a friendly diplomat. Papi is in government custody and nobody knows if he’s alive. Because of all of this trauma, Anita loses her ability to speak sometimes, and writing in her diary is the only thing that makes her feel like herself. Ultimately, Anita and Mami immigrate to New York and discover that Papi was murdered. Though this is difficult for Anita, she also vows to do what Papi asked her to do: “**fly** free”—that is, find happiness.

Mami – Mami is Anita, Lucinda, and Mundín’s mother. She’s a loving and caring person, but Anita finds her annoyingly strict and nervous; Mami consistently takes tranquilizers to help with her bad nerves. With her husband and family involved in a plot to assassinate her country’s dictator, Mami has a tough job: she has to keep her children safe and preserve as much normalcy for them as she can. Despite her efforts, odd and scary things keep happening to the family, and Anita has lots of questions about what’s happening that Mami refuses to answer—both to protect Anita from horrific information and because she fears that the house is bugged. While Anita initially believes that Mami’s main role in life is being a mother, she slowly discovers that Mami is just as involved in the resistance as Papi. Mami is a typist who is apparently writing revolutionary materials in secret, and her canasta group seems to provide an opportunity to share political information with other women whose husbands are involved with the resistance. While Mami fights hard for her family to stay safe and together, once Lucinda becomes a target of Trujillo’s lust, everything falls apart: Lucinda flees to Colombia, Papi’s coup attempt fails, Mundín hides out in an embassy, and Mami and Anita go into hiding with the Mancini family. Ultimately, Mami and Anita flee to New York, which Mami insists is temporary—until she finds out that Papi was murdered. With her husband gone and her family dispersed, she and Anita decide to build a life in New York. By the end of the novel, she and Anita become close like they were when Anita was very young, which Anita appreciates.

Papi – Papi is Anita’s father. He was educated in the U.S. and runs the family business selling hurricane-safe building



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Anita – Anita, the novel’s 12-year-old protagonist, is a Dominican girl living through the final days of the repressive Trujillo regime. She has grown up among her entire extended family, but when her relatives flee to the United States for mysterious reasons, the only people who remain are Anita’s nuclear family: her Mami and Papi, her older sister Lucinda, her older brother Mundín, and her family’s housekeeper Chucha. Anita is full of questions about what is happening—why are there government agents with guns parked outside, and why can’t they speak freely inside the house anymore—but nobody will give her any answers. As Anita tries to piece together these odd and frightening events, she proves herself to be a curious, observant, and independent young girl with tremendous courage. Over the course of the novel, Anita learns more and more about the political situation engulfing her country. As it turns out, her uncles were plotting to overthrow the Trujillo

materials. A few weeks after Anita begins her story, she discovers that Papi is involved with the underground resistance movement against Trujillo, the dictator of the Dominican Republic. This is shocking for Anita, as she thought that Papi liked Trujillo. But as Mami tells her more about Papi's history, Papi's involvement in the resistance movement starts to make more sense. Papi didn't get involved until many of his brothers had already been arrested or left the country to escape the SIM (the Dominican secret police). After the Mirabal sisters—the **Butterflies**—were assassinated, Papi realized that the only way to bring education, free elections, and prosperity to the country was to assassinate the dictator. He believes that by freeing the Dominican Republic from Trujillo, he'd make the country a safe place for his family as well as for all other Dominicans. Anita doesn't see as much of Papi as she does of Mami, since she isn't allowed to sit in on the men's meetings. But Papi appears to be a dedicated and pragmatic planner who wants nothing more than to make sure that everyone can be free. Indeed, not long before he assassinates Trujillo, Papi tells Anita that she must go on and **fly** free. Though this is frightening for Anita at the time, it makes sense to her months later. After Papi is murdered for his involvement in the assassination, Anita decides that Papi didn't just want her to be free politically—he wanted her to be happy.

Chucha – Chucha is Anita's family's housekeeper, who is originally from Haiti. She's been with the family since Papi was a baby and the family trusts her with everything. Chucha sleeps in a coffin to prepare for the next life, and she made a promise to some unknown person or entity that she'd wear nothing but purple. She also has dreams that tell her the future. All of this gives her a mystical and sometimes frightening air. Chucha is fond of proverbs and sayings, many of which Anita adopts as her own as she comes to understand their value. She also relies heavily on Chucha for comfort—and for information as the situation in the Dominican Republic gets increasingly dire and Chucha proves to be one of the only adults who will tell her things, albeit by speaking in riddles. Chucha prepares Anita cryptically for the possibility that she will have to leave the country and that Papi might die. And when Anita gets her period, Chucha is the person she immediately tells. Following Trujillo's assassination, when Papi is arrested and Mami and Anita go into hiding at the Mancinis' house, Chucha takes a job at a local grocery store. From there, though she isn't supposed to know where Anita is, she manages to pass messages to Anita to prepare her for the next stage of her journey. Though it's unclear by the end of the novel if Anita is going to see Chucha again, Anita thinks often of Chucha's sayings and spirituality. As she does, Anita is able to vow to try to be happy again.

Sam Washburn – Sam is Mr. Washburn's son; he's a 12-year-old American boy living next door to Anita in the Dominican Republic. Sam has blond hair that Anita thinks looks bleached. At first, it looks bleached in a bad way—but as time goes on,

Anita finds herself falling in love with Sam. Sam is something of a challenging friend and love interest, though. He insists that the U.S. is the best country in the world, and he doesn't seem to understand that this hurts Anita. On the plus side, he doesn't criticize Anita for not speaking perfect English, as other American kids do. She looks at him as an idealized romantic interest until after Susie's *quinceañera* party, during which Sam gets drunk. To Anita, this kind of behavior is unacceptable, and it clouds her idea of Sam. Furthermore, as Anita learns more and more about the political situation in her country and the danger that her family is in, she realizes that she and Sam have very little in common and that his attitude and outlook is often somewhat immature. He isn't capable of understanding her or her experiences, and she falls out of love. Though they end the novel on good terms, Anita implies that she and Sam aren't going to stay in touch or be good friends unless their parents force them to.

Lucinda – Lucinda is Anita's 15-year-old sister. At the beginning of the novel, Anita scoffs at Lucinda—to her, Lucinda seems like a self-centered teenager who cares only about her looks. (She sleeps in hair rollers and uses pimple cream, even though Anita insists that Lucinda doesn't need it.) Lucinda also treats Anita with scorn when Anita asks for information about what's going on. However, the girls grow closer as Lucinda takes it upon herself to tell Anita about their family's involvement in the resistance movement. Since she's the only person in the family who will tell Anita anything, Anita returns to Lucinda again and again for information—Lucinda appears to share it because she understands that Anita is more scared and confused without knowing and she wants to look out for her sister and help her mature. Lucinda has a rash on her neck that appears whenever she's stressed. It's visible for most of the novel—though it grows worse after Susie's *quinceañera*, when Trujillo decides to court Lucinda. Lucinda is understandably terrified at the prospect of becoming Trujillo's next rape victim, though she's also frightened when her only option turns out to be leaving the country. On the night before she flees to the U.S., Lucinda talks to Anita about boys and Anita feels a deep love for her. In the morning, when the girls discover that Anita started her period, Lucinda promises not to tell anyone. Anita sees this as proof that she and Lucinda are growing closer.

Mr. Washburn – Mr. Washburn is an American diplomat who is tall and wears a bowtie. After the SIM search Anita's family's compound, Mr. Washburn decides to move his family in next door. While Anita is most thrilled to have a new friend in Mr. Washburn's son Sam, it's also one of the first clues that Mr. Washburn is involved in the resistance—he has evidently moved closer to Anita's family to provide them protection from the repressive regime. While Mr. Washburn isn't deeply involved in Anita's day-to-day life, he proves himself to be a trusted ally of the family, particularly by helping Lucinda flee the country after Trujillo threatens to rape her. For as

dedicated as Mr. Washburn is to the resistance, however, he can only do so much due to what the American government will allow. He's the one to supply the guns that Papi and the other resistance members use to assassinate Trujillo, and he attends most of their meetings. Mr. Washburn mostly disappears from Anita's narrative in the weeks preceding Trujillo's assassination, but Anita thinks of him as a kind and trustworthy man in her life. He's the one to travel to New York and break the news that Papi and Tío Toni were murdered.

Mundín – Mundín is Anita's older brother; he's 14 when the novel begins. He has a nervous habit of chewing his fingernails, and he's often nervous these days because of the danger that the family is in. As the novel progresses, Mundín gets involved with the resistance movement. Papi allows this, but he makes it clear that Mundín's primary responsibility is to his family—particularly since he would be the man of the house if something were to happen to Papi. Even with all the political turmoil, Mundín still finds the time to pine after girls; he takes a particular interest in Oscar's older sister, María de los Santos. On the night of Trujillo's assassination, Mundín is supposed to stay home with Mami and Anita—but when the opportunity presents itself, he sneaks off with Papi and the other men in the resistance. After the assassination, Mundín goes into hiding at the Italian embassy. Eventually, the Italian ambassador sneaks Mundín out of the country on an Italian cruise ship, dressed as a girl. He joins the rest of the extended family in New York. Months later, once Anita and her family receive the news that Papi died, family members say that Mundín takes the news the hardest. While Anita takes issue with this given her own all-consuming grief, she also thinks that Mundín's bitten nails are proof that he's having a hard time coping.

Trujillo/El Jefe/Mr. Smith – Rafael Trujillo is the antagonist of the novel; he was the dictator of the Dominican Republic from 1930 to 1961, serving two terms as president and ruling from behind the scenes the rest of the time. Many in the Dominican Republic refer to him as El Jefe—"the boss"—while the underground resistance group refers to him by the code name "Mr. Smith." At the beginning of the novel, before Anita understands what a dictatorship is, she idolizes Trujillo. To her, he's benevolent, strong, and fatherly—an idea that she mostly formed in school. But Anita's thoughts on Trujillo begin to change as she discovers that her parents are involved in the resistance movement and as she learns that Trujillo's secret police, the SIM, want to imprison and possibly hurt her family. Then, when she learns that Trujillo has a tendency to rape underage girls, she begins to find him truly evil and nightmarish. The only time Anita sees Trujillo in person is at Susie Washburn's *quinceañera* party, during which Trujillo sets his sights on raping Lucinda. Though the adults in the novel try to shield Anita from the full reality of the situation, Anita is aware that Trujillo regularly kidnaps and rapes young girls—and Anita's fears that she and her sister might become his victims

intensify once she starts her period. Throughout the rest of the novel, Trujillo remains a distant but ominous presence. Ultimately, Papi and the resistance assassinate Trujillo. Not long after, associates discover Trujillo's body in the trunk of Papi's car.

Tío Toni – Tío Toni is Anita's paternal uncle. He's young at 24 and he's very popular with women. Several months before the novel begins, Tío Toni disappeared. Anita later learns that this is because Toni was involved in a plot to overthrow Trujillo. In the winter, Toni returns to the family compound and continues to involve himself in the resistance movement. Anita sees very little of him, as he tries to lay low and escape the notice of the SIM agents that the family believes are watching the house. When she does see Toni, he seems very serious and he is in constant meetings with other members of the resistance. Along with Papi, Toni is arrested after the assassination of Trujillo. He, Papi, and four others are murdered on the beach just after Trujillo Junior agrees to step down.

Oscar Mancini – Oscar is the son of Mr. Mancini, an Italian diplomat in the Dominican Republic. His mother is Dominican, and he's in Anita's class at the American school. At school, Oscar isn't well liked because he asks questions incessantly. Some of his questions initially seem silly to Anita, but as the novel progresses, she begins to understand that Oscar is a smart and curious person who seems to know more about what's going on in the Dominican Republic than many of their other classmates. For instance, he's the one to explain to Anita and Sam the significance of the American embassy turning into just a consulate, and he has the best explanation of what an embargo is. As time wears on, Anita finds Oscar less annoying and likes him more and more. Once the American school shuts down, several families start sending their students to the Mancinis' house for lessons. By this point, Anita has stopped speaking, and she appreciates that Oscar doesn't treat her any differently because of this. Indeed, Oscar has a crush on Anita and kisses her one day after school. The next day, following the assassination of Trujillo, Anita and Mami go into hiding in Oscar's parents' walk-in closet. Because he's so curious and observant, Oscar puts it together that Anita is there, even though his parents don't tell him. He keeps his romance with Anita alive by passing her a queen of hearts playing card in the books that she borrows from the Mancinis. Once Trujillo Junior steps down and Papi is killed, Oscar writes Anita and thanks her for Papi's sacrifice—in Oscar's understanding, Papi is the reason that the Dominican Republic is going to have free elections. Anita isn't sure if she's in love with Oscar anymore by the end of the novel.

Carla – Carla is Anita's favorite cousin. Though Anita doesn't offer much information about Carla's personality, Carla has a nervous habit of tucking her hair behind her ears and, like her three sisters, she has a temper. Carla and her family leave the Dominican Republic in early November, after their

father—unbeknownst to his daughters—was involved in a plot to overthrow the government. Anita and Carla write to each other as much as they can in the year that follows. Once Anita joins the rest of her family in New York, she finds Carla changed. Carla's mother, Tía Laura, is concerned that all her daughters are losing their grasp of Spanish after speaking so much English at school. Carla is also fixated on a boy who lives in her neighborhood.

Mr. Mancini/Tío Pepe – Mr. Mancini is an Italian diplomat in the Dominican Republic. He's also Oscar's dad. When Anita and Mami go into hiding in the Mancinis' closet, he asks that Anita call him Tío Pepe. This is because his wife, Mrs. Mancini, is Dominican, and she and Mami discover that they're distant relations. While Anita is living in his closet, Tío Pepe takes it upon himself to encourage her to make the best of her time. He tells her about other famous people who wrote important works while in captivity or in hiding, and he encourages her to keep a regular writing schedule. He's generally good-natured and he's one of the few adult men that Anita decides she can trust.

Wimpy – Wimpy owns Wimpy's, a fancy grocery store in town. It carries mostly American foods and has air conditioning. Wimpy himself is an American marine who married a wealthy Dominican woman. He's muscled with lots of tattoos, and he sometimes flexes his muscles to amuse children. As the novel progresses, Anita discovers that Wimpy is involved in the resistance movement. It's likely his store is being used to store weapons and other materials for the resistance. He remains in the Dominican Republic after Anita and Mami leave and he employs Chucha in his store. It's unclear if he's ever arrested for his involvement in the resistance.

Mrs. Mancini/Tía Mari – Mrs. Mancini is a woman in Mami's canasta group. She's the wife of Mr. Mancini, and she's Oscar's mother. Mrs. Mancini is involved in the resistance, and she and Mami eventually realize that they're distantly related, which is why she eventually asks Anita to call her Tía Mari. She loves the Virgin Mary and so she included Maria in all of her children's names. Tía Mari is kind and supportive, especially when Mami and Anita end up hiding in her walk-in closet. She encourages Anita to write in her diary, as she notices that it helps Anita regain her ability to talk. She also comforts Mami often and assures her that things are going to be okay.

Mrs. Brown – Mrs. Brown is Anita's teacher at the American school. She is generally nice, but Anita observes some discriminatory behaviors—for example, Mrs. Brown gives the good parts in skits to American rather than Dominican students. It's also frustrating for Anita when Mrs. Brown won't answer all of her questions. For instance, when Anita has questions about why there's an embargo on the Dominican Republic, Mrs. Brown is evasive. In reality, Mrs. Brown probably can't tell her students the truth and expect to stay safe and keep her job, but her omissions are nevertheless annoying for

Anita.

Lorena – Lorena is a maid that Mami hires from the Domestic Academy. Anita offers little in the way of description about Lorena, aside from the fact that she's very superstitious. From the beginning, Mami treats Lorena with suspicion. She believes that Lorena is a spy for the SIM and so she showers Lorena with tips and days off to keep her happy, all while trying to come up with a reason to fire her. Ultimately, Chucha scares her into quitting by setting up her coffin with a bloody sheet in Lorena's room.

Susie Washburn – Susie is Sam's older sister; she turns 15 in the spring of 1961. Anita doesn't know Susie well, as Susie becomes close friends with Lucinda and the older girls don't care to play with Anita, but Anita does help convince Susie to talk to her parents about throwing her a *quinceañera* party. Not long after, Susie and Lucinda have to flee the country.

Pupo – Pupo never appears in the novel in person. He's the leader of the military and he conspires with Papi and the other members of the resistance. They plan for Pupo to temporarily take control of the country after the resistance assassinates Trujillo, but Pupo never shows up. This is what leads to Papi's murder.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mrs. Washburn – Mr. Washburn's wife and Sam's mother. She becomes friends with Mami, joining a canasta group with her. She is confident in her husband's power as an American diplomat, though she can be brash with that confidence in an insensitive way.

Tía Laura – Tía Laura is Anita's aunt; she's the mother of Carla, Yo, Sandi, and Fifi. She looks constantly worried. Along with her daughters, Tía Laura leaves the Dominican Republic in early November. She moves to Queens, New York.

Sister Mary Joseph – Sister Mary Joseph is a teacher at a Catholic school in New York. She allows Anita to sit in on her second-grade class. Though kind, Sister Mary Joseph makes Anita feel even less at home by asking her to tell the class about the Dominican Republic.

Monsito – Monsito is a poor boy who helps Anita's family carry bags when they shop in the market. Though he's about Anita's size, he says he's 16—apparently, he's so small because he's malnourished. Papi sees kids like Monsito as the reason that the Democratic Republic needs to become a democracy.

Navajita – Navajita is a SIM agent who arrests Papi and Tío Toni. His name means "little razor blade." Though Anita wonders where he got his nickname, she fortunately never finds out.

Tío Carlos – Tío Carlos is Carla's father. He narrowly escapes arrest for his involvement in the resistance movement by traveling to the U.S. ahead of his wife, Tía Laura, and four

daughters.

Trujillo Junior – Trujillo Junior is Trujillo’s son. He takes over after his father is assassinated and commits even more human rights abuses than his father did. At the end of the novel, under political pressure, he steps down from leading the country.

Joey Farland – Joey is one of Anita’s classmates. His father is the American ambassador to the Dominican Republic.

Charlie Price – Charlie is one of Anita’s classmates. He makes fun of Anita and insinuates that she’s crazy when she has to go to the nurse.

Sandi – Sandi is one of Carla’s younger sisters. She moves to New York at the beginning of the novel.

Yo – Yo is one of Carla’s younger sisters. She moves to New York at the beginning of the novel.

Fifi – Fifi is the youngest García sister. She’s only a baby when her family leaves the Dominican Republic at the start of the novel.

Papito – Papito is Anita’s grandfather. He lives in New York.

Mamita – Mamita is Anita’s grandmother. She lives in New York.

María de los Santos – María is Oscar’s older sister; Mundín has a crush on her.

essential that they learn to think critically about what’s happening around them—but for children, this can be a fundamentally traumatic experience.

The novel shows that a feature of growing up in a dictatorship is that, by design, the situation seems normal to children. For innocence, on the day that Anita leaves school to say goodbye to her departing cousins and aunt, she doesn’t pray to Jesus for help and strength—instead, she prays to Trujillo, the dictator of the Dominican Republic whom she and most others call El Jefe, or “the boss.” In her mind, El Jefe is a benevolent caretaker of a fantastic country, and she wants nothing more than to impress him. This, the novel suggests, is a natural result of growing up in a dictatorship—Anita has been taught, in school and at home, to revere Trujillo and not question why he’s been in power for the last 30 years. The situation, to her, is perfectly normal.

However, *Before We Were Free* suggests that children are more observant than adults give them credit for—and these observations create opportunities to practice critical thinking and, in turn, come of age. As Anita begins to suspect that there’s something amiss politically, she asks perfectly reasonable questions of her parents and teachers but gets unsatisfactory or contradictory answers in turn. This is apparent, for example, when Anita’s teacher, Mrs. Brown, tries to answer a student’s question about the embargo against the Dominican Republic. While Mrs. Brown is willing to give a cursory explanation of what an embargo is (punitive trade restrictions), she’s unwilling to tell her students *why* the embargo is in place. Nonetheless, her evasive answer gives the students the impression that their country has done something wrong, which helps wake them up to the political situation. Another major moment of awakening comes when Anita’s older sister Lucinda finally explains what a dictatorship is and notes that the family only has a portrait of Trujillo in their home because they’re required to. Hearing this, Anita feels like everything she’s ever been told is a lie and she starts to realize that her world isn’t safe. Indeed, she—and everyone she loves—is at risk of arrest or imprisonment. In this sense, as Anita comes of age and comes to a more complete understanding of what’s going on in the Dominican Republic, she’s forced to move away from the false sense of safety that characterized her childhood.

Along with this new maturity comes the opportunity for Anita to grapple with morality in a way she hasn’t before. This is clear when Anita learns that Mami and Papi are involved in a plot to assassinate Trujillo. When Anita first thinks about it, she uses the word “kill” to describe what her parents plan to do. In her mind, killing and assassinating are unquestionably bad. But later, after Papi assassinates Trujillo, Mr. Mancini (the Italian diplomat who hides Anita and Mami in his walk-in closet) uses a different word to describe what happened: *ajusticiamento*, which translates to “bring to justice.” This new word requires Anita to overhaul her understanding of right and wrong to make room for the possibility that at times, killing can be an



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



COMING OF AGE AND POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Before We Were Free follows 12-year-old Anita, a young girl living in the Dominican Republic during the last days of the Trujillo regime. Odd things begin to happen in the fall of 1960, when the last remaining faction of her extended family suddenly flees the country for New York, leaving only Anita, her two siblings, and her parents in the family compound—and a swarm of frightening government agents lurking outside the gates. As the months wear on, Anita becomes aware of the fact that the Dominican Republic isn’t the wonderful place she once thought it was; instead, she’s living in an oppressive dictatorship and her family members are active in the resistance movement, plotting to assassinate the dictator, Rafael Trujillo. For Anita, a major part of her coming-of-age process is developing a more accurate understanding of the political turmoil happening around her. With this, *Before We Were Free* suggests that in order for children to come of age, it’s

instrument of justice. This also requires her to undergo a major shift in the way she sees her country. While before, she was certain that the Dominican Republic was the greatest country in the world, seeing Trujillo as an evil person who must be brought to justice causes Anita to question this—and for Anita, this feels like a major loss of innocence. Nonetheless, Anita prefers to know the truth than to remain naïve—and she *has* to learn the truth to keep herself and her family safe. Because of this, the novel proposes that one of the true marks of adulthood is the ability to think critically, especially about one’s government.



ADULTHOOD, CHILDHOOD, AND FEAR

Even as Anita becomes increasingly affected by the political turmoil around her, her life does, to some extent, proceed as usual. This is particularly apparent in the adolescent milestones she reaches, such as falling in love for the first time and having her first kiss, as well as experiencing puberty. Through Anita’s detailed account of her changing body and the emotional turmoil of adolescence, *Before We Were Free* makes the case that life—and the process of growing up—doesn’t stop for people just because they’re living in a politically turbulent time. This backdrop does, however, make growing up much more dangerous and stressful than it would be otherwise.

When the novel opens in early November 1960, Anita hasn’t yet turned 12. And though her narration shows that she’s innocent and naïve, it also paints her as being on the cusp of beginning her coming-of-age journey. At this point, Anita scoffs at her older sister, Lucinda, for spending so much time worrying about her hair or her clothes, which Anita finds silly. However, it’s also telling that when Anita’s family gets new neighbors—including Sam, a boy Anita’s age—Anita lies and tells Sam that she’s already 12. In her desire to impress Sam, Anita makes herself seem older by projecting an air of maturity and poise. At this early stage in the novel—when Anita doesn’t yet have a full grasp of the political situation—being older seems like a good thing. But at the same time, Anita’s diary entries from this time period are charmingly immature. She’s madly in love with Sam and, with the help of many exclamation points, agonizes over whether he’s as interested in her as she is in him, or if her parents can tell she’s in love. Her suspicion that everyone can tell she’s in love is a natural expression of normal youthful selfishness; since Anita is the center of her own universe and her feelings are so obvious to her, she believes they must be obvious to everyone else. Puberty, in this regard, is anxiety inducing, but the perceived villains are only trusted adults who might embarrass her—or, in a worst-case scenario, forbid her from playing with Sam.

But while growing up can be anxiety inducing in and of itself, the novel shows that growing up can take on even more weight in the midst of political turmoil. For example, Anita learns that

the Dominican Republic’s dictator, Trujillo, regularly courts and rapes young girls—and, even worse, he starts targeting Anita’s 15-year-old sister Lucinda. With this, Anita realizes the danger of becoming a young woman; she dreads getting her period now, because while she once thought that getting older would be glamorous, she now sees her maturing body as a threat to her safety. In other words, growing older no longer seems to present fun new opportunities—now, it seems that growing older makes her a target for evil men. This is why, when Anita starts her period, she does everything in her power to hide it. Suddenly, Anita no longer wants to grow up and look mature to impress Sam; she wants to remain a child so that she’ll be safe from predatory men and so that she won’t have to acknowledge the horrific adult realities around her.

But living under threat from a violent and repressive regime means that Anita cannot put off adulthood for long. After Papi and his friends assassinate Trujillo, Anita and Mami have to go into hiding in the walk-in closet of an Italian diplomat, Mr. Mancini. There, in many ways, Anita starts to bridge the gap between childhood and adulthood and become the very thing she once despised: a teenager. Even as she spends her days worrying about her own fate and that of her father, she also spends a lot of time playing with her hair in the bathroom, wondering if a ponytail will impress the Mancinis’ son Oscar. She delights in the game that she and Oscar devise, in which they pass a queen of hearts card back and forth in the books that Mrs. Mancini brings for her, while fixating on her memory of Oscar kissing her on the cheek the day before she went into hiding. With everything else going on, pining after Oscar—a product of Anita’s growing interest in romance and a mark of her increasing maturity—makes life more livable. With this, the novel suggests that even in a difficult political period, puberty doesn’t just have to be only a source of fear and anxiety. Rather, puberty and the changes that come with it can provide an emotional escape from a terrifying reality.



FAMILY AND POLITICS

Anita is the youngest child in a close-knit nuclear family, and she adores her many aunts, uncles, and grandparents. But in the months before the novel begins, all of Anita’s extended family immigrates to New York from the Dominican Republic—and right after Anita begins her story, her favorite cousin, Carla, leaves suddenly with her family, too. As Anita learns why her nuclear family hasn’t left yet (Mami and Papi are major players in the resistance movement against the Dominican Republic’s dictator, Trujillo), she’s forced to confront the question of whether it’s more important to be loyal and supportive of one’s country or one’s family. Ultimately, the novel proposes that it is, to some degree, impossible to choose only family or country—family and politics are often tightly intertwined. The political is, in every way, personal.

At first, Anita sees politics and family as entirely separate—and

learning that this isn't correct is frustrating and confusing for her. Following the sudden departure of her cousins, SIM agents—the Dominican secret police—search the family compound and keep watch for weeks right outside the gates. This is understandably frightening for everyone, but for Anita it brings with it another indignity: despite Mami's insistence that the family carry on as usual, she won't let Anita go to school. When all Anita craves is a sense of normalcy, it's frustrating to see Mami so worried but refusing to explain why, or to see her older brother Mundín allowed to accompany Papi to work. But what Anita doesn't fully grasp is that she's being kept out of school for her safety. Since Papi and Anita's Tío Toni are known to be political dissidents, the entire family's safety is at risk. She has to give up her sense of normalcy if Mami and Papi are to keep their family members safe.

Indeed, Mami and Papi show throughout the novel that they prioritize familial loyalty and safety over anything else. This is why, when Mundín attempts to accompany Papi to secret meetings and even to the assassination of Trujillo, Papi reminds Mundín of his responsibility as the oldest son: to become the head of the family should Papi die. By giving Mundín this responsibility, Papi ensures that he will in good conscience be able to continue work on the resistance—his son, who's fast becoming a man, will be able to help his mother and sisters in a worst-case scenario. And at the same time, this keeps Mundín safe by making it clear that joining the resistance isn't the only way to be valorous or moral; it's also honorable to care for one's family. If he believes what Papi tells him is true and focuses on his family, Mundín won't find himself arrested for involvement with the resistance.

In return, Papi also makes the case that being involved in the resistance movement is in service of his family, again emphasizing that family life and political life are inextricably linked. Papi is vocal about his dreams for the Dominican Republic. He wants to be involved in the process of bringing education, economic opportunity, fair elections, and safety to every citizen. But while this is a goal that will help everyone in the Dominican Republic, Papi also makes it clear that he wants to make his country a safe place for everyone in his family. Papi's dream is that, after getting rid of Trujillo and setting up a democratic government, his entire family will be able to return home and resume their lives, happier and freer than ever before. With this, the novel shows clearly that the political is personal; a person's personal experiences are what make it worthwhile to get involved in the political sphere.

And yet, Anita still must come to grips with the fact that the political being personal can, at times, feel invasive and improper. Following the assassination of Trujillo, the secret police arrest Papi, Tío Toni, and other members of the resistance group while Mami, Mundín, and Anita go into hiding in various diplomats' homes. It takes several months but eventually, all three in hiding make it to New York to await news

on Papi and Toni. Mami says again and again that they'll return to the Dominican Republic the moment they hear that prisoners have been released and the new dictator has stepped down. But instead, the family in New York receives news that Papi and Toni were two of the final six prisoners who were brutally murdered in the hours before the regime collapsed, which turns Anita's father and uncle into internationally known heroes. Anita, however, struggles with how to react when her family and others in the United States thank her for her father's sacrifice and note that the Dominican Republic is free because of him. Though it seems likely that her father's death in captivity was always going to make him a public figure, it's still difficult for Anita to deal with people treating Papi's death as heroic martyrdom when for her, it has a very different meaning: her beloved father is dead. With this, the novel ends with the sense that family and politics are always intertwined and always influence each other, whether a person likes it or not.



STORYTELLING AND TRAUMA

Before We Were Free takes the form of 12-year-old Anita's diary. While the diary is a way for her to voice her secret dreams and frustrations away from the prying eyes of her parents, it also becomes a record of the six months preceding and six months following the assassination of Trujillo, the dictator of the Dominican Republic. As Anita comes to rely more and more on her diary to make sense of the frightening things going on around her, the novel pays close attention to the way that trauma brings about silence and secrecy—and how this creates a vicious cycle, in which the silence and secrecy in turn cause even more trauma. Ultimately, the novel suggests, it's essential to break the cycle and share one's story, as sharing can be a way to heal and gain a sense of control.

From the beginning, *Before We Were Free* shows that sharing one's thoughts and recording one's story is empowering. The Anita whom readers initially meet is confused—at only 11 years old, she doesn't understand the political and familial turmoil happening around her—but she's confident in her voice. Indeed, her family members call her by the nickname *cotorrita*, or "little parrot," because she's so talkative. At this point, talking and asking questions is a way for Anita to assert who she is. Though she resents the nickname because she thinks it makes her sound like a little child, she's not ashamed of being talkative and communicative.

But as Anita becomes more familiar with the danger and the political turmoil plaguing the Dominican Republic, speech itself starts to seem dangerous and unwieldy. When it seems like every conversation brings about a new kind of pain and suffering, silence starts to look more and more attractive. Furthermore, Anita realizes that her parents and their friends speak almost exclusively in code—they refer to Trujillo as Mr. Smith, for instance, and they bring up nonexistent flies as a

warning that someone might be listening in. This makes Anita realize that silence can protect her family; with the possibility that nefarious people are eavesdropping or bugging the house, Anita worries that if she speaks, she might accidentally say something that puts her family in danger. Because of this, when Anita receives a diary for Christmas, she erases every entry after writing it, just in case her family is arrested and her diary is searched. With this, she begins to experiment with trying to protect herself through silence.

However, the novel makes the case that having to stay silent is a traumatizing experience. Eventually, Mami asks Anita to stop writing in her diary altogether; she seems to share Anita's fear that it could put the family at risk if discovered. And at the same time, Anita's older sister Lucinda is evacuated from the country to save her from being Trujillo's next victim of sexual abuse—on the same day that Anita starts her period. Menstruating, in Anita's mind, puts her at risk of Trujillo's predation. In this increasingly frightening time, Anita stops talking altogether. Though Anita describes her silence as “forgetting” words, it's possible to read her silence as an understandable response to major trauma. Again, when it seems like anything she says could lead to pain or suffering for her or someone else, the best alternative seems to be silent.

While staying silent initially seems to help Anita and her family, ultimately the novel suggests that in order to heal, Anita should make every attempt to tell her story. Following Trujillo's assassination, when Mami and Anita go into hiding in the Italian diplomat's walk-in closet, Mami gives Anita permission to start writing in her diary again. In Mami's opinion, it's important for Anita to record her experience so that others in the future will know what happened—but Tía Mari, the diplomat's wife, notes that as Anita writes she begins to talk more, too. Writing helps Anita regain a sense of normalcy and control as she records her every thought. And while the novel ends before Anita has fully regained her voice, it nevertheless shows clearly that finally being allowed to express her thoughts and tell her story were essential to her recovery. It's possible, the novel suggests, to survive traumatic experiences—but the success of one's recovery hinges on their ability to talk about what happened.

country's leader, El Jefe. Her prize was this eraser, and Anita and Carla both treasure it. Because they've always been taught to admire El Jefe and believe that their country is great, they do not question the contest or the prize (which are both propagandistic manipulation of young minds)—instead, they're proud that Carla is so talented and patriotic.

However, after Carla's father crosses El Jefe and she and her family are forced to flee the country in a hurry, Carla leaves her eraser behind, symbolizing her loss of faith in her country. Anita finds the eraser in her bed (an indication that politics are much closer to her personal life than she once suspected) and begins using it to erase words from her diary. She has to erase her diary regularly because she has come to understand that El Jefe is a dictator and her family is under threat from his tyrannical regime; if she wrote anything controversial and the secret police seized the diary, she could get her whole family killed. As she erases her truest thoughts in order to keep her family safe, the eraser begins to lose its shape. Likewise, Anita is losing her faith in her country and starting to understand how evil the government is.



BUTTERFLIES AND FLIGHT

Butterflies and flight symbolize freedom and hope for the future. “The Butterflies” are the three sisters who started the resistance movement against the Dominican dictator El Jefe. They were murdered for this, and their legacy becomes a symbol of hope for Papi, inspiring him to become a leader in the resistance movement himself. Flying animals like butterflies and birds are well-known symbols of freedom—and in this context, the three Butterflies made it seem like freedom was something worth hoping and fighting for.

Meanwhile, throughout the novel, both Chucha and Papi tell Anita to be prepared to fly—that is, to flee the Dominican Republic. While this is terrifying for Anita, who doesn't want to leave her family, Chucha and Papi recognize that Anita and the rest of the family will probably need to leave the country in order to find freedom. And indeed, Anita and Mami are eventually airlifted out of the Dominican Republic after Papi assassinates El Jefe and is executed as a result. In this sense, butterflies represent the abstract ideals that the sisters inspired the resistance to fight for, while flight represents a more pragmatic and practical way of achieving freedom.

At the end of the novel, having fled the Dominican Republic, Anita and Mami are living with their extended family in New York City. On Thanksgiving, Anita looks out the window at the snow angels that she and her cousins made and notices that they look a lot like butterflies. She interprets this as a sign from Papi, and she promises him that she'll try to be free. Anita has literally flown away from the Dominican Republic and has begun to build a life in New York, but the butterfly-shaped



SYMBOLS

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



THE ERASER

Carla's eraser, which is shaped like the Dominican Republic, symbolizes the erosion of Anita's pride in her country. The eraser came into Anita and Carla's life the year before the novel begins, when Carla won a state-sponsored poetry contest by writing an adulatory poem about the

figure in the snow symbolizes the freedom that Anita still must seize: the freedom to make herself happy and leave the demons from her previous life behind.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Ember edition of *Before We Were Free* published in 2002.

Chapter One Quotes

●● I look up at the portrait of our Benefactor, El Jefe, which hangs above the classroom, his eyes watching over us. [...]

Just staring at El Jefe keeps my tears from flowing. I want to be brave and strong, so that someday if I ever meet the leader of our country, he'll congratulate me. "So, you are the girl who never cries?" he'll say, smiling down at me.

Related Characters: Anita (speaker), Trujillo/El Jefe/Mr. Smith

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

When Anita and her cousin Carla are suddenly pulled out of class without being told why, Anita feels ready to cry. But she looks to the portrait of El Jefe (Rafael Trujillo, the dictator of the Dominican Republic) to steady herself and remind herself to be strong and brave.

This speaks to Trujillo's success in controlling information. In fact, Trujillo is a tyrannical and repressive dictator whose corruption and abuses have lost him the support of much of the Dominican population. However, part of his autocratic power is the power to control his image—he forces the populace to hang portraits of him and speak reverently of his rule, making him seem benevolent and normal to young people like Anita who haven't learned the truth. Since Anita's parents and teacher seem afraid to say anything negative about Trujillo, Anita believes at the beginning of the novel that Trujillo is the country's benefactor, and she looks to him for confidence and strives to make him proud. As she comes of age, though, she learns to think critically about her country and government and realizes that Trujillo is evil and unworthy of her admiration.

This passage is especially sinister in light of what Anita learns later in the novel; that Trujillo has a penchant for kidnapping and raping young girls. Here, Anita imagines meeting Trujillo and connecting with him as he smiles at her and admires her courage. It's clear that she sees this as a

safe and wonderful possibility. However, when Anita *does* meet Trujillo later on, it's horrific—he becomes fixated on her sister, Lucinda, and decides that he wants to rape her, which causes Lucinda to have to flee the country. This shows that Anita's misconception that Trujillo is good and benevolent is actively dangerous; it makes people, especially young girls, vulnerable to the dictator's most horrible abuses.

Chapter Two Quotes

●● "Are they really policemen?" I keep asking Mami. It doesn't make any sense. If the SIM are policemen, secret or not, shouldn't we trust them instead of being afraid of them? But all Mami will say is "Shhh!" Meanwhile, we can't go to school because something might happen to us. "Like what?" I ask. Like what Chucha said about people disappearing? Is that what Mami worries will happen to us? "Didn't Papi say we should carry on with normal life?"

Related Characters: Anita (speaker), Chucha, Papi, Mami

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Following the SIM (secret police) raid on the family compound, Mami and Papi keep their children at home. This happens despite Papi's insistence that the family should carry on as usual, which Anita finds confusing and scary.

Here, Anita demonstrates how curious and observant she is about everything that is going on around her, but also how profoundly ill-informed she is about the political situation in the Dominican Republic. Of course, this isn't her fault; her family hasn't told her what's going on, and her school has simply taught the party-line: that everything is fine and the country's government is great. Since Anita has never mistrusted her teachers nor the government, she reasons that if the SIM who raided her house are with the government, then they must be trustworthy. But it's notable that these are the same men who just raided their house with guns, trashed the place, terrified everyone, and seemed to target her sister and uncle in particular. Here, Anita seems to trust the propaganda she was fed at school more than her own experiences and observations. This speaks both to the power of propaganda in repressive regimes, and also to Anita's desire to believe that everything is safe and normal. It's easier to think that the SIM men are good and trustworthy people than to acknowledge that they're a

threat to her family, which would make her feel endangered and would force her to examine her fundamental beliefs about her family and government. That would be a lot for any 11-year-old to take on, so it's no wonder that Anita is pretty confused here.



For Mami, who knows more about the role the SIM play in keeping the country's dictator Trujillo in power, the raid was simply a taste of what's to come. It drives home that her family is in danger because of their involvement in the resistance, and she's trying to protect Anita by shielding her from this information. (She also might be trying to protect the whole family with her silence, since she fears that the house might be bugged.) But by refusing to answer Anita's questions, Mami inadvertently makes Anita feel more confused and afraid and deprives her of information that is essential to her developing a mature idea of her family and country.

☝ Now I'm *really* confused. I thought we liked El Jefe. His picture hangs in the front entryway with the saying below it: IN THIS HOUSE, TRUJILLO RULES. "But if he's so bad, why does Mrs. Brown hang his picture in our classroom next to George Washington?"

"We have to do that. Everyone has to do. He's a dictator."

I'm not really sure what a dictator does. But this is probably not a good time to ask.

Related Characters: Lucinda, Anita (speaker), Tío Toni, Papi, Mrs. Brown, Trujillo/El Jefe/Mr. Smith

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 16-17

Explanation and Analysis

When Anita finally learns from Lucinda that the family is involved in the resistance movement against Trujillo, she finds herself more confused than ever. This shakes up everything that Anita has ever been told about her government—and her family.

Anita makes it clear that up until now, she hasn't thought much about why her parents have a portrait of Trujillo in their home and why his portrait hangs in her classroom at school. In her mind, the only reason to hang a portrait like this is out of admiration, so she assumed that Trujillo enjoys widespread support from his people. But Lucinda tells Anita the frightening truth: that everyone in the Dominican Republic is required to hang Trujillo's portrait in their homes

or workplaces, whether they like him or not. This hints at how extremely repressive his regime is; not only is criticism not tolerated, but anything less than full adulation can be punished. If failing to hang a portrait of Trujillo is a problem, then it's hard to imagine what fate her family might face for being part of the resistance and seeking to overthrow his regime.

This is also a moment that challenges Anita's childlike tendency towards black-and-white thinking. Before this, Anita thought that everyone's allegiances and values were straightforward; people like who they say they like and their behavior is either good or bad. But now that she knows that her family hangs a portrait of a man they're actively trying to overthrow, she realizes that everything is more complicated than she thought. If people are required to express support for the dictator, then she can't assume that she knows what *anyone* thinks of him. Furthermore, she has to grapple with the fact that her family is involved in trying to overthrow a government she thought, until this moment, was benevolent—she would ordinarily consider revolutionaries to be bad, disruptive, dishonest people, and now she has to re-evaluate what she thinks of her family. Obviously, this is a life-changing and confusing moment for Anita, since her values and beliefs are turned upside down. It's also a step towards becoming a critical thinker and coming of age; Anita can't truly mature until she knows the truth about her country and family and is able to think for herself about what is going on.

☝ "That's where I'm from," Sammy says, puffing out his chest, as if someone is going to pin a medal on it. "Greatest country in the world."

I want to contradict him and say that my own country is the greatest. But I'm not sure anymore after what Lucinda told me about us having a dictator who makes everybody hang his picture on their walls.

Related Characters: Anita, Sam Washburn (speaker), Trujillo/El Jefe/Mr. Smith, Lucinda

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

When Anita meets Sam (the son of an American diplomat who just moved next door), she shares that the rest of her family is already in the United States, which Sam deems the "greatest country in the world." For Anita, this is hard to



stomach—she had an idyllic childhood in the Dominican Republic and she loves her country. Furthermore, her school has taught her to idolize the country’s government and its leader, Trujillo. Until recently, Anita would have fought back against Sam and defended her country, but everything has changed. Now that she has learned that Trujillo is a tyrannical dictator who forces his people to pretend to love him, she feels that defending her country would put her on somewhat shaky moral ground—after all, she’s not sure that she can defend someone who seems to abuse his power.

This is a bittersweet moment for Anita. It’s hard for her to not be able to defend the country that she loves in the face of Sam’s chauvinistic pride in America, but it also marks an important step in her coming of age. She is beginning to piece together what is happening to her family and in her country, and it’s making her question everything she once thought she knew. Here, Anita shows how much she cares about learning and respecting the truth—rather than simply defending the Dominican Republic to her new friend regardless of what Lucinda has told her, she swallows her pride and lets Sam believe that what he said is true because she herself doesn’t know enough to factually contradict him. In a way, this sets up the dynamic that will persist between Anita and Sam for the whole novel: Anita is mature enough to know what she doesn’t know, while Sam fails to think critically or notice what’s going on around him, instead making questionable assertions without providing facts to back them up.

Chapter Three Quotes

☝☝ Not that I think of Sam as a boyfriend, which I’m not allowed to have anyway. Mami doesn’t approve of my being around any boys who aren’t related to me. But since my cousins moved away, the rules have both tightened and loosened in odd ways. I can’t talk about the SIM’s visit or my cousins’ leaving for New York City, but I can have Sam for a best friend even if he is a boy.

Related Characters: Anita (speaker), Carla, Mami, Sam Washburn

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Anita details her burgeoning friendship with Sam, the American boy who moved next door after her extended

family fled the country. It’s clear, even at this early point, that Anita is developing a crush on him. This in and of itself is an indicator that she’s growing up, as she’s becoming more interested in romance.

However, more compelling here is the way that Anita picks apart how things have changed in the last month or so. Not all of it makes sense to her, but the very fact that Anita sees the discrepancies in her mother’s new rules shows that she’s paying attention. To her, it seems contradictory that Mami has made stricter rules about what Anita can and can’t say (she can’t even talk about basic facts, like her cousins leaving for New York) while she has become much less strict about Anita playing with boys (before, Anita wasn’t allowed to play with boys other than her cousins, but now Mami lets her spend tons of uninterrupted time with Sam). It could be that Mami understands how scary and confusing things are at home and allowing the friendship with Sam is a way to help Anita feel like everything is okay. But as the political climate worsens, it’s also worth considering that Sam, as the American consul’s son, may be a strategic friend for Anita to make. Keeping the Washburn family close and loyal means that Anita’s family is safer. In this sense, it’s possible that Mami allowing Anita to have a male best friend might have very little to do with gender at all—Mami is probably trying to protect her family one of the only ways she can.

☝☝ “You know how your parents will sometimes ground your brother or sister? It’s not because they don’t love him or her, now, is it? It’s because they’re concerned and want to make him or her a better person.”

The more I think about it, an embargo sounds an awful lot like the punishment chair at home whenever we misbehave.

“So how has the Dominican Republic misbehaved?” one of the Dominican students wants to know.

But that is a question Mrs. Brown won’t answer.

Related Characters: Mrs. Brown (speaker), Anita

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

In class one day, Mrs. Brown tries to explain what an embargo is in simple terms, comparing it to grounding a child in order to change their behavior. It’s not a bad metaphor, but it’s a simplistic one: an embargo is a trade restriction placed on a country whose government has, in

the eyes of other countries, done something beyond-the-pale. In this case, the embargo is a result of Trujillo's failed plot to murder the president of Venezuela—this was seen as so out-of-line on the world stage that other countries placed economic sanctions on the Dominican Republic to punish Trujillo and try to change his behavior. Those placing the embargo hoped that it would inflict enough economic pain that Trujillo would be forced to behave.

However, Mrs. Brown refuses to explain any of this—she'll go so far as to admit (albeit subtly) that other countries are punishing the Dominican Republic for something that the government did, but she stops there and refuses to answer more questions. This puts her in line with other adults in Anita's life who refuse to answer potentially controversial political questions, and it's pretty clear that Mrs. Brown is holding back not because she worries about offending her students, but because she might lose her job or endanger herself if she says too much that sounds critical of Trujillo.


This shows how the Trujillo regime consolidates and maintains power; even teachers feel too unsafe to tell basic truths about their country and their world, which means that children have few sources of reliable or comprehensive information. In its absence, they're left (like Anita is) to piece together information from other sources, which is often confusing and incomplete. If Dominicans were able to get true information about their government, they would likely be much less loyal to Trujillo and might even revolt, which is why it's so crucial for Trujillo to control the flow of information and make people live in fear of speaking the truth.


Chapter Four Quotes

☛☛ Sam tells me about this invention in the United States called invisible ink that lets you write stuff down so that no one can read it until the page is soaked in a chemical that makes all the letters reappear.

I wish I had a bottle of that kind of ink for writing in my diary because the truth is I feel kind of sad writing in pencil, always prepared to erase. But Sammy says that ink is probably not sold anywhere in the country, even at Wimpy's.

Related Characters: Anita (speaker), Sam Washburn

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Anita tells the reader that whenever she writes something personal in her diary, she leaves it for a while and then erases it. Since she has been taught that speaking honestly about what's happening in her life might endanger her family, she fears that her diary might fall into the wrong hands and cause something bad to happen. However, writing in her diary is so important to her that she can't bear to stop altogether—her compromise with herself is to write in pencil and erase anything potentially dangerous a few hours after she writes it down.

It's clear, however, that censoring herself this way is not good for her emotional state. Writing in her diary helps her process all the confusing and traumatic things that are happening around her and it provides her a place to work out how she feels and who she is. But she can't fully do any of this without the expectation that her diary is safe and private, and unfortunately, because of how tyrannical and repressive Trujillo and his SIM agents are, she cannot take this for granted. When she says that she feels sad writing in pencil with an eraser always at the ready, it's completely understandable—the diary has become the receptacle for her most important thoughts and it's a central part of who she is. Feeling like everything she writes is temporary and about to disappear reminds her of her life overall; people she loves keep vanishing from her life and she's uncertain about what her own future is and whether she will be safe. Anita longs to have even a single aspect of her life that feels permanent—even if it's just writing in ink rather than pencil—but she understands that there's no way to do it safely, and this takes a huge toll on her mental health.

It's also worth noticing that invisible ink, which Sam could get easily in America, isn't available in the Dominican Republic. It's possible that this is a result of the trade embargo, meant to punish Trujillo for trying to assassinate the Venezuelan president. While such sanctions are intended to punish the government, here it's clear that the embargo is punishing innocent civilians like Anita, too. After all, Anita can't get the ink that would allow her to keep a diary safely, simply because other countries are punishing her country for something that their tyrannical dictator did. It's not fair to her at all.

“Doris, put the lid on the sugar bowl, *por favor*. There are so many flies.”

I look around for flies, but there are none I can see. Lorena has just come out from the kitchen with a tray to collect the empty coffee cups. Perhaps she scared them away.

Then, just like that, it dawns on me: my mother is speaking to Mrs. Washburn in code. She’s saying: *We are being overheard; be quiet*. It’s as if I’ve stepped into a room I’m not supposed to be in—but now that I’m inside, the door has disappeared. I feel the same way as when Lucinda told me how one day I, too, would get my period.

Related Characters: Anita, Mami (speaker), Lorena, Mrs. Washburn

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

During a meeting with the canasta ladies, Mami says something to Mrs. Washburn (Doris) about flies. This is initially confusing because there aren’t any flies around, and then Anita realizes that she’s speaking in code, instructing Mrs. Washburn to stop speaking so freely in case someone (likely Lorena) is listening in.

This moment shatters Anita’s sense of the world. Since she herself feels safe in her home, it has never occurred to her that Mami would either have to speak in code or censor others. The realization of what’s really going on causes Anita to feel off balance and unmoored—suddenly, it seems as though nowhere is safe. She compares this feeling to trespassing in a forbidden room and then realizing that the exit has disappeared—suddenly, she’s trapped in this knowledge that she wasn’t even supposed to learn, and now she can never return to her innocence of moments before.


It’s also significant that Anita compares learning that her mother is speaking in code to learning that she will someday get her period. In this sense, Anita suggests that learning adult truths is a similar rite of passage to menstruating—both are markers of growing up, one physical and one emotional. While Anita mostly sees growing up as a fun and exciting thing, the anxiety that she apparently felt when learning about her period mirrors the anxiety she feels in this moment, which shows her growing awareness that maturation involves not simply gaining more privileges and having more fun, but also grappling with difficult things and taking on frightening adult responsibilities. However, she seems aware that now that she has begun growing up, she can’t ever go back; as she

says, “the door has disappeared.”

“*We are free!* I want to cry out. But thinking about how the SIM raided our property, how Tío Toni had to disappear, how I have to erase everything in my diary, I know that Oscar is telling the truth. We’re *not* free—we’re trapped—the Garcías got away just in time! I feel the same panic as when the SIM came storming through our house.

Related Characters: Anita (speaker), Oscar Mancini, Sam Washburn

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

As Anita, Sam, and Oscar discuss politics, Oscar references freeing the Dominican Republic. Anita initially balks at the implication that Dominicans aren’t already free, but she quickly sees that Oscar is right.



Unsurprisingly, this is something that Anita finds very hard to stomach. Anita has grown up believing that she lives in one of the greatest countries in the world, where she and her family enjoy freedom and happiness. But in the last few months, Anita has had to grapple with the possibility that all of that was a lie. The police isn’t trustworthy like Anita once thought it was—instead, the SIM are mysterious, violent, and seem bent on hurting Anita’s family. In addition, her extended family members had to go into hiding or leave the country to stay safe. This in particular contradicts Anita’s earlier view that her country is the best in the world. Anita believes that people should be able to live without fear of being persecuted for criticizing the government, so she has to conclude that she’s not really free. Furthermore, she treasures writing in her diary and sees it as an extension of herself, so not being able to write freely in it is a particularly painful lack of freedom for her to accept.

While Anita might have pieced all this together before Oscar said something, it’s still significant that his comment about freedom makes Anita question and then reconsider her whole life. She’s smart and inquisitive enough that she doesn’t simply deny what he says—instead, she tries to make sense of it, and she’s openminded and observant enough to know that he’s right.

“Suddenly, you have to be a big girl—”

“I *am* twelve, Mami!” I sigh and roll my eyes. Recently, if anyone talks to me as if I’m a little kid, I get mad. But I also feel sad that I’m not a little kid anymore and that I know as much as I do. I’ve written about these confused feelings in my diary, too, but this is one confusion that doesn’t get any clearer by writing about it.

Related Characters: Anita (speaker), Mami

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

One night, Mami takes Anita outside to talk to her about the political situation. Even though Mami intends to speak to Anita like Anita is an adult, she makes the mistake of talking to Anita as though she’s still a small child, something that 12-year-old Anita doesn’t appreciate.

At this point, Anita feels very grown up. In her mind, being 12 means that she’s mature, knowledgeable, and very nearly an adult. This is especially true since Anita has already picked up a lot of information about the political situation without Mami’s help, such as that the Dominican Republic is a dictatorship and that the country’s residents aren’t free. This is one of the reasons that Anita resents Mami telling her that she must act like a big girl—she feels that she already is.

But even as Anita thinks of herself as mature and wants to be treated like an adult, she still finds that the process of growing up is difficult and sad. This makes her sort of wish that she were still an innocent little girl—if she were a small child, she wouldn’t know so much about the political turmoil going on around her, and then she could still be happy and carefree.

It’s a good thing that Anita is turning to her diary to try to make sense of this confusing situation, but Anita also discovers that writing only goes so far. Writing might be able to help her think through the experience of growing up and piece together various confusing pieces of information, but her confused feelings about whether she wants to be an adult or a child cannot be resolved by writing alone. Instead, Anita has to resolve these feelings simply by living more and figuring out who she is.


“One last big favor to ask you, *mi amor*. No more writing in your diary for the time being.

“That’s so unfair!” Mami gave me the diary for Christmas. Telling me not to write in it is like taking away my only present.

“I know it is, Anita.” Mami wipes away my tears with her thumbs. “For now, we have to be like the little worm in the cocoon of the butterfly. All closed up and secret until the day…” She spreads her arms as if they were wings.

Related Characters: Anita, Mami (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

During Mami and Anita’s conversation about political events going on in the Dominican Republic, Mami asks Anita to stop writing in her diary for a while. The implication is that if the diary were found by the wrong people, it could put the family in danger. This is understandably awful for Anita. Over the last month or so since she got her diary, it has become a relatively safe space for her to process her emotions, make sense of what’s going on, and come to a better sense of who she is.

However, though the diary is an important tool that helps Anita come of age, Anita’s reaction—while justified—still reads as extremely childish. Exclaiming that it’s “unfair” that she can’t enjoy her only Christmas gift makes Anita sound more like the immature little kid she doesn’t want to be. And while Mami’s reference to being like a butterfly is effective, this reference and Mami’s hand motions read as something geared towards a small child, not a mature preteen. In this sense, this passage situates Anita as being on her way to coming of age—but despite her desire to be mature, she’s not quite there yet.

When Mami says that they have to be like a caterpillar cocooning so that it can become a butterfly, she is bringing up one of the novel’s central symbols. Butterflies symbolize freedom throughout the book, and Mami’s implication here is that if Anita can stop writing in her diary for a while—staying silent and secretive like a caterpillar in a cocoon—then someday soon, they will become butterflies and be free. This frames Anita not writing as a sacrifice that she’s making for her and her family’s future freedom. This explanation does seem to help Anita understand why it’s important that she stop writing, even if it’s terribly unfair.

Chapter Six Quotes

☞ Not even the thought of falling in love with Sam is a consolation anymore. Overnight, all boys (except for Papi and Tío Toni and Mundín) have become totally gross. Here's an old lech flirting with my sister. Here are Oscar and Sam drinking liquor and throwing up. If only I could be like Joan of Arc, cut off my hair and dress like a boy, just to be on the safe side. Or even better, if only I could go backward to eleven, instead of forward to thirteen!

Related Characters: Anita (speaker), Trujillo/El Jefe/Mr. Smith, Sam Washburn, Oscar Mancini, Mundín, Tío Toni, Papi, Lucinda, Susie Washburn

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

At Susie's *quinceañera* party, Anita has a few startling experiences that make her lose all trust in men. Anita mentions the most important and traumatic of these in a deceptively casual way; when she references the “old lech flirting with [her] sister,” she’s referring to Trujillo, the country’s dictator, who has made clear his intention to kidnap and rape 15-year-old Lucinda. While Anita seems to attribute less importance to this than to her discovery that Sam drank too much and threw up, it’s obvious that Trujillo’s predation is the real story here.

Not stating outright how horrifying she finds Trujillo’s behavior is probably Anita’s attempt not to acknowledge the magnitude of her fear. Instead, she focuses on a problem that feels more innocuous and containable: that her crush, Sam, drank too much and vomited. This is definitely gross and irresponsible, but her statement that “overnight, all boys [...] have become totally gross” doesn’t have much to do with Sam. Instead, she finds herself unable to think about marrying Sam anymore because, in light of what’s happening to Lucinda, any kind of romantic feelings seem unsafe.

This becomes even clearer in Anita’s next statement, that she wishes she could cut off her hair and dress like a boy, “just to be on the safe side.” Joan of Arc, whom she references, did just this—in part to keep herself from being raped. By dressing like a boy, Anita believes that she would avoid such predation altogether, since she has come to see femininity as vulnerability. But then she contradicts herself; she doesn’t *want* to be a boy, because she’s just come to realize that she doesn’t trust anyone who’s male. Instead, she’d rather be herself, but younger. This has two meanings: first,

her prepubescent body presumably wouldn’t be appealing to Trujillo, so she would be safe. Second, if she could go back to being eleven, then she wouldn’t know anything horrible about men and she wouldn’t be afraid for herself and her sister.

☞ I lift the sheet and she looks down with a questioning expression. Then a knowing smile spreads on her lips. “Congratulations,” she says, leaning over and kissing me. “My baby sister’s a *señorita*.”

I don’t feel like a *señorita*. I feel more like a baby in wet diapers. And I don’t want to be a *señorita* now that I know what El Jefe does to *señoritas*.

Related Characters: Lucinda, Anita (speaker), Trujillo/El Jefe/Mr. Smith

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

On the morning that Lucinda plans to flee the country to avoid becoming Trujillo’s next rape victim, Anita discovers that she has started her period—a marker of coming of age. In the past, becoming an adult seemed glamorous and fun. It meant that Anita got to wear pretty dresses, high-heeled shoes, and makeup—all things that she finds exciting. She also looked forward to attending parties normally reserved for adults, like *quinceañeras*. But now that Anita is confronted with her period, an unmistakable sign of her maturity, she feels worried and uncomfortable and she no longer wants to be an adult.

The primary reason for this is that, in the last few days, the fear of sexual violence has suddenly entered Anita’s life—and in Anita’s mind, sexual violence only happens to adult women or girls who have become *señoritas* (girls who have started their period). Lucinda has to leave the country because Trujillo met her at a party and made clear his intention to rape her. Seeing her big sister targeted by a powerful man and fleeing the country in terror makes Anita feel like becoming a woman comes with more danger than excitement. Now that she has her period, she worries that she herself could become the victim of Trujillo or another man.


Consistent with her new desire to remain a child, Anita insists here that she doesn’t “feel like a *señorita*”—or that she doesn’t feel grown up. She then compares the feeling of

having blood in her underwear to a baby who has wet its diaper. For someone who has repeatedly insisted that she is a mature person whom everyone should treat as an adult, this is a startling regression. It makes clear just how terrifying she finds Trujillo's behavior and how thoroughly it has shaken her world.

☝ I admit I feel mean participating in this scheme—but I also understand that our lives are in danger. A tip from Lorena could wipe us out. It's so unfair to have to live in a country where you have to do stuff you feel bad about in order to save your life. It's like Papi and Tío Toni planning to assassinate Mr. Smith when they know that murder is wrong. But what if your leader is evil and rapes young girls and kills loads of innocent people and makes your country a place where not even butterflies are safe?

Related Characters: Anita (speaker), Trujillo/El Jefe/Mr. Smith, Chucha, Tío Toni, Papi, Lorena

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Anita is reflecting on something morally questionable that she and Chucha have just done: in order to frighten Lorena into quitting, they set up Chucha's coffin in Lorena's room. Ordinarily, Anita would consider it immoral to try to frighten a superstitious woman, but she does it anyway because there's more at stake than simple morality here: her family's lives are in danger because Lorena is likely a spy for the government, so they need to get her out of the house.

Anita's thinking here marks her maturity; instead of the black-and-white moral thinking of her childhood, she is now weighing different aspects of a complex situation in order to make a difficult choice. On the one hand, she is—as she acknowledges—being mean. But on the other hand, she's realizing that sometimes meanness is justified, and this is one of those times.

One thing that clarifies Anita's thinking is the importance of family. By scaring Lorena away, Anita can protect the people in her life whom she treasures most. She sees that Mami and Papi have done everything they can to protect her, and now it is her chance to help protect them. So in a way, scaring Lorena is consistent with a core value of Anita's:

loyalty to family.

Furthermore, Anita understands at this point that her family is planning to kill Trujillo, and while she initially struggled with the idea that killing someone could ever be justified, she is starting to understand that Trujillo is evil and that all Dominicans could be safer and more free with him dead. For this reason, too, Anita feels that it's important to scare Lorena off—not only does it protect her family's safety, but it also protects their assassination plan, which could help her whole country. So this passage marks a crucial moment in Anita's development—she has understood the complexity of moral judgment to the extent that she can not only forgive and accept what her father plans to do, but she can also make such fraught choices herself.

Chapter Seven Quotes

☝ “I think we'd better have the nurse look at you,” she says, taking my hand.

I don't resist. I stand and walk with her. As we cross the front of the room, Charlie Price makes a circle motion in the air to Sammy, who grins as if he agrees.

I feel like screaming, *I AM NOT CRAZY!* But instead, I swallow that scream, and suddenly it's very quiet inside me.

Related Characters: Anita, Mrs. Brown (speaker), Lucinda, Charlie Price, Sam Washburn

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

When Anita seems to shut down following the announcement that her school will close, Mrs. Brown takes her to the nurse—but Anita sees Sam and Charlie making fun of her as she leaves the room. This is the moment in which Anita begins to forget her words.

It's easy to see Anita's silence as a product (at least in part) of being asked to be strong and silent for a long time leading up to this point. Her parents and siblings have impressed upon her the importance of acting normal as to not attract attention from the SIM, and Mami asked Anita months ago to stop writing in her diary in case someone dangerous found it. The family rarely feels safe speaking freely, even in the privacy of their own home. This pressure to censor herself constantly is a lot for young Anita to handle, and it seems that she has internalized the notion that speaking is dangerous—even to the extent that she can no longer speak at all.

Anita's sudden inability to speak is also simply a result of trauma. She has lately experienced more than any 12-year-old could ever be expected to handle. Just this morning, for instance, Lucinda left for Colombia to avoid becoming Trujillo's next rape victim (something that terrified Anita more than almost anything she has ever experienced before), and Anita also started her period, which made her feel vulnerable and unsafe. With all of this to deal with in addition to the political turmoil, Anita simply reaches her breaking point, and her brain reacts by forgetting words.

The fact that all of this is going on makes it especially painful that Charlie and Sam would make fun of her. Sam used to be Anita's best friend, but she sees here that he actually doesn't understand anything about her—he thinks that she's just overreacting to the somewhat banal news that school is closing, and he doesn't even consider the possibility that Anita might be going through much more. Worse, when Anita wants to tell him that she isn't crazy, she physically can't form the words. Words have always been at the heart of Anita's identity—she's known as a chatterbox, and she feels most herself when she's writing—so the inability to speak feels not simply scary, but like a wholesale loss of her identity.

Anita's Diary Quotes

☛ *Actually, Mr. Mancini says that people are secretly calling it an *ajusticiamiento*, which means bringing to justice, the way criminals have to face the consequences of their evil deeds.*

I feel so much better thinking that Papi and Tío Toni were doing justice, not really murdering killing hurting someone. But still...just the thought of my own father—

Related Characters: Anita (speaker), Trujillo/El Jefe/Mr. Smith, Tío Toni, Papi, Mr. Mancini/Tío Pepe

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

Anita and Mami are now in hiding in the Mancinis' walk-in closet, and she writes in her diary something significant that Mr. Mancini said. He recently explained that people aren't saying that Trujillo was murdered—they're saying he was "brought to justice." For Anita, this is a comforting bit of news, since she doesn't want to see her Papi as a murderer or as someone who hurts other people—it's easier to think of him as a crusader for justice.

Ever since she learned of the assassination plot, Anita has struggled with how to think about its morality. She has always been taught that it's wrong to hurt others, and especially to kill people. But Papi and Tío Toni were closely involved in Trujillo's assassination (Trujillo's body was found in the trunk of Papi's car). Anita has previously shown that she understands the moral logic of the situation: Trujillo is oppressing an entire country, and if he dies, then everyone can be free. In this way, it's possible to justify his murder. But this passage shows that, even as she recognizes this logic, she has struggled to really believe it—she still sees her father as somebody who hurt another person, and this casts a shadow over the gentle and kind father she loves.

By introducing her to this new word for the assassination, Mr. Mancini is trying to give Anita a way to help her process what has happened and forgive her father. And it helps—it reminds her that many people see what Papi did as morally good, and that he was acting in service of his values, which are values that Anita also supports. But here, she implies that Mr. Mancini has not entirely put her mind at ease—she ends the passage still obsessing about the fact that her father killed someone and still feeling disturbed. Anita's ambivalence about her father's role in the assassination is perfectly natural, and it's something she'll grapple with for a long time to come. In fact, being able to hold two truths in her mind at the same time (that Trujillo was a criminal who needed to die, and that Papi killed someone) is a mark of Anita's growing maturity. She doesn't feel the need to reduce this situation to one single moral truth, and instead she acknowledges its complexity and allows herself to feel all parts of it.



☛ *Whenever I feel this way, I start writing in my diary so there's another voice that I can listen to. A third radio, tuned to my own heart.*

So I snuck off to the bathroom with my diary, and soon enough, Mami was calling me, saying it was rude for me to be off by myself, come join them and be sociable, but then Tía Mari told her to let me be, that it's a good thing that I'm writing, that ever since I started keeping this diary, I'm talking a lot more.

It took her saying it for me to realize it's true.

The words are coming back, as if by writing them down, I'm fishing them out of forgetfulness, one by one.

Related Characters: Anita (speaker), Mrs. Mancini/Tía Mari, Mami

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

Earlier in the novel, as the political conditions in the Dominican Republic began to seriously deteriorate, Anita became so anxious that she started forgetting her words. This was particularly striking because, prior to all of this turmoil, Anita was known as a chatterbox, always observing her surroundings and asking astute questions. In losing her ability to speak, then, Anita lost a core part of herself. A major step in healing from her trauma is getting that back.

It's significant that writing in her diary is what begins to help her heal. She has always found writing in her diary to be a way to make sense of confusing events and sort out her own identity, but now she's doing something new: trying to tell the story of what just happened to her. Writing that story down in her diary is a way to feel in control of the traumatic events that have just happened, rather than feeling like those events simply control *her*. It's also significant that she describes writing in her diary as creating "another voice [to] listen to." Rather than listening to distorted radio narrations of the country's political turmoil or the cryptic conversations of adults, Anita finally chooses to listen to her own voice and trust her own observations. This is both personally empowering and healing, as it allows her to accept that her perspective is important and that her story is hers alone to tell.

☛ *Today's note was just to me. I guess from his hiding place, Mundín caught a glimpse of María de los Santos sitting in the gallery with some young fellow, and he wants to know what I know.*

I couldn't believe that Mundín was thinking about a girlfriend at a time like this!

But then... I'm thinking a lot about Oscar! As Chucha would say, the hunchback laughing at the camel's hump!

Related Characters: Anita (speaker), Chucha, María de los Santos, Mundín

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

Anita and Mami have been secretly exchanging notes with Mundín, who is hiding at the Italian embassy. Anita seems to

expect that any note passed in secret between fugitives whose lives are in danger would be serious and important in its contents—but here, Mundín is simply curious about whether or not María de los Santos, the Mancinis' oldest daughter, has a boyfriend. Initially, Anita judges Mundín for having such frivolous thoughts when such cataclysmic things are happening in their own lives and in their country, but then she re-thinks her reaction. In doing so, Anita proves that she's mature enough to think critically about herself and others and realize that what Mundín is doing isn't wrong—it's normal. This is a moment of tremendous self-awareness, too, since Anita acknowledges that she is having many of those same thoughts.

This passage shows clearly that normal life must go on, even in the most difficult situations. Nobody can survive while thinking only about politics or terrible truths—everyone needs passion, human connection, and hope for the future. In this light, Mundín's note isn't simply a distraction from more important things, but rather it *is* what's important. Instead of allowing his life to be consumed only by tragedy and fear, he's figuring out ways to find meaning and happiness, making his life worth living despite everything else that's going on. In fact, what Anita doesn't yet put together is that maintaining joy in difficult times is part of what it means to be free.

Chapter Ten Quotes

☛ Then one of them shook our hands and said, "Welcome to the United States of America," and pointed us out of Immigration. And there was my answer to how I would survive in this strange, new world: my family was waiting for us—Mundín and Lucia, my grandparents, Carla, her sisters, and Tía Laura and Tío Carlos and Tía Mimí—all of them calling out, "Anita! Carmen!"

Related Characters: Anita (speaker), Carla, Lucinda, Mundín, Mami

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

In the moment that Anita arrives in the United States, she is understandably scared—her family has spent weeks in hiding, and she has been constantly terrified that they would be found and killed. Furthermore, she isn't sure when (if ever) she will get to go back home, or what condition her country might be in if she does, and she has no idea what to expect of her new life in America. But when she emerges

from the Immigration section at the airport, she sees her whole family waiting for her and it feels like a lifeline. Anita seems surprised that she feels this way, but she shouldn't be—the whole novel has made clear how important she finds family. She grew up in a compound among her entire extended family, and she was devastated when everyone outside her nuclear family fled the country. Without them, she was lonely, confused, and frightened, and while the hardship of that period was defined not by the absence of family but by dangerous political turmoil, it's clear that missing her family was taking its toll on Anita, too. Furthermore, her Mami and Papi impressed on her repeatedly how important it is to look out for family; they had Mundín prioritize family over resistance activities, for instance, and Papi framed his own involvement in the resistance as a way to fight for his family's future. With family so central in Anita's life, it's no wonder that being greeted at the airport by her relatives makes her feel that she will survive.

Having her family there also helps Anita realize that not everything will be unfamiliar in America. Even though she cannot return to her childhood at the family compound, being with all her relatives in New York will provide some semblance of home. Anita has always trusted and relied on her family, and seeing them there gives her confidence that—despite everything that has happened to her—she'll be able to handle this new life as long as they're there.

spoke cryptically about wanting Anita to fly and be free—concepts that, at the time, she didn't really understand. As she began to understand, though, she thought that freedom only meant *political* liberty: being free of the Trujillo regime and “flying” to the United States.



Now, Anita sees that Papi and Chucha meant something more. Freedom doesn't simply come from politics—it also comes from within. If a person is “free inside” (that is, able to find happiness and peace), then not even a dictatorship can make them unfree. Papi and Chucha certainly did hope and fight for Anita to have political freedom, but their dearest wish for her was that she would find freedom within—a more durable kind of freedom that nobody can take away. Anita hasn't yet found this, but her growing awareness that this is what her family meant is the first step to attaining true freedom. Now, she faces a huge and important task: processing her traumatic experiences, figuring out who she is and who she wants to be, and cultivating happiness and peace in her new life. Only then will she be truly free.


☝ But now that Papi is dead, it doesn't seem so scary to die. Sometimes, I think it's scarier to be alive, especially when you feel that you'll never be as happy and carefree as when you were a little kid. But I keep remembering Chucha's dream. She saw us sprouting wings, flying up and away. It has to mean more than our coming to the United States. After all, as Chucha herself would say, what good is it to escape captivity only to be imprisoned in your own misery?

Chapter Eleven Quotes

☝ I guess I finally understand what [Chucha] and Papi meant by wanting me to fly. It was like the metaphors Mrs. Brown was always talking about. To be free inside, like an uncaged bird. Then nothing, not even a dictatorship, can take away your liberty.

Related Characters: Anita (speaker), Papi, Mrs. Brown, Chucha, Oscar Mancini

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

After Anita receives a letter from Oscar, she begins to understand more fully what Papi and Chucha wanted for her future. Throughout the novel, both Chucha and Papi

Related Characters: Anita (speaker), Papi, Chucha

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

After Papi's death, Anita doesn't think that dying seems as scary as it once did. In part, this reflects how much Anita has grown up in the last year, but it also reflects her sadness and trauma. As a carefree and happy kid, death seemed like the worst fate imaginable, but now that she has lost her home, her innocence, and her father, she no longer thinks that death would be so bad. After all, as she suggests here, life hasn't been so great lately—she sometimes feels that she will never be as happy as she was when she was a child, so she might not feel like there's all that much in the future to live for.

However, Anita is starting to get a handle on her grief. This shows up in her analysis of Chucha's vision of her family flying away. Up until this point, Anita has mostly taken Chucha's vision literally, as a reference to the family being airlifted to the United States. But now, Anita sees that Chucha probably meant more than that. Freedom isn't simply living in a less violent country—it's also being able to claim happiness and security for oneself. Anita is beginning to see that, even though she's politically free, she's still "imprisoned in [her] own misery," which means that she isn't completely free yet. This gets her thinking that she still has some work to do to fulfill Papi's dream.


☛ What I see as I look down aren't angels but butterflies, the arm swings connecting to the leg swings like a pair of wings, our heads poking out in between! I'm sure if Chucha were here, she would say they are a sign. Four butterflies from Papi, reminding me to fly.

I close my eyes, but instead of making a wish, I think about Papi and Tío Toni and their friends who died to make us all free. The emptiness inside starts filling with a strong love and a brave pride.

Okay, Papi, I say, I promise I'll try.

Related Characters: Anita (speaker), Papi, Chucha

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

On Thanksgiving night, Anita looks out the window at the snow angels she made with the García girls and sees butterflies instead of angels. Throughout the novel, butterflies have been symbols of hope and freedom—their appearance at the very end of the book gives insight into the

meaning of freedom now that Anita is in the United States. Papi initially joined the resistance back in the Dominican Republic because he was inspired by "The Butterflies," three sisters who died for their revolutionary beliefs. At that point, freedom meant being free of Trujillo's repressive regime—Papi wanted democracy, better living conditions, and the ability to live without fear. And while Papi hoped that his family would be able to find freedom in the Dominican Republic, many adults hinted to Anita that she may instead have to "fly"—in other words, leave her country to find freedom in the United States. Of course, this is exactly what happened, which is why she's now in New York watching the snow.

Seeing butterflies in the snow angels shows that, even as she is far from her home country, Anita still carries it with her. Just as Chucha saw signs in everything, Anita now sees this as a sign, which shows that Chucha is still part of her life. And she sees it as a sign from Papi, who always encouraged her to fly, which shows that he's still with her, even though he was murdered. It's good that her family and home have stayed with her in these ways, but her experiences in the Dominican Republic have also remained with her in ways that are damaging—notably, in her persistent fear that she will someday lose her freedom and have to once again live under a repressive regime. This was apparent, for instance, in the incident at the grocery store, where Anita assumed in terror that she would be deported.

When Anita sees the snow angels as a sign that she should be free, she's realizing that freedom means something more than simply moving to a country with a less repressive government—freedom also comes from within. To truly be free in her new home, Anita needs to process her traumatic experiences, build a new life, and feel secure that she will be okay. In this closing passage, Anita feels an "emptiness" filling with "love" and "pride," and she promises her Papi that she will try to be free. It seems that this is a commitment to finding happiness in her new life and not being haunted by her past.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER ONE

It's a muggy November afternoon in the Dominican Republic. Anita's teacher at the American School, Mrs. Brown, asks for volunteers to play the Indians in the Thanksgiving skit. When Anita's cousin Carla raises her hand, Mrs. Brown calls on Carla and Anita. Anita is disappointed; Dominican students always get the worst parts. Mrs. Brown tells Anita to welcome the pilgrims, her classmates Joey Farland and Charlie Price, to the United States. When Oscar Mancini asks why they welcome the pilgrims to the United States when the United States didn't exist back then, Mrs. Brown cites poetic license.

The classroom door opens, interrupting the rehearsal. It's the principal and Tía Laura, Carla's mother. Tía Laura looks worried, but this isn't unusual—what is unusual is that, these days, even Anita's Papi looks worried. Mrs. Brown steps outside then returns and asks Anita to help Carla pack her things—even the things that usually remain at school, like Carla's **eraser** in the shape of the Dominican Republic. Anita can't figure out why she doesn't have to pack too, since she and Carla are cousins. Oscar's hand waves, but Mrs. Brown ignores it. She leads Anita and Carla out of the classroom. Anita stares at the portrait of their benefactor, El Jefe, and vows to be brave and strong like him.

Squeezed in the backseat between Carla and Carla's little sisters, Sandi and Yo, Anita asks if something is wrong. Papi, who's driving, calls her *cotorrita* ("little parrot"), a reminder to not talk so much. He explains that the Garcías got permission to leave the country for the United States in a few hours. The girls say nothing when Papi reminds them of all the family members they'll get to see. Family members have been leaving the country for New York since June—and now, Anita's family will be the only ones left in the compound. Papi explains that they're staying because he needs to mind the store.

Given that Anita attends an American school, many of her peers aren't Dominican like she is—they're often international, and many of them are American. Immediately, in the book's opening, Anita calls attention to the racism in this dynamic; Dominican students get the worst theatrical roles, presumably because white foreigners are favored. Oscar's question, meanwhile, suggests that some kids in Anita's class are already learning to think critically about this. It's entirely valid to wonder why they would mention the United States in a play about a time before the United States existed, but Mrs. Brown's answer is evasive. By suggesting that the United States already existed when the pilgrims arrived, Mrs. Brown sidesteps a major political and moral issue: that the pilgrims created the United States with land they stole from the indigenous people who welcomed them.



Though Anita might not voice as many of her questions as Oscar does, she still has a lot of good ones. It's perfectly reasonable, for instance, to wonder why she doesn't have to pack up like Carla. Importantly, Anita asks this question because she and Carla are cousins. They're family and, in Anita's mind, they're close enough to be treated the same. When Anita promises the portrait of El Jefe to be strong, it illustrates how the dictatorship in the Dominican Republic is normal for children. Anita believes that El Jefe is brave and strong because that's what she's been told to believe.



The news that Anita's family members have been leaving the Dominican Republic for the last few months suggests that all is not well in the country. It's telling that Papi says the Garcías "got permission" to leave—this implies that it might not have been easy to arrange their departure for one reason or another, and that Anita's family themselves are not free to leave if they want to. When Papi says that his branch of the family will be staying, he essentially tells Anita that the family business is more important than keeping the extended family together.



Anita's older siblings, Lucinda and Mundín, are already home. They stand with Mami and Chucha, the nanny, who holds Carla's baby sister Fifi. Once the car stops, Anita races for Mami. She notices Mr. Washburn, the American consul. He cheerily asks if everyone is ready to go. Yo asks where her father is, but after an uneasy silence, Papi explains that Tío Carlos will meet them at the airport. Anita thinks this is rude. Tía Laura sends everyone to change and choose a special item to bring. Anita follows Carla and suggests she take her jewelry box, but when she gets up to fetch it off the shelf, she shakes a snow globe. Yo cries that she wants to take the snow globe. Carla declares this a stupid decision and the girls yell at each other.

Yo and Carla stop yelling when Tía Laura threatens to go to New York alone. The girls change into party dresses and head outside, where Mr. Washburn is waiting in his car. But when Yo says she doesn't want to go, all four García girls burst into tears. Tía Laura cries too, but Mami crouches to talk to the girls. She promises that they'll see each other soon, which surprises Anita. Anita thinks this means that the Garcías are just taking a short trip, but she also wonders if Mami is lying. Anita hugs all her cousins and cries—there's no portrait of El Jefe to make her feel brave out on the porch.

Anita muses that now she's part of what Mrs. Brown calls a nuclear family. The compound used to be teeming with aunts and uncles and cousins, but now the houses are empty. After a while, Anita goes to help Chucha move into the family house. Chucha has cared for every family member since Papi was born. First, they move her coffin, which she sleeps in every night. Then, they move Chucha's clothes, all of which are purple. Chucha is Haitian and can see the future in her dreams. She saw that the García girls would leave weeks ago. Once Chucha is moved in, Anita asks when she'll see the Garcías next. Chucha answers with a riddle: Anita "will see them before they come back but only after [she is] free."

It's odd that Mr. Washburn will presumably be the one taking the Garcías to the airport. Since there's no indication that Mr. Washburn is their friend, it's possible that the Garcías need help from the United States government to leave the country. It's quite clear that something is wrong here. The adults seem far too cagey about why Tío Carlos isn't here, while it's hard to tell if Mr. Washburn's cheerfulness is real or a front. The hurriedness of the situation gives the impression that bad things might happen if the Garcías don't leave immediately.



Anita starts to demonstrate her maturity here when she stays silent instead of questioning what Mami says to the García girls—it seems that she senses that Mami knows something important and that this might be the reason that Mami is saying something that doesn't ring true. The questions that Anita has (but doesn't voice) indicate that she's perceptive and curious, even in difficult and confusing situations. As she wonders if Mami is lying, Anita has to consider what a person can or should do to help their families. Mami may be choosing to give the García girls false hope if it means that Tía Laura is able to get them to go.



Though Chucha works for the family, Anita seems to have a relationship with her that's more familial than anything else. Chucha's eccentricities provide some comic relief—but the way that Anita talks about Chucha sleeping in a coffin also shows that children can get used to anything if it's presented to them as normal. In this case, this isn't a bad thing; it just makes Anita more accepting of Chucha. Indeed, Chucha plays an important role in Anita's life, given that she can see the future and keep Anita occupied with riddles. The riddle that Chucha tells here shows that either she really can see the future, or she's just perceptive enough to know the family's likely fate. When she says that Anita will see her cousins "before they come back," she means that when Anita and her cousins are reunited, the cousins will not yet have returned to the Dominican Republic—implying that Anita might see them next in New York. And it's not totally clear yet what Chucha means when she says that Anita will see them only after she is free—that's the story that the novel will tell.



Over supper, Papi explains that the store isn't doing well and that the family will be scattered for a while. When Anita asks how long, Mami gives her a stern look. A black moth flies into the room, frightening Lucinda—she thinks it's a bat. Mundín, however, says it's a black **butterfly**. According to Chucha, black moths are death omens, so the family stops and watches it fly away. Everyone is shaky and sad after this. Anita is thrilled when Papi compliments her maturity, but she's secretly just as sad as Lucinda. After supper, Anita pours the contents of Carla's schoolbag onto her bed. It makes her sad, so she packs the supplies back up and vows not to use them. But later, Anita discovers the **eraser** in the shape of the Dominican Republic hiding in her sheets.

Finding the Dominican Republic eraser in her sheets is a clue that the political situation of Anita's country is more connected to her daily life than she might think. The black butterfly, meanwhile, implies that the hope and freedom that butterflies symbolize might come at a price—death, according to Chucha. When the family takes Chucha's spirituality seriously, it speaks to how integrated Chucha is into the family. Her beliefs are, in many ways, the family's beliefs.



CHAPTER TWO

The next day, Papi goes to work early and takes Mundín along. Anita mopes at first, but then she hears the gardener singing and thinks it'll be a good day. Suddenly, the gardener stops—six Volkswagens are coming up the drive. Men with guns pour out of the cars and ask Mami for Carlos García and his family. To Anita's surprise, Mami acts like the Garcías should be home and allows the men to search the house. She won't tell Anita who the men are. Anita finds Chucha, who says the men are SIM, the secret police. According to her, they "investigat[e] everyone and then disappear[] them." When they search the bedrooms, the men act like they expect to find weapons. They enter Lucinda's room without knocking and shove their bayonets under the bed. Lucinda still has her rollers in and a rash breaks out on her neck.

The arrival of the SIM agents is an understandably terrifying experience for Anita, especially since she doesn't feel able to ask for much clarification. Just as she intuited before that Mami was lying to the García girls, here Anita knows for sure that Mami is lying; they all watched the Garcías leave yesterday, but Mami pretends that they might be home. In this situation, as before, Anita stays silent, knowing that Mami must have an important reason to lie. Chucha's explanation raises more questions than it answers, such as what it means to "disappear" someone. In any case, though, the SIM raid makes it clear that not all is well in the Dominican Republic. Anita also has to confront the possibility that her parents might not be able to protect her—it's probably terrifying to see Mami let the SIM in and allow them to poke around in Lucinda's room.



When the men finish searching Lucinda's room, Mami tells Lucinda and Anita to stay put. Anita wails; she's terrified that the men will hurt Mami. One man turns to Anita and tells her to calm down, which makes Anita freeze. Once the door closes, Lucinda asks what's going on. Anita shares what Mami said about the Garcías, but Lucinda grumbles that the SIM know where the Garcías are—they just want Papi. When Anita asks why, Lucinda looks at her like she's dumb. But it's comforting when Lucinda brushes Anita's bangs back from her face. The girls wait until they can't hear anything and creep out of the bedroom. They find Chucha, who looks ready to kill the SIM for dirtying her floors. The SIM trashed the compound and even destroyed Chucha's coffin.

For a day now, Anita has wanted an explanation of what's going on and hasn't been provided one. Lucinda's explanation, however, is both incomplete and terrifying; hearing that the SIM want Papi forces Anita to confront that her family is in danger. She also begins to see that the adults around her are involved in more deceptions than she knows—not only was Mami lying about the Garcías being home, but the SIM seemed to only be pretending to look for the Garcías, since they apparently want Papi instead. Lucinda drives home here how young Anita is, both by showing that she has a greater intuitive grasp on what's going on than Anita does, and by comforting her as one would a small child—by touching her hair. With this, the novel offers hope that Anita and Lucinda will grow closer as Anita's story continues.



Chucha says that the gardener and the cook are terrified and will leave. The SIM, however, stay parked at the top of the driveway. Later, Papi assures everyone that things will be fine. Anita doesn't believe him, since she notices that no one eats. What's even more concerning is that Mami and Papi make everyone sleep on the floor of their bedroom with the door locked. Anita wants to know why Mami and Papi are also sleeping on the floor and she's concerned about Chucha, who's alone in her own room. Mundín offers that bullets couldn't penetrate Chucha's coffin, frightening Anita even more.

The Volkswagens sit at the compound's entrance for days. One always follows Papi to work and back. Anita constantly asks Mami if the SIM are really policemen. If they're police, Anita reasons, they should trust them—but Mami just shushes her. Mami also keeps the children home from school "because something might happen," even though Anita reminds her that Papi wants them to carry on as normal. Mami begs for Anita to stop asking questions she can't answer, so Anita goes to Mundín. Mundín seems more anxious than usual; he's started biting his nails again. He sends Anita to ask Papi.

Anita follows Papi into the living room when the phone rings one night. She hears something about "some **butterflies** in a car accident" and asks about it. Papi is tense, but he explains that the butterflies are "special ladies" who were in an accident. Finally, Anita goes to Lucinda and offers a back rub in exchange for information. On the patio, Lucinda explains in a whisper that the SIM probably hid microphones and are listening to their conversations. Anita notes that they haven't done anything wrong, but Lucinda whispers that it's about Toni, their uncle whom they haven't seen in a few months. She spells Toni's name in English.

Mami and Papi's unwillingness to explain anything to Anita certainly exacerbates her anxiety. She's confronted with all kinds of alarming new evidence that their lives are in danger, but nobody will say so outright, forcing Anita to try to piece together what's happening by herself, which she's too young to successfully do. Nonetheless, Anita is making good observations and connections, which shows that she's on the cusp of learning to think critically.



Anita's questions about trusting the police again betray her youth—just as she gained false confidence from the portrait of the country's dictator, El Jefe, she now believes that if the SIM are really policemen, then they can't be as bad as her family thinks. This shows that her lived experience is in conflict with the political beliefs that she has been taught in school (namely, that she should love and trust her government). It's not totally clear if Mami and Papi won't outright contradict Anita because they want to protect her from the truth that the government is dangerous, or because they're afraid that saying what they believe out loud could endanger the family. Regardless, Anita has found herself in a terrible vacuum of information, and everything that she sees and hears is confusing and terrifying to her.



While so far it has seemed like everyone was keeping information from Anita because of her youth, now it becomes clear that there's more to the story—her family can't speak freely about what's going on because their house may be bugged. Answering Anita's questions honestly could put the family in danger. Lucinda is closer to Anita's age and she may be willing to finally fill Anita in because she understands better than their parents how not having any information could make Anita more afraid rather than less. But this information is still confusing to Anita because she thinks of her family as good people—she can't understand why the government would target them. Lucinda's insistence that they're in trouble because of Tío Toni makes her consider that her family might not be as innocent and as normal as she thought. The butterflies Papi talks about refer to the Mirabal sisters, who led the resistance movement against Trujillo (whose nickname is "El Jefe") until they were assassinated.



Lucinda explains that Tío Toni was involved in a plot to get rid of their dictator, but she won't say Trujillo's name. Anita is confused. She thought they liked El Jefe (whose real name is Rafael Trujillo), since his picture hangs in their entryway. Anita notes that even Mrs. Brown has a picture of El Jefe in the classroom, but Lucinda explains that everyone has to hang his picture since Trujillo is a dictator. Anita isn't sure what a dictator does, but she doesn't ask. Lucinda says that the SIM uncovered the plot and arrested Tío Toni's friends. No one knows where Toni is; he might be in hiding or he might be in custody. Lucinda shudders when Anita asks if they'll "disappear" Toni. This is why the extended family left—the SIM are after them. When Anita asks why their family hasn't left yet, Lucinda says they can't abandon Toni.

In Anita's understanding, people hang portraits out of admiration for the person depicted. However, Lucinda upends this simplistic understanding, suggesting that the adults in Anita's life are only pretending to admire Trujillo—another example of adults being deceptive, seemingly to keep everyone safe. This also introduces Anita to the possibility that Trujillo is far more dangerous and powerful than she realized. He has the power to make everyone hang his portrait—even people Anita thought were strong and independent, like Papi. Anita's youth also shows through when she doesn't know what a dictator does. This, though, is probably by design—Trujillo probably won't let schools teach something that might make him look bad. The notion that the family is still in the Dominican Republic because they can't leave Toni is frightening—Toni is in major trouble with the government, and it has forced the entire rest of their family to leave. This hints at the severity of the situation in which Anita's family has found themselves.



Two weeks after the Garcías leave, Mr. Washburn visits. He remarks on the "little ole bugs" while looking at the Volkswagens. Then, he and Papi go to the study to speak in English. After a bit, Papi calls Anita in and says they're going to have new neighbors: Mr. Washburn and his family are going to move into the compound. This means that the SIM might not bother the family anymore. The best part is that Mr. Washburn has two kids, Sam and Susie. Sam is Anita's age. A few days later, Anita watches the Washburns through the hibiscus hedge. The workmen set up a trampoline and a boy with hair that looks bleached jumps on it. The boy yells "Howdy Doody!" at Anita when he notices her, shakes her hand, and is shocked she doesn't own a TV.

Mr. Washburn's comment about the "little ole bugs" is clearly some kind of code. Anita is pretty sure that she knows what he's talking about, thanks to Lucinda's explanation: he's referencing the house being bugged, which is why nobody can speak freely about what's going on. In this moment, it's clear that Anita is losing her innocence—rather than feeling confused and frightened, or asking for an explanation that nobody will provide, she figures out what's going on all by herself without saying anything that might endanger the family. However, despite her growing maturity, she's also behaving like a child here. When the Washburn family moves in, it's clear even to Anita that it's to protect their family from the SIM. Nonetheless, Anita finds this news noteworthy not because it implies that they will be safer, but because it means that she'll have a playmate. Anita still cares far more about being a normal kid and having friends than about the political issues engulfing her country or the danger that her family is in.



Anita tells Sam about the compound. Her grandparents bought it years ago and their children each built a house when they got married. She says sadly that her nuclear family is all that's left, since everyone else is in the United States. Sam says proudly that he's from the U.S. and it's the best country in the world. Anita wants to argue, but she's not sure anymore if the Dominican Republic is the greatest. She offers to show Sam the property and likes him immediately when he doesn't make fun of her clumsy English. They spend the afternoon exploring the lily pond, the old Taino cemetery, and the empty plots. After a while, Mrs. Washburn calls Sam back. He says, "See you later, alligator," which gets on Anita's nerves because it seems like he's comparing her to an ugly animal. She now hates being called *cotorrita* ("little parrot"), too.

The compound itself illustrates how Anita's family thinks about what family is and should be. According to her grandparents, each generation should provide for the next in whatever way they can—and since the grandparents did so by buying land, it had the effect of keeping the extended family geographically and emotionally close to one another. The current political crisis is ripping the family apart, though—it's not clear to Anita whether family loyalty should mean going to the United States with her other relatives or staying to try to help Toni. Anita's interaction with Sam recalls the opening scene in Anita's classroom when Anita reflected that Dominican students (as opposed to white foreign students) always got the worst parts in the play. Here, too, Anita is made to feel inferior for being Dominican, since Sam implies that the United States is better than the Dominican Republic, seemingly without realizing how this might feel to Anita. And Anita's reaction shows her growing understanding of her situation; she wants to defend her country, but she's no longer sure how to do that since she has begun to mistrust everything she has ever been told about her government. Nonetheless, Anita knows that she wants to start demanding that people respect her—especially by having them stop using animal nicknames.



The next day, as Sam and Anita explore the orchid shed, Anita notices that Tío Toni's house is open. It's supposed to be locked up. Sam looks nervous. They creep to the door and can see someone moving inside. Terrified, they race back to the trampoline and decide that they won't tell their parents what they found. That might frighten their parents and then they won't be able to explore anymore.

It's understandable that Anita and Sam would choose to keep their discovery a secret—they have no idea who is creeping around and what it means, and they don't want to say anything that might keep them from playing together. This, however, suggests that they don't fully grasp the magnitude of the situation—if someone is in Toni's house, Anita's parents probably want to know for everyone's safety.



CHAPTER THREE

With the Washburns next door and the SIM gone, Mami and Papi decide that the children can go back to school. Mami makes them promise to not talk to anyone about what happened—even to Sam and Susie. Susie and Lucinda are now great friends. Mundín is not concerned that he didn't get a new friend, since Papi now gives him more responsibility and lets him practice driving around the compound. Mundín goes silent, though, when Papi reminds him that he'll be the man of the house if Papi dies.

While at the beginning of the book, it seemed to be primarily the adults who were keeping secrets, now the whole family is participating. This further shows Anita moving towards maturity—she now has a responsibility to be silent and deceptive, just as her parents were to her. Papi's reminder to Mundín is a way to make the case that it's honorable to protect one's family—and to drive home, yet again, the seriousness of the situation and the importance of staying quiet.



Later, Anita seeks out Lucinda. She is concerned with what to tell her classmates about why she missed so much school, and Lucinda tells her to say they had the chicken pox. She explains that Mami didn't let them go to school because lots of scary things happened to other people, like raids, arrests, and accidents. Anita mentions "some accident with **butterflies**," but Lucinda corrects that it's *the Butterflies*—and their death wasn't an accident. Anita is suddenly afraid to go to school, even though Lucinda insists the Americans are their friends.

Lucinda has become Anita's best source of secret information. Even though her parents have chosen not to provide this information, Lucinda is not irresponsible for sharing it with Anita; while it scares Anita to hear these things, it also helps her to understand why it's important that she do what her family says. Perhaps Lucinda understands that Anita is getting old enough that she may not obey without some understanding as to why she should. Anita is particularly terrified to hear that the Butterflies were assassinated; this makes her fear that she too is at risk.



Having the Washburns around seems to calm Mami down. The rent they pay is also good for the family finances since the business isn't doing well because of the embargo. Anita doesn't know what an embargo is, but it causes her parents to sell furniture. It helps that Mami makes friends with Mrs. Washburn and starts a canasta group. This means that there's often a group of ladies on the patio, playing cards. The new maid Lorena serves lemonade and clears ashtrays during the games, but Mami tells Anita to be careful what she says around Lorena. Mami won't explain why, so Anita just figures you can't trust a maid who hasn't changed your diapers. Anita and Sam continue to check on Tío Toni's house. Although the padlock is back on the door, there are piles of fresh cigarette butts outside.

An embargo is a restriction on trade between countries. During Trujillo's rule, he orchestrated a (failed) plot to assassinate the President of Venezuela. Because of this, many countries imposed economic sanctions on the DR—including trade embargoes. This passage shows that diplomatic measures like trade embargoes unintentionally punish civilians; Anita's family doesn't support the Trujillo regime at all, let alone the plot to destabilize Venezuela. Nonetheless, they pay the price, even having to sell their furniture to make ends meet. The idea that Anita can't trust a maid who didn't change her diapers is a reference to Chucha, who has been with Anita's family for two generations and is implicitly trustworthy. But Anita's assumption that they can't trust Lorena just because she's unfamiliar is overly simplistic. Just as they feared that the house might be bugged, it seems that they fear that Lorena might not be loyal to the family, but to Trujillo's government, and she might be there to spy.



Fortunately, Anita's two-week absence isn't as exciting for her classmates as Christmas and Sam's arrival are. American girls giggle about Sam, which makes Anita jealous. Sam isn't her boyfriend, but he is her best friend now. After Mrs. Brown introduces Sam, she announces that they're going to play a Secret Santa game for Christmas. She ignores Oscar's hand until she's done explaining the rules and then answers his question about what happens if a person draws their own name. At this, Anita thinks that Oscar is "sort of smart." He's only half Dominican; his father is Italian and works at the Italian embassy. Anita is excited about Secret Santa and hopes she'll draw Sam's name. Instead, she draws Oscar's.

While Anita worried that her classmates would ask a lot of questions about her absence, this proves untrue, showing that not everyone is as curious and perceptive as she is. Anita starts to appreciate Oscar, since she too has a lot of questions that people seem reluctant to answer. When Anita notes that she feels jealous about Sam at school, it suggests that she's developing romantic feelings for him. This points to her growing maturity.



The next day, Mrs. Brown announces that since some parents complained about Secret Santa, she's canceling the game. At recess, Anita discovers that only Dominican parents complained. Anita isn't surprised; she figures the Dominican parents dislike the game on religious grounds. But it turns out that the Dominican parents think there's enough tension in the air without kids sneaking around and keeping secrets from one another that might be misinterpreted. Oscar explains to an exasperated American girl that it's about the embargo. He says that many countries, including the U.S., don't want anything to do with the Dominican Republic. Oscar can't explain the embargo in any more detail, so the girls storm away to play with Sam. At supper that night, Anita learns that her parents were some of those who complained.

It's new, important information that the Dominican parents canceled Secret Santa because it requires being secretive and they believe that their children being openly secretive at school might put their families in danger. It is, of course, ironic that these families do not want their children to do a secretive activity, since Anita's parents (and presumably many other Dominican parents) have been so secretive lately—but it's precisely this need to be secretive at home that makes these parents not want their children to seem secretive or sneaky at school. It's also telling that the Dominican families take this so much more seriously than the American families. The American parents and students seem not to understand the seriousness and danger of the current political situation, since they cannot imagine that a child's behavior could have anything to do with politics or that a children's game could endanger families.



The next day, Mrs. Brown explains what an embargo is. She describes it as what happens when a group of countries disapproves of another country, so they refuse to do business with that country until things improve. American students have questions about whether they'll be taken prisoner, but Mrs. Brown assures them that the U.S. and the Dominican Republic want to be friends. She likens the embargo to how parents ground teenagers. To Anita, this sounds like her parents' "punishment chair." But when a Dominican student asks what the Dominican Republic did wrong, Mrs. Brown won't answer.

Here, Mrs. Brown is trying to explain a complex political situation to children, so it makes sense that her metaphors would be a little simplistic. However, this is another example (like when Oscar asked about the Thanksgiving skit) of Mrs. Brown refusing to answer any questions that might be politically controversial. While the Thanksgiving situation seemed like Mrs. Brown blatantly not wanting to criticize America, this one is a little more complicated—it's possible that she, too, feels that she cannot speak freely in her classroom, even if she wanted to explain the cause of the embargo (which has to do with Trujillo's policies). Mrs. Brown probably isn't allowed to say anything critical of the government, so she stays silent to protect herself and her students.



Anita is too shy to hang out with Sam at school, but they're good friends at home. She tells him all about the compound and even shows him Chucha's coffin. Sam is impressed and asks why the velvet lining is ripped. Anita can't mention the SIM raid, so Sam comes up with his own explanation: Chucha had to claw her way out after the lid closed on her. Anita decides that Mami is right about there being too many secrets. One afternoon, for instance, she sees Chucha heading toward Tío Toni's house with food. At other times, Anita answers the phone but the caller hangs up. Once, a caller asks for Papi. Anita stays on the phone as Papi takes the call in his study. The men talk about waiting for Mr. Smith's tennis shoes, which will be at Wimpy's. Wimpy's is a fancy grocery store.

While Anita and Sam are growing closer, the need to keep secrets creates some barriers between them that Anita regrets—she wants to share everything with him, an indication of her growing romantic feelings. Despite Anita's youth, she's a keen observer of what's happening around the house, and it's clear that something is afoot. Since Chucha is bringing food to what otherwise seems like an empty house, it would appear that the family might be secretly harboring Tío Toni. Anita cannot make any sense of the comments about the tennis shoes. From hearing her father talk in code, though, it's clear to her that they're still in danger and that there's a lot she still doesn't understand.



When school gets out for the holidays, Anita is excited: her birthday is right before Christmas. Mami offers to invite Sam over, but Anita refuses—she told him she already turned 12. Mami is known for her fancy cakes, but the cake is a disappointment since the embargo prevents her from getting the right flour or food coloring. The embargo means the family also can't get things like red apples, walnuts, or candy canes. In addition, Anita will get only one gift this year. When Mami hints that gold is too expensive, Anita asks for a diary instead of a charm.

On the Saturday before Christmas, the family goes shopping at a market. Seeing the merchants' children in rags makes Anita feel both ashamed and lucky. Papi grouches that this country needs to educate everyone, and although Mami shushes him, she looks proud. Monsito, the boy who helps the family carry their bags, is about Anita's size. But when Mami asks how old he is, he looks worried. He says he's 16. Mami tells Anita that he might actually be 16—poor kids don't eat well and don't grow. On the way home, the family stops at Wimpy's for an apple. Anita looks for tennis shoes, but she doesn't see any. Papi goes into the back office with Wimpy, the store's owner. Later, when the family is ready to go, Anita finds Papi and Wimpy talking by the car. Chucha sits in the backseat, looking murderous.

Back at home, the family decorates the house. They hang a Santa face by the portrait of El Jefe, and Anita notices Papi throwing the portrait of Trujillo dirty looks. On Christmas eve, Papi and Mami throw an all-night party. They invite the Washburns and Oscar's parents, since Mrs. Mancini and Mami just realized they're related. Before the guests arrive, Anita's parents receive a call from Mamita and Papito and everyone else in New York. Then, Anita helps Lorena and Chucha serve at the party. She notices that when Papi raises a toast, Mami looks nervously at Lorena. Papi amends his toast to wish peace and liberty on everyone in the world, not just his friends.

Later, Mrs. Washburn asks Anita what she wants from Santa Claus. Anita has to bite her tongue—she's small for 12, but she's wearing a pair of hand-me-down heels and makeup. She feels very adult and resents being treated like a child. That night, Anita dreams that Santa arrives in a black Volkswagen and is knocking on the door. She knows she must let Santa in. The house is silent as Anita gets up and sees a light on in Tío Toni's house. Anita feels sleepy and joyful, like she's still a little kid.

Anita told Sam she's already 12 because she wants to appear older and more mature to him. This is an indication of her romantic feelings, and also of her growing comfort with secrecy and deception. When it comes to Anita's birthday cake and the Christmas treats, Anita again must confront the fact that politics and her personal life are deeply connected. Politics influence what her family eats and what they can afford to buy as gifts. Again, this shows how when countries punish other countries for the behavior of their leaders, innocent civilians suffer.



Even if Anita's family is struggling a bit with money right now, Anita can still tell that her family is better off than many people in the Dominican Republic. The merchants are struggling in particular, since the embargo has profoundly disrupted the country's economic conditions. Here, she gets a taste of Papi's reasons for getting into politics: he believes it's necessary to help everyone achieve the kind of success that his family has achieved. Everyone, he believes, should be able to eat and go to school. Mami's shushing, however, suggests that this is a controversial view—one that might get them in trouble if overheard.



Again, Anita is a particularly observant child, so she notices the odd things happening with her parents. Seeing Papi throw dirty looks at Trujillo's portrait reinforces that Papi doesn't support the dictator. Meanwhile, watching Mami seem to encourage Papi to change his toast when Lorena is around reminds Anita that the family doesn't trust Lorena and the government might be more involved in the family's lives than it seems. By not singling out the Dominican Republic in his toast, Papi makes his toast general and meaningless—but it's safer in this political climate.



Anita wants to look as adult as possible, hence the heels and the makeup, and when Mrs. Washburn acts like Anita still believes in Santa, it feels like an assault on her dignity—of course she's not young enough for that anymore! At this point, she finds herself in an in-between state—she's not grown up enough to be treated like an adult, but she feels too adult to accept being treated like a child—especially with all the new information and circumstances that she has lately been processing. Her dream is both a stress dream that compares Santa to an unwelcome government official and a happy dream about the holidays, reflecting Anita's confusion about the situation she's in and the politics of the moment.



CHAPTER FOUR

Anita writes that Mrs. Brown always says that writing makes someone more interesting and more thoughtful. Writing is definitely making Anita think more—especially about Sam. She wants him to be her boyfriend. Anita explains that she writes in pencil in her diary so she can erase everything with Carla’s **eraser** if the SIM come. She’s also worried about Mami, who’s not usually nosy but under current circumstances, might overreact. So Anita writes personal things in the morning and then erases them at night. She hasn’t told Sam about her diary for fear he’ll want to read it. Anita wishes she had the invisible ink that Sam told her about, because writing in pencil and erasing makes her sad.

The principal postpones the start of school until the end of January, since so many American students will be away for the inauguration of John F. Kennedy. The Farlands won’t be coming back afterwards, so Papi takes Anita to go say goodbye. Anita catches bits of the adults’ conversation—which includes mentions of tennis shoes, **Butterflies**, and a CIA intervention—but Mrs. Farland sends Anita to play with Joey. Anita knows how the Americans elect their presidents and that the president can only win the election twice. In the Dominican Republic, Trujillo is the only one who runs in elections. He’s been the jefe for 31 years and nobody will tell Anita why no one runs against him.

At the next canasta get together, the women list the families who have left. Mrs. Washburn insists that she’s not leaving until Mr. Washburn leaves. She says that “That S.O.B.’s a dead duck if he dares lay a hand on us,” which elicits no response from the Dominican ladies. Mami primly asks Mrs. Washburn to put a lid on the sugar bowl to protect it from flies. Anita doesn’t see any flies and wonders if Lorena, who’s collecting empty cups, scared them away. Then, Anita realizes Mami is speaking in code—talking about flies means the women are being overheard. Anita feels like she’s not supposed to be here. She felt the same way when Lucinda told her what menstruation was.

At this point, the novel begins to read more like Anita’s diary. Here, Anita seems like a budding preteen in that she’s interested in romance and agonized that Sam might discover how she feels. This passage begins to show the effects of having to live with so much secrecy and silence. While Mrs. Brown and Anita both think that writing down thoughts helps someone to develop their personality and intellect, this is not something that Anita is really able to do—she has to erase her thoughts as soon as she writes them, and she probably self-censors to some degree, since she lives in so much fear of her mother or the government finding her diary. So not only is Anita not able to develop her writing in the way she wants to, but she’s also sad about having to erase deeply-felt feelings each day, which feels like an assault on her personhood. This is the novel’s first clue that silence can be traumatizing—though at this point, it’s not yet truly traumatic, just frustrating.



Visiting Joey and thinking about American elections helps Anita come up with more questions about her own government; she doesn’t understand why Trujillo gets to be president indefinitely, while in other countries the citizens have a choice. This is more evidence that Anita is beginning to understand that her government isn’t trustworthy or desirable—it doesn’t seem responsive to the people’s will.



The women’s conversation gives the impression that there’s been a mass exodus of families from the Dominican Republic, both American (like the Farlands) and Dominican (like Anita’s extended family). This suggests that conditions in the DR are deteriorating and the family might be in increasing danger. When Mrs. Washburn references an “S.O.B.” being a “dead duck” if he hurts her family, she seems to be suggesting that if Trujillo hurt the Washburns, the American government would kill him. While Trujillo can hurt Dominicans with impunity, in other words, the global power of the American government means that Americans living abroad (like the Washburns) are somewhat insulated from violence. But even though Mrs. Washburn herself might feel safe, it doesn’t seem to occur to her that calling Trujillo an “S.O.B.” might put the Dominican women she’s with in danger. That’s why Mami makes a coded reference to being overheard (flies are bugs, and the house might be bugged with recording devices).



Anita starts spending more time in the bathroom. She stands in front of the mirror, staring at her reflection and wondering if she's pretty enough for Sam. One afternoon, Mrs. Mancini brings Oscar to the canasta meeting. Anita is worried that Sam won't want to hang out with her if Oscar is around and puts off going outside to play. She finally finds the boys jumping on the trampoline, and it upsets Anita that they became friends without her. All of this is confusing; Anita thinks that writing is the only thing that makes her feel less crazy. She turns to go back inside, but Oscar yells and leads Sammy after her. Anita feels happy again.

Anita sits with Sam and Oscar under the trampoline as Oscar shares that the school might close due to everyone leaving. Sam announces that his family is staying, since they have "amnesia." Oscar corrects him, saying that Sam's family has immunity, not amnesty. Oscar's family also has immunity, and Oscar notes that lots of people—like Anita's uncle—hide in the embassies to escape the SIM. This piques Anita's interest, but Oscar says he can't say which uncle. In any case, countries are closing their embassies due to the embargo. This is why the U.S. now has a consulate instead of an embassy, which means that Mr. Washburn can't help people "who want to free this country." Anita wants to shout that they *are* free, but she realizes they're not—Anita has to erase her diary, Tío Toni is gone, and the SIM raided the property.

Anita writes everything Oscar says in her diary. She doesn't know what she'd do without it, as writing makes her feel like she's piecing her world back together. Things are confusing. Lucinda now lets Anita stay in bed with her when Anita has nightmares, and Oscar tells terrifying stories about El Jefe. Anita shudders to think that she prayed to El Jefe instead of Jesus. One day, Oscar explains what it means to "disappear" someone. It means arresting someone, cutting out their eyes and fingernails, and throwing the body in the sea. Sam is impressed; Anita feels ready to vomit. She changes the subject by mentioning the ghost she and Sam believe lives in Tío Toni's house. Oscar suggests they go look.

Spending more time in the bathroom thinking about Sam is another indicator that Anita is growing up and fast becoming a teenager. She now sees herself not just as an individual person, but as a person who might be attractive to others. Again, this shift isn't altogether comfortable for her. This shows up when Anita says she feels crazy and writing is the only way she can sort out her thoughts. Telling her story, even just to herself, helps her process these difficult emotions.



This conversation shows again how observant and inquisitive kids can be. Oscar, for one, knows the difference between amnesty and immunity (that is, a family with immunity can't be arrested or prosecuted in the Dominican Republic, while amnesty refers to pardoning someone). And while Oscar might not fully understand the implication of having a consulate versus having an embassy, he does understand the main functional difference: Mr. Washburn won't be able to help the resistance movement as much as he may have in the past. It's a bitter moment when Anita wants to defend her country but realizes that she can't—her own life is evidence of the fact that the Dominican Republic has a repressive and unjust regime.



Though things are confusing, they're not all bad—keeping a diary is fulfilling and enlightening, and it's a step forward for Anita and Lucinda now that Lucinda is willing to care more for her little sister. But when Anita learns what it means to "disappear" someone, it's quite traumatic because she knows that this could happen to her family. Sam, on the other hand, reacts as though this information is simply cool—obviously, this is because he has no personal stake in the matter and doesn't have to imagine his American family being affected.



Chucha intercepts the children before they can get there. After scolding Anita, she warns Anita to be careful—things will happen soon, and Anita won't find protection except in "dark hiding places, **wings**, and prayers." Sam can't understand Chucha's mix of Spanish and Haitian words, so Anita tells him that Chucha is speaking in riddles. Then, Anita asks Chucha if Tío Toni is okay. Suddenly, Toni's face appears in the window of his house. Both Oscar and Sam see the face and Sam asks who it is. Chucha tells Anita to tell Sam "that it's someone he did not see."

Chucha seems to know better than anyone what's going on, although she—like the other adults—won't express herself directly. Chucha's riddles aren't all that different from the code words that Anita hears her parents using, except that Chucha's riddles seem more like something Anita could eventually decipher. Finally confirming that the family is harboring Tío Toni is probably both relieving and frightening to Anita—Toni hasn't been disappeared, which is good, but the family is doing something that is a clear affront to the Trujillo regime, and the punishment if they were caught would be severe. Chucha's riddle perhaps gestures towards this and suggests that these consequences might be coming soon.



Anita is writing Chucha's words to Sam in her diary when Mami knocks on the door. Anita erases her entry and shoves the diary under her pillow. Mami leads Anita outside and says she knows unusual things are happening. When Mami says softly that Anita has to be a big girl now, Anita snaps that she's 12. She hates it when people talk to her like she's little, but she also misses being a kid. Mami apologizes and says she's going to talk to Anita like she's a young lady. Anita rolls her eyes and says she already knows a lot, but she decides not to tell Mami about seeing Tío Toni or Oscar's scary stories. Instead, she says she's been learning about becoming a *señorita*.

Mami's decision to talk to Anita like Anita is an adult speaks to Anita's increasing maturity level. Even if other adults won't treat Anita like the adult she feels she is, Mami understands that treating Anita like an adult gives her the best chance of figuring out how to get through this difficult time. When Anita doesn't take this opportunity to ask about Toni or Oscar's stories, it suggests that Anita is learning to be quiet and listen. At this point, though, this could be good or bad.



Mami says that Anita's uncles were unhappy with the government. They made a plan, but the SIM found out and arrested or killed those who didn't leave the country. She says that Papi didn't want to get involved at first, since he didn't want to put his family in danger. But now, he believes that a life without freedom isn't worth living. Anita thinks this sounds terrifying, so she asks why they don't find freedom in New York. Mami points out that people have to persist to change things for the better, which makes Anita feel ashamed for being afraid. Mami says that one day, they'll be free and, at that point, the rest of the family will return. She says the embargo is already helping; it's pressuring Trujillo to appear more fair to other countries, so he released some political prisoners who were Tío Toni's friends.

Here, Mami tries to explain to Anita that Papi got involved with the resistance movement knowing that it was dangerous. But Papi also knew that getting involved was the only way to make sure his family was going to be safe in the Dominican Republic. When Anita asks why they don't just flee, Mami emphasizes that making change requires remaining in their country—this evokes the moment at Christmastime when they saw the poor kids at the market and Papi said that they should all be able to have an education. For Papi, staying in the Dominican Republic and making things better for everyone is more ethical than prioritizing only his family and fleeing to New York. It's concerning, though, that Anita feels ashamed for being afraid. She may feel that Mami is putting too much pressure on her.



Mami explains that Tío Toni has been in hiding. He's safe with Mr. Washburn next door, but Anita needs to avoid drawing attention to him. Then, Mami swears Anita to secrecy and asks that Anita stop writing in her diary for a while. Anita feels gutted, but Mami says they have to be like the caterpillar in its cocoon. They have to be secret until they can spread their **wings**. Anita agrees and erases her diary.

To Mami, asking Anita to stop writing in her diary may seem like an unfortunate but necessary request to keep the family safe. For Anita, though, it deprives her of the one place where she can think through everything that's happening and try to make sense of it. Without her diary, Anita's emotional wellbeing might suffer.



CHAPTER FIVE

Anita takes to spending most of her time playing cards with Sam. Though the kids are back in school, they don't go anywhere else. One afternoon, Susie and Lucinda join Anita and Sam for a game, since they're also bored. When Anita asks why parents aren't letting their daughters out, Susie giggles and says it's because of Mr. Smith. Mr. Smith isn't this man's real name, but he's powerful and likes young girls. If he sees a girl he wants, he'll get her. Anita shudders and notices that Lucinda is scratching the rash on her neck. Lucinda changes the subject to Susie's upcoming 15th birthday. Susie moans that they can't go anywhere to celebrate, but Sam suggests they have a party here. Susie thinks this is a great idea.

Later, Susie explains to Anita and Lucinda how she convinced her parents to throw her a *quinceañera* party. Anita usually gets sent away when Lucinda is with her friends, so Anita is happy to be included in this conversation; she wonders if Lucinda thinks of her as a "potential friend" now. Over the next two weeks, the Washburns hire gardeners to spruce up the property. The canasta group makes invitations and favors, while Mr. Washburn hires a band. He explains that it would have been impossible to throw a small party; as the consul, he can't offend anyone. Lucinda and Mami settle on a yellow strapless dress on the condition that Lucinda wears a shawl. Meanwhile, Mami reminds Anita that it's an exception that she, as a young girl, gets to attend at all. Anita thinks that if Mami knew she loved Sam, Mami wouldn't let her go.

Now that Tío Toni is back and it's not as much of a secret, people drop by every night to see him. Mr. Washburn usually joins the group. Toni eats supper with Anita's family and tells them all about his last few months running from safe house to safe house. He's nervous and jumps at everything. When he notices Lucinda's rash and Mundín's bitten nails, he laments that kids can't be kids in this country. Papi nods and says they need democracy, but Mami shoots him a look. They have to be careful what they say since they recently caught Lorena "cleaning" in Papi's desk. Anita thinks that Papi and Toni are brave. She wants to be brave like Joan of Arc, but she hasn't heard a voice telling her what to do yet.

It's significant that Susie giggles when she talks about Mr. Smith targeting young girls, especially when both Anita and Lucinda seem disturbed. It may be that Susie doesn't grasp the implication that Mr. Smith rapes girls, but it could also be that she, as an American, isn't at risk. Mr. Smith has come up before when Papi spoke in code about Mr. Smith's tennis shoes, so this is one piece of that puzzle, but it's still not clear who he is or what it all means. It's also significant that Lucinda is getting a rash on her neck—that rash also appeared when the SIM searched her bedroom, and it's a clear sign that she's feeling overwhelmed and scared. Despite Mr. Smith's wandering eye and the other political turmoil, though, life goes on—Susie still wants to celebrate her birthday like a normal kid.



It's a big deal for Anita to be included in Susie and Lucinda's conversation. To her, this is proof that she's getting older and more mature. Mami, however, makes the case that Anita is still a child and should expect to be treated as such most of the time. This party is an exception and Anita shouldn't get used to it. It's concerning, though, that the party turns out to be so large. This suggests that even if it's supposed to be a family birthday party, politics are still going to play a role.



Tío Toni sees Lucinda's rash and Mundín's nervous habit as proof that they're being forced to grow up too fast—they're just kids and they shouldn't have to handle all of this stress. This then raises the question of Anita's maturity, since she doesn't exhibit the same kinds of nervous rashes or tics that her siblings do. It's likely that Anita simply doesn't know enough about what's going on yet to develop these issues, suggesting that things are worse even than they seem. It has meanwhile become clearer and clearer that Lorena is spying on them, and for Papi to merely approve of democracy would potentially endanger them, showing just how repressive this regime really is.



At dinner one night, Tío Toni asks about the party. He reveals that he's not coming; it wouldn't look good for Mr. Washburn if Toni showed up. He comments that Lucinda will be the belle of the ball, while Anita isn't far behind. He calls Anita a *señorita*. Anita tells the reader she's not a *señorita* yet, but her breasts hurt and have begun to grow. She's also totally in love with Sam. As Toni bids everyone goodnight, he hugs Lucinda and Anita and tells his "two **butterflies**" to take care of each other.

A few days later, on Lorena's day off, two men from the consulate come to check for SIM devices. Anita is confused, but Lucinda insinuates that they're concerned about Lorena. During Mami's canasta game later, the women discuss Lorena. When Mami says that Lorena came from the Domestic Academy, Mrs. Mancini whispers that the Domestic Academy is a SIM training facility; they train maids to be spies. Anita listens to this conversation from behind the doorway and jumps when Chucha appears. Anita realizes that if she's going to spy, she has to watch out for other spies like Chucha.

The night of the party coincides with the Dominican Republic's independence day. Lucinda gets ready with Susie at the Washburns'; Anita has to wait in the kitchen as Mami, Chucha, and Lorena fry extra batches of *pastelitos* (pastries). When the first batch is done, Mami tells Lorena to take the *pastelitos* to the party. As soon as Lorena is gone, Mami calls that the coast is clear. Papi, Mundín, and some other men head down the path toward Tío Toni's house. Finally, when Mami is done frying, she puts on her long black gown and helps Anita into Lucinda's old blue dress. Anita consents to lipstick but refuses the hairspray—Sam doesn't like hairspray. The heels she wore at Christmas don't fit, so Anita settles for blue flats.

The fact that Tío Toni isn't going to come to the party for Mr. Washburn's sake drives home that this may be a birthday party, but it's also an important political event. Mr. Washburn has to look like a diplomat who plays by every rule, and it's in Toni's best interest to help him maintain that illusion. When Anita says that she is not a señorita yet, she means that she has not yet gotten her period, but that seems imminent based on the other changes happening in her body. She's on the cusp of maturity in every way right now; she knows, to some extent, what the political situations in her country and her family are, but soon she will know much more. Calling the girls butterflies suggests that Toni sees them as the future of the resistance movement.



What Anita learns from the canasta ladies drives home for her that she can't trust anyone but her family members and Chucha. Further, the fact that Lorena might be a SIM spy makes it clear that the political finds its way into people's homes, no matter what—Lorena works intimately with Anita's family, after all. Indeed, Trujillo and the SIM recognize the power of being in people's homes, where they believe their conversations are private. This inspires Anita to embrace spying for herself; it's one way that she can piece together what's going on.



It's maddening for Anita to have to wait with Mami, Chucha, and Lorena when all she wants to do is attend the party and feel grown up. But staying back has its benefits—she sees firsthand how much Mami doesn't trust Lorena, and she may suspect that there's something going on at Tío Toni's tonight. As she puts herself together, Anita experiments with how to make herself most attractive to Sam. Tellingly, she never says if she wants hairspray—it's more important to impress Sam than to consider if she would like hairspray herself.



Anita and Mami walk to the party with Lorena and Chucha. They all have platters of food. But when Mami sees a line of Volkswagens pulling up, she says in an odd voice that she forgot her shawl. She asks Chucha and Lorena to take the platters while she runs back to the house. As soon as Chucha and Lorena start down the path, Mami tells Anita to go to Tío Toni and say that Mr. Smith's friends have arrived. Anita thinks that now she can be like Joan of Arc. She runs all the way and repeats the message. She doesn't know what it means, but she remembers Susie saying there's a Mr. Smith who likes pretty girls. Many of the men take off running. Papi drags Anita to the house and then they walk calmly to the party.

Asking Anita to warn Tío Toni makes Anita feel important and mature, particularly because she gets to protect her family. It also gives her a way to feel like she's helping with the resistance movement, even if she's not sure what exactly is going on. And as Anita thinks about all the things she's heard about Mr. Smith and realizes he must be bad news for Tío Toni, clues begin to point to Mr. Smith being a nefarious government figure. Going to this party marks Anita's growing social maturity, but it's clear that this night might become a political coming-of-age too.



The party is in full swing. People are dressed up and Oscar and Sam take drink orders. Lucinda, Susie, and their friends look like flowers as they sit on lawn chairs. Mami and Mrs. Mancini look around nervously. They seem to relax when they see Papi, though Mami tips her head slightly to point to SIM agents surrounding the patio. Anita grows anxious. Suddenly, someone shouts for attention. An old man covered in military medals steps onto the patio. It's El Jefe—Mr. Smith. Everyone shouts, “Long live the chief” as fireworks explode.

The revelation that El Jefe is Mr. Smith is perhaps not surprising, but it adds more disturbing information to Anita's understanding of El Jefe. Now, she has to confront that a man she once worshipped preys on young girls—possibly, young girls like her. This starts to make the political happenings seem even more personal for Anita.



CHAPTER SIX

As Anita walks home after the party, her parents discuss El Jefe's surprise visit. Papi thanks Anita, his “little messenger.” Anita feels proud, even if the party was disappointing, since Mami wouldn't let Anita leave her side. Mami says that Tío Toni is putting the family in danger, but Papi insists he's safest in the compound. When they hear Lorena drop empty platters, Mami hisses that they have to fire her. Anita knows they have to be careful about it; Lorena might report things to the SIM. Fortunately Lorena is superstitious, so the family can ask Chucha to frighten her off. When Anita sees Chucha standing in the doorway, she feels safe. Recently, Chucha had a dream in which Anita, Lucinda, Mundín, and Mami all flew away. When Anita asked about Papi, Chucha said, “Not everyone can be a **butterfly**.”

Even if the party was disappointing because Anita didn't get to experience the independence she hoped for, it's still thrilling for Anita to have helped her family stay safe. The experience of being Papi's messenger, then, shows Anita that politics can help her feel closer and more loyal to her family, and that sometimes this is more important than trying to feel grown up. Further, it's telling that Anita feels so safe seeing Chucha in the doorway. Chucha is, in many ways, a part of Anita's family; Anita trusts her entirely. This is why Anita takes Chucha's dream seriously, although the content of the dream is frightening—it implies that while Anita and her siblings will be safe, her father might not make it.



The next morning, a limousine from the palace arrives with roses for Lucinda, from “an admirer.” Lucinda bursts into tears—the roses are from El Jefe. She begs Mami to not let El Jefe take her away. Mami pauses and looks at Anita before saying she'll cut off El Jefe's hands if he touches Lucinda. Later, Susie and Mrs. Washburn drop by. Susie assures Lucinda that Mr. Washburn will keep her safe, while Mrs. Washburn starts to tell Mami that El Jefe has eyes on some part of his body. She looks at Anita and says he has eyes “on the back of his butt.” Anita asks where Sam is. Mrs. Washburn shares that Sam and Oscar got into the rum last night, so they're still asleep.

The pointed looks that Mami and Mrs. Washburn throw Anita before talking about El Jefe suggest they're censoring themselves in front of her—it's likely that Mami wants to threaten to cut off El Jefe's genitals (not his hands) and that Mrs. Washburn is implying that El Jefe has eyes somewhere other than his butt. It's telling that Anita doesn't seem to pick up on the meaning of this—only that the adults aren't quite saying what they mean. It shows that while she's longing to be treated like an adult, she's not quite processing the situation in an adult way yet. Neither are Oscar and Sam, who clearly don't yet know how to tolerate rum.



The phone rings. Lorena picks it up and says it's "Un señor"—a man "who needs no introduction." Lucinda sobs. Mrs. Washburn takes the phone and says there's no one named Lucinda here. When Papi gets home, Mami fills him in. He goes to talk with Tío Toni and Mr. Washburn. The phone rings all day and no one answers it, since Mami gives Lorena the afternoon off. Finally, Papi and Mr. Washburn come up with a plan to send Lucinda to Colombia. Tío Toni isn't sure it'll work, so he suggests they "take Smith down now." Papi agrees that, "The king must die," which shocks Anita. She can't concentrate all day because she can't believe her father would do something he always told her was wrong.

Finally, Anita asks Mundín if Papi is going to kill El Jefe. He swiftly covers her mouth and tells her to be quiet, making Anita cry. Anita seeks out Lucinda, who's in the middle of packing. Mami and Mrs. Washburn help her put together a small bag of necessary items. Anita is stunned. She feels as though she's become ancient in the last few months. The thought of losing Lucinda is sad and Anita feels as though boys have suddenly become disgusting. Her male peers are drinking and vomiting, while an old man is courting Lucinda. Anita wishes she could cut her hair and dress like a boy—or go back to being 11.

Lucinda invites Anita to sleep with her that night. After they turn out the light, Anita sees visions of Papi and Tío Toni around El Jefe's body, covered in blood. She hears sobbing and realizes it's Lucinda. Lucinda apologizes for every mean thing she did and Anita bursts into tears too. Once they calm down, Lucinda tells Anita about all the boys she's kissed. Eventually, the girls fall asleep. Anita wakes up early and feels like her legs and nightgown are wet. She's afraid she wet the bed but when she lifts the sheets, she sees blood. Anita can't figure out what happened, so she pokes Lucinda. Lucinda congratulates Anita. Now, Anita is a *señorita*.

This is a moment of intense crisis for the family—the powerful Trujillo dictatorship now wants to take Lucinda and rape her, which causes Tío Toni and Papi to agree that they must finally assassinate Trujillo. The family has accepted a lot from the Trujillo regime so far (surveillance, repression, and the persecution of Tío Toni), but this is different. Tío Toni was a member of the resistance, so it was rational (if not morally just) that the regime was after him. By contrast, Lucinda is an innocent person who has done nothing to wrong Trujillo—she's being targeted simply for being a beautiful young girl, and the immense evil of Trujillo thinking he is entitled to her simply because he is powerful makes Papi and Tío Toni's choice morally clear. This is not, however, so clear to Anita, who has always been taught that killing is wrong. She's trying to square the gravity of the situation with her respect for her father, her love of her sister, and the moral lessons that she's always been taught, but it's still confusing to her. She's not quite adult enough to make sense of her family's actions, but she's going to have to understand soon.



Anita's desire to dress like a boy suggests that she now sees her femininity as a liability. She, like Lucinda, might one day be the target of sexual violence, and that's understandably horrifying. However, she's also suddenly critical of the men around her—her male playmates are drinking and throwing up, her father is planning an assassination, and her country's leader is trying to rape her sister. Suddenly, she doesn't feel that she can trust any men, and yet the women around her—ones she usually trusts, like Lucinda—seem vulnerable and unable to keep her safe. It's a terrible position for Anita to be in. In an indication of just how distressing this is, Anita for the first time wishes she could be younger. For the whole novel, she has wanted to seem older than she is, but now she sees that growing up means facing terrible things.



It's significant that Anita's first thought upon feeling the blood on her legs is that she wet the bed—something associated with childhood. Instead, Anita started her period, which indicates that she's now a young woman (a señorita). Perhaps it's wishful thinking that Anita interprets this as having wet the bed—growing up has become scary to her, and getting her period is just another affirmation of the growing dangers she will have to face. Anita's visions of Papi and Tío Toni speak to how disturbed she is at the prospect of them assassinating Trujillo. These thoughts are difficult and even traumatizing—but Anita has nowhere to process these emotions without her diary.



Anita doesn't feel grown-up, and she doesn't want to be a *señorita* now that she knows what El Jefe does to them. When Anita begs Lucinda to not tell Mami (she can't stand the thought of Papi knowing), Lucinda asks what to do with the sheets. Anita knows that Chucha will keep her secret, so she gathers the sheets and slips out. Mami, Papi, and Mr. Washburn are already in the study. Anita finds Chucha outside. Chucha isn't surprised. She studies the sheets and says, "This will do." She promises to not tell Mami, shares that both Lucinda and Susie will leave today, and says they have to get rid of one more person while glancing at Lorena's room.

Chucha leads Anita to her room. There, they pray to a picture of San Miguel. Then, Anita helps Chucha drag her coffin to Lorena's room. They arrange the bloody sheets so they spill out of the coffin, as though a dead person has crawled out. Anita feels mean, but she knows that she has to do this to protect her family. She thinks that people have to do bad things—like assassinate Mr. Smith—in order to be safe. Murder is wrong, but El Jefe is evil. He kills people and rapes young girls. When Chucha and Anita are done, Anita heads back to her room. She runs into Mr. Washburn and averts her eyes—she's sure he can tell she started her period. He says that Lucinda's visa came through. Anita decides that Mr. Washburn is a good, trustworthy man, like Papi and Mundín.

In Lucinda's room, Mami tells Lucinda that she won't have to teach English or be a maid—she has a visitor's visa and will accompany Susie to Susie's grandparents' house. When Mami asks about the stripped bed, Lucinda says that Chucha knew she'd be leaving. Then, they hear a scream from the other end of the house. Chucha appears moments later with the news that Lorena is leaving.

Starting her period isn't an exciting marker of Anita's burgeoning adulthood. For Anita, it means that she's now at risk, and the fewer people who know about it the better. Her ability to trust Chucha drives home again that Chucha is family for Anita. Chucha will be here to support Anita as she grows and changes, and she'll always tell Anita the truth—such as that Lucinda and Susie are leaving the country today. Previously, the family has discussed having Chucha frighten Lorena into quitting, since it's not politically feasible for them to fire her. It seems that Chucha now wants to put this plan in motion.



This passage marks the emergence of a more complex moral framework for Anita. She and Chucha are conspiring to scare Lorena into quitting, and it's fitting that the sheets appear in this moment; just as the sheets are mark Anita's physical maturation, her attitude towards frightening Lorena marks her new acceptance of how complicated moral behavior can be. While it's certainly not nice to try to frighten Lorena into quitting, they must do it to keep their family safe—especially since Lucinda is attempting to flee Trujillo, and Lorena could spoil this plan. So just as Anita finally accepts that her father might have to kill someone in order to do justice, she accepts that she might have to scare someone to help her sister. Anita's acknowledgement that some men—including her father and Mr. Washburn—are good is also an indication that she's getting beyond black-and-white moral thinking and learning to accept complexity.



It's a mark of Anita and Lucinda's improving relationship that Lucinda makes good on her promise and keeps Anita's secret about getting her period. Now, it's up to Anita whether or not to tell Mami or anyone else. This is a situation that makes Anita seem far more mature, as she's wholly in control of her secret.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Anita begs to stay home until Lucinda leaves, but Mami reminds her that they have to act normal. Anita and Lucinda hug and sob. On the way to school, everything feels wrong. When Anita sees police stopping a car, she slips her crucifix necklace into her mouth. She does this now when she needs good luck. Papi drives slowly and Anita worries that she'll say or do something that will hurt her family. She prays that Lorena won't tell anyone about her erased diary. When they stop to drop Mundín off, Mundín offers to take Anita for a ride in Tío Toni's hot rod later. Anita is too struck by his kindness to answer, but Sam (who is riding with them) says he'd like to go. Sam is thrilled that Susie is leaving, which makes Anita even sadder. She realizes she and Sam have never felt the same way about anything.

Mrs. Brown has bad news: the American School will close for a while. To Anita, this means she'll lose her last normal thing. She's so sad that she puts her head down on her desk and can't tell Mrs. Brown if she's ill. Anita allows Mrs. Brown to lead her to the nurse. On the way out of the classroom, she sees Charlie Price make a circle in the air and Sam grin at Charlie. Anita wants to scream that she's not crazy. When she swallows her scream, her mind seems to go quiet. A bit later, Mami arrives at school. Anita wants to tell Mami the truth about her period and everything else, but she can't remember the words.

Anita stays in bed all day. Chucha brings her tea, while Mundín offers to take her for a ride. He bites his nails and Anita empathizes—she realizes that while Mundín bites and Lucinda breaks out in a rash, she forgets her words. Since she forgets simple words, Anita wonders if she's going crazy. When Papi gets home from work, he sits with Anita, smiles, and says that one day, Anita will look back and think she was strong and brave. He seems to know that Anita is thinking she's not strong or brave, so he assures Anita she is. He tells her to be free and **fly**. This is scary, since Papi sounds like Chucha. Mami pokes her head in and suggests Anita has mumps, but Papi says that's not what's wrong.

Anita is now almost fully aware of the seriousness of her family's situation, and instead of making her feel proud grown up, it makes her feel afraid. The sense of responsibility that Anita now has—her awareness that her actions could put the family in serious danger—shows that she's shouldering more of the family's burden and accepting a more adult role. This means losing interest in some of the things that gave her pleasure just weeks before; she can't imagine enjoying a ride in a hot rod in a time like this, and—more important—the differences between her maturity and Sam's obvious innocence make her no longer feel in love with him. This is a sad discovery for Anita, because it shows her how much has changed.



Charlie and Sam make fun of Anita because they don't understand the pressure she's under right now. They're American, not Dominican, so their families' lives are not currently on the line. This is another example (like the Secret Santa controversy) of Americans misunderstanding and trivializing Dominican suffering—throughout the novel, American characters often rush to judgment, rather than trying to understand the experiences of the Dominicans around them. When Anita forgets how to speak, it's possible to read her silence as a normal reaction to a traumatic situation. She doesn't have the maturity or the coping skills to function normally anymore—and for that matter, silence currently seems like the safest option, since words are such a liability.



Here, Anita has the presence of mind to realize that her loss of words is just like her sister's rash and her brother's nail-biting. It's not necessarily that something is wrong with them; it's just a reaction to stress. Anita's father sees this even more clearly than she does, and he tries to offer comfort—not by telling her falsely that everything will be okay, but by reassuring her that she is inherently strong. He seems to know that she will need to draw on her courage and strength to get through what lies ahead, but he's also confident that she'll one day be free.



Men begin to meet every night on the patio, right outside Anita's window. She listens to them speak in code. Papi, Tío Toni, Mr. Washburn, and Wimpy are almost always there. Mr. Mancini doesn't come anymore because he can provide a safe house, and though Anita doesn't know what this means, she thinks it's related to why she now goes to the Mancinis' house for lessons. Anita and Mundín ride with Sam in the consulate car, since it's safer. There are now lots of checkpoints and curfews. One morning, lots of people on the street are wearing black. Mundín explains that it's a silent protest. At night, Anita also hears the men talk about a pill that will allow them to commit suicide if the SIM captures them. Anita checks Papi's pockets for pills when she does laundry and vows to keep one pill for herself if she finds one.

One night, Anita hears Tío Toni say that this has got to stop. They've been waiting for a delivery of "ingredients for the picnic" for weeks and they sound desperate. Toni insists that the Americans are playing with them, but Papi reminds Toni that Mr. Washburn saved Lucinda. The men agree that Mr. Washburn is "on his way out." Anita figures this means the Washburns will leave soon. Mami opens Anita's door and asks if she's still awake. Anita turns on her ugly monkey lamp, which she inherited from Carla. Pleadingly, Mami asks Anita if she'd like a different lamp. She says Anita is too quiet and sad and says she has bad news. Anita squeaks out that the Washburns are leaving. Mami starts to cry that they've made Anita grow up too fast. She laments that Anita hasn't had a childhood, but Anita thinks her childhood is over anyway.

Outside, Anita hears Mr. Washburn and Wimpy arrive. They discuss how they won't get any more picnic ingredients and Mr. Washburn says he'll bring what he has in a few days. Mami looks horrified and calls out the window that Anita can hear what the men are saying. Papi peers in and says, "No wonder." After this, the men meet at Tío Toni's house. It's inconvenient, since the radio in Papi's study is tuned to Radio Swan. According to Oscar, Swan is a new station that broadcasts reports by people who want to free the country. It's illegal, but everyone tunes in.

While Anita has grown tremendously more mature and knowledgeable about the situation in her country, this is a situation that she doesn't quite understand, which suggests just how scary and dangerous it is. The few facts she does glean makes this even more worrying; presumably, her father and Tío Toni would only want suicide pills if they thought that being captured by the SIM would be a fate worse than death. Anita is searching her father's pockets for pills in part because she doesn't want him to die, and in part because she wants to protect herself; she has come to understand that this situation is incredibly dangerous, and even at twelve, she is thinking about ways to avoid being tortured and murdered.



Even as Anita doesn't understand all of what's going on, she's still developing critical thinking skills as she tries to piece things together. And clearly, Anita is doing better at this than her parents thought; Mami seems shocked that Anita already knew about the Washburns' departure. For Mami, it's heartbreaking to see her daughter so silent and withdrawn. It likely makes her feel like she's failing to protect Anita, but Mami is walking a fine line; she has to make Anita aware of what's going on to some degree so that Anita knows how to keep herself and the family safe. As Anita suggests, this seems incompatible with allowing Anita to remain an innocent child.



Once Papi realizes how much Anita can hear, her silence starts to make more sense. He seems to recognize that she's overwhelmed with everything she knows about the assassination plot. However, it's also worth considering that part of Anita's stress comes from all the things she doesn't know. While her parents are well within their rights to protect her, a lot of Anita's stress has to do with her uncertainty about what's going on and whether they will be okay.



Mami keeps Anita close. With only Chucha left in the household, Mami has a perfect excuse: she needs Anita to take on small tasks, like serving for the canasta group. One afternoon during the canasta game, Mrs. Washburn calls Anita over, puts her arms around Anita, and asks if she's going to miss Sam. She and Sam are going back to Washington soon, even though Mr. Washburn is remaining longer. Mrs. Washburn asks Anita if she's going to come visit. Anita stays silent and shakes her head. Mami scolds her, but Mrs. Washburn brushes Mami away. She hugs Anita again. Anita wonders if Mrs. Washburn knows that she now has breasts that hurt when she's squeezed like this.

These days, Sam comes over to hang out with Mundín and work on Tío Toni's hot rod. Anita knows for sure that she doesn't love Sam. Sometimes, Anita sees the boys working on the car and Mami playing canasta and things seem normal. She comes up with things to say—but suddenly, she forgets her words and remembers she's not safe. One morning, Mr. Washburn drives Anita, Sam, and Mundín to the Mancinis' house for class. Traffic is bad and Mr. Washburn slams on the brakes. The car behind rams into the consulate car and the trunk flies open. Mr. Washburn rushes out and two policemen come over to help. Sam, Mundín, and Anita get out too.

Mr. Washburn tells the driver who rear-ended him that it's no problem as he tries to close the trunk. One of the policemen offers to try to fix the trunk, but Mr. Washburn insists he just needs some rope. The other policeman heads back to his post while the first insists on helping Mr. Washburn. He opens the trunk as the other driver gets back with rope. Everyone's eyes go wide. The "ingredients for the picnic"—guns—are spilling out of bags. The policeman reaches for the rope, secures the trunk, and tells Mr. Washburn to get it fixed. Mr. Washburn's hands are shaking as he gets back into the car. Anita puts her crucifix in her mouth but can't come up with a prayer of thanks.

It's an ominous sign that the Washburn family is returning to Washington without Mr. Washburn—previously, Mrs. Washburn dismissed that possibility, since she felt safe in the Dominican Republic as an American. Of course, if Trujillo discovered Mr. Washburn's involvement in the assassination plot, diplomatic immunity would not protect him and his family. This all suggests that things are getting more dangerous. To Anita, it once again seems like Mrs. Washburn is treating her like a small child, when in reality, she is quickly becoming a teenager. It's also frustrating to her that she can't explain to Mrs. Washburn what she's thinking in this moment—but there's no way to safely or politely explain the gulf that has developed between her and Sam.



Anita has become so consumed by her family and country's predicament that she no longer has anything at all in common with Sam. While there are times when things feel almost normal, Anita does not feel capable of relaxing—if she relaxes, she worries that she'll say too much and endanger everyone. That fear has taken nearly all the joy out of her life, from her crush on Sam to her enjoyment of school. The policemen coming over to help after the accident is scary—Anita has learned that policemen in the Dominican Republic aren't really there to help, but rather to support the Trujillo regime.



Seeing the policeman and the other driver say nothing about the guns is terrifying—but it also shows Anita that there are many people in the country who want exactly what Papi wants. In other words, this helps Anita realize that her family isn't operating in isolation; the resistance movement is made up of all sorts of people all over the country, including people like police officers who appear to be working for Trujillo. This shows just how far-reaching the country's instability has become, and it also further complicates Anita's sense of her country. She once thought that the government was good, then she realized the government was bad, and now she realizes that the government is made up of a lot of people, some of whom are genuinely evil while others are not.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Oscar yells that El Jefe is coming. Every day, El Jefe walks from his mother's house to the ocean. The route passes in front of Oscar's house, so Anita joins Oscar and Oscar's three little sisters at the window. The first time Anita saw the parade she was shocked to see men she recognized from Papi's evening meetings, but she keeps quiet about this. Oscar's sisters comment that El Jefe isn't wearing his "jewelry" (medals). Oscar observes that El Jefe is wearing his khaki uniform on a Tuesday. He usually only wears khaki on Wednesdays when he visits his country house and his girlfriends. Anita shivers as she remembers how El Jefe courted Lucinda.

Once El Jefe passes, Anita stands at the window and watches the daily **flight** leaving for the U.S. It's the flight that Anita's family members, Sam, and Mrs. Washburn took. Oscar joins Anita at the window and asks if she's sad that Sam is gone. Anita thinks this is sweet, but she hasn't spent much time with Sam in the last few weeks. He was so excited to go back to the U.S., but Anita could only wonder why Sam smiled when Charlie made fun of her. Oscar brings Anita back to the present by saying it's scary being the last ones left. Anita is thankful; it makes her feel less crazy to know that Oscar is scared too. Oscar says that according to his father, a person can't be brave if they're not scared. Suddenly, Oscar seems old and wise. Anita smiles and Oscar kisses her cheek.

Papi arrives soon after to pick up Anita and Mundín. Normally, he visits with Mrs. Mancini's mother while Mundín finishes a Parcheesi game with María de los Santos. María is Oscar's older sister and Mundín is in love with her. But today, Papi says he can't come in. Anita races down to the car, feeling like her emotions are everywhere. She's certain Papi can tell Oscar kissed her, but Papi seems distracted. On the drive, Anita asks if Papi is going out tonight. It takes a moment for Papi to answer and he seems angry that Anita asked, but he says he is. Anita recalls that last week, Papi and his friends went out. They came back with the news that Mr. Smith didn't show at the picnic site. Mundín notes that El Jefe is wearing khaki today and Papi nods.

El Jefe's predictable schedule gives the sense that even in such a dangerous time, some things are dependable—such as El Jefe's evening walk to the ocean. However, the fact that El Jefe is sometimes surrounded by people from Papi's meetings shows that things are more precarious than they seem—El Jefe is quite vulnerable, since those close to him aren't all loyal. Oscar's sisters' observations show that even very young children can pick up on more than adults give them credit for. While it's unclear if there's any significance to El Jefe not wearing medals, the fact remains that the girls are learning to pay attention.



Oscar is half-Dominican and he has stayed in the country while other Americans have fled. From the beginning of the novel, Oscar seemed to understand more about the world than Anita's other peers, and this is suddenly attractive to her. While she lost interest in Sam because she couldn't relate to his naivete, Oscar seems to know just what she's going through, since he's in a similar position. Oscar helps Anita with her fear by sharing it, and also by linking fear and courage—someone cannot show courage without also having fear, because courage is about defying one's own fear. With this to think about, Anita may be able to appreciate how brave she's already been over the last few months. She's spent much of her time afraid, but she has also helped her family and shouldered the burdens of remaining in the Dominican Republic rather than fleeing. His kiss also helps Anita feel mature. It reminds her again that life goes on.



Anita's youthful self-centeredness comes to the forefront when she's certain that Papi can tell Oscar kissed her. Since it's so important to Anita that Oscar kissed her, she feels that everyone else must be able to tell, but it's actually the furthest thing from Papi's mind. Given what Anita now knows about what the "picnic ingredients" are (the guns in Mr. Washburn's trunk), it seems that Papi has already tried once to assassinate Trujillo, but Trujillo didn't show up. The implication is that tonight they're going to try again.



Mr. Washburn had to leave the compound a few days ago, so Anita's house is the only one occupied. But there are lots of cars in the driveway and the portrait of El Jefe has been turned to the wall. When Mami runs out, Papi gives her a nod like he gave Mundín. Mami asks Anita how school was and doesn't seem to notice Anita's blush. Instead, she snaps at a man carrying a sack to unload it in Papi's study, away from Anita. Anita knows that Mami is trying to keep things from her, but she's still aware that something big is happening. She often finds Mami at Papi's typewriter. Once, Anita found one of the papers. It was like a Declaration of Independence.

Mami also worries about Mundín, as he's now old enough to be treated like an adult if the SIM arrest him. Papi doesn't think they can get Mundín to New York since Lucinda has already overstayed her visa. Mami announces that the children will have an early dinner and then go to bed. Mundín says he's going with Papi, but Papi reminds Mundín that he needs to stay here in case something happens. After supper, Mami, Mundín, and Anita go into the bedroom to listen to the radio. The government station, Radio Caribe, is having a poetry contest. Mami turns it off since the poems are all about El Jefe. Anita remembers that Carla won her **eraser** in the shape of the Dominican Republic in a poetry contest. She wonders if Carla's poem was about El Jefe.

Anita has lots of questions but stays silent. She flips through *Life* magazines until Chucha knocks. Anita offers to help Chucha turn down the beds. As they stand around Mundín's bed, Chucha whispers for Anita to get ready to **fly** free. At that moment, they hear cars honking outside. The men rush in with guns and say "Long live the Butterflies!" Papi says they're free, but Tío Toni says that no one can find Pupo. Anita doesn't ask who that is. One man remarks that Pupo might have betrayed them, and then, after a phone call, Papi sends men on errands. They need to find Pupo to "view the evidence."

Anita picks up on all the things that are different at home, including Trujillo's portrait facing the wrong way. This clue in particular suggests that there has been a shift in power—the family is no longer living in fear of Trujillo, not because Trujillo is no longer in power, but perhaps because they're more confident now that they can defeat him. Anita is also starting to understand Mami's role in the resistance movement. While Mami is not involved in the assassination itself, it seems that she has been typing pamphlets or fliers, planning for the future when they are free and Trujillo is gone.



Both Mami and Papi try to impress upon Mundín that it's essential he look out for his family. While he may want to go out and help Papi kill El Jefe, it's his responsibility to stay home and support the family in case, it's implied, Papi dies. Staying out of the action to make sure Mundín can support the family is just as noble as whatever Papi and his friends are going out to do. As Anita thinks back to the poetry contest that Carla won, she has to confront how young and naive she was at the time. At the time, she probably thought nothing of it if Carla recited a poem venerating El Jefe—that would've seemed normal, and the eraser seemed like a wonderful prize. Now, however, she understands that the contest and the prize were meant to indoctrinate the children into admiring their country and its leader without understanding the ugly truth of the regime.



While Anita used to always ask questions whose answers she wasn't prepared to hear, now she stays silent, even though she knows that something enormous is happening. This is, in a way, a sign of maturity—she knows that it isn't essential for her to know everything, and she gives everyone else the space to do whatever they need to do uninterrupted. When the men with guns rush in talking about the butterflies, it seems that their cause has been victorious, but the mysterious absence of Pupo points to a hiccup in their plan. The implication is that one of their co-conspirators may have been secretly loyal to the government, which would put everyone involved with the plot (and their families) in danger.



When Mami asks what happens if they can't find Pupo, Papi looks to El Jefe's portrait. In the commotion, it's turned back around. Papi says that it'll be every man for himself. He kisses Anita and Mami and leaves with the other men. Suddenly, Mami realizes that Mundín is gone. After a frantic phone call, she finds out where he is and grouses that she's going to punish him. But Chucha says that Mundín is already a man. Anita feels like all that's left of her family now are Mami and Chucha.

The realization that El Jefe's portrait turned itself around is an ominous sign—when they turned it towards the wall, it indicated that they were no longer afraid of Trujillo, but now that it's back, it seems that they must try to keep up appearances again. At the very least, Mundín is now in danger since he snuck out. When Chucha insists that Mundín has become a man already, it reminds Anita that she's not the only one growing up in her household. Her siblings are going through much the same thing she is.



CHAPTER NINE

Chucha goes back to her room while Anita kneels next to Mami to pray. Instead of praying, she thinks through how to escape the SIM if they come. It occurs to Anita that they all might die. She wonders if the SIM will torture her for staying silent and wonders how to tell them that she's not talking to anyone right now. When Anita sees that Mami is shaking, she realizes that Mami is afraid too. Anita remembers Oscar saying that one has to be scared to be brave and she wonders where he is. Maybe, if things work out, Anita can be normal again and fall in love with Oscar. Eventually, Mami gets in bed with Anita. They keep the radio tuned to the official station and hope to hear Pupo's announcement, but it doesn't come.

Given what Anita has heard about Trujillo's government, it's hard to say if her fears of facing interrogation are justified or just a reflection of her youthful belief in her own importance. On the plus side, things seem a little bit easier for her once Anita remembers that it's impossible to brave without being afraid. This helps her decide that Mami isn't doing anything wrong or scary by shaking—Mami, like Anita, is trying to be brave despite her fears. Dreaming of a normal life after this is understandable, given how traumatic the situation is.



Anita jerks awake when she hears sirens. She asks Mami if they're going to be okay and who Pupo is. Mami says they're in God's hands, but Pupo is the head of the army. He was supposed to announce the Dominican Republic's liberation. Anita wants to ask if there aren't other people who will help, like the police officer who saw the guns. Mami sobs that without the army, they won't be free. Anita barely sleeps. She dreams of the García girls, the **eraser** in the shape of the Dominican Republic, and blood. Eventually, Chucha shakes Anita awake. Moments after, "gangster men" rush in and search the room. Other men push Mami in and shout "Traitors."

Mami may feel that under the current circumstances, it doesn't do any harm to let Anita know what was supposed to happen. It may not seem useful to protect her anymore by withholding information. For Anita, Mami appears to be overreacting, since Anita knows there are other officials besides the military who support the resistance. But while Anita might not be wrong about the resistance's broad support, this does show that she doesn't understand how Trujillo's government works and how crucial it is to have the backing of the military.



Then, the men lead Mami and Anita to the living room, where a man they call Navajita—"little razor blade"—sits. After a while, a SIM agent shouts that they found El Jefe in the trunk of the Chevy. Navajita tells the agent to "take them in" and Anita sees agents shove Papi and Tío Toni towards the line of Volkswagens outside. Soon, all the cars are gone. Mami tries to phone people for help, but no one can help her. Pupo seems to be gone; meanwhile, the SIM, Trujillo Junior, and Trujillo's brothers are in charge. They plan to make the country pay for El Jefe's murder.

El Jefe was found dead in the back of Papi's Chevy, which confirms that Papi and Tío Toni assassinated the dictator. The fact that the body spent the night at Anita's house shows her again that politics and family life are impossible to separate from each other. Her home isn't just where she lives; it's where the resistance planned and even carried out parts of its assassination plan. However, the fact that Pupo is missing and Trujillo's son and brothers are now running the country is terrible news—not only is the dictatorship intact, but now the Trujillo family is thirsty for revenge.



Mami, Chucha, and Anita start to clean up the trashed house, but Mami breaks down. Finally, Mami reaches Mrs. Mancini. Mrs. Mancini comes over immediately with her husband. Mr. Mancini tells Mami that she and Anita need to get to safety—if the SIM can't get confessions out of their captives, they'll arrest the family. Mami panics when she realizes that Mundín is in danger, but Mr. Mancini assures her he's fine. He tells Mami and Anita to pack bags and come with him, and he tells Chucha to go to "her people." Chucha snaps that this is her family. Anita breaks down when she sees the smashed monkey lamp in her room. Chucha comes in, packs a bag, and tosses Anita's diary in. Then, she tells Anita to **fly** free.

Mr. and Mrs. Mancini's arrival shows Anita that even if the resistance can't get help from people like Pupo, there are always people willing to help. And sometimes, even someone as strong as Mami will have to rely on outsiders to help her get through this traumatic situation. The smashed monkey lamp marks the irrevocable shattering of Anita's innocence. While she has previously clung to some vestiges of her childhood to keep her world feeling normal and safe, she can no longer do that after today. Chucha's undying loyalty to the family is a reminder that some bonds are unbreakable. No matter what went wrong among the conspirators, Anita is reminded that blood isn't the only marker of loyalty and there are plenty of people in the family's orbit who are dedicated to keeping them safe.



ANITA'S DIARY

On Saturday, June 3, Anita writes that Mami gave her permission to write in her diary as much as she wants. Maybe her account will help someone else. A few days later, Anita explains that she and Mami are staying in the Mancinis' walk-in closet. There's not a lot of privacy—Mrs. Mancini woke them up the other night to tell them to stop snoring. On Tuesday, Anita says that the Mancinis are set up well to house fugitives. They always lock their bedroom door and never let the help clean in there. According to Mr. Mancini, the SIM are imprisoning whole towns. Trujillo Junior wants to punish everyone involved in the assassination, but people are calling the assassination an *ajusticiamiento*, which means "bringing to justice." This makes Anita feel better, since Papi and Tío Toni were carrying out justice, not just murdering someone.

*From the Mancinis' closet, Anita begins her process of healing. Now that she can write freely, there's hope that she'll be able to make sense of what's happening and figure out how she feels about all of it. This is most evident in her writing about how people are calling the assassination an *ajusticiamiento*. Using this word recasts the assassination into something righteous and positive—it's how the country collectively gets justice for what they've experienced under Trujillo. It also helps Anita come to terms with Papi's role in the assassination, since it implies that Papi did a good thing.*



On June 7, a rainy Wednesday, Anita writes that she and Mami have to stay in the closet when the Mancinis go out. They have to use a chamber pot at those times. Now, the Mancinis insist that Anita call them Tío Pepe and Tía Mari. Pepe and Mari are the only ones who know about Anita and Mami, aside from their two Yorkshire terriers. It's weird for Anita to be in the same house as Oscar, and she wonders if the Mancinis notice her blushing whenever they talk about him. If the SIM come to the house, Anita and Mami plan to sneak into the bathroom and hide in two deep, narrow closets.

Even though Anita is certainly stressed about her life and her future, it's telling that she's still blushing at any mention of Oscar. With this, the novel makes it clear that life goes on, even in difficult times. People still fall in love in all sorts of circumstances. Though her interest in Oscar is a mark of her maturity, her question of whether the Mancinis notice her blush shows how young she still is; her crush is so obvious to her that she believes it must be obvious to others, too, even when everyone else is so clearly preoccupied with huge issues.



The next day, Anita writes that Tía Mari turned on Radio Caribe while Tío Pepe turned on Radio Swan. Everyone gathered around the radio playing Swan to listen to the real news. According to Caribe, everything is fine. According to Swan, there are groups in the country investigating human rights abuses. The stations agree that the situation is dire. Trujillo Junior is arresting and killing people. Anita doesn't want to listen, so she writes in her diary to give herself something else to focus on. Mami thinks this is rude, but Tía Mari notes that Anita is talking more now that she's writing. Anita feels like she's slowly remembering her words.

On Friday, June 9, Anita learns that Mr. Washburn is back in Washington. He's trying to get Papi and Tío Toni on a list of interviewed prisoners, since that makes it harder for the SIM to kill them. Anita tries to pray with Mami and Tía Mari, but she can't remember the words. The next day, Mari gives Anita a tiny flashlight, since the electricity goes out all the time. Anita only knows what time it is because a siren sounds at noon and at six in the evening to announce curfew. Living so close to the Mancinis, Anita observes their private habits. She wonders if they notice that she touches the spot where Oscar kissed her when she's afraid.

It's Anita's second Sunday in hiding. Sundays are hard, since they used to have big family gatherings on Sundays. Earlier, Anita vowed to stop asking about Papi and Tío Toni. But then she broke down and asked. Mami told her that they're alive and started to cry. Tía Mari took Mami to the bathroom while Tío Pepe sat with Anita. He encouraged her to think positively. Anita tried it and imagined walking between Papi and Tío Toni. Then, she wished for their freedom so they could be together as a family.

Even though Anita can barely bring herself to listen to the two radio stations, they still offer her an important lesson in thinking critically. By comparing what Caribe and Swan report, Anita can figure out how the government is twisting facts to manipulate the narrative and thereby control the people. Similarly, it's telling that both stations agree that the situation is a bloodbath. This fact seems inarguable, even to a regime that not that long ago wanted to look fair and good. That Anita starts talking more now that she can write is important—it shows that writing gives her confidence and clarity in who she is, and that she's beginning to feel safe again. For a long time, talking made her feel vulnerable because she worried about saying the wrong thing. Now, she feels comfortable saying slightly more.



When Anita writes about the list, the novel touches on another good use for writing: literally saving lives. Getting Papi and Tío Toni's name on the list will make them people that international organizations can track, which makes it a much bigger deal if the Dominican authorities try to kill them. When Anita takes notice of the Mancinis' private habits, it shows that she's starting to think of other people as having rich internal lives—a mark of her maturity. Nonetheless, she still has a tendency towards self-centered magical thinking; there's no way anyone could know that she sometimes touches the spot where Oscar kissed her, because she never told anyone about it.



Without Papi around, Tío Pepe steps into a paternal role for Anita. By encouraging her to think positively, he helps her develop new coping skills, despite the difficult situation. In addition to recording her thoughts so she can start to organize them, Anita can also try to replace her negative thoughts with positive ones in her mind. Nonetheless, it's clear from all the adults' reactions that Papi and Toni are in grave danger and nobody is confident that they will be okay.



The next day, Anita writes that she sometimes thinks of her life as a movie—it makes it easier to put up with Mami’s nerves. Every night, Anita digs out her flashlight and diary, rolls her eyes when Mami snaps that the Mancinis are asleep, and then writes on the toilet. Then, Anita says she wants to record everything that happened the night they left the compound. Tío Pepe covered Mami and Anita in sacks and, fortunately, no one stopped the car. Mundín was at the Italian embassy. They decided that Mundín would stay there, where the SIM can’t touch him, while Mami and Anita would live with the Mancinis. Anita was thrilled to discover her diary in her bag. As soon as there’s a way out, everyone will leave the country.

On Tuesday, June 13, Anita learns that the compound is now a SIM interrogation center. Chucha, however, is fine—she has a job at Wimpy’s, which she always refused to enter. The next day, Anita explains how she and Mami get food. Breakfast and lunch aren’t problems, since the Mancinis normally eat breakfast in their room and they have the excuse of wanting to listen to the news at lunchtime. Dinner is the only challenge, but Tía Mari hides a plastic bag on her lap and slips food into it.

Thursday marks two weeks of hiding. Earlier, Anita was writing when she heard Oscar’s little sisters playing outside. Anita was envious and burst into tears. Mami told Anita she was too big to cry, but Tía Mari told Anita to keep writing and stay strong. The following day, Anita writes that she and Mami get notes from Mundín. He’s fine, but he wants to know if María de los Santos has a boyfriend. Anita can’t believe Mundín is thinking about girls—but to be fair, she thinks about Oscar a lot. The next day, Anita writes down what happened when she asked the Mancinis if María had a boyfriend. Tía Mari said that María always has a boyfriend, while Tío Pepe was shocked his daughter was seeing boys at all. It turned into a big argument.

While Anita rolls her eyes at Mami’s nerves, it’s understandable that Mami is beside herself with worry and fear. In addition to fearing for her husband, Mami may also worry about offending the Mancinis—which is probably why she discourages Anita from writing in the middle of the night. By telling the story of leaving the compound with the Mancinis, Anita both records the story for herself so she’ll always remember it and gets to give voice to how frightened she was. It’s telling that she was so happy to find her diary—her diary gives her something to hope for. The suggestion that everyone will leave the country when they can makes clear that the plan didn’t really work. Papi dreamed of a Dominican Republic that is safe and free for everyone, which is why he wanted to stay instead of fleeing to the United States. Now it’s not even safe for his own family to stay.



The fact that the SIM are now using the compound to interrogate people is certainly difficult for Anita to swallow. The compound is the center of her family’s existence and a connection between generations—now it’s being used to torture people and advance political goals that her family explicitly opposes. But this also shows her once again that the political is personal—she cannot separate her personal life from the fate of the country. Certainly, Papi believes this too or else he wouldn’t have risked his life for his country.



While she lives with the Mancinis, Anita essentially has two mothers to look after her. This means that at times when Mami falls short and asks too much of Anita, Tía Mari can step in and assure Anita that things are going to be fine and that her behavior and feelings are normal. Getting Mundín’s note about María de los Santos drives home again that life and love go on in all manner of circumstances. Just because Mundín is scared for his life doesn’t mean that he can’t still have a crush—and the same goes for Anita, who’s still thinking often about Oscar.



On Sunday, Anita has an okay day. Tía Mari threw a barbecue for the canasta group, thinking that it would be good for Mami to observe her friends. Mami explained to Anita that her friends were involved in the plot, but they don't have to go into hiding because they weren't as involved. El Jefe's body, after all, was in Papi's Chevy. Anita thinks it was dumb to leave the body lying around, but Mami explained that Pupo was supposed to come see the body and then announce the revolution. She and Anita took turns watching out the tiny bathroom window. Anita could see Oscar reading and decided she'd like to read too. She asked Tía Mari to get her a book.

On Monday, Tía Mari brings Anita a book about the life of the Virgin Mary. It isn't very interesting, so Anita plays with her hair in the mirror and wonders if Oscar would appreciate a ponytail. The next day, Anita tells Tío Pepe about wanting to read. According to him, lots of famous people have read and written amazing stuff in prison. The important thing, according to Pepe, is to keep a schedule. Anita writes her schedule down. She wakes up, does her exercises, and showers. During breakfast she tries to learn something from Pepe. She spends her day reading, trying to be nice to Mami, and writing in her diary. Dinner is the best meal of the day. Anita writes in the evenings and thinks of Papi and Tío Toni.

Anita doesn't write for nine days. When she picks her diary up again, she explains what happened. After writing late at night, Anita heard someone outside and woke up Mami, who woke up the Mancinis. The Mancinis let the dogs out and Anita heard knocks at the door and two gunshots. Mami and Anita went into the closets. After a while, Tío Pepe came back. The SIM agents came to investigate "intruders," but one of the agents recognized Tío Pepe and declined to search the house. The next morning, they found the dogs dead. Anita felt awful, especially since she left her diary out while she hid. She couldn't write for the shame—but then she realized that she can't let the SIM take writing away from her.

Mami and Anita's relationship seems to be changing during their time in hiding. Given Mami's earlier behavior, it seems of character for her to tell Anita so openly what was supposed to happen with Pupo and El Jefe's body. This could indicate that the trauma of the situation is bringing them closer together and also that Mami sees Anita as mature enough to know the unvarnished truth. Anita's desire to read, meanwhile, helps her feel closer to Oscar; it seems like she wants to impress him.



Anita may be in hiding to save her life, but this doesn't mean that her thoughts and desires change all that much. She still dreams about Oscar—and though she scorned Lucinda for being such a stereotypical teenager not that long ago, Anita now does the same primping in the bathroom that Lucinda once did. With this, Anita begins to bridge the gap between being a child and being an adult—and in the process, she starts to look more like a teenager. When Pepe suggests that many imprisoned people have written amazing things, he implicitly frames Anita as being a political prisoner herself—and he suggests that she has an important story to tell.



Though Anita and the Mancinis don't seem to have all the information, it seems likely that the SIM came to the Mancinis' house in hopes of searching it (using made-up "intruders" as a pretext). This suggests that the Mancinis may be in more danger than they thought. For Anita, this experience drives home just how at risk her life is right now. But even if she has to confront the possibility of arrest or death, Anita understands that she can't let the SIM sap all of her joy. She must keep writing if she wants to make it through.



On July 1, Anita writes two resolutions: to write every day and to keep her diary hidden. During the day, it lives in Tía Mari's fur coat. When Anita writes, she feels like she's **flying**. The next day, Anita feels sad. It's been more than a month since she saw Papi. The following day, Mami and Anita have a scare. Oscar's little sisters come into the bedroom—which isn't locked—to play in Tía Mari's makeup. Then, they decide to check out "Mami's bear," which is Mari's fur coat. Anita and Mami back into the clothes, leaving their game of Concentration spread out on the floor. Then Oscar shows up and sends the girls away, but he steps into the closet. When he notices something, he backs out. Later, Anita discovers that Oscar turned over the queen of hearts.

Early on Tuesday morning, Anita hears pebbles hitting the bathroom window. When she looks out, she sees Oscar down there. Later, she writes that she tossed the queen of hearts out the window. The next afternoon, Anita details what she learned about Wimpy's Independence Day barbecue. Chucha was there, and she spoke a lot with Oscar. Anita wonders if they were talking about her. After dinner the next evening, Tía Mari brings Anita *The Arabian Nights*. Oscar helped her pick it out—and inside, Anita finds the queen of hearts. On Friday, Anita writes that having a secret code with Oscar makes her happier. She now spends more time in the bathroom, playing with her hair.

On Saturday, Anita wonders whether something like *The Arabian Nights* can happen in real life. She wonders whether, if El Jefe had kidnapped her, she would've been able to change his heart by telling him stories. According to Tío Pepe, this is the question that people like "Knee-chi" and "Hide-digger" tried to answer. The next afternoon, Anita writes about her day. The Mancinis went to the beach and closed up the house. While they were gone, Mami did Anita's hair and told Anita she was prettier than Audrey Hepburn. Later that evening, Tía Mari brought Mami and Anita seashells. When Anita remembered how Chucha always said that girls with seashells die old maids, she gave the shell back to Mari. Tío Pepe also shared that Mundín is going to be evacuated.

The one positive consequence of the close call with the SIM is that Anita now understands just how important it is to stay hidden. Unfortunately, the close call with Oscar's little sisters shows that everyone makes mistakes sometimes. But Oscar himself demonstrates his maturity by getting out of the closet as soon as he realizes that someone is hiding there. Like Anita, he's coming of age—and becoming interested in romance, as evidenced by turning over the queen of hearts for Anita. With this, he can show her that he knows what she's going through and he cares for her without scaring her.



As Anita turns more of her attention toward Oscar and romance, she becomes less and less frightened of what might happen to her. In this sense, puberty—and the interest in romance that comes with it—doesn't have to only be a source of misery, as it was when Anita started her period. Rather, some elements of puberty can provide a much-needed escape from this terrifying situation. Hearing that Oscar spoke with Chucha can't hurt, either. It reminds Anita that she has family and friends everywhere. And it's also noteworthy that Oscar and Anita's skill at secrecy has now become a positive thing—they've been around secret codes and poignant silences for so long that they know implicitly how to communicate with one another. These kinds of secrets and codes aren't only traumatic now—they can also be positive.



In these entries, Anita's youth seems more obvious, even as she's becoming more of a teenager. The people Tío Pepe mentions are the philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger who were interested in the relationship between language and truth and the ways in which language shapes human ideas of reality. Even though Anita doesn't know who these philosophers are or why they're important, the fact that Tío Pepe mentions them shows that he's treating her like an adult. It's also a clue to why Oscar always seemed so inquisitive and well-informed; he clearly comes from a family of intellectuals.



Anita doesn't write on Tuesday. Instead, Mami tells her stories about her own childhood and her big *quinceañera* party. Then, Mami laughs and recalls how, when Anita was little, she became obsessed with El Jefe's daughter, whom he made a queen. For her birthday, Papi made Anita a marshmallow crown that melted into her hair. This makes Anita think of her daydream about Papi and Tío Toni, so she reaches out for Mami's hand. The next day, Anita discovers that Papi and Tío Toni didn't make it onto the public prisoners' list. This is bad. On the radio, Anita heard prisoners' stories of their torture. Some had their fingernails pulled out, while one was fed a steak that he learned later was the flesh of his son. After hearing that, Anita vomited.

The following evening, Anita writes about being surprised. Earlier, the maid knocked and said the Mancinis had visitors: the ambassador and a lady. This was unexpected, so Mami and Anita hid. After a while, Tía Mari called them out. There was a blond girl with a sour face on the bed—it was Mundín in disguise. He was on the way to being evacuated on an Italian cruise ship. Everyone cried, even Mundín.

On July 15, Anita shares Mami's story of how she and Papi got involved in the resistance movement. When Papi got back home after studying in the U.S., he didn't care much about politics. He was busy raising his family. But his brothers got involved and people started to disappear. Then, they heard about the **Butterflies**, who organized the movement. Papi watched his brothers join but he was afraid to risk the lives of his family members. The SIM found out about the Butterflies and murdered them. This is why Mamita, Papito, and Anita's uncles left when they could. Then, Mami and Papi took over. Anita can't believe that Mami and her bad nerves were involved. The movement spread, but then, they couldn't find Pupo on the night of the *ajusticiamiento*.

Listening to Mami's stories about the good times in the past help both Anita and Mami begin to heal. It's important to keep in mind that this is a traumatic experience for Mami too—and she, like Anita, will only recover as she finds ways to tell her story. At this point, telling happy stories of the past gives her the opportunity to focus on things she knows were happy rather than the uncertain future. What Anita hears about the torture methods in the prisons drives home how cruel Trujillo's regime is. With this, Anita knows for sure that Trujillo was a bad person and that Papi did the right thing—although since Papi's name isn't public, Anita knows it's possible that he could be disappeared by the regime.



Making the effort for Mami and Anita to see Mundín before he leaves gives the impression that there's a possibility they might not see him again. Though Anita doesn't acknowledge this outright, this shows that, even now, Anita's family prioritizes each other over everything else. It also shows how much the Mancinis are willing to risk to help them.



Here, Mami continues the process of telling Anita her story—but now she moves on to more difficult stories, rather than simply telling nice stories from the past. In addition, by telling Papi's story, Mami ensures that the story will live on. But this might be an implicit acknowledgement that Mami doesn't expect Papi to come home and tell the story himself. This is also one of the first times that Anita confronts the possibility that Mami has been just as major of a player in the resistance as Papi. In hearing Mami's story, Anita has to see that she is a fully-fledged human being in her own right. This requires Anita to look at Mami through adult eyes.



On Monday night, as Anita and Mami brush their teeth with Tía Mari, Mari says she ran into Chucha at Wimpy's earlier. Chucha asked her to pass on a message: that Anita needs to "get ready to use [her] wings again." She gave Mari a holy card of San Miguel to give to Anita. Anita is excited to maybe be free soon, but she's afraid. She doesn't want to be free without Papi and Tío Toni. The next day, Anita writes that people are hopeful. There will be a rally tomorrow. On Wednesday, the day of the rally, Anita writes that she can hear people shouting for liberty. Earlier, Tío Pepe said there's a small chance that Anita and Mami will be able to escape on an American flight. Anita is terrified to leave. She wonders what it's like to be free.

In Anita's mind, freedom is tied up closely with Papi and Tío Toni. It seems like she shouldn't have the opportunity to be free herself if her father and uncle can't join her and be free too. This illustrates how important family is to Anita—as she grows up, she comes to see that her parents were right to do everything they could to support and protect their family. And again, hearing from Chucha shows Anita that there will always be someone in the Dominican Republic who loves her and will look out for her. Her family is bigger than she thinks it is. It's also significant that Chucha, throughout the novel, seems to be the adult most willing to clue Anita into what's going on, even if she does so in riddles or code. Chucha sends only one message here, so she must find this one important, and it's a message meant to prepare Anita for what is to come. Clearly, she sees value in informing Anita of coming change, rather than keeping her in the dark.



On Thursday, Anita writes that she and Oscar communicate through books. He picks out the books for her and passes them through Tía Mari. As they pass the books back and forth, they also pass the queen of hearts. The next day, Anita can hear another rally outside. The SIM are arresting people, and Tía Mari sent Oscar and the girls away for safety since a few bullets hit the house. Anita begins her entry on Sunday. It's a boring day, since the Mancinis are at the coast. Suddenly, Anita's writing changes. She's writing from her hiding spot. She heard a roar in the backyard and there are people in the house. Anita wants to leave a record, just in case.

It seems like things are getting more fraught out on the streets. This could spell trouble for Anita or for Papi and Tío Toni. Fortunately, Anita has her budding romance with Oscar to get her through. Passing books and the queen of hearts gives her something to focus on other than the protests taking place out on the streets. When Anita's writing changes, it suggests that she's going to experience more trauma. Now, though, she knows how important it is to write, even if she won't live to read it.



CHAPTER TEN

Anita is sitting in front of the TV at the Hotel Beverly. Her grandparents, Mamita and Papito, are renting an apartment here, and Anita and Mami have been here about six weeks. It's September 18, 1961. Anita watches as much TV as she can to distract herself, but this annoys Mami. The first time that Anita saw a commercial for Chiquita bananas, she was terrified. She thought the Chiquita banana lady was saying, "I'm Anita Banana and I'm here to stay." Lucinda explained that the lady is Chiquita Banana, and "she's here to say." Anita feels like she's seeing signs and ghosts everywhere, and she doesn't have Chucha to help decipher them.

Anita is terrified by the commercial seemingly because she interprets it as a sign that she has come to the United States for good and will not be able to return home to the Dominican Republic. It distresses her to be seeing so many mysterious signs, especially without having Chucha to help her understand them; Chucha has always helped her to make sense of the world, and without her, Anita feels lost. Her fear and anxiety are a result of her traumatic flight from the Dominican Republic, and they're also a natural reaction to living in a new place. She doesn't know how to interpret even normal things like commercials because everything is so new to her.



Mami is on the phone with Mr. Washburn. She calls him twice a week for news of Papi and Tío Toni. Once again, he has no news. Once Mami hangs up, she says that the U.S. is trying to make Trujillo Junior leave the country and release the prisoners. Papito reacts to the news hopefully, while Mamita sobs. Lucinda, Mami, and Anita cry too.

Anita says that on the day she left the Dominican Republic, she had no idea she was leaving. The men in the house weren't the SIM; it was Wimpy and some paratroopers coming to airlift Anita and Mami to safety. They flew to a tarmac where Wimpy helped many people board a plane. As the plane took off, Anita wondered if Oscar would know that she was gone. She also thought of all the people and places she might never see again. As she went through Immigration, Anita wondered how she'd make it in this cold, unfamiliar world—but when she saw her entire family waiting for her, she knew she'd be okay.

It's now the end of September and the family hasn't heard anything about Papi and Tío Toni. Mami refuses to move to Queens (a neighborhood in New York) with the Garcías. That's where people go when they decide they're going to stay in the U.S. To give the children something to do, Mami arranges for Anita, Lucinda, and Mundín to sit in on classes at a Catholic school. Anita ends up in a second-grade class led by a teacher named Sister Mary Joseph. Sister Mary Joseph introduces Anita as a "special" student who came to the U.S. to be free. She asks Anita to tell the class about the Dominican Republic, but Anita can't. She's too sad. Instead, she thanks the class for letting her into their country.

Sister Mary Joseph asks Anita to write a composition of what she remembers from the Dominican Republic. She shows Anita how to dedicate her work to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph by putting a cross and J.M.J. at the top of her page. Anita adds Papi and Tío Toni's initials. She pretends she's writing in her diary and writes pages. She makes lists of things she misses and writes out Chucha's sayings. Anita thinks she can hear Chucha telling her to **fly** free, but she doesn't know how to be free without Papi. Sister Mary Joseph tells Anita she did a good job, even though she marks up the page in red.

At this point, Anita's family feels like they have no choice but to lean on each other and grieve—it seems clear that Papi will not be returning home, even though they still hold out a sliver of hope. As they cry together, Anita is reminded that she has lots of people here who will support her and care for her going forward, even if Papi never comes.



Again, Anita tells her story so she won't forget it—and also so that she can give voice to everything she felt as she was fleeing the Dominican Republic. This helps her process her emotions and move forward. At the time, leaving her home country felt like leaving behind everything familiar. But then seeing her family at the airport impressed on Anita that as long as she has her family around, she's going to be okay. There will always be someone to love her.



While the family has begun to grieve for Papi, Mami still can't let go and move on. She insists that they continue staying at the hotel (conspicuously temporary housing) rather than starting an actual life in Queens, which would imply that they intend to stay. Presumably, she still thinks there's hope that they could go home. Thanking the second graders for letting her into their country reads as a moment of humility for Anita. As she thanks the schoolchildren, she allows that her own country—while close to her heart in many ways—wasn't a safe place for her. Mami's insistence that the children attend school during this time speaks to her and Papi's belief in the power of education. It won't do, Mami believes, to let her children do nothing. Getting them an education will give them power as they grow older.



Sister Mary Joseph's compliment on the composition is somewhat confusing for Anita, since she marks up the paper so much. But no matter what Sister Mary Joseph thinks about it, it's still a step in the right direction for Anita to be able to write all this. This is especially true since she's writing for an audience, not just for herself. As she writes for Sister Mary Joseph, Anita starts to find her voice again and heal. It's also noteworthy that she puts Papi and Toni's initials at the top of her page alongside Jesus—she seems to understand that they have sacrificed so that she could be free, just like Catholics believe that Jesus did. This transforms Papi and Toni into a holy presence, people who can guide her as she moves forward in her life, even if she never sees them again in the flesh.



By the end of October, nothing has changed. All Anita knows is that Trujillo Junior refuses to cooperate with the Americans, so she decides to write to Oscar for information. She tells him about fall in New York and then asks how things are in the sultan's court. But when Anita gives the letter to Papito, he explains that there's no mail to or from the Dominican Republic. Anita tears the letter up and tosses it out the window. It looks like snow. Though the García girls have told Anita she'll see snow by Christmas, Anita believes she'll be home before then. As time passes, Anita wonders if she'll be here longer than she thought.

On the way home from school, Anita stops to visit the grocery store. It makes her feel excited and happy to fill a cart and then put everything back. But today, a big man shouts at her. Anita tries to act old enough to be grocery shopping and thinks she has a good chance, since a lady in the elevator recently thought she was 14. The man, however, tells Anita to stay away unless she has an adult with her. He pats her down, looking for stolen items, but Anita screams that it's a free country when he gropes her chest. Anita wonders if it's a free country for anyone who isn't American. The thought of being deported and killed by Trujillo Junior makes Anita run all the way back to the apartment.

When Anita gets to the door, she hears Mamita crying. Mundín opens the door and says that Mr. Washburn is here. Anita fears that Mr. Washburn is here to deport her after the grocery store incident, and everyone inside is crying. Papito takes Anita's hands and says that Papi and Tío Toni are dead. Mr. Washburn explains that just after the Trujillo family agreed to leave, SIM agents seized the final six prisoners. They took them to the beach, tied them to palm trees, and shot them. Then, they dumped the bodies in the sea. Mami sobs uncontrollably. Anita doesn't cry until Mr. Washburn is done with his story. Then, she joins the rest of her family in a tight hug.

In her letter, Anita experiments with writing in code. This mirrors how her parents spoke in code over the past year and it demonstrates that Anita is growing up and learning how to adapt to new situations. While code once felt foreign and dangerous, it's now something she can use herself to communicate with others. However, the fact that mail has been cut off between the Dominican Republic and the United States shows again how diplomatic sanctions hurt civilians. So many people have family and friends in both countries, and it's incredibly difficult not to be able to check in. As time passes, Anita has to confront the possibility that Papi's dream for everyone to go back to the Dominican Republic won't come true.



Due to the embargo on the Dominican Republic, Anita probably hasn't seen a well-stocked grocery store in some time. Going to the grocery store is a way for her to dream about what her life in the United States could potentially be like—possibly filled with opportunity and resources she couldn't have imagined back home. The grocer's assault, however, presents a different aspect of American life: how racism stands in the way of the American dream. The man seems to be targeting her because he feels that she doesn't belong, which Anita interprets immediately as a sign that she isn't really American. Worse, she can't stand up for herself when he gropes her, because she worries that getting into any trouble—even trouble that someone else started—will mean being deported to a dangerous country. The fantasy of stocking her cart with any food that she wants evaporates as she considers her powerless position as an immigrant and the possibility that she will spend her life living in fear of the Trujillo family.



This is another moment that shows some of Anita's innocence; she assumes that Mr. Washburn is here because of what happened at the grocery store, when in fact only something much graver could bring him. The murders of Papi and Tío Toni read as a final attempt by the SIM to hurt and terrify those involved in the resistance. In doing so, they take away some of the most important people in Anita's life and force her to confront the fact that her father is now more than just her father. He's an internationally known martyr—and he died trying to save the country he loved. While this doesn't diminish his love for Anita, it shows Anita that at times, politics seem to take precedence over family.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Anita stands outside, bundled up with Carla and Yo in Queens. It's Thanksgiving and they're waiting for the snow. Most of the family is here to celebrate and there are enough cooks that Carla and her sisters don't have to help. Instead, the girls have been walking around the block past where Carla's crush lives. Since getting to the U.S., Carla has become boy crazy. She insists it's what happens to girls in seventh grade, but Anita doesn't share that she became boy crazy last year, in sixth grade. Anita and her family have been here for a few weeks now. She's in the sixth grade at Carla's school, but she might be able to move up to seventh grade by spring. Mami says they'll stay in New York until their hearts are healed.

Mami appears on the step to say it's time to eat. She looks sad and thin in her black dress and coat, though she's excited for Anita to see snow. The girls follow Mami inside and Mami and Anita put their arms around each other. In the last few weeks, they've gotten close again, like they used to be when Anita was little. Mami sighs that it's hard to adjust to everything looking gray and dead. From the corner of her eye, Anita spots white dust—but she doesn't think it's snow, since she expects big lacy doilies. Inside, she sits with the other children. Tío Carlos and Papito say a prayer and try not to cry. Fifi shouts "Amen," making everyone laugh.

Earlier, Mrs. Washburn called to talk to Mami. Then, Mami handed Anita the phone to talk to Sam. Sam offered his condolences and then invited Anita to visit. Anita could tell that Mrs. Washburn was coaching him through the conversation. Carla hovered, interested to see if Anita was madly in love with Sam, but Anita shook her head. She invited Sam to come visit once she and Mami have a place to live, but she doesn't want to marry him. Back in the present, Anita finishes her meal. Then, Mami comes out carrying a birthday cake to celebrate Anita's 13th birthday a few weeks early. Anita only wants one thing that she can't have, so Mami suggests she save her wish for later.

Now that Anita and her cousins live in Queens, it's clear that they plan to stay in New York. Being around other girls her age again immerses Anita fully in the changes of puberty. Now she sees Carla undergoing the same transformation she did during her final months in the Dominican Republic. For Carla, though, it doesn't seem like these changes are going to be as terrifying or anxiety inducing as they were for Anita. Rather, her concerns center on getting a glimpse of her crush, no matter what it takes—a charmingly trivial concern compared to Anita's fear of sexual violence. This suggests that, even though their lives in New York will not be easy or free of pain, they at least might be liberated from some of the worst aspects of the Trujillo regime and Anita might be able to grow up in safety and comfort.



With all the change and trauma that took place in Mami and Anita's life in the last year, it's not surprising that they're growing closer to each other. This also suggests that Anita has reached a new phase in her maturity, as she's now able to see Mami as a person and as a friend, not just as an authority figure. This Thanksgiving dinner is difficult for everyone, as they miss Papi and Tío Toni. But because they're together, their grief is more manageable.



Anita's awkward conversation with Sam impresses upon her that she's not in love with him anymore. The discrepancy in their maturity is very clear, since Sam's mother is coaching him through the call. Now, Anita has grown enough to see how childish and immature her crush on him was. When the family celebrates Anita's birthday as well as Thanksgiving, it suggests again that even despite tragedy and horror, life goes on. Anita will continue to get older—and her family will continue to be there to support her and celebrate her along the way. Presumably, her wish is for Papi to come back, but her ability to acknowledge that it can't happen shows that she's processing her grief, moving forward, and seeing the world maturely. Mami suggesting that she save her wish indicates that grief lessens over time—it's possible that, soon enough, she'll have other wishes to distract her.



Once the cake is gone, Yo asks if they can go out into the snow. Tía Laura insists they have to sit and digest for a while. The adults tell stories about Papi while Anita looks out the window. She's glad she's experiencing her first snow before she's 13. Now, she'll be able to tell her kids she did lots of things, like lived in a closet and had two boyfriends, by 13. Finally, Tía Laura lets the kids go outside. As Anita steps out, she hears Papito say that the new government will return the compound to the family. They'll have to decide whether or not to sell it.

A few days ago, Tío Pepe came to visit. He thanked Mami for sacrificing her husband to liberate the Dominican Republic. He also gave Anita a letter from Oscar. These days, Anita isn't sure how she feels about Oscar. In the letter, Oscar offered his condolences and said he tried to write many times. He couldn't send anything because of the censors. But now, the Dominican Republic is going to hold its first free election in 31 years, thanks to Papi and Tío Toni. Oscar also wrote that he ran into Chucha at Wimpy's. She asked him to tell Anita to remember her **wings**. Now, Anita understands what Chucha and Papi meant. It's a metaphor—they want Anita to be free *inside* so nothing can take away her liberty.

The snow is magical. It makes Anita feel light and bright, like she's waking up from a bad dream. She closes her eyes and sees Papi sitting on the edge of her bed, asking her to promise. Anita shakes her head to clear it. Fifi asks to make a snowman, but Sandi suggests they make snow angels and coaches everyone through the process. They all run inside afterward. Tía Laura scolds the girls that they'll catch "deathly colds." These days, dying doesn't seem as scary to Anita. It's scarier to be alive, especially since Anita suspects she'll never be as happy as she was as a little kid. But Anita keeps thinking of Chucha's dream of the family **flying**. Hopefully this means the family will escape their misery, not just the dictator.

When Anita talks about wanting to tell her kids about all the things she's done before turning 13, it suggests she's turned the corner as she heals from her trauma. Even if she's still struggling, she can now look forward to telling her story—and she sees that story as proof of her courage and resilience, rather than simply an emblem of her pain. Her story might also inspire her children to value family and political freedom, as Anita and her parents did.



Now, Anita has to confront the fact that many see Papi as a martyr, not just as a member of her family. This is somewhat painful for Anita, because as much as she wanted the Dominican Republic to be free, losing her father is an unimaginable sacrifice. While for everyone else, Papi's death is redeemed somewhat by the country holding a free election, that's obviously less comforting for Anita, who lost both her father and her home after the assassination. However, Anita also understands now why Papi did what he did. He was fighting for everyone, not just for his family, and now, back in the Dominican Republic, people are hopeful about the future because of Papi's courage and vision. When Anita realizes that her wings are not just about fleeing the Dominican Republic, but also about cultivating a sense of internal freedom, she can understand even more what her father did. By assassinating Trujillo, Papi was honoring his inner freedom—he was living as though he were already free, as though nothing else were an option. In this way, her wings are a family legacy, both inherited and earned.



Anita looks more and more mature as she says that dying doesn't seem so frightening anymore. This is in part because Anita now knows how stressful and scary it can be to stay alive, and in part because she understands the value of sacrificing for a cause. At this point, Anita has an adult perspective on her childhood. As a child, Anita was happy, carefree, and didn't know anything about how her world worked. Now that she's becoming a teenager, she feels totally distant from that—too much has happened since, and she has learned too many difficult truths. Her job now is to figure out how to find that childlike sense of happiness, in spite of everything she knows about the world—that is part of what it means to cultivate inner freedom and remember her wings.



That night, Anita sits in the bedroom she shares with the García girls. Carla gets up to look out the window. She calls the others to the window to see their snow angels, which are illuminated by the outdoor light. But when Anita looks down she sees **butterflies**, not angels. If Chucha were here, she'd think it was a sign. Anita closes her eyes and thinks about all her friends and family members who died to make her free. She promises Papi she'll try.

As the novel ends, Anita understands that Papi wanted her to be happy, not just physically free. Seeing the butterflies—symbols of hope and freedom—impresses upon her the importance of carrying on and making Papi proud, no matter how hard that seems. While Papi dreamed that the family would be free in the Dominican Republic, Anita is beginning to understand that it's fine to be free in New York instead—after all, she's seeing butterflies in the snow, which blends the world of her childhood with her new life in New York. Papi died for her to get here and it's Anita's turn to make his sacrifice worth it.





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