

# Clap When You Land



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ELIZABETH ACEVEDO

Elizabeth Acevedo was born in New York to Dominican parents. She's the youngest child and only girl. At age 14, Acevedo participated in one of her first slam poetry events at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe and went on to perform at open mic events around the city. She later earned a BA in performing arts from George Washington University and an MFA from the University of Maryland. Since graduating, she's taught poetry to teens in a variety of settings, as well as eighth-grade English through the Teach for America program. [The Poet X](#) (2018) was her first novel, and part of her inspiration for writing it—and then continuing to write novels about Dominican characters—was spending time with students who didn't see themselves reflected in classic literature or in novels commonly taught in schools. All of her published works have won numerous awards, and she's also been recognized for her spoken word poetry. She lives in Washington, D.C. with her husband.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While *Clap When You Land* clearly takes place in the modern day (characters mention social media, Netflix, and video chatting—all hallmarks of the mid-late 2010s)—Acevedo writes in her author's note that she was inspired to write *Clap When You Land* by the 2001 crash of American Airlines flight AA587, which occurred when Acevedo was 13. On the morning of November 12, 2001, the plane took off from New York City's JFK airport, bound for Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic, minutes after a larger jet and encountered turbulent air from the jet's wake. The pilots attempted to stabilize the plane in a way that ultimately caused a stabilizing element to snap off, sending the plane spiraling downward and killing all 251 passengers and nine crew members, as well as five bystanders. As the crash occurred only two months after the terrorist attacks of September 11, it was initially investigated as a terrorist plot. When officials determined that it was the pilots' error that caused the crash rather than terrorism, the crash—despite being the second-deadliest aviation crash in American history—faded from news coverage. However, Acevedo writes that the crash “completely rocked the New York Dominican community.” Ninety percent of the passengers were of Dominican descent, and at the time, American Airlines ran some of the only flights from JFK to the Dominican Republic; this particular flight normally ran 51 times per week. Family members of victims told reporters that anyone with connections to the Dominican Republic in the New York area

had either taken the flight at some point or knew someone who had. However, the crash did not end up affecting the flight's popularity—it continued to run until American Airlines canceled service from JFK to Santo Domingo in the spring of 2013.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Acevedo cites the Dominican author Junot Díaz ([The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao](#)) as a major influence on her writing, as well as Jacqueline Woodson's 2014 verse novel [Brown Girl Dreaming](#). *Clap When You Land* joins the growing genre of verse novels for young adults including [The Crossover](#) by Kwame Alexander and [The One and Only Ivan](#) by Katherine Applegate. Though verse narratives and epic poems like the *Odyssey* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* have existed for millennia, the verse novel is distinctly modern and traces its roots to the early 1800s. A famous early example is *Eugene Onegin* by Alexander Pushkin, which was published initially in serial form between 1825 and 1832. Acevedo's other young adult novels, [The Poet X](#) and [With the Fire On High](#), also portray Dominican American culture. And *Clap When You Land* is one of many novels, particularly those aimed at young adults, that follow young people coming to terms with a parent's legacy after that parent's death. Novels that tackle this in a variety of ways include Sharon Creech's [Walk Two Moons](#), as well as [On the Come Up](#) by Angie Thomas and even J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series. Secrets and their impact also make for compelling subject matter in books for all ages, from young adult novels like *All the Boys I've Loved Before* by Jenny Han to classics like F. Scott Fitzgerald's [The Great Gatsby](#). In his nonfiction work *The Secret Life of Secrets*, Michael Slepian researches the reasons people keep secrets, what types of secrets people most commonly keep, and secrets' (oftentimes negative) impact on people.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Clap When You Land
- **When Written:** 2019
- **Where Written:** Washington, D.C.
- **When Published:** 2020
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult Verse Novel
- **Setting:** New York City and the Dominican Republic
- **Climax:** Yahaira, Tía Solana, and Mami save Camino from El Cero.
- **Antagonist:** El Cero
- **Point of View:** First person, told alternately from Camino

and Yahaira's perspectives

## EXTRA CREDIT

**A Quick Read.** While Acevedo began writing verse novels because of her own history with written poetry and spoken word, many young adult authors, like Kwame Alexander and Jason Reynolds, also point out that verse novels can be especially useful for getting reluctant readers to read. Fewer words on the page means that kids who would normally struggle to finish a book can easily and more quickly finish an entire book.

**Dental Records.** While *Clap When You Land* implies that it's totally normal (if tragic) that officials use dental records to identify Papi's body, identifying remains in this way has only been an option for a few centuries. The first instance is believed to have occurred during the Revolutionary War, when silversmith Paul Revere identified Dr. Joseph Warren's body by a false tooth he'd made for the doctor.



## PLOT SUMMARY

*Clap When You Land* is told from 16-year-olds Yahaira and Camino's alternating perspectives. Though they share the same father, Papi, neither knows the other exists.

Camino, who lives in the Dominican Republic with her aunt and caregiver, Tía Solana, discovers that Papi died in a plane crash when she skips school to meet him at the airport for his annual summer visit. Now, she feels like she's truly an orphan, as Mamá died of dengue fever almost a decade ago. Meanwhile, in New York, Yahaira's mother comes to Yahaira's school to tell Yahaira about Papi's death. They walk home together and Yahaira, knowing that someone needs to be strong, answers phone calls and heats up dinner while Mami sobs in her room.

Over the next few days, both Yahaira and Camino struggle with their grief. Camino tries to grieve Papi by swimming at the **beach**, where Papi taught her to swim. But a pimp named El Cero, whom Papi has paid for years to leave Camino alone, appears on the beach. Though he wants Camino to work for him, he leaves her alone when she ignores him—at least for now. Yahaira, meanwhile, refuses to acknowledge Papi's death. She thinks about other aspects of her life instead, like her history as a competitive **chess player** and her relationship with Dre, her girlfriend and next-door neighbor. Both Camino and Yahaira hope that ignoring news of the crash will help their pain, but it still hurts when, a few days after the crash, the news officially announces that there were no survivors.

Papi's death hits Camino especially hard, as Papi financially supported Camino and Tía. He paid Camino's tuition at a fancy private school, but without his money—or his ability to help her get a visa—Camino fears she'll have to drop out and abandon

her dream of attending Columbia University and becoming an obstetrician. She shares none of these fears with Tía or her best friend Carline, who's heavily pregnant. Still, Carline tries to get Camino out of the house. Meanwhile, in New York, Yahaira skips school and spends her days walking or with Dre's mom, Dr. Johnson.

Once officials identify Papi's remains, Yahaira's family in New York flies into action, making funeral arrangements. Tío Jorge, Papi's brother, informs Mami that according to Papi's will, he wants to be buried in the Dominican Republic. This enrages Mami, and she insists that she and Yahaira won't attend the funeral. Mami's anger makes Yahaira wonder if Mami—or indeed, the entire rest of the extended family—knows the secret Yahaira learned last year: that Papi has another wife in the Dominican Republic, and that she is the person he visits every summer. Yahaira discovered Papi's secret last summer. After a man assaulted her on the subway, she tried to contact Papi, who was in the Dominican Republic at the time. She went looking for a phone number for Papi and found the marriage license. After the assault and this revelation about Papi, she quit chess and stopped talking to Papi altogether.

When Camino learns about the discovery of Papi's remains, she's on the beach, and El Cero is harassing her again. When she gets home, Tía insinuates that she believes Camino is soliciting El Cero's attention, which makes Camino believe she can't tell her aunt the truth or ask for help. That night, Carline goes into labor several weeks early. Tía and Camino attend the birth, and thanks to Tía's relationship with the Saints, the baby boy finally breathes.

An airline representative visits Mami, Yahaira, and Tío Jorge to share that the airline is offering a half-million dollar payout to avoid lawsuits. They're all shocked. Once Tío Jorge calls Tía to share the news, Tía finally tells Camino that Papi has a wife in New York, Zoila (Mami), and another daughter with her. She says Camino can apply for some of the money since she's one of Papi's dependents, but Zoila will probably fight the claim. Camino is shocked to learn that she has a sister, but she also feels like her dreams might come true now that she has money coming her way.

In New York, once news gets out about the advance, relatives start stopping by to ask Mami for money. Yahaira hates this, but Mami writes checks to everyone who asks. Meanwhile, curious about her sister, Camino looks Yahaira up on social media and finds Yahaira's profile. She sends her sister a message, but for weeks, Yahaira doesn't check social media and doesn't see Camino's message. Finally, Yahaira logs on and finds a friend request from Camino. Camino's profile picture is of her with Papi. When Yahaira screams for Mami and asks her what's going on, Mami tells the truth: that Papi married a woman in the Dominican Republic (Mamá) after he married her, and they had a daughter, Camino. Their marriage wasn't legally valid, and Mamá died about nine years ago. Mami explains that Papi was

complicated and a bad husband, but he tried to do right by his daughters.

Yahaira messages Camino back, suggesting they video chat. In the days between when the girls agree to talk and when they actually talk, Mami remains firm that she and Yahaira aren't going to the funeral in the Dominican Republic—so Yahaira secretly buys herself a ticket with Mami's credit card. When Camino learns this, she admires Yahaira's nerve, but she resents how privileged Yahaira is—Camino and Tía will be struggling to eat soon.

Camino has been avoiding the beach for several weeks now to avoid El Cero, but Tía finally sends Camino to go swim. When Camino gets out of the water, El Cero and a strange, smelly man try to catch her, but Camino escapes and races home. That evening, she and Yahaira video chat for the first time. Days later, a few days before Yahaira is set to arrive in the Dominican Republic, Camino calls and says she won't help Yahaira unless Yahaira wires \$10,000. Yahaira wires the money and a few days later, she attends the New York wake for Papi. Afterward, Yahaira tells Dre her plan to sneak out of the country. She asks to spend the night at Dre's so she doesn't arouse Mami's suspicions when she leaves in the morning.

On the day of Yahaira's arrival, Camino makes *sancocho*, an involved dish traditionally made to welcome visitors. Don Mateo drives Camino to the airport and, though Camino can barely bring herself to enter the building, she goes inside and finally meets Yahaira. Tía welcomes Yahaira and later, Mami calls, worried and angry at what Yahaira did. Mami decides to come as soon as she can and shows up the next day in a little Prius.

Papi's funeral is a grand affair that everyone in the neighborhood attends. Camino keeps it quiet until almost midnight, but it's also her birthday—and once Yahaira goes to sleep, Camino begins to carry out her plan. She locates Yahaira's passport, takes some money, and leaves a note for Tía—she's going to immigrate to the U.S. herself, since Mami clearly doesn't want to help her. Camino goes to the beach to say goodbye to her favorite place first. As a storm picks up, El Cero appears, takes Camino's money and the passport, and attempts to assault her. Back at the house, Yahaira, Mami, and Tía realize that Camino has run away and head for the beach to find her. They frighten El Cero away after bullying him into giving back the money and the passport. Yahaira sleeps close to Camino that night, while Mami sleeps in the corner of Camino's bedroom.

When she gets up in the morning, Yahaira tells Mami that they need to bring Camino back home with them. That day, Mami—who has family connections at the consulate—pulls some strings and gets an appointment for Camino in three days. Camino and Mami travel all over the island together, completing the paperwork and appointments necessary to get Camino the visa. Finally, Camino is ready to go to New York

with Mami and Yahaira. She says goodbye to Tía, and though she's sad to leave her home, she looks forward to her future.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Camino Rios** – One of the novel's protagonists, Camino is a Dominican teenager who lives in a poor seaside neighborhood in the Dominican Republic with her aunt, Tía. Camino's mother, Mamá, died about nine years ago, and normally Camino looks forward to Papi's yearly summer visits. Her world falls apart when she learns that Papi has died in a plane crash: without him and his financial support, Camino and Tía can't afford to live, let alone continue Camino's education at a private school. Camino also fears that she'll have to set aside her dreams of immigrating to the U.S., attending Columbia University, and becoming an obstetrician. Adding to Camino's fears about the future, when Papi dies, a pimp named El Cero begins stalking her—and Tía believes that Camino is asking for the attention. Camino isn't entirely surprised when she learns that Papi had another wife in New York, but she's shocked to learn she has a sister, Yahaira. She helps Yahaira sneak into the Dominican Republic for Papi's funeral—but when it becomes clear that Mami isn't going to help Camino, Camino steals Yahaira's passport, planning to fly to the U.S. herself. After Mami, Tía, and Yahaira rescue Camino from El Cero (who attempts to rape her), Mami agrees to sponsor Camino's visa and bring her to the U.S.

**Yahaira Rios** – One of the novel's protagonists, Yahaira is a Dominican American teenager who lives in New York with her parents, Mami and Papi, until Papi dies unexpectedly in a plane crash. Yahaira is quiet and follows the rules, and until a year before the novel begins, she played **chess** competitively. She quit playing chess due to the trauma she experienced when a strange man assaulted her on the subway—and then when she contacted Papi for help, she discovered that he was married to another woman in addition to Mami. This secret caused Yahaira to withdraw and, for the year before Papi's death, she barely spoke to him. Yahaira is mostly unaware of the privilege her middle-class upbringing affords her, which causes some issues when she and Camino finally connect. In a break from her usual character, Yahaira purchases a plane ticket so she can attend Papi's funeral in the Dominican Republic. There, when she discovers that Camino stole her passport and planned to immigrate to the U.S. with it, she insists to Mami that they bring Camino back with them legally. She ultimately decides that while Papi made mistakes in his life, it's up to her, Camino, and Mami to make the best of what he left them.

**Papi** – Papi is Camino and Yahaira's father; he's deceased in the novel's present, as he dies when his plane crashes en route to the Dominican Republic. Both girls love their father, though

neither knew the other existed: Papi kept it a secret from his daughters (and for a while, from his wives) that he was married to two different women, Zoila (to whom his marriage was legal) and Mamá. In life, Papi was larger than life. He doted on his daughters, was loud and gregarious, and ran a pool hall in New York. He spent his summers in the Dominican Republic with Camino and the rest of his time in New York with Zoila and Yahaira. Each daughter took up something Papi loved and taught them; Yahaira played competitive **chess**, while Camino loves to swim. Both girls idealized their father, so it shocks both of them to discover that he kept such a massive secret from them. Much of their development hinges on learning to come to terms with the complicated legacy Papi left behind. Ultimately, they generally agree that Papi did the best he knew how for his daughters, though he was certainly an imperfect husband and father.

**Mami/Zoila Rios** – Yahaira’s mother and Papi’s legal wife, Mami is a beautiful, demanding, and tightly-wound woman. She manages an upscale spa and believes that her appearance is good advertising, so she’s always impeccably dressed, with styled hair and makeup. This changes, however, when Mami learns of Papi’s death—for weeks, she barely showers and wears only sweats and flip-flops. For much of the novel, Yahaira keeps it a secret from Mami that she knows about Papi’s other wife in the Dominican Republic, as she believes Mami doesn’t know. However, Mami ultimately reveals that she did know about Papi’s other wife, and that Papi’s infidelity is the reason she was unhappy in her marriage. When Camino learns of Mami’s existence, Tía describes Mami as hard and unforgiving—and unlikely to help Papi’s other daughter (Camino). This devastates Camino, as she also learns that Mami’s employment and visa were essential to her own visa application. Though Mami initially wants nothing to do with Camino, Yahaira convinces Mami that they must help Camino and bring her to the U.S. By the end of the novel, Camino and Mami are working on their relationship, and Mami has apologized for ignoring Camino.

**Tía Solana** – Tía Solana is Camino’s aunt (though she’s not technically related) and caregiver; she’s always lived with Camino and Mamá, but she took over caring for Camino after Mamá died. A healer and practitioner of an unspecified polytheistic religion, Tía is both beloved and feared in her community. Though some people—namely Catholics—fear witchcraft, those same people still call Tía to heal their loved ones or deliver their babies, as they know that Tía’s relationship with the Saints means that she can sometimes work miracles. She’s been training Camino as her apprentice for years. Though the two have a close and trusting relationship, a rift forms between them when Tía hears rumors that people have seen El Cero near Camino—and she believes that Camino is soliciting El Cero’s attention. This makes Camino unwilling to tell the truth (that El Cero is stalking her), but the night of Papi’s

funeral, Tía nevertheless figures out what’s going on and, with Mami and Yahaira’s help, rescues Camino from El Cero. Tía encourages Camino to go to the U.S. with Mami and Yahaira, where she’ll be safe, but she refuses to leave the Dominican Republic herself. The novel implies that Tía takes Carline on as an apprentice after Camino leaves.

**Mamá** – Mamá is Camino’s mother. She died of dengue fever about nine years before the novel begins. Like Zoila, who was her childhood friend, Mamá was married to Papi—but unlike Zoila, Mamá found out much later that her marriage, which was Papi’s second, wasn’t actually valid. Despite this, Papi supported Mamá, Tía, and Camino financially and visited them every summer. Though Camino has fond memories of her mother, she doesn’t miss Mamá all that much. This is mostly due to Camino’s strong relationship with Tía, who was Mamá’s good friend.

**El Cero/Alejandro** – The antagonist of the novel, El Cero is a young man who makes his money as a pimp. He regularly targets young, vulnerable girls—some who are only nine or 10 years old—and as soon as they begin puberty, he dresses them in skimpy clothing and forces them to become sex workers, seeing foreign men at the local resort. Since Camino was 13, Papi has been paying El Cero to leave Camino alone. But Papi’s sudden death leaves Camino vulnerable, and El Cero begins stalking and threatening her. Camino manages to deflect El Cero’s advances until the night of Papi’s funeral, when El Cero catches her alone on the beach with thousands of dollars in cash and Yahaira’s passport. He attempts to rape her, but Yahaira, Mami, and Tía scare him away. Camino knows that on some level, El Cero became the monster he is today due to his grief for his sister, Emily, who died of dengue fever about nine years ago.

**Andrea “Dre” Johnson** – Dre is Yahaira’s next-door neighbor, as well as her girlfriend. They’ve been dating since seventh grade. Dre is a Black girl from the South, though she’s lived in New York since she was about seven. She loves nothing more than gardening and growing things; she keeps a container garden on her and the Rios’s fire escape and also has a plot in the community garden. Yahaira loves and appreciates Dre and Dre’s family for their love and unwavering support, but she also resents Dre because Dre always seems to know what the right thing is—and she always does what she believes is the right thing. An environmentalist, Dre wants Yahaira to feel the same way she does about, for instance, the evils of plastic straws, and she doesn’t always understand that Yahaira sees the world in shades of gray more than she does. Dre’s loving and generous nature comes to the forefront at the end of the novel, when she reveals a pot of herbs she planted to help Camino feel more at home when she comes to New York.

**Carline** – Carline is Camino’s best friend. She’s heavily pregnant at the beginning of the novel. A few weeks after Papi’s death, she gives birth prematurely to her son, Luciano. Like

Camino, Carline is only 16 or 17, and so she struggles to cope with the pressures and responsibilities of becoming a parent at such a young age. Though Papi was able to get her a job at the local resort when she first found out she was pregnant, Carline hates the job (her boss sexually harasses her), and she's fired when she refuses to return to work only a week after Luciano is born. Carline's boyfriend, Nelson, also struggles to earn enough money to be able to support his young family. Camino goes out of way to protect her friend, emotionally and physically, in every way she can. At the end of the story, the novel suggests that Carline, Luciano, and Nelson will move in with Tía and Carline will become Tía's new apprentice.

**Luciano** – Luciano is Carline and Nelson's infant son. He's born several weeks after Papi dies. Luciano comes several weeks early, so he's a tiny baby who struggles to breathe from the moment he's born. Despite being warned that the baby likely won't survive, Carline names her son anyway. By the end of the novel, when he's about five weeks old, Luciano seems likely to survive. His good outcome is attributed to Tía's ability to work miracles and call on the Saints for help.

**Nelson** – Nelson is Carline's 19-year-old boyfriend and Luciano's father. He's been in love with Carline since they were children. Nelson is extremely driven: prior to Luciano's birth, he attends night classes while also working two jobs, trying to earn enough money to be able to afford a place for himself and Carline. The novel implies that once Camino leaves the Dominican Republic, Nelson, Carline, and Luciano will move in with Tía, where Nelson's presence will help protect the women.

**Vira Lata** – Vira Lata is the neighborhood stray dog who attached himself long ago to Camino. He sticks pretty close to Camino's house, though when it floods, he lives in an elevated doghouse that Don Mateo made him. Though Vira Lata isn't a particularly aggressive dog, he does growl at El Cero and seems to understand that El Cero means to hurt Camino—Vira Lata is the one to alert Mami, Tía, and Yahaira to the fact that Camino is in trouble and needs help. At the end of the novel, Vira Lata attaches himself to Tía, suggesting that he'll have someone to continue caring for him once Camino leaves the country.

**Don Mateo** – Don Mateo is Camino and Tía's friend and neighbor. His gruff demeanor hides a caring, protective, and loving personality—he drives Camino to the airport to meet Papi and later to meet Yahaira, and he also spends a lot of time sitting with Tía and comforting her after his death is confirmed. Additionally, he set up a doghouse on stilts in his backyard for Vira Lata to use when their neighborhood floods.

**Dr. Johnson** – Dr. Johnson is Dre's mother. The book never reveals what kind of a doctor she is, but she teaches classes at a local university. An intelligent and level-headed woman, Dr. Johnson regularly explains to Dre and Yahaira why things they find on the internet aren't actually funny. After Papi's death, Dr. Johnson welcomes Yahaira into her home whenever Yahaira needs someplace to go—even if Yahaira is skipping school. She

encourages Yahaira to talk about her grief and return to the neighborhood association's grief counseling sessions.

**Tío Jorge** – Tío Jorge is Papi's brother; he's both Yahaira and Camino's uncle. However, while Camino has only heard of Tío Jorge, he and Yahaira have a close, loving, and supportive relationship; part of this is due to the fact that Tío Jorge lives in the same neighborhood and is physically around often. Before immigrating to the U.S., Tío Jorge practiced law in the Dominican Republic. He remained Papi's legal advisor as Papi opened his pool hall, and he also seems to have advised Papi about how to protect Camino in his will. Once Papi dies, though, Mami rejects Tío Jorge's counsel.

**Wilson** – Wilson is Tía Lidia's son and Yahaira's cousin. The novel doesn't state his age outright, but he's likely in his mid-20s. A bank teller who makes a decent wage, Wilson often wears designer clothes and expensive cologne. However, when he learns about the half-million dollar advance that the airline is giving to Mami and Yahaira, he approaches Mami and asks for money to buy a four-figure engagement ring to propose to his girlfriend. Yahaira initially finds this crass and offensive, but she ultimately decides that Papi would've been generous and happy to help if he was still alive.

**Coach Lublin** – Coach Lublin was Yahaira's chess coach until she quit the chess team. A kind and supportive man, he never pressured Yahaira to rejoin the team—Yahaira even suspects that he knew she didn't truly love chess. However, he continues to treat her kindly and even calls to offer his condolences after Papi dies.

**Emily** – Emily was El Cero's sister and Camino's best friend until her death of dengue fever about nine years before the events of the novel begins. Camino believes that Emily's death brought about El Cero's brother's transformation from goofy, loving Alejandro to the dangerous, predatory pimp who stalks and threatens Camino in the novel's present.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Tía Mabel** – Tía Mabel is Tío Jorge's wife. She helps make arrangements after Papi's death.

**Tía Lidia** – Tía Lidia is Mami's sister and Yahaira's aunt. She and her son Wilson visit to help make arrangements after Papi's death.

**Maman** – Maman is Carline's mother. She and her family are Haitian, which means that Maman is too afraid (and too poor) to get Carline admitted to a hospital when she goes into labor weeks early.

**Ms. Santos** – Ms. Santos is the principal's assistant at Yahaira's school.

**Mr. Henry** – Mr. Henry is the security guard at Yahaira's school.

**Mr. Johnson** – Mr. Johnson is Dre's father. He serves in the air force and so is often deployed.



## 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.



## FAMILY

*Clap When You Land* tells the stories of two 16-year-old girls, New Yorker Yahaira and Camino, who lives in the Dominican Republic. Both girls'

lives fall apart when, one June day, they receive word that their father, Papi, has died in a plane crash. In the weeks after the crash, the girls discover that their father kept huge secrets while he was alive—most notably, that he had two wives in two separate countries, and a daughter with each (Yahaira and Camino, respectively). As Yahaira and Camino learn of each other's existence and begin to form a relationship, they discover that family is less about blood ties or even legal ties, like marriage. Instead, they find that being a good family member is about showing up for the people one considers family. Upon first finding out about each other, Yahaira and Camino respond similarly. They feel as though Papi betrayed them, and while they're both curious about each other, they also resent each other for various reasons. Papi split his time between the Dominican Republic and New York, which caused one daughter to feel abandoned while he was visiting the other. Camino in particular resents Yahaira for having grown up in New York as an American citizen with a passport and access to the best colleges in the world—privileges that are beyond reach for Camino, as she believes that without Papi, she'll never be able to immigrate to the U.S. to attend medical school.

Yahaira is the first to decide that showing up for one's family members is not just important but is absolutely necessary. Though Mami (Zoila), Yahaira's mother, forbids her from going to the Dominican Republic for Papi's funeral, Yahaira buys a plane ticket with a credit card Zoila never checks and sneaks out of the country. Zoila ultimately follows her daughter to the Dominican Republic when she finds out what Yahaira has done, and the funeral is a cathartic event for all of Papi's surviving family members. Then, when Camino steals Yahaira's passport so she can illegally immigrate to the United States and ends up unwittingly putting herself in grave danger, Yahaira and Zoila both come to the same conclusion: that Papi may have made mistakes as a husband and father, but it's their responsibility as Camino's family members to support Camino and bring her to the U.S. With this, Papi's living family members ultimately decide that Papi's mistakes may have caused them all immense pain—but the best way to heal and move forward is to nurture and strengthen the relationships that his mistakes left them, relationships they ultimately all choose to see as gifts.



## SECRETS

Though the conflict of *Clap When You Land* centers around one massive secret—that Papi was living a double life, splitting his time between his family in New York City and his family in the Dominican Republic—nearly every character in the novel keeps a secret of some sort. In almost all cases, however, the novel proposes that regardless of what a person's secret is or how noble or helpful they think they're being in keeping it, secrets harm people more often than they help them. Indeed, *Clap When You Land* demonstrates the many ways that keeping secrets can create strife, resentment, and uncertainty. For instance, Yahaira details how, about a year before Papi's death, she discovered that he spent every summer in the Dominican Republic with his other wife—not traveling for work, as he'd led her to believe. This revelation upends Yahaira's image of her father as an upstanding, righteous, and supportive dad, and it causes her to disengage from him, from the **chess** club, and even from her schoolwork. Additionally, Yahaira feels immense pressure to keep this revelation secret from Mami, as she doesn't want to be the one to break the news of Papi's double life to her mother.

Things come to a head when Yahaira, unwilling to skip Papi's funeral in the Dominican Republic, secretly buys a plane ticket and sneaks out of the country. Mami follows Yahaira to the Dominican Republic as soon as she discovers what happened, and once there, numerous other secrets come to light. Yahaira, Mami, and Tía discover that Camino stole Yahaira's passport and plans to leave the country, while Mami is finally willing to speak openly about how Papi hurt and betrayed her with his yearslong infidelity. Ultimately, Mami insists that when they all (even Camino, whom Mami helps get a visa) return to New York, they resume grief counseling so the family has a place to air their grievances and secrets. With this, and more broadly, the happy ending for the whole family, the novel highlights all the good that can come from not keeping secrets. If people are willing to open up to each other, the novel suggests, they can overcome the hurt, shame, and confusion that otherwise would drive them apart.



## GRIEF

As Yahaira, Camino, and their respective families move forward in the aftermath of Papi's sudden death in a plane crash, they struggle with immense and crushing grief. *Clap When You Land* insists that grief, while uncomfortable, is a normal and unavoidable part of losing a loved one—and that the healthiest way to move through one's grief is to connect with others who either feel the same way or can offer support, rather than hiding or repressing one's emotions. Though Yahaira and Camino live in different countries and spend most of the novel unaware of the other's existence, they end up grieving Papi in extremely similar

ways—ways that the novel suggests are ultimately unhelpful. Both girls refuse to cry or acknowledge their difficult emotions, and Yahaira brushes off a close family friend, Dr. Johnson, when she warns that keeping everything inside will mean that Yahaira will never be able to move on and recover. Yahaira and her mother, Mami, attempt to go to grief counseling sessions, but they ultimately stop going when they find them too painful. Camino also refuses to cry or talk about what she's feeling, though she finds some solace in her aunt Tía's religious ceremonies.

As Papi's funeral in the Dominican Republic approaches—and as Yahaira and then Mami fly in from New York to attend—the novel suggests that while it may be uncomfortable to grieve with others, coming together to remember a deceased loved one is cathartic, restorative, and necessary. This, Yahaira begins to realize, is the whole point of funerals and other grief rituals, such as the *novena* (nine days of prayer): these rituals bring people together in their grief and offer a safe space to feel one's emotions and connect with others who feel the same way. In addition, the spiritual or religious elements of such rituals offers extra comfort to those who practice. Indeed, at the end of the novel, even Mami—who initially refused to attend the funeral in the Dominican Republic—seems to have learned the importance of talking to others about grief, as she insists that she, Yahaira, and Camino return to the grief counseling sessions once they get back to New York. Grief, the novel shows, can be painful—but talking about grief and engaging in rituals that help people work through their emotions can help diminish that pain and encourage recovery.



### MONEY, SECURITY, AND IMMIGRATION

By showing how differently Papi's daughters live, *Clap When You Land* highlights how class, nationality, and money aren't just things that make life more comfortable—rather, money and a passport, the novel shows, can mean the difference between thriving and barely surviving. Yahaira, who grew up in New York City in an apartment that Papi and Mami own, is mostly blind to the privileges that being a middle-class American citizen offer her. She has access to colleges and financial aid, a safe place to live, and enough food to eat. Camino and her aunt Tía, in contrast, live close to poverty. Papi's money affords them luxuries like a house with a lock, an air conditioner, and a generator, but Camino and Tía still struggle to keep enough food in the house, even before Papi's death (he'd sometimes send money late). And Camino, as a Dominican citizen with no passport and no easy path to becoming an American citizen, sees clearly how her nationality and her poverty will keep her from achieving her dream to study medicine in the U.S. and become an obstetrician.

As Camino and Yahaira connect—and as Camino learns that the airline is giving Papi's relatives a half-million dollar advance

payout—Camino grows increasingly resentful of Yahaira and afraid for her own prospects. As Papi's daughter from his legal marriage, Yahaira doesn't have to fight for the airline's money, while Camino (whose deceased mother's marriage to Papi wasn't valid) believes she'll have to fight for every penny. And with Papi gone, Camino also learns that her American visa application likely won't go through, as Mami's citizenship and income were essential to Camino's eligibility, and Mami isn't interested in helping Papi's other daughter. All of this makes Camino feel like her dream is truly just a dream, and that she'll have to abandon it to focus on the simple act of survival. While the novel ends with Camino getting a visa and moving to New York with Yahaira and Mami, it's clear that this outcome is as much a matter of luck as anything else—Camino is lucky that Mami ultimately comes around and is willing to help, but Mami just as easily could have chosen not to help Camino. Still, *Clap When You Land* ends with the implication that while Camino may be able to overcome the circumstances of her birth and achieve her dreams, for those she leaves behind in the Dominican Republic, poverty, insecurity, and fear will continue to rule their lives.



### GROWING UP AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Both Yahaira and Camino are 16, almost 17, and for both girls, their burgeoning maturity—particularly when it comes to their bodies—represents a threat to their safety and their senses of security. Since Camino was 13, Papi has been paying men in the neighborhood to leave her alone. But without Papi's money to deter him, El Cero, a known pimp, begins stalking and threatening Camino, trying to convince her that she should work for him. Yahaira, too, experiences sexual violence: a year before the novel's events begin, Yahaira was assaulted by a strange man on the subway. Though the girls' experiences with unwanted sexual advances differ greatly, their experiences are extremely similar in that neither girl feels able to ask for help. Tía makes Camino feel like she can't ask for help, as she insinuates that Camino is actively soliciting El Cero's attention. And though Yahaira reaches out to Papi, who's in the Dominican Republic, immediately after her assault, he never returns her phone calls, texts, or emails—and when he does finally contact her days later, it's to berate her for something else. Physically growing up, for Yahaira and Camino, isn't necessarily something that brings with it joy or excitement. Rather, as young women who relied on Papi to protect them (until his betrayal and ultimately, his death), *Clap When You Land* bleakly presents growing up as a process that leaves both its protagonists alone, afraid, and vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence.



### SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and

Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## CHESS

Yahaira's relationship to chess represents her relationship to Papi. More specifically, Yahaira's changing relationship to chess and her father shows how she comes of age. Papi teaches Yahaira to play chess when she's a little girl, and though she's naturally good at the game, what she really loves—and what motivates her to keep getting better—is Papi watching her win. Yahaira's relationship to chess, then, isn't based off a love of the game. Rather, it's rooted in how close chess brings Yahaira to Papi, something that Yahaira characterizes as childish and even naïve.

In the year before the novel begins, Yahaira discovers that Papi has been keeping a major secret from her: he has a second wife in the Dominican Republic. She learns about Papi's other life at around the same time that a strange man assaults Yahaira on the subway. When Papi doesn't answer Yahaira's calls, texts, or emails asking for help and support, Yahaira pulls away from chess—and this causes her and Papi to grow apart. The novel suggests that Yahaira's decision to pull away from chess (and the trauma that precipitated her decision) represents how Yahaira is beginning to grow up and see her parents as fully formed people capable of keeping secrets and having their own lives. So, while Yahaira once saw Papi as an enthusiastic (if unskilled) chess player whose moves she could always discern well in advance, Yahaira's discovery teaches her that Papi is actually far better at hiding his true feelings—and deepest secrets—than Yahaira ever thought to give him credit for.

Additionally, though, discovering Papi's secret and quitting chess allows Yahaira to come of age in an important way. Realizing that she really only liked playing for Papi's sake gives Yahaira the nudge she needs to explore things she's actually interested in and develop her own identity. So, while the traumatic circumstances surrounding Yahaira's choice to give up chess cause a huge rift in her relationship with Papi, leaving chess behind also allows Yahaira to come of age and develop independence.



## THE BEACH

The beach where Camino swims symbolizes her changing relationship to the Dominican Republic and her family's roots in the country. Swimming at the beach is Camino's happy place; it's where she feels free, safe, and fulfilled. It's also where she can connect with memories of both Mamá and Papi, as she has fond memories of spending time with both of her parents on the beach. In this sense, the beach is a positive symbol of the Dominican Republic for Camino: it represents her love of the people, the land, and her heritage. After Papi's death, though, Camino's relationship to the

beach—and to the Dominican Republic more broadly—becomes more fraught. Papi has been paying a known pimp named El Cero to leave Camino alone for several years, but without Papi around to pay up, El Cero begins stalking and harassing Camino, often at the beach. El Cero's harassment corrupts the happy memories and associations Camino has with the beach. Now, when Camino runs into El Cero on the beach, it's a constant reminder that she's in danger if she remains in the country and continues to swim on her beloved beach.

It's significant that on the night Camino runs away with Yahaira's passport with plans to immigrate to the U.S. on her own, Camino's last stop before the airport is the beach. She wants to say goodbye to all her happy memories of Mamá, Papi, and the Dominican Republic. But El Cero corrupts Camino's bittersweet goodbye on the beach by attempting to rape her, further underscoring the reality that for her own safety, Camino cannot stay in the Dominican Republic. It's this traumatic event that finally pushes Mami move up Camino's visa appointment so that Camino can accompany them to the U.S. In this way, the beach symbolizes how Camino's relationship to her roots has changed—though Camino loves the beach and the Dominican Republic, she nevertheless must leave them behind for her safety and in order to achieve her dreams.





## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Hot Key Books edition of *Clap When You Land* published in 2020.

### Chapter 1 Quotes

☝☝ To be from this barrio is to be made of this earth & clay: dirt-packed, water-backed, third-world smacked: they say, the soil beneath a country's nail, they say. I love my home. But it might be a sinkhole trying to feast quicksand mouth pried open; I hunger for stable ground, somewhere else.

**Related Characters:** Camino Rios (speaker), El Cero/Alejandro

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 2

### Explanation and Analysis

Camino describes her neighborhood (her *barrio*) and the




Dominican Republic more broadly to the reader. Earlier in the poem, she described how the mud gets everywhere during the rainy season. While she described the mud in the first part of the poem more neutrally, here, she describes it in decidedly negative terms: it's "the soil beneath a country's nail," suggesting that people don't think highly of her neighborhood. In fact, it doesn't actually belong. Like the dirt under a person's nail, which is not actually part of the person, removing the barrio leaves behind the shiny clean city. This metaphor suggests that life in this neighborhood is precarious and, perhaps, that everyone who lives there is at risk of losing their homes at any moment. However, this doesn't stop Camino from loving her neighborhood—it is her home, after all, even if objectively it's not a nice place to live.

Still, Camino can't ignore the fact that her home isn't always helpful and supportive. Describing it as a hungry "sinkhole" and "quicksand" suggests that Camino fears her home will literally eat her up and cause her to disappear. Throughout the novel, she identifies El Cero as the living embodiment of the more metaphorical monster she describes here. El Cero wants to coerce Camino into sex work, something she knows will keep her stuck in the country and won't benefit her at all (and will actually put her at risk and make her even more vulnerable). Thus, Camino yearns for "stable ground" where she can build a life for herself. This, she reveals later, is the United States, where she dreams of studying to become a doctor.

## Chapter 3 Quotes

●● the crowd outside our little teal house expands.  
 People stand there in shorts and caps,  
 in thong sandals, the viejos held up by their bastones,  
 they shuffle onto the balcón,  
 they wrap their fingers around the barred fence,  
 they watch & wait & watch & wait an unrehearsed vigil.  
 & they pray & I try not to suffocate  
 under all the eyes that seem to be expecting  
 me to tear myself out of my skin.

**Related Characters:** Camino Rios (speaker), Tía Solana, Papi

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 33

**Explanation and Analysis**

Papi's plane crashed into the ocean a day ago, and all of Camino's neighbors in the Dominican Republic gather around her and Tía's house to hold a vigil. At this point, it seems likely that Papi is dead, though the official announcement that there were no survivors won't come for another few days.

Camino observes that absolutely everyone in the neighborhood—even the *viejos*, or the elderly with their canes (*bastones*), show up to collectively mourn Papi. For the gathered people, this seems to be a fulfilling event—they're all able to mourn together for someone who was an integral part of the neighborhood. But for Camino, she finds all the watching neighbors "suffocate[ing]." They expect her to lose herself in her grief, sobbing and crying, but Camino is trying very hard to hold all her emotions inside of her and not give way to such an emotional outburst. This highlights one of the difficulties with grief: that is, that every person grieves differently. The bystanders find solace in coming together to pray for Papi and seem to expect Camino and Tía to appreciate their presence. But Camino would, at this point, rather be left alone to grieve in peace and without any expectations to display her grief in a certain way.

●● [...] Before I learned to fear him,  
 there was one memory that kept coming back,  
 the one I cannot shake even as I shake when he approaches:  
 Cero has never appeared young to me. Always this same  
 age, this same face. But he would come to school  
 to pick Emily up. & she would stop  
 everything she was doing & run to him, arms spread wide.  
 He would catch her, swinging her in circles. & I was jealous.  
 Jealous I didn't have a consistent male figure like Cero in my  
 life.

**Related Characters:** Camino Rios (speaker), El Cero/Alejandro, Emily, Papi

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 50

**Explanation and Analysis**

Camino shares an ironic fact with readers about El Cero, a known pimp who's stalking her and trying to coerce her to work for him: before he became a pimp, she admired him and thought he was a great man to have around. (El Cero turned to his current line of work after his sister Emily, Camino's best friend, died of dengue fever about 10 years ago.)

These days, Camino is terrified of El Cero. At multiple points, she identifies him as the most dangerous thing on the beach and in her neighborhood, and she describes in detail how he coerces girls as young as 10 or 11 to start working for him. But he wasn't always the monster he is today: Camino cannot forget how he clearly adored his little sister Emily, and how he was always there for her after school. Camino doesn't take this a step further because her safety depends on seeing El Cero as a monster and nothing more, but this does highlight that El Cero is human—and that he, just like Camino, is dealing with grief. In this sense, he presents a vision of what a person can turn into when they don't appropriately address their grief.

This passage also highlights how conflicted Camino felt about her father as a young girl. Though she loved him, she also resented him on some level for not being around for her all the time, like El Cero was for Emily.

## Chapter 4 Quotes


☝☝ But before we got off at our stop,

Papi turned to my nine-year-old self & said:  
“Never, ever, let them see you sweat, negra.

Fight until you can't breathe, & if you have to forfeit,  
you forfeit smiling, make them think you let them win.”

**Related Characters:** Yahaira Rios, Papi (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 86

### Explanation and Analysis

Yahaira is recounting how, at a chess tournament when she was little, she thought she was going to win—and then she cried when she ended up losing. This is the advice Papi gives her on the train home about how to conduct herself going forward.

On the surface, Papi's advice seems sound: Yahaira should always maintain her composure so that she always appears to be the one in control. This way, even if she doesn't win the match, then she still appears powerful and poised. However, the novel goes on to show how Yahaira's choice to internalize Papi's advice has negative consequences for her. For instance, when a man assaults Yahaira on a train, her first instinct is to fall back on Papi's advice—and this leads her to shut down completely, so she never tells anyone

what's going on or asks for help. In the novel's present, in the days and weeks after Papi's death, Yahaira continues to follow Papi's advice—which means that she prioritizes maintaining her composure over letting herself show emotion and grieve in a way that may be more helpful to her than keeping everything bottled up inside. Indeed, Yahaira sees Papi's death as a “loss” like one might lose a chess match, suggesting that she feels she may have done something to contribute to his death in some way. Though Yahaira is ultimately able to differentiate between situations where it's healthier to voice her emotions and those where it's better to follow Papi's advice and keep her cool, the novel mostly traces Yahaira's journey to get to this point.

☝☝ Did I love chess?  
I did chess.

But love? Like I  
love watching beauty tutorials?



[...]

Or how I love Papi's brother, Tío Jorge,  
holding my hand and saying I make him proud  
for myself not for what I win?

Like I loved my father, that kind of love?  
Consuming, huge, a love that takes the wheel,  
a love where I pretended to be something I wasn't?  
I did chess. I was obsessed with winning.

But never love.

**Related Characters:** Yahaira Rios (speaker), Papi, Tío Jorge, Andrea “Dre” Johnson, Mami/Zoila Rios

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 93

### Explanation and Analysis

After describing how good she was at chess when she played competitively, Yahaira muses about whether or not she loved playing chess—and she decides that she really didn't. The things Yahaira describes truly loving (like her uncle and Papi, as well as Mami and her girlfriend Dre) suggest that what Yahaira really values is her family. She appreciates the people who make her feel loved and special, like how her Tío Jorge always makes her feel like she doesn't have to do anything to earn his love. Papi, for his part, is

someone that Yahaira loved so much that she “pretended to be something [she] wasn’t” (that is, someone who loved chess).

Part of Yahaira’s coming-of-age journey hinges on making discoveries like this and figuring out what she likes, who she is, and who she wants to be. Letting go of chess caused strife in her relationship with Papi, but it also gave Yahaira the opportunity to pursue other interests, like beauty and nail art. And after making these discoveries about what she loves and what (or who) she values, Yahaira can continue to make choices that align with her values as she goes through the rest of her maturation process.

## Chapter 6 Quotes



Without fail, most days I’m in school,  
I get sent to the guidance counselor.  
But I don’t have anything to tell her.  
She asks me how I’m doing. Stupid fucking question.

I want to tell her some days I wake up  
to find dents on the inside of my palms  
from where I’ve fisted my hands while sleeping,  
my nails biting into the skin & leaving angry marks.

On the days I wake up with smooth palms I’m angry at myself.  
There should be no breaks from this grief. Not even in sleep.

I don’t tell her that. I don’t tell her anything.  
I chew on the little green mints she offers & wait for the bell.

**Related Characters:** Yahaira Rios (speaker), Papi, Camino Rios, Dr. Johnson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 120-121

### Explanation and Analysis

Yahaira describes how, on days she goes to school (she skips most days), she inevitably ends up in the counselor’s office—but refuses to say anything to the counselor. It’s clear from this passage that Yahaira is angry and hurting. Declaring an inquiry about how she’s doing a “Stupid fucking question” makes it abundantly clear that Yahaira isn’t doing well, and that she’s upset that anyone would ask since, to her, the answer should be obvious.

Then, as she describes literally hurting herself in her sleep, it looks as though Yahaira is attempting to find some outlet for her grief. The physical pain makes Yahaira feel like she’s doing something with her emotions—and yet, the fact remains that Yahaira is still doing something painful and

destructive as she hurts herself. The fact that she’s seeing the counselor to begin with suggests that the people around her believe Yahaira would be better off if she were willing to talk to someone about what she’s feeling, and even Dr. Johnson echoes this at several points in the novel. But Yahaira, like Camino, believes it’s better and less shameful to keep all of this inside, at least for now. Eventually, both girls get to a point where they’re willing to start talking about how they’re feeling, but it takes them several weeks after Papi’s death to get there.

## Chapter 7 Quotes

Even when he came to visit  
this house he paid for & updated,  
Papi treated Tía like an older sister:  
so much respect for how she kept the house,  
for the beliefs she had,  
the decisions she made regarding my well-being.

They were friends. But until this moment  
I have not thought of what she’s lost.  
He was like her brother. Besides me, her only family.

**Related Characters:** Camino Rios (speaker), Tía Solana, Mami/Zoila Rios, Papi, Yahaira Rios

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 153

### Explanation and Analysis



Camino has come home from the beach and realizes that she’s not the only one grieving Papi’s death—Tía, who has known Papi all his life, is grieving too. Here, she considers her aunt and father’s relationship and how much her aunt must be hurting. This highlights that Camino is coming of age and beginning to acknowledge that her adult caregivers have inner lives, just like she does. Yahaira goes through much the same process in the chapters that she narrates, as when she shares that she had no idea her parents could keep secrets or put on a face in front of her. Though Camino is more mature than Yahaira in several ways, simply by virtue of having grown up in an environment where she had to grow up faster, they’re both going through this same process of accepting adults’ humanity and emotions.


Camino also notes that Tía is likely feeling the same things she is in terms of the magnitude of having lost Papi. Tía doesn’t have any other living family, so like Camino (who doesn’t yet know of Yahaira’s existence), she believes that

she's totally alone in the world, aside from Camino. Camino finds losing family in this way particularly unsettling, especially after losing her mother almost a decade ago. It feels like a process of winnowing down a family to, ultimately, only one or two people—and Camino, on some level, begins to face Tía's age and her mortality in this passage as well. Put simply, she realizes that Tía also won't be around forever, even if she seems ageless and powerful in the novel's present.

☝☝ If you are not from an island,  
you cannot understand  
what it means to be of water:  
to learn to curve around the bend,  
to learn to rise with rain,  
to learn to quench an outside thirst  
while all the while  
you grow shallow  
until there is not one drop  
left for you.  
I know this is what Tía does not say.  
Sand & soil & sinew & smiles:  
all bartered. & who reaps? Who eats?  
Not us. Not me.

**Related Characters:** Camino Rios (speaker), El Cero/Alejandro, Tía Solana, Carline

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 159-160

### Explanation and Analysis

Tía has just accused Camino of asking for El Cero's attention. She also pointed out that women who engage in sex work for El Cero don't benefit at all from the work—other people, like El Cero and the foreign men who purchase El Cero's girls' bodies, are the ones who benefit. Here, Camino addresses the reader to explain more fully what Tía means.

When Camino describes herself and other islanders as being “of water,” what she essentially means is that they're accommodating to outside forces. Whether those forces be weather like hurricanes, or poverty, or tourists that drive the economy (the “outside thirst” that women engaging in sex work, or anyone who works in the tourism industry,

must “quench”), people in the Dominican Republic must serve others' needs rather than attend to their own. This is why Camino describes Dominican people “grow[ing] shallow”: the industries that drive the Dominican Republic's economy unfailingly occur at locals' expense.



Earlier in this poem, for instance, Camino described how sugarcane grows in the Dominican Republic but is exported to other countries while local kids go hungry. So, everything in the Dominican Republic, she insists, is essentially for sale or trade—land use overwhelmingly benefits foreigners, and the people who work in tourism and tourism-adjacent industries (including sex work) end up compromising their health, safety, and wellbeing in order to serve tourists. Indeed, Camino describes how Carline, who works at the nearby resort, deals with much the same thing, even though she's not involved in sex work: her boss continually sexually harasses her and ultimately fires her for being unwilling to return to work a week after her baby's birth.


Camino takes this example and others to mean that no matter which way a person looks at it, local Dominican people don't benefit from the way their country's economy works. And though she acknowledges that lots of young girls get drawn into working for El Cero because he buys them groceries and takes care of their families, the girls themselves—including Camino if she were to accept his offer—might stay afloat, but they're not the ones who will get wealthy off of their work.

## Chapter 8 Quotes

☝☝ Things you can buy  
with half a million dollars:  
a car that looks more  
like a space creature than a car.  
[...]  
Five hundred flights  
to the Dominican Republic.  
A half million Dollar Store chess sets,  
with their accompanying boxes.  
A hundred thousand copies  
of Shakespeare's [The Tempest](#).  
Apparently a father.

**Related Characters:** Yahaira Rios (speaker), Papi, Camino Rios, Tía Solana, Mami/Zoila Rios

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 185-186

### Explanation and Analysis

Representatives from the airline have just visited Yahaira's apartment to offer the family a half-million dollar advance to ward off lawsuits, and Yahaira and her family members are totally shocked.

On one hand, Yahaira acknowledges that a half-million dollars is an inordinate amount of money. That kind of money will change her life, and to try to make sense of just how much money that is, she tries to figure out how much she could buy of certain things that make sense to her, like a one-dollar chess set or a flight to the Dominican Republic. But what doesn't make sense, no matter how she tries to look at it, is assigning a price to Papi's life and worth. So, even though Yahaira can recognize that the money will improve her life and secure her future, it still feels like an insult because the money is so connected to Papi, and her grief is still so raw.

It's also worth noting, though, that Yahaira's privilege is what allows her to see this money as such an insult. Camino also finds the payout baffling, but she quickly shifts to focus on how the money will fundamentally improve her life and pull her and Tía out of crushing poverty. Yahaira's quality of life is higher to begin with, so although the money will help her and Mami, it's not essential to their future.

## Chapter 9 Quotes

☝☝ I want to put my fingers against my sister's cheek.

I want to put my face in her neck & ask if she hurts the way I do.

Does she know of me?  
Would my father have told her?  
Did she share

in his confidences?  
While the whole while he lied to me?  
Or is she the only one

who would understand my heart right now?  
If I find her

would I find a breathing piece of myself I had not known was missing?

**Related Characters:** Camino Rios (speaker), Yahaira Rios, Papi

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 197-198

### Explanation and Analysis

Camino has just discovered that Yahaira exists, and she's full of questions and conflicting emotions. Her first thought is whether Yahaira is hurting the same way that Camino is: if Papi's death has been just as devastating for Yahaira as it's been for Camino. Readers know that Papi's death has been extremely difficult for Yahaira to deal with and that the girls are dealing with their grief in similar ways (by clamming up, refusing to speak about it to anyone, and trying to stay strong for their families). So, while it's possible to read this line of questioning as a positive message—it is essentially Camino opening herself up to having a lot in common with her sister—her other questions read as far more negative. She can't, for instance, help but wonder if Yahaira was the favorite daughter who knew all about Papi's second family in the Dominican Republic. If Papi told Yahaira all his secrets while keeping so much from Camino, Camino suggests that she'd feel a bit differently about her sister.

But for now, all Camino can do is consider these questions, as she hasn't yet reached out to Yahaira to begin a relationship and get these questions answered. This passage overwhelmingly highlights that Camino is curious about Yahaira—but she's also fundamentally suspicious of her sister and of Yahaira's relationship with Papi.

## Chapter 11 Quotes

☝☝ I'm the child her father left her for in the summers. While she is the child my father left me for my entire life. I do not want to hate a girl with a glowing name.

But I cannot help the anger planted in my chest, fanning its palm leaves wide & casting a shadow on all I've known. I wonder what kind of girl learns she is almost a millionaire & doesn't at all wonder about the girl across the ocean she will be denying food. Tuition. A dream. Unless she doesn't know about me.

**Related Characters:** Camino Rios (speaker), Papi, Tía Solana, Yahaira Rios

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 220

**Explanation and Analysis**

Camino has decided to try to find Yahaira on social media, and she wonders what Yahaira is like and what she'll find online. Again, Camino's conflicted thoughts about Yahaira shine through in this passage: Camino knows that Yahaira must have good qualities, as evidenced by her "glowing name" (*Yahaira* means "to light or to shine"). But she also can't help but wonder if Yahaira is actually not a great person. Is she someone who is knowingly keeping money from her impoverished sister? Camino doesn't have the answer to this question yet (and she later discovers that the answer is basically no), but for now, she can't help but resent Yahaira.

This is in part because Camino and Tía's precarious financial situation makes Camino particularly sensitive about money. She and Tía depended almost entirely on Papi and his money to keep them afloat, and things have gotten dire since he died and is no longer able to support them. Her relatively comfortable life in the Dominican Republic and her dreams of college will disappear if she can't claim some of the airline's payout for herself.

However, a lot of this resentment also has to do with the fact that Camino now understands why Papi never came to the Dominican Republic outside of the summer months: he was in New York with Yahaira and his other wife. So, Camino begins to feel resentment not at Papi, but at the people whom she believes kept him in New York for most of the year. And while she can acknowledge that she too took Papi from Yahaira for part of the year, she also believes that being without one's father for a few months out of the year is nothing compared to going nine or 10 months out of the year *without* him, year in and year out.

**Chapter 12 Quotes**

☹☹ Mami still had an air around Papi, like he was a medicine she knew she needed even as she cringed at the taste.

But now I wonder if it was always more than that.

Maybe Mami knew about the other woman? Even without seeing the certificate.

I think of how the word *unhappy* houses so many unanswered questions.

**Related Characters:** Yahaira Rios (speaker), Mami/Zoila Rios, Papi, Mamá

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 231

**Explanation and Analysis**

In the previous chapter Yahaira narrated, Mami implied that she was unhappy in her marriage to Papi and said outright that he embarrassed her. Now, Yahaira wonders if Mami knows that Papi had a second wife in the Dominican Republic and if this is what caused Mami to be so unhappy. As Yahaira considers the root of Mami's unhappiness, she continues to come of age. Part of this has to do with realizing that her parents were capable of concealing things from her, and that they weren't just stereotypical parents who existed simply to care for her. They were, put simply, people, with lives of their own—and secrets of their own, too.

Yahaira has so many questions exactly because her family members kept so many secrets. Last year, Yahaira found out that Papi had another wife in the Dominican Republic, but because this a fact her family states openly, she has no way yet to put together the rest of the story (that Mamá is dead, that Papi has another daughter, and that Mami knows about both of these things). All of these secrets make Yahaira feel off balance and insecure, as she doesn't know what everyone else knows and she's so afraid to tell anyone about what she knows. This highlights what the novel suggests is one of the consequences of keeping secrets: Yahaira feels so anxious for really no reason, as keeping her secret isn't actually helping anyone.

☹☹ Tía Lidia puts her hand over mine. "Your mother is having a tough time. Their marriage wasn't easy, & she has so much she's dealing with. Yano was a great father to *you*, & I know you loved him, but he wasn't always a great husband." & I don't know how one man can be so many different things to the people he was closest to. But I nod. I almost slip and ask does everyone know? But if they don't I can't be the one to reveal the dirt on my father's name.

**Related Characters:** Yahaira Rios (speaker), Mami/Zoila Rios, Papi, Mamá

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 232-233

**Explanation and Analysis**

Mami has just lost her temper with Yahaira and left the room over something seemingly inconsequential. Tía Lidia, who is Mami's sister, is trying to help Yahaira understand what Mami is going through.

What Tía Lidia essentially tries to help Yahaira understand is that Papi was a complex person; he wasn't fundamentally good or fundamentally bad. Though he was an exceptional father to Yahaira, that doesn't mean that he was a good husband and partner to Mami. (This is because he betrayed Mami by marrying a second wife in the Dominican Republic, something that Mami resents him for—but Yahaira doesn't know Mami knows about Papi's other wife.) Yahaira is still young and, though she might theoretically see the world in shades of gray and accept that people are nuanced and complex, her struggle to accept that Papi could have been "so many different things / to the people he was closest to" suggests that she's not yet able to own these beliefs in practice. This is something that will come later, as she matures a bit more and continues to come to terms with Papi's legacy.

Then, what shines through later in the passage is Yahaira's shame at knowing Papi's secret—and at the fact that she's keeping her knowledge a secret, too. Though Yahaira believes she's protecting Papi's memory and Mami by staying quiet about Papi's other marriage, ultimately, the novel suggests that all Yahaira is doing is causing herself unnecessary pain and discomfort.

## Chapter 13 Quotes

☝ It is strange to go from being an only child to seeing someone wearing your own face. Now there is this other person & supposedly she is my sister where yesterday she was just a name holding the future I thought I wanted; now there is a girl of blood & flesh who is second only to Tía as the closest thing I have to family.

**Related Characters:** Camino Rios (speaker), Yahaira Rios, Papi, Tía Solana

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 250

### Explanation and Analysis

Camino and Yahaira have finally connected on social media, and Camino marvels at how her conception of Yahaira has changed since putting a face to her sister's name. As she acknowledges, this is particularly huge for Camino because

she's been an only child her entire life, she lost her mother and recently her father, and she thought that the only family she had left was Tía, who isn't actually a biological family member. But now, all of that has changed because she has a sister out there who even "wear[s] [her] own face."

This is a huge tonal shift too from Camino's earlier thoughts about Yahaira, which tended toward being ungenerous, jealous, and angry with her sister. Seeing Yahaira's face changes things for Camino in that regard, at least in the short term (Camino does go back to resenting Yahaira for a while, particularly once Yahaira arrives in the Dominican Republic). But in the long term, even Camino ultimately decides that letting Yahaira into her life is a positive thing, and that it's actually a blessing to discover Papi's secret.

## Chapter 14 Quotes

☝ The squares do not overlap. & neither do the pieces.

The only time two pieces stand in the same square is the second before one is being taken & replaced.

& I know now, Papi could not move between two families.

[...]

He would glide from family to family, square to square & never look back.


[...]

Everything has a purpose, Papi taught me.

But what was his in keeping such big secrets?

**Related Characters:** Yahaira Rios (speaker), Camino Rios, Papi

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 253-254

### Explanation and Analysis

Yahaira thinks back on what Papi taught her about how to play chess, and she realizes that the rules of chess almost perfectly apply to how Papi conducted his secret double life (Yahaira has recently found out about Camino). As Yahaira understands it, Papi was a lot like a chess piece. He moved

from one “square” to another when he flew back and forth from New York and the Dominican Republic, and he only metaphorically inhabited the same square when he was on the plane flying between his families.


However, Yahaira also recognizes that the metaphor begins to break down as she considers whether it was a good or a bad thing that Papi conducted his life in this way. While chess’s rules make the game function as it should and give it structure, she realizes that applying these rules to Papi’s real life just led to lies, secrets, and pain for the entire family. Additionally, Yahaira’s burgeoning maturity is evident in this passage as she wonders what Papi’s reasoning was for keeping his second family a secret. Yahaira’s ability to understand that Papi did have his reasons for being secretive may not make those reasons intelligible to her, but it does show that she is mature enough to see her father as an adult who had the agency to make complex decisions about how he would conduct his life and his affairs.

## Chapter 15 Quotes

☝☝ I want to offer her platitudes & murmurs that it will all be all right. But thing is, this isn’t an uncommon story.

A lot of people don’t finish school or follow their dreams. That fairy-tale plotline is for telenovelas.

**Related Characters:** Camino Rios (speaker), Carline, Nelson, Luciano, Tía Solana, Papi

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 265

### Explanation and Analysis

Carline has just shared that Nelson, her boyfriend, might have to drop out of school so he can provide for Carline and their new baby, Luciano (whom Carline also fears won’t survive as he was born several weeks premature). Camino wants to tell Carline that everything will be okay, but she’s become more of a realist in the weeks after Papi’s death. Camino’s recognition that things probably won’t work out okay for Carline is a project of her realization that things probably won’t work out okay for her, either. Papi isn’t alive to send money, keep Camino in private school, and ultimately, pay for her to attend college in the United States. However, at this point, it’s emotionally easier for Camino to accept that things aren’t going to work out for Carline and

ignore her own rapidly diminishing options.

Overwhelmingly, the way Camino describes Carline and her family’s circumstances gives readers insight into how many of Camino’s neighbors live—and how Camino and Tía will likely live, once Papi’s money runs out. The neighborhood is poor, and Camino and Tía are some of the only (if not the only) people who have a generator to provide electricity when the power grid goes dark. All of this contributes to Camino’s growing sense that she’s never going to be successful or escape the Dominican Republic. Without outside help, she fears that she has no choice but to ultimately remain here, living in poverty like so many of her neighbors.

☝☝ Neither of us says a word.

On the screen, beyond where she can see my hand, I trace her chin with my finger.

& for the first time

I don’t just feel loss.

I don’t feel just a big gaping

hole at everything

my father’s absence has consumed.

Look at what it’s spit out & offered.

Look at who it’s given me.

**Related Characters:** Camino Rios (speaker), Papi, Yahaira Rios

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 276

### Explanation and Analysis

Camino and Yahaira have just gotten on a video chat, so they’re seeing each other’s faces in real time for the very first time. What shines through in this passage are the positive feelings Camino feels, which differ greatly from the negative emotions she’s struggled with prior to this. Suddenly, Camino is able to put Papi’s death and his secrets in perspective and look at his choices in a new light: his choices, despite making things difficult and uncomfortable for Camino (and Yahaira) while he was alive, have now given her a gift of a sister. This reframing is huge, and it marks a major turning point in Camino’s development. Though she continues to struggle with how she wants to conduct her relationship with Yahaira for the remainder of the novel, this is the first time Camino genuinely sees having a sister as a positive thing.



However, this passage also highlights how guarded and private Camino remains. The fact that she traces Yahaira's chin with her finger but doesn't let Yahaira see this suggests that Camino is trying to keep her emotions a secret. She's not yet willing to fully let Yahaira in on all the things that she's feeling, good and bad. So, while this represents a huge step forward for Camino, she still hasn't gotten to the point yet where she's willing to open up and be vulnerable with anyone, even Yahaira.

## Chapter 16 Quotes

☹️ Papi will have two funerals.  
Papi will have two ceremonies.

Papi will be mourned in two countries.  
Papi will be said goodbye to here & there.


Papi had two lives.  
Papi has two daughters.

Papi was a man split in two,  
playing a game against himself.

But the problem with that  
is that in order to win, you also always lose.

**Related Characters:** Yahaira Rios (speaker), Papi, Camino Rios

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 285

### Explanation and Analysis

Yahaira is again considering Papi's legacy, his two funerals, and his reasoning for keeping it two families secret (at least from his daughters). In listing the pairs of things that Papi had in life and now in death—his two funerals, mourners in two countries, and his two lives and daughters—Yahaira concludes that Papi essentially split himself into two different people. She and Camino later discuss this when they're both in the Dominican Republic, particularly in regard to Papi's jewelry. In New York he wore only a ring, while he wore way more jewelry in the Dominican Republic. It's possible that in life, this may have given him some sort of freedom—he could experiment with being almost two entirely different people, after all. But Yahaira also acknowledges that despite there having certainly been upsides to his double life, Papi's secrecy also hurt him in significant ways. For instance, he only got to spend a few months out of the year with Camino, and he missed every

summer of Yahaira's life. Yahaira doesn't offer any judgment on what Papi should have done. Instead, she simply seems to accept that Papi hurt everyone with his lies—most of all, himself.

## Chapter 17 Quotes

☹️ I don't want to be brisk. It almost hurts me to look into her wide, soft eyes & ask for so much. But her softness has nothing to do with the desperation I feel growing inside me. After Papi's burial I will have to leave this place. There is nothing for me in this town where I see my exit doors growing smaller.

**Related Characters:** Camino Rios (speaker), Yahaira Rios, Papi, Tía Solana

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 290

### Explanation and Analysis

Camino has just called Yahaira to insist that she wire \$10,000, or Camino will refuse to tell Yahaira anything about Papi's funeral. Camino's desperation shines through in this passage. She doesn't really want to ask for the money; in fact, she finds the request distasteful and disrespectful to Yahaira. However, Camino believes that demanding the money from Yahaira is her only option. She's made it very clear that she and Tía can't support themselves without Papi's help, and she's pretty sure that Yahaira won't help her out of the goodness of her heart.

Camino also leaves her first clue for what she plans to do later (sneak out of the country with Yahaira's passport) when she insists that she must leave the Dominican Republic. The Dominican Republic offers Camino few opportunities, if any, to continue her education and achieve her dream of becoming a doctor. For now, Camino prioritizes these dreams, her wellbeing, and her safety over making overtures to Yahaira and developing their relationship.

## Chapter 20 Quotes

☝ & there was a moment when the wheels first touched down  
 that my heart plummeted in my chest, but then we were slowing  
 & a smattering of passengers erupted into applause.  
 The old lady in the seat beside me said in Spanish,  
 “They don’t do that as much anymore. This must be a plane of Dominicans returning home;  
 when you touch down on this soil, you must clap when you land.  
 Para dar gracias a dios. Regrezamos.” & I smiled back.

**Related Characters:** Yahaira Rios (speaker), Papi, Mami/Zoila Rios

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 323

**Explanation and Analysis**

Yahaira describes her anxiety on the flight to the Dominican Republic and the older lady who explains the tradition of “clap[ping] when you land” to her. This overture helps to ease Yahaira’s anxiety, in part because the lady is clearly letting Yahaira in on a local tradition. Though Yahaira was raised very Dominican, she’s never been to the Dominican Republic before. She fears that this fact makes her less Dominican than, say, Camino or Papi, who grew up there. But when this woman explains the tradition, Yahaira feels like she’s connecting with local Dominican folks and immersing herself deeper in the country’s culture.

The woman explains that clapping when they land is to thank God, presumably for helping the plane fly and land safely. *Regrezamos*, meanwhile, translates to “we came back” or “we returned.” Especially given that Papi died in a plane crash—a plane that, this woman might suggest, God *didn’t* help—this is comforting for Yahaira to hear. It signals that Yahaira has indeed arrived in the place she’s been wanting to visit for much of her life.

More broadly, since the novel takes its title from this woman’s advice, it’s worth considering what “clap[ping] when you land” means in the context of the whole novel. It is, essentially, advice to give thanks for whatever good things happen to a person. So, Yahaira and Camino might take this as advice to celebrate the fact that they ultimately find each other, and that Camino eventually travels to New York with Yahaira and Mami. The phrase acknowledges that little in life is a given, and so it’s important to celebrate the positive things when they happen (such as discovering one’s

sister, or a baby’s survival, or achieving one’s dreams).

☝ The ceremony we had for Papi in New York is nothing compared to what is planned in DR.

Tía and Camino arrange an entire party.  
 Mami looks on disapprovingly  
 as a band of men in white show up with drums & tambourines, & it’s a good thing the grave site isn’t too far from the church because dozens & dozens of people show up, until we’re a blur,  
 a smudge of people dressed like ash  
 advancing down the street.

I borrowed a light-colored dress from Camino,  
 & we walk down the street arm in arm.

People sing songs I don’t know.

I think Papi would have loved us making such a fuss.

**Related Characters:** Yahaira Rios (speaker), Camino Rios, Papi, Tía Solana, Mami/Zoila Rios

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 352

**Explanation and Analysis**

Yahaira is describing Papi’s funeral and how cathartic the experience is for her, even if Mami clearly disapproves. In thinking this, Yahaira accepts what she’s suspected for some time: that Papi was far more tied to the Dominican Republic than he ever let on, and that this funeral is thus the far more meaningful one. Finally, she’s beginning to put together Papi’s two halves and come to a better understanding of who her father was. This process feels healing to Yahaira, suggesting that she’s finally getting the answers she wants and needs—and that she’s finally beginning to move through her grief.

Additionally, Yahaira focuses on how close she and Camino feel during the funeral. Yahaira has already gotten to the level of borrowing Camino’s clothes, and the girls continue to hold hands throughout the funeral. During this event, the fact that they’re both Papi’s daughters bonds them. They both hurt the same way, and they both find solace in this ritual.



Finally, Yahaira is also learning why exactly rituals like funerals and weddings are so important. They bring together people who all feel more or less the same way, which allows them to collectively work through their

emotions, mourn, and celebrate. Yahaira gets at this collective nature when she describes the funeralgoers as turning into a “blur” and a “smudge.” Each individual person loses their defining characteristics and instead becomes part of a larger, mourning whole. And perhaps even more importantly for Yahaira, she also believes Papi would’ve loved such a big, loud funeral. He always loved big parties and being the center of attention, and Yahaira realizes that the funeral is Papi’s last chance to be the center of attention, if only in spirit.

☛ [...] & here we are: Tía like a bishop, slashing her long machete. Mami, the knight with rims. My body in front of my sister’s body: queens. Papi, who I know is here too. He did build that castle he always promised.

**Related Characters:** Yahaira Rios (speaker), Tía Solana, Mami/Zoila Rios, Camino Rios, Papi, El Cero/Alejandro

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 388

### Explanation and Analysis

Yahaira, Tía, and Mami have arrived at the beach to rescue Camino from El Cero, who was attempting to rape her. Yahaira thinks of this scene as being akin to a chess match, with each person taking on the role of a chess piece. The fact that Yahaira does this is, again, a testament to how comforting chess is to her, even as she and Papi ultimately fought so vehemently about her quitting chess. Now that he’s dead and she’s coming to terms with his legacy, she realizes that she doesn’t have to throw chess out entirely. Rather, she can think of all the happy memories she has of Papi and chess, and she can use chess’s rules to help her make sense of her life. In this sense, this passage highlights how Yahaira is finally reaching a point in her grief where she’s able to see the good in Papi’s life and his actions.

Part of Yahaira’s newfound ability to give Papi some grace is her willingness to accept that his choices and his secrets, as difficult as they were for everyone to deal with when Papi was alive, have ultimately given them a “castle.” That “castle,” in Yahaira’s metaphor, is the more robust family she now shares with Tía and with Camino. Papi perhaps didn’t intend to build this particular “castle,” as there’s no indication if he

ever planned to let his daughters know the other existed. Still, Yahaira is now choosing to see Papi’s choices as gifts.

☛ She grabs her purse & drives out.  
There was so much I had left to say:

That maybe a bad husband can still be a good parent.  
That maybe he tried to be the best he knew how to be.

That he hurt her got caught up there’s no excuse.  
But he is not here. He is not here. We are all that’s left.

**Related Characters:** Yahaira Rios (speaker), Mami/Zoila Rios, Papi, Camino Rios, Tía Lidia, El Cero/Alejandro

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 396

### Explanation and Analysis

The morning after El Cero attempts to rape Camino, Yahaira tells Mami that Camino must come home with them. Mami doesn’t respond, leaving Yahaira to her own thoughts.

Yahaira’s thoughts show how much she’s changed over the course of the novel. At the beginning of the novel, before she had all the information about Papi’s secret second family, she felt ashamed and disappointed in him. He seemed like not just a bad husband, but also a bad father for not being there for Yahaira when she needed him. She also spent a lot of time wishing that Papi would come back or refusing to acknowledge at all that he’s dead. Here, though, Yahaira shows that she took her Tía Lidia’s advice to heart and now understands that Papi was a complex person who made mistakes—but that doesn’t make him a wholly bad person. Rather, she’s able to hold multiple truths in her mind: that Papi seriously hurt Mami with his infidelity, and that for the most part, he was as good and present of a father to Yahaira and Camino as he could be. And most importantly, Yahaira says—twice—that Papi isn’t here anymore. Her point, essentially, is that it’s time to move on.

As Yahaira sees it, what’s most important now is that she and Mami make the best out of the gift that Papi’s infidelity and secrets gave them: Camino, a sister and a second daughter. He’s no longer around to mediate their relationship (or keep them from having a relationship at all), and so it’s up to them to figure out their relationship and make the best of it.

At this point, Yahaira doesn’t realize that Mami isn’t ignoring her at all. She’s actually gone to the consulate to move up Camino’s visa appointment. So Yahaira’s hurt and the fact

that she feels Mami is betraying her right now exposes that Yahaira is still making assumptions about her parents. She's come a long way, but as she continues to mature beyond the end of the novel, she still has more to learn.

☝☝ Zoila & I speak little on these trips,  
but when I'm humming along to a song,  
she turns up the radio.

& when her face was red from heat  
in the clinic waiting room,  
I used a magazine to fan it.

It is awkward, these familial ties & breaks we share.  
But we are muddling through it.

**Related Characters:** Camino Rios (speaker), Mami/Zoila Rios, Papi

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 405

### Explanation and Analysis


Camino and Mami are running errands to put together the packet of documents Camino will need for her visa appointment. Slowly, they're beginning to form a relationship with each other, beginning simply by showing each other they care in these small ways. Camino knows that Mami is trying and cares about her, for instance, when Mami makes note of which songs Camino likes and turns up the radio. In turn, Camino shows her thanks and positive regard by helping Mami stay comfortable in the heat. As Camino acknowledges, this doesn't mean that this process isn't awkward. Camino has only recently found out Mami exists at all, and she's spent much of that time believing Mami is stuck-up, selfish, and rude. And Mami has, by her admission, unfairly resented Camino for existing at all and has refused to help Camino or even acknowledge her existence. All in all, Camino decides, things are difficult and somewhat uncomfortable. But in the end, she believes that they'll all have a happier, better family to rely on. This family

will exist because Papi lied and kept secrets, but now that his secrets are out in the open, Camino, Mami, and Yahaira can move past that and into a happier, more secure future.

☝☝ I skim my feet in the water, with my face stroked by the sun  
& pretend it is my father hands on my skin  
saying sorry I love you welcome home goodbye.  
I forgive you. I forgive you. I forgive you.  
Say the waves. Say I.

**Related Characters:** Yahaira Rios (speaker), Camino Rios, Mami/Zoila Rios, Papi

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 423

### Explanation and Analysis

While Mami and Camino are out running errands, Yahaira walks to the beach to say goodbye to Papi. The fact that Yahaira decides to go to the beach for this experience reinforces the beach's symbolism as a place where Yahaira (and not just Camino) can experience happiness and connect to the Dominican Republic and her family members. Prior to this point, the beach has been Camino's happy place exclusively. But now, its symbolism changes slightly to allow Yahaira to enjoy a similar experience.

That Yahaira has this experience at all suggests that she's beginning to move through her grief and say goodbye to Papi. In imagining that the sun is Papi touching her skin, Yahaira is able to have the apology that she's wanted from Papi for more than a year, as well as the goodbye that she never got due to his unexpected death. Getting this from Papi, even if it's in her own imagination, allows Yahaira to finally reach the point where she's willing and able to forgive Papi for his transgressions. With this, Yahaira makes peace with her grief and will be able to move forward in a much better mindset than she's been in for much of the novel.



## 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 1. CAMINO

Camino knows too much about mud. She knows that streets without sidewalks flood when the water rises—and at those times, learning about mud is “learning the language of survival.” Camino knows how Tía will snap a dishrag at her if she happens to track mud inside. She knows how mud dries and clings to everything, or slurps at “the high heels / of the working girls” she used to go to school with. Tía always warns Camino not to let the mud “stain” her, but Camino knows the truth: “To be from this barrio is to be made of this earth and clay.” People say this is an awful place to live, “the soil beneath a country’s nail.” Camino loves her home, but she longs to live somewhere stable, not in “quicksand” or a sinkhole.

Camino wakes up at five in the morning so she can accompany Tía Solana to visit a woman with stomach cancer. Camino has been going with Tía since she was a toddler, even when Mamá was alive. This is in part because Camino and Tía have an understanding: Tía doesn’t make silly rules, so Camino doesn’t feel the need to rebel. They gather breakfast, lock up the house, and find the neighborhood stray, Vira Lata, waiting for them at the gate. Vira Lata might be a stray, but he’s attached himself to Camino. He follows them to the woman with cancer’s house.

There, despite the door not having a lock, Tía knocks before entering. Camino doesn’t make a face at the smell of the woman’s unwashed body. Instead, she murmurs a greeting to the woman, who only moans in pain. The woman calms when Camino touches her forehead; her forehead is cool, which is good. Camino helps her drink and then gently touches her abdomen, which is hard to the touch. Tía lights incense. In moments like this, it’s easy to want to say that there’s nothing to be done. But Camino learned long ago that you don’t speak of dying people as though they’re already dead—this denies them their dignity and gets rid of any chance for a miracle. So, Camino merely chants prayers with Tía and hopes for a miracle.

*Camino lives in the Dominican Republic, an island nation in the Caribbean. She makes it clear that living there is a matter of survival as she describes how the mud insidiously works its way into everything, dirtying people and homes and “stain[ing]” things. Tía’s warning to not let the mud “stain” Camino suggests that both Camino and Tía dream that Camino will one day be able to leave the Dominican Republic for someplace better, especially since Camino seems to view her home country as a place that’s trying to trap and swallow her.*



*Immediately, it becomes clear that Camino and Tía have a close, loving, and trusting relationship. They work well together and, over the years, have come to see each other more as equals than as authority figure and child. This passage also highlights that Camino admires her aunt, since she’s been accompanying Tía on rounds even when her biological mother was still alive.*



*What shines through in this passage is that Tía has taught Camino the importance of treating ill and dying people with dignity and respect. It’s essential to respect this woman’s privacy, even if her home doesn’t lock; and it’s necessary to act as though her smell isn’t a bother, even if it’s actually overwhelming. Tía and Camino’s spirituality is also apparent, as Tía seems to engage in some sort of ritual as she and Camino pray for the woman’s improved health. This shows that Camino has faith to fall back on when things get difficult.*



Camino admires Tía above everyone else. She's seen "death & illness & hurt," but still, she knows how to smile and joke. After all these years watching Tía, Camino knows exactly what she's getting into when she says she wants to be a doctor. The best schools are in the United States. Camino hopes to take what she already knows and, after med school, be able to help others. Sometimes, Papi's check comes late and Tía and Camino worry about whether they'll have enough food. Camino doesn't want to have to live like that forever. She's going to make it so she and Tía can have a better life.

*The Day.* Camino is learning that life-changing news is like a baby born too early: it's not timed right; it catches people unaware and unprepared, and the person usually isn't where they're supposed to be.

Camino is missing a math test so she can wait for Papi at the airport; she doesn't care if he's going to be angry. He reminds her regularly that he pays too much for her school for her to do things like this, but Camino always makes the honor roll. She knows that secretly, Papi will be happy—he "loves to be loved." As usual, he's flying in the first weekend of June. Tía and Camino have been cooking for days. Camino thinks of the food as she begs Don Mateo to give her a ride to the airport. He grumbles but drops her off at the terminal. But when Camino gets there, she doesn't see Papi's flight number on the screen—just a crowd of people around a TV.

Tía believes that the Saints will try to warn you if bad news is coming. They'll make the hair on the back of your neck stand up and send ice down your spine. Tía believes that if you hold still and pray hard, sometimes the Saints will change things. Don Mateo's car's air conditioning was broken, so Camino is hot and sweaty. But suddenly, she becomes chilled and her hands tremble. Several airport employees approach the crowd and someone says "accident." The floor seems to open up into a mouth with sharp teeth, and Camino feels like it's swallowing her.

*The biggest gift that Tía has given Camino is the inspiration to pursue medicine and be able to help people. Camino wants to pursue medicine because she wants to help her community, but it's also clear that her concerns are personal: she'd like a doctor's salary so that she and Tía don't have to worry about money. The women rely on Papi, it seems, but this doesn't always work for them since Papi isn't always reliable. Already, Camino feels like she has to take things into her own hands.*



*Camino could've likened learning life-changing news to anything, so it's telling that she chooses to compare it to a premature birth—this highlights her commitment to medicine and to obstetrics specifically. This passage also foreshadows that something awful is about to happen and catch Camino unaware.*



*Papi's checks might be unreliable, but his yearly visit to the Dominican Republic is something Camino knows for sure that she can rely on. As she describes how important it is to her and Papi that she greet him at the airport, Camino highlights how essential it is to show up for the people she loves. This is also why Camino and Tía have been cooking: they want to be able to properly welcome Papi home. However, the crowd of people around the TV suggests that something has happened to Papi's plane and, perhaps, Camino won't be welcoming Papi this year.*



*Note that Camino is telling readers what Tía thinks about the Saints, not necessarily what she thinks—this leaves room for Camino's beliefs to differ from Tía's. Still, Camino can't ignore that she experiences what sure seems like a divine warning as she enters the airport and learns, presumably, that something happened to Papi. She conveys how earth-shattering this is for her by describing the ground opening up and swallowing her like a dangerous animal. What was once trustworthy and standard suddenly becomes scary and unknowable.*



Camino explains that Papi wasn't here on the day she was born. Mamá held Tía Solana's hand when she was "dando a luz," or in labor. (Camino loves this phrase, which means "giving to light.") Camino knows that she was Mamá's gift to Papi, the "sun of her life," as Mamá revolved around Papi and waited for his yearly visits. But when Camino was born, Papi stayed in New York City. He wired money and a note asking Mamá to call the baby Camino. That birthday was the only one Papi ever missed. But now, he'll miss this one too, as his plane has fallen from the sky.

It's always been better to accept Papi's affection when he gives it rather than mention how often he's absent. Camino has wanted to go live with Papi in New York since Mamá died; she feels as though Papi's stories of the city are almost her own memories. This fall, Camino is supposed to start her senior year at the International School. She'll then apply to Columbia University. But last year, when Camino told Papi about her dreams of attending Columbia, he laughed. He said she should be a doctor here, and he said he didn't want to spend more money on another "fancy school." But though Papi seemed to realize he hurt Camino's feelings, he didn't apologize.

Camino is sure this is all a mistake. The plane couldn't have crashed. If it did, obviously Papi wouldn't have been on it—Tía's saints would've warned him. Camino thinks this as she walks the four miles home. She's not willing to call Don Mateo to come get her, though she knows he would. Camino thinks through all sorts of scenarios where Papi lives and everyone else on the plane dies, all while ignoring news alerts on her phone. When she gets to her neighborhood, she greets Vira Lata. It's not true that Papi was on that plane.

Every year, Papi boards the same flight, and Camino and Tía wait for him and his stories of disgruntled airline passengers. Last year, Papi got Camino a tablet for her birthday, and they video chatted before he got on his flight this morning. So far, "They" are saying it's too early to know if there were any survivors. But because Camino is so used to Papi's absence, it doesn't feel like death yet—just a delay. Tía has heard the news when Camino gets home. She holds Camino and rocks, but Camino doesn't join in—Tía suggests Camino is in shock. Camino sits on the porch until Tía goes to bed, and then she approaches the altar to the ancestors. She grabs a cigar off the altar, lights it, and smokes and coughs. Then she sits on the porch until morning, waiting to hear Papi's voice but knowing she never will.

*By describing Papi's first (and so far, only) birthday absence, the narrative creates tension: readers are left wondering what happened. It's not until the end of this poem that Camino reveals that his plane crashed. By describing Papi as a sun around which she and Mamá revolved, Camino shows that Papi was the guiding light in her life. Now, the very thing that gave her life and meaning is gone.*



*Camino clearly loves her father, but this doesn't mean that he was always the easiest person to love—indeed, Camino implies that Papi loved her on his terms and often refused to change his behavior based on what Camino wanted from him. For now, it's not entirely clear why Papi didn't want Camino to come with him to New York or support her dreams of becoming a doctor. What's important to Camino is that he didn't fully support her, and that seriously hurt her feelings.*



*At the moment, Camino is in denial: it's too painful for her to accept that Papi might be dead. Denying the truth, or feeling numb, is often the first stage people go through when they begin to grieve—and so, this scene marks the beginning of Camino's process of working through her grief and saying goodbye to Papi.*



*Camino is struggling to accept that Papi is dead because everything else about his trip today was so normal: they chatted earlier, and he always takes the same flight and arrives just fine. Further, there's the tantalizing possibility that there were survivors, so she doesn't have to accept that Papi's gone until rescue crews can make a definitive call. The fact that Papi has been physically absent for so much of Camino's life further complicates her ability to accept Papi's death. Practically speaking, it doesn't feel all that different to her now that he's deceased.*



## CHAPTER 2. YAHAIRA

You're usually "in the most basic of places" when you learn life-changing news. Yahaira is at lunch with Dre, listening to Dre chat about a climate change protest and flipping through a magazine when she's called to the office over the loudspeaker. Though she gets a pass and flashes it at Mr. Henry, the security guard, he jokes that she wouldn't cut class after being summoned. Yahaira used to be known for taking risks in **chess**, but in real life, she's very predictable. She spends every Saturday with Dre, and all her progress reports say that she's quiet and meets expectations. So, she has no idea what they want with her in the office. News spreads through the halls, but Yahaira still has no idea that there are no rules when you learn news like this.

On this day, the 5th of June, Yahaira thinks the worst thing that could happen is that she'll be scolded for poor grades or asked to return to the **chess** club. She had no idea that three hours before, "the door to [her] old life slammed shut."

Mami is in the office, wearing flip-flops and rollers in her hair. She never leaves the house without putting herself together, as she manages a nice spa and believes looking nice is good advertising. Ms. Santos, the principal's assistant, puts an arm around Yahaira's shoulders. Yahaira wants to shrug it off, as she knows this hug is trying to lessen the impact of whatever news is coming. Looking at Mami, Yahaira asks what's going on. Mami's lip quivers. She says, "Tu papi" (your father).

On most days, the flight Papi was on makes it from JFK to Puerto Plata without incident. It's a routine flight, with a veteran pilot, and it should have landed just fine. According to Mami, the New Yorkers found out earlier than the families waiting for the plane to arrive. Thirty minutes after taking off, the plane's tail snapped and the jet plunged vertically into the water.

Yahaira signs herself out of school, ignoring Ms. Santos's condolences. Mami, still crying, accompanies Yahaira to her locker. They don't say goodbye to Dre first. It's a beautiful day outside, with a lovely breeze—but Mami still cries. Has the day forgotten it stole Papi? Or is it happy to have him? Yahaira doesn't cry.

*Given the way that Yahaira begins her narration (by implying that she's going to learn some big news), it seems likely that she's going to learn what Camino just did: that a plane to the Dominican Republic crashed. Unlike Camino, who seems to occasionally enjoy breaking rules, Yahaira seems to find comfort in following the rules—as she notes here, staying in line means that she usually doesn't have to confront surprises. She creates increasing dread in the reader as she describes the news spreading through the school while she remains oblivious.*



*Note that while Camino described how difficult her life is and compared finding out about Papi's death to a premature birth (implying she has some experience with premature births), Yahaira's concerns up to this point are pretty mundane: she doesn't want to be scolded. This may reflect that Yahaira is better-off financially, or is better supported, than Camino is.*



*Immediately, Mami's appearance is a red flag for Yahaira: it's unheard of for Mami to be so underdressed in public. Mami's two-word explanation suggests that like Camino, Yahaira has also lost her father in the plane crash. And also like Camino, Yahaira is already trying to shrug off people's attempts to comfort her or grieve with her.*



*The matter-of-fact tone in this passage contrasts with the emotional heft of what happened—a plane full of people is probably dead, and countless families are learning about this now, just as Yahaira and Camino are.*



*Yahaira picks up on some irony as well: it seems unbelievable to her that Papi could die on such a beautiful day, and that the weather wouldn't reflect her and Mami's inner turmoil. Just as Camino did when she walked home from the airport, Yahaira is going through the motions and doing her best to pretend that things are normal.*





Through a text, Yahaira learns that she's one of four students who lost someone on the flight. In her neighborhood, everyone is outside, trying to glean new information and wondering about survivors and if the crash was a terrorist plot. Mami ignores them. Their neighborhood, Morningside Heights, is made up of people from the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Puerto Rico, as well as Black Americans, white people, and Columbia students "who disrupt everything." But everyone from the Dominican Republic knows someone who died on the flight. Mami continues to ignore the neighbors as she enters the apartment and then slides to the floor to cry. Yahaira helps her up and to her bedroom. When the phone starts ringing, Yahaira answers it. She "take[s] charge where no one else can."

*While the neighborhood community starts to come together to grieve and discuss what happened, Mami and Yahaira distance themselves from their neighbors. It's unclear at this point if Mami finds the neighbors' speculations distasteful or disrespectful, or if she's simply more comfortable grieving on her own. And with Mami in such a state, Yahaira is forced to assume a far more mature role than she might otherwise as she "take[s] charge" and begins answering the phone.*



When Yahaira learned Papi's secret last summer, she felt instantly like she had to keep it a secret herself—even from her other family members. Papi always thought she stopped talking because of **chess**; he had no idea that she was actually just disappointed in him because of what she discovered. However, Yahaira never stopped being a "steady daughter." She didn't know how. She still doesn't know how, so she continues to take out the trash and microwave leftovers. She keeps her feelings wrapped up inside herself, like "a gift no one wants."

*For now, Yahaira isn't forthcoming about what Papi's big secret is, but it's clear that discovering his secret had a huge impact on Yahaira's life. She implies that it harmed her relationship with Papi, since she stopped talking after learning about the secret. However, even the secret couldn't keep Yahaira from continuing to be reliable and dependable. Keeping up with household chores is something that helps Yahaira feel more normal, so she clings to her chores in difficult times like these.*



### CHAPTER 3. CAMINO: ONE DAY AFTER

There's still no news of survivors a day after the crash, but Camino's friend Carline visits. Carline's pregnant belly gets in the way of their hug, and Camino is a bit afraid she'll break her friend—or that she herself will break. Carline has lost many family members and tells Camino that God will help—but Carline still has both parents. Camino doesn't think Carline can understand what she's going through, but she keeps thoughts to herself. Carline leaves when her manager at the resort calls, wondering where she is. Once Carline is gone, Tía watches TV, holding Don Mateo's hands.

*Opening this passage with the fact that there's no news about survivors indicates that Camino is clinging to any hope that Papi might have survived the crash. This is all that feels real and useful to her, so it's hard to take Carline seriously when Carline tries to offer her support. Still, that Carline visits and tries to help Camino (and that Don Mateo comes to sit with Tía) highlights that Camino has an extensive support network at home.*



Everyone in the neighborhood knew Papi. The hustlers, fruit sellers, and the people Tía has healed all converge outside Tía and Camino's teal house to hold a vigil. As they pray, Camino tries not to suffocate—it seems like the crowd expects her to fall apart. Camino and Tía's house is the nicest house in the neighborhood, thanks to Papi. He initially wanted them to move, but Tía insisted on staying and serving the community. So, Papi bought them locks, installed a bathroom, and got them appliances, including a generator. The generator is a big deal, as their house is the only one with electricity when the power goes out. Now, though, it feels like their house is dark.

*This poem highlights just how integral Tía, Camino, and Papi are (or were) in their neighborhood. Everyone comes together to begin to grieve—but while others might find this comforting, Camino finds it overbearing and emotionally difficult. At this point, it doesn't feel to her like communal grieving is going to do anything to help her move on. Papi was also clearly very respectful of Tía's wishes, hence improving the house rather than insisting that Tía and Camino move.*



Tía and Camino's house has two bedrooms, a dining room, and a kitchen. There's a patio, and the floors are tile, not dirt. Papi provided luxuries, like a TV and Wi-Fi. The best thing about the house, though, is that it's only a few minutes to the **beach**. It's not great in times of flood, but it saves Camino's life by reminding her that "there is a life for [her] beyond the water." Now, she pulls on her red swimsuit, sneaks out the back door, and hurries to the beach; Vira Lata follows her. Camino passes a few men sitting in front of bars, including El Cero. When Camino turned 13, Papi began paying El Cero to leave her alone. Recently, though, she's noticed him watching her. Camino ignores his gaze and hurries to the beach, which Papi used to call "Camino's Playa." She wades into the water.

Camino is certain that swimming is as close to flying as a person can get. In the water, she understands evolution and how everything came from the water. According to Tía, Camino is probably related to a water saint. Camino's not sure about that, but she knows she feels at home in the water.

Papi learned to swim here and often jumped off the tall cliffs nearby. He taught Camino to swim when she was little, and he insisted it's best to learn in water "that wants to kill you." Usually he'd just keep an eye on Camino, but sometimes he'd execute an impressive dive and join her. In the water, he became something else, a water creature. He could cut through any current. Camino is certain the ocean shouldn't be any different than this. Papi had been practicing to survive a hard dive all his life.

Camino swims until she's exhausted. She considers just letting the ocean take her. But she hears a whistle from the beach—it's El Cero, and he warns her that the beach is dangerous at night. Somehow, Camino knew this was coming. She plans her route out of the water to avoid El Cero, wishing Vira Lata were more aggressive; El Cero, not the water, is the most dangerous thing here. Calmly, Camino grabs her shorts and heads back toward the neighborhood, Vira Lata at her side. She doesn't want to go back home to the people praying and whispering about Papi. But she knows it'll be better than whatever El Cero wants, as he'll "attach conditions to his condolences."

*Once again, Camino makes it clear that she loves her life in the Dominican Republic, though living in this country sometimes makes life more difficult: it's great to be so close to her favorite swimming spot, but during hurricane season, staying safe becomes more difficult. Camino's spotting of El Cero implies that staying safe is going to continue to get harder—it's impossible to say what will happen now that Papi isn't around to pay El Cero off. His death (and inability to protect her), and Camino's burgeoning maturity, are putting Camino at risk.*



*The beach offers Camino a place where she can feel at peace, something she doesn't seem to regularly feel elsewhere in her neighborhood. Even now, as she's grieving for Papi, being at the beach helps her feel more secure and in control.*



*Camino elaborates on why this particular beach is so meaningful to her: it holds happy childhood memories of Papi teaching her to swim. However, given how Papi has probably died, the beach doesn't make Camino feel as good today as it usually does—it just feeds Camino's denial and unwillingness to acknowledge that Papi is probably gone.*



*The way Camino describes knowing that El Cero's harassment was coming suggests that El Cero has truly been waiting for the right time to pounce on her and begin intimidating her. As Camino sees it, her age, her sex, and her newfound vulnerability (since Papi can't protect her) makes her a perfect target for a dangerous man like El Cero. Camino still isn't interested in grieving with others; she doesn't want to go home and act appropriately sad for all the neighbors. She'd rather feel (or deny) her grief privately for now.*



Papi has never liked that Camino has attracted boys since she was 12, but he was never around to stop her from flirting. Camino ignores the boys in the neighborhood, opting to flirt with American boys at the International School instead. They're usually obnoxious and fetishize Camino's "gutter-slick tongue and brownness," but they're "safe." They can't dance bachata and know nothing about the Dominican Republic. They'll never be able to understand Camino, so she knows they won't ever distract her.

Papi was a hustler, the kind who could "sell water to a fire hydrant." He's from this neighborhood and has always made sure Camino and Tía have everything they need. So, though Camino and Tía are better off than their neighbors, they're poorer than Camino's classmates. They rely on Western Union for money and wait for Papi to send secondhand sneakers. But Papi worked hard so Camino would "have a throne to inherit."

El Cero is a hustler, too, but unlike Papi, he "hustles bodies." He draws girls in around age 10 with kindness and groceries, and as soon as they start puberty, he "plucks them for his team." Most people around here think women should be able to engage in sex work if they want—but not if a man is making them. El Cero "gets a first taste" of his girls, and then he takes them to the resort. Foreign men in the country for "sun and sex" then "give thumbs-up or -down to his wares." They're still just girls, and they make El Cero's money for him. As Camino walks away from El Cero and the beach, he calls out that he's here for her now that Papi is gone. Camino feels cold. She's sure El Cero still expects payment—and he'd accept something other than money.

Camino knows what El Cero sees in her. She has curly hair, is thin but well-fed, and swimming has made her strong and sharp. Her skin is like Mamá and Tía's, lighter than Papi's. She looks like a girl, not a woman. And this is El Cero's typical prey: girls who are easy to convince to work for him, even if they don't want to.

*Earlier, Camino implied that she resented Papi for being absent so much. Now, however, she suggests that she was grateful that he wasn't around to police her activities with boys. Camino also implies that she's not genuinely interested in romance right now; she just wants to have fun with boys who are too mean or ignorant to capture her heart.*



*Camino describes Papi in reverent, glowing terms: sure, he could probably rip people off if he's such a skilled salesman, but if he did, he did so to help his daughter and Tía. In other words, Papi does what he does so he can serve others and support his family; being a hustler isn't self-serving or just an ego boost for him.*



*Camino didn't say exactly what kind a hustler Papi was, but she makes it clear that he and El Cero are not at all on the same level. This is mostly because El Cero traffics girls into sex work, something that Camino and many others find abhorrent. She also describes how El Cero targets girls who have no other ways to fulfill their basic needs, so sex work seems like their only option to make ends meet. In this context, Camino sees growing up as a dangerous proposition for girls in her neighborhood: it makes them vulnerable to El Cero and other men like him.*



*Here, Camino isn't cagey at all as she describes how El Cero targets vulnerable girls. Without Papi around to protect her, Camino is suddenly far more vulnerable. Now, she's in danger—though she also implies that unlike El Cero's usual targets, she's physically stronger and has a better support network, which means she's better equipped to evade him.*



Camino used to go to school with El Cero's sister, Emily, back when El Cero was just Alejandro. That was before the fever and before Papi put Camino in private school. Emily was Camino's friend; she was smart and friendly. The dengue fever arrived with the rain, and Tía couldn't save everyone—she couldn't save Mamá or Emily. Apparently, Alejandro wasn't the same after Emily's death. But even now, Camino thinks of one memory of him from before. He'd always come to pick Emily up, and she'd run to him. El Cero would swing her around—and Camino was always jealous that she didn't have a male role model like El Cero around.

It's been three days since the plane crash. Tía still has the TV on, and the candles lit under Papi's picture on the ancestral altar are still burning. This morning, divers started to bring up pieces of the plane. News coverage is already dying down, and nobody expects survivors at this point. But Papi could hold his breath longer than anyone. It's Monday, and Camino goes to school. She craves normalcy, but her teachers don't ask for her homework. El Cero is waiting near her bus stop after school, and later Camino has to walk past him to get to the **beach**. He's everywhere, and Camino doesn't feel safe. But she knows he's not going anywhere, since his "dealings" happen at the resort nearby. Camino and Tía aren't hoping for a miracle anymore, but they can't speak of "it" and make the truth real.

Camino and Tía act like not talking about "it" will keep it from being true. Sometimes, Camino catches Tía on the phone. Tía always hangs up quickly—she's probably making funeral arrangements, but she knows Camino isn't ready to hear that yet.

## CHAPTER 4. YAHAIRA

Yahaira used to play **chess**, but not how grandpas play chess at the park. She was ranked nationally, won local competitions weekly, and attended national tournaments. Yahaira was the one of the best chess players in the city, and her school loved her because of that. She put the neighborhood on the news for something good rather than for drug problems or gentrification. But that changed last year, and so did Yahaira. Chess taught Yahaira one important thing: if you pick up a pawn, you have to move it forward. You can't just put it back.

*El Cero hasn't always been this one-dimensional, predatory villain: he once was a doting older brother. His grief for his sister, however, changed him and turned him into the monster he is today. Camino doesn't share how exactly Alejandro's grief turned him into El Cero, but this offers a chilling warning as to what can happen when a person doesn't address their grief. And in contrast, Camino lost both her friend and her mother, and she emerged from these losses with her humanity still intact.*



*Though Camino seems to understand on one level that Papi is dead, she's still avoiding confronting the truth and her emotions surrounding Papi's death (which is the "it" Tía and Camino can't mention). However, things aren't normal—despite Camino's desire for everything to feel normal, her teachers are clearly giving her extra space and treating her differently than they would normally. El Cero's constant presence creates a sense of foreboding, as it's looking more and more like he's trying to pressure and scare Camino into agreeing to work for him.*



*For now, at least, Tía respects Camino's desire to not confront the truth—and Camino is certain that her aunt is trying to protect her. This makes Camino feel supported and loved, rather than like Tía is keeping something from her, which reflects their trusting relationship.*



*Pay attention to Yahaira's phrasing: she no longer plays chess, and this is clearly something that weighs on her. Still, chess helped her feel purposeful and like she was helping out her community. It also taught her a lot of important lessons about the world, such as that it's impossible to just stop something once that thing always starts. This foreshadows again that whatever Yahaira learned about Papi catapulted her forward—perhaps before she was ready for that to happen.*



Papi was good at teaching people to play **chess**, but he wasn't a good player—he wasn't good at hiding things, especially not his next move. Or Yahaira used to think that. When Papi is in the Dominican Republic, he and Yahaira don't speak much. But last summer, she needed to talk to him about “The Thing That Happened,” which Yahaira still can't talk about. She called him, texted him, and sent him an email. Papi was traveling for work, but Yahaira didn't have a work number for him. Tío Jorge couldn't help, and Mami just assured Yahaira that Papi would get back to her. But one day, Yahaira went through Papi's papers, hoping to find a phone number. Instead, she found a closed envelope. Yahaira is certain Mami has never seen what was inside of it—if she had, she'd know what Yahaira knows, and nothing would be the same.

Mami and Papi's story changes depending on who's telling it. Papi always said he saw Mami at the boardwalk, and she was gorgeous. Mami describes Papi creeping closer; he was strong, with dark skin and crooked teeth. Papi thought Mami was like a **chess** piece to capture, while Mami talks about Papi calling to her somehow, introducing himself to the woman he'd one day marry.

One would think that Papi's “coffee” and Mami's “condensed milk” would add up to light brown, but Yahaira is dark like Papi—she looks just like him. Yahaira's cousins would sometimes make fun of her, but Papi always told her she was beautiful like the night sky or a precious stone like onyx or obsidian. Yahaira knows she's beautiful like those things, but she also knows she's not like *any* of those things. She's just herself, though she prefers to play black in **chess**—and win.

Yahaira's skin color and facial features are Papi's, but otherwise, she's curvy like Mami. The first time that Dre touched Yahaira's bare waist, Yahaira wanted to thank Mami for the curvy spot where Dre's hand fit. But Yahaira's personality is only her own. She doesn't like loud parties, and where Papi is frugal, Yahaira wants to write Sephora wish lists. Mami is a great cook, but Yahaira burns everything. She's their daughter—and she's also her own person. “Mostly.”

*Three Days After.* Since Yahaira doesn't know if Papi is on the bottom of the ocean, she declines everyone's calls. She doesn't want to hear or accept that Papi might not open his eyes again. Yahaira falls asleep on the couch in front of the TV, and she wakes up when Mami moans. Mami is on the phone, but Yahaira sees what she's responding to on TV: Papi's flight had no survivors.

*Yahaira creates more intrigue as she implies that Papi was hiding something that she didn't see coming. Further, Yahaira's inability to talk about “The Thing That Happened” suggests that it was likely traumatic. When one also considers Yahaira cagey attitude toward what she found in the sealed envelope, it starts to look like whatever she found inside was also shocking and hard to deal with. Incidentally, just as she refuses to speak openly about these other things, Yahaira is currently refusing to accept that Papi is likely dead, so shutting down seems like her usual response to traumatic life events.*



*Yahaira seems to adore the stories of her parents' early romance. At the very least, focusing on their once magnetic attraction to each other detracts from the fact that in the more recent past, Mami and Papi were keeping secrets and perhaps weren't as happy as when they were newlyweds.*



*Even though Yahaira's cousins sometimes tease her about her dark skin, the way she describes resembling Papi so much suggests that she really likes the resemblance—she is her father's daughter, and this makes her feel happy and secure. Still, she's beginning to grow up and recognizes that she nevertheless has her own identity, separate from either of her parents.*



*This is the first overt indication that Yahaira and Dre are romantically involved, which suggests that despite Yahaira's grief and her issues with her parents, she has a supportive partner to help her get through it. Whether Yahaira has come of age fully is called into question here as she insists that she's only “Mostly” her own person. She hasn't yet fully separated her identity from her parents, though she's begun the process.*



*This poem brings readers back to Yahaira's present—Yahaira is perhaps sharing so much about her parents and her features to distract herself from the tragedy unfolding in the present. Finally, Mami and Yahaira get confirmation that Papi didn't survive, but there's no indication here of how (or if) they deal with this new wave of grief.*



Dre and Yahaira have been best friends since Dre's family moved in next door. They've been girlfriends since seventh grade, when they started spending a lot of time on their shared fire escape. Dre would read or prune a tomato plant, while Yahaira would play virtual **chess** or look up nail tutorials. They're different, but comfortable sharing space. Dre's family is a military family from the South, but she's a "hippie child," a vegan who follows astrology. Yahaira loves fashion. She used to love chess, but she quit when she was "at the top of [her] game." In seventh grade, she and Dre both felt like outsiders in their families, but they found "all the answers of [themselves]" in each other.

Yahaira is the sort to notice people's long nose hairs or close-cut fingernails. Dre will make everything about gardening—if someone jokes about "hoing around," she'll think about dirt and seeds. But "Here [they] are," with their very different interests and their shared interest in each other.

Yahaira has been ignoring Dre's texts all morning and her phone is now off—she doesn't want to speak to anyone. But Dre must've heard the news, and a person can only ignore their girlfriend for so long. Dre knocks on the window, sticks her head in, and asks if it's true. Her voice trembles; she loved Papi like family, and he loved her back. Yahaira starts to say that anything is possible, but she stops. It feels like a lie. Yahaira looks down, but she knows Dre is nodding and crying. Dre climbs through the window, kneels on the floor, and puts her head in Yahaira's lap. They sit like that for hours.

Dre is from Raleigh. She's lived in New York a long time now, but sometimes when she's upset, her accent "switch[es] up." New Yorkers talk quickly when they're mad, but Dre's speech slows down and becomes more polite. She's like her mother, Dr. Johnson, in that way. When Dr. Johnson gets upset, she folds her hands and calmly lectures Yahaira and Dre. Yahaira has only met Mr. Johnson—or, Senior Master Sergeant Johnson—a few times, since he's in the air force, so she's not sure how he speaks. But now, Dre speaks to Yahaira slowly, in the same manner in which she speaks to dying plants. It's as though she thinks she can sing the plants back to life.

Dre grew very tall the summer before seventh grade. She wants to study speech therapy in college, but Yahaira thinks she should study agriculture—she can make anything grow. She grows okra, tomatoes, and peppers on the balcony. Every time the landlord sends a notice that the garden is a fire hazard, Dre just moves the plants. She's always gardening, trying to "grow us / something / good."

*After the brief interlude into the present, Yahaira returns to telling readers about things that make her happy—in this case, her relationship with Dre. Just like with Papi and Mami, Dre and Yahaira seem to be another instance of opposites attracting: Dre is into gardening and getting dirty, while Yahaira likes nail art. Still, though the girls have opposite interests, they manage to connect. Yahaira adds another ominous note about having quit chess, which creates tension as to what caused her to quit.*



*Yahaira clearly finds her relationship with Dre marvelous and beautiful. It's something that delights her because in many ways, she doesn't think it should have happened at all—and yet, here it is.*



*Yahaira's first instinct when it comes to dealing with her crushing grief is to isolate herself, even from people she knows and trusts. As Yahaira's girlfriend, Dre has special privileges: unlike other friends who can only contact Yahaira via a phone call or text without it being weird, it's perfectly normal for Dre to crawl through the window and insist on comforting Yahaira in person. Yahaira also seems to find some comfort in this time with Dre, suggesting that Yahaira may be mismanaging her grief when she isolates herself.*



*It again seems like when Yahaira spends so much time describing how Dre and her parents speak depending on their moods, she's trying to distance herself from the tragedy at hand and her crushing grief. It's not until the end of this passage that Yahaira brings it back around and describes Dre's slow manner of speaking. The fact that Dre is speaking to Yahaira in the same way she talks to dying plants, though, suggests that Dre sees that Yahaira is, in some respects, dying of her grief.*



*Yahaira clearly thinks very highly of Dre and Dre's green thumb. She also characterizes Dre's balcony garden as something Dre does to care for Yahaira and her family—Dre is trying to grow things that are nourishing for the people she loves. This is one more way she supports Yahaira, even if Yahaira is currently too caught up in her grief to acknowledge it.*



Papi never saw—or at least never said anything about—Dre and Yahaira. Mami, though, knows—she also knows that Yahaira doesn't want to make a big deal out of it. Last Valentine's Day, Mami gave Yahaira \$20 so she could buy something nice for Dre. Yahaira has never had to pretend that Dre is just a friend.

*Though Yahaira spoke about how much she used to adore Papi, she and Mami seem to almost have a healthier relationship. Mami seems to understand Yahaira on a deeper level, and there's no indication she's ever done anything to make her daughter uncomfortable. She's simply supportive and loving.*



Falling in love with the girl next door is an old trope, but it's how things happened for Yahaira and Dre. They were friends, then they were best friends, and then they were kissing. After that first kiss, Yahaira went to her parents' bedroom and thanked the porcelain saint Papi kept on his dresser.

*Even as Yahaira moves away from her parents into a more adult identity (as by entering into a relationship with Dre), she still remains connected to and thankful for her parents. This is why she goes to thank Papi's saint. (The book doesn't describe Papi's saint, but it may be one of the same saints that Camino's Tía worships.)*



The one thing about Dre that bothers Yahaira is that she's "too good." She always does the right thing. This is why Dre was disappointed when Yahaira didn't "come out" like Dre wanted her to; Dre insisted they shouldn't hide. But Yahaira argued that she just wasn't making a big fuss. Dre also wants Yahaira to have opinions on things like plastic straws or her feelings about Papi. She doesn't always get that Yahaira needs time to think about things, to "watch the board," and discover "possibilities." Yahaira admits to the reader that she's been talking about herself and Dre because that's easier than admitting that Papi is dead. If she says it out loud, the stuff holding her together will disappear.

*Dre is principled; if she thinks something is wrong, that's just the way it is, and she changes her behavior to avoid that thing. And ideally, her loved ones would follow her lead—but in this regard, Yahaira can't give Dre exactly what she wants. Part of Yahaira's identity is this part of her that was an excellent chess player, so she knows how important it is to study what's happening and think critically about it. And finally, Yahaira admits outright that she's sharing this with the reader to avoid having to accept Papi's death. For now, she continues to deal with her grief by ignoring it or outright running from it.*



The phone has been ringing all day. Family members from the Bronx and the Dominican Republic call, as do reporters. The neighborhood association calls, too, offering grief counseling at the local church. Mami answers all the calls, but she doesn't say what will happen next.

*Yahaira is conspicuously absent in this passage (though she's narrating), which suggests that though Mami is speaking with lots of people about Papi, Yahaira is staying out of it and is still running from her grief.*



One thing that nobody knows (and that nobody would believe) is that the night before Papi left, Yahaira almost asked him to stay. That would've been the first sentence she'd said to him in about a year. They haven't been close since Yahaira stopped playing chess and Papi tried to force her to play—and since Yahaira saw the certificate in the envelope. Papi said that Yahaira quitting chess broke his heart, but she never told him that he broke hers.

*There was clearly a lot of hurt and at least one big misunderstanding that colored Yahaira and Papi's relationship. Whatever happened between them was so intense that Yahaira hadn't even spoken to Papi in a year—suggesting that Yahaira has been isolating herself for some time now.*



Yahaira doesn't believe in magic like Mami and Papi, but the night before Papi left for the Dominican Republic, it was like something tugged on her heart. That night, Papi came to her room to say goodnight for the first time in a year. He'd tangled his fingers in her curls (which she hates), but Yahaira accepted his touch for a minute. Papi said that he had to go for work, and he's always back in September, right before Yahaira's birthday. But every year, as his trip approaches, Mami gets angrier and angrier. Yahaira wonders now if Mami regrets that her last few days with Papi were so angry. Yahaira didn't respond to Papi; she knew he was lying about traveling for work. Before he left her room, he said he hoped that they could talk about their difficult relationship when he got back. Yahaira said nothing.

Once, when Yahaira was little, she played in a **chess** tournament with older kids. She was in one of the last rounds and was convinced she'd win—but her opponent trapped her. Yahaira cried and shook, but she looked up and saw Papi watching her. He said nothing, but somehow, Yahaira got his message. She accepted defeat. Later, on the way home, Papi warned Yahaira to never let her opponents see her sweat. If she's going to lose, she should lose smiling—they'll think she let them win.

*Four Days After.* The news is saying things like blunt force trauma and that the bodies are unidentifiable. They're trying to identify people by dental records, tattoos, and personal items. Yahaira watches videos of the plane diving into the ocean. She keeps waiting to hear that passengers got their life jackets on, or that they boarded life rafts. The news keeps saying that the death count is unconfirmed. Divers have been pulling up debris and bodies from where the plane went down. Yahaira tells Mami they have to go to Queens, where people have been lighting candles. Her hope isn't logical, but somehow, she believes that being close to the crash site will change things. Mami just goes to her room and closes the door.

Papi first taught Yahaira **chess** when she was three. He "loved...loves" to tell people about how Yahaira would give up her king but hung onto her knight because she liked horses. But Yahaira was good at memorizing the patterns and was a natural at the game. She could beat Papi by age four. By the time Yahaira was five, Papi was taking her to Washington Square Park to compete against the hustlers. They thought Yahaira was cute—until she won. Yahaira loved how much Papi loved watching her win.

*Interestingly, Yahaira's sense that something tugged on her heart echoes what Camino said about Tía's Saints warning people when bad things are going to happen. Though Yahaira would perhaps characterize Tía's Saints as "magic," something happened between her and Papi in this moment that Yahaira cannot explain. There are also clues here that perhaps Mami does know about the certificate, or at the very least knows something Yahaira doesn't about Papi—why, for instance, is she so angry about his trip? The novel leaves this unanswered for now.*



*Papi's advice in this passage may explain why Yahaira tries so hard to hide her emotions from the world: she learned from him that she should go out of her way to never look weak. And if she is going to lose, she must lose gracefully. The fact that Papi was there at the tournament also highlights that chess was an important part of their relationship; it's how Yahaira and Papi bonded—until Yahaira quit.*



*That the authorities are trying to identify people by dental records or tattoos implies that the victims' bodies are in awful shape—most, if not all, are damaged beyond recognition. Yahaira brushes past this implication and tries to focus on what should have happened or what she can do now, like light candles in Queens. Finally, she's beginning to try to move through her grief and figure out what to do with it. However, for now, it's Mami who keeps Yahaira from moving forward and finding closure—and as a teen, Yahaira doesn't yet feel ready to disobey Mami and go to Queens on her own.*



*Saying that Papi "loved... loves" to tell this story about Yahaira is Yahaira actively modifying her language to make it seem like Papi isn't dead—shifting to the present tense suggests he still can tell the story. Meanwhile, note that Yahaira talks a lot about how naturally good she is at chess, but she never mentions liking it all that much. Instead, she likes Papi watching her win—suggesting that their bond over chess was really only ever going to last until Yahaira decided to switch to something she likes better.*





Yahaira started competing in **chess** tournaments in second grade. When he was in the country, Papi went to every match, and he never complained about the cost or the time commitment. He'd build a new shelf every few years for Yahaira's trophies and ribbons, and he'd tell her she'd win it all. She won for him—until she couldn't anymore. She suddenly didn't know how—or why—she should have to do that.

Yahaira “did **chess**,” but she didn't love it—not the way she loves beauty tutorials or making Dre laugh. She doesn't love it like she loves Mami's cooking, or like she loves hearing Tío Jorge say that he's proud of *Yahaira*, not what she's won. She doesn't love it like she loved Papi; loving Papi was a consuming love that made Yahaira pretend to be someone she isn't. Yahaira might've been obsessed with winning, but she never loved chess.

Mami wanted Yahaira to be a lady, while Papi wanted Yahaira to be a leader. Playing **chess** taught Yahaira that a queen can be both “Quiet and cunning,” that she can offer a hand to kiss—and punch someone while smiling. But what's supposed to happen when principles like that only apply in chess? In the real world, people just want Yahaira to go away.

Yahaira has always wanted to go to the Dominican Republic with Papi, but he always said no. Yahaira figured he was working and busy, not that he was doing something he didn't want her to know about. Mami has been telling Yahaira for years that she wouldn't let Yahaira go to the island if it was the last place on earth. She still has family there, but she hasn't been back. Yahaira assumed Mami just had bad memories, but she knows now she was assuming a lot. Now, Yahaira realizes her parents showed her what they wanted her to see. She never imagined they're real people who lie and keep secrets. So this year, Yahaira didn't ask to go with Papi. She didn't want to even sit with him, let alone talk to him. This is because Yahaira knew too much about what he was hiding.

Yahaira “was raised so damn Dominican.” Spanish was her first language, and she was raised on bachata music and traditional Dominican foods. She'd say she's Dominican if you asked—but “can you be from a place / you have never been?” What would the island think of her if she went? Is it possible to claim a place as your home if that place doesn't know you?

*Papi was clearly a devoted father, at least when it came to chess. Yahaira's issues with Papi, she reveals here, began when she stopped seeing the point in pleasing him anymore, especially with a game that she didn't truly love. Rather, as her relationship with Papi fell apart, giving up chess was a natural consequence of that.*



*Finally, Yahaira says outright that she really just played chess because she liked winning and making Papi happy. Playing chess, in fact, made Yahaira into someone she's not. This framing suggests that giving up chess was a defining moment in Yahaira's coming-of-age process: now she can figure out who she is and what she wants, rather than just please Papi.*



*Keep in mind that Yahaira's dark skin may mean that she experiences racism and cruelty from other people—especially those who erroneously believe that Black people are less intelligent. Chess, Yahaira acknowledges, taught her a lot of good life skills. But it didn't necessarily prepare her to handle a world that isn't welcoming or supportive.*



*The implication here is that Papi never actually went to the Dominican Republic for work—he went there for other reasons that, presumably, he kept secret from Yahaira. Mami, though, seems to know of what Papi was up to (and didn't like it), hence Yahaira's earlier note that Mami always got angry before Papi left and her insistence here that Yahaira never go with Papi. Learning that her parents weren't truthful with her—that they're people with personal agendas, not just cookie-cutter parents—helps Yahaira come of age and differentiate herself from her parents.*



*Yahaira is in a difficult spot in terms of her identity, as she knows she's culturally very Dominican but has no idea what the country itself is like. And interestingly, even if she didn't want to go with Papi this last time (and can't go with him again), she still seems to express vague interest in going. This foreshadows Yahaira's increasing interest in the country.*



## CHAPTER 5. CAMINO: FIVE DAYS AFTER

Papi's fingers were stubby, and the tip of one was missing. He lost it when his machete slipped while he was cutting a mango for Camino, and the spot where his fingernail used to be is dark brown like his **chess** pieces. (He tried to teach Camino to play chess, but she wanted to involve her Barbies.) Papi never tried to hide his missing fingertip as he smoked cigars and waved his gold rings around. He took up so much room. But now, it's like he took all the air with him when he got on that flight.

When the news announces that there were no survivors on the crashed flight, Camino and Tía cling to each other. Soon, neighbors stream into the house to say the rosary. Later, Tía will go to the backyard and, using cowrie shells, divine from the Saints what she and Camino should do next. The Saints, after all, know about people dying as they try to cross the Atlantic. Faith gives Camino and Tía something to hold onto, and deities to ask to bring Papi home.

According to Tía, Mamá and Papi grew up together in this neighborhood. But they didn't reconnect until they were older. One day, Papi approached Mamá and one of her friends on the boardwalk. The friend stuck out her hand and was clearly taken with Papi, but according to Mamá, she knew in that moment that she herself would be the love of Papi's life.

On the day that Mamá contracted the fever, Tía was visiting other sick people. Camino was home alone with Mamá, wiping her forehead and praying. As soon as she got home, Tía called Papi for help so they could get Mamá to a hospital. But Mamá didn't want to go and wouldn't let Don Mateo drive her, since she didn't want to get him sick. In the end, Papi's money arrived too late to help: Mamá died only two days later. It's been almost a decade since Mamá's death, but Camino still doesn't talk about it.

Tía had always lived with Camino and Mamá, and now, she tries her best to be the best mother to Camino. And Camino has always thought of Tía as "the other / mother of [her] heart." Between living with Tía and Papi's phone calls and visits, Camino has never felt like an orphan. But today, at almost 17 years old, Camino feels like an orphan. Both she and Tía know that without Papi's help, life as they know it is over.

*Unlike Yahaira, Camino is willing to talk about Papi in the past tense—she's willing to accept that he's gone. Still, his absence is very painful if he took all the air with him when he died. The note that Papi tried to teach Camino chess is interesting and might suggest that Camino's father and Yahaira's father are the same person.*



*Once news gets out that Papi is definitely deceased, the community comes out of the woodwork to grieve together and support Camino and Tía. Noting that the Saints know about people dying during Atlantic crossings implies that Tía's religion is likely one that developed among enslaved people in the Caribbean; these systems often combined elements of Catholicism and West African religions. Importantly, though, faith helps Camino make sense of what's going on and offers her a place to channel her grief.*



*Camino's story of Papi approaching Mamá is suspiciously similar to Yahaira's story of how her parents met: Papi approached two women on the boardwalk. This creates tension and intrigue—especially since, if Papi is the same person, both women insist that he was the love of their life.*



*As Camino describes the final days of Mamá's life, Mamá reads as selfless and focused mostly on ensuring others' safety. This may have also influenced Camino's desire to be a doctor and serve others. The note that Camino doesn't talk about her mother's death, though, shows that she keeps her sadness inside—and perhaps doesn't process it.*



*Camino has always been surrounded by people who love and support her, first Mamá and then Tía (and Papi when he's in the country). What allowed Camino to feel so secure even without a biological parent present all the time, though, was Papi's financial help. Tía's support is great, Camino acknowledges, but it doesn't remedy the fact that they're both in trouble without Papi's financial support.*



Carline texts Camino from work. Worried for her friend, Carline shows up after work, swollen and looking exhausted. She explains that the manager made her work hard and the baby kept her up all night. Papi helped get Carline this job six months ago, when she found out she was pregnant and dropped out of school. She can't cut her hours as money is tight for her family. Nelson, her boyfriend, takes night classes and works two jobs.

Tía serves Carline dinner. Afterward, Camino braids Carline's hair. A year ago, they would've whispered about boys and the future. But now, both girls are just trying to survive in the moment. And though Carline came to comfort Camino, Camino is the one to tuck Carline in when Carline falls asleep. Camino "parents" Carline before Carline becomes a parent herself—and Camino remembers that she is an orphan.

*Ten Days After.* Camino goes to school like nothing happened. School observes a moment of silence once, as most everyone there knows that Camino had a dad in the U.S. who sent money. Camino has always stuck out at school, since she doesn't live with both parents and her parents aren't diplomats or factory owners. Instead, Camino is "American-adjacent," with a dad who could pay tuition but not contribute to the fundraisers or buy Camino a car for Christmas. Sometimes, Camino even had to bug him to pay her tuition on time. Now, Camino sits quietly in class and does her homework on the bus and late at night. She pretends Papi dying doesn't change anything—though it's far from certain that she'll return in the fall. Her dreams seem to be slipping away.

Most of Camino's relatives are dead. All she has are Tía and Papi's brother in New York. So there's no one to live with or help Camino. When the guidance counselor calls Camino in to ask if she's doing okay, Camino asks what will happen if her family can't pay tuition. The counselor explains that Camino missed the deadline to apply to scholarships, but the school will figure things out and, in the worst-case scenario, admit Camino next spring. This will delay graduation and Camino's college timeline—and will mean that Camino lives in the Dominican Republic longer than she planned to.

*Describing Carline and her family's financial situation right after describing Camino's highlights that for now, Camino and Tía are doing pretty well compared to other people. Again though, this is thanks to Papi's support. The note that Papi helped Carline get this job shows how important of a figure Papi was in the neighborhood community: he helped everyone.*



*Camino prides herself on being self-sufficient, which is why she sidesteps Carline's attempts to offer comfort and ends up comforting and "parent[ing]" Carline instead. Both girls' circumstances, though, force them to grow up far too quickly, Carline as she becomes a teen mom and Camino as she faces life without Papi's money or protection.*



*Since Camino is trying so hard to act like nothing is wrong, it's no doubt uncomfortable when the school observes a moment of silence for Papi. It only draws attention to the fact that Camino isn't like her classmates due to her financial situation and her lack of American citizenship. This is what Camino means when she describes herself as "American-adjacent": she goes to an American international school, but she herself isn't American. She also reiterates that Papi wasn't always reliable with his money, and she's always stressed about having enough, or whether he'd actually continue paying for her school.*



*Bureaucracy and the loss of Papi's money are already causing problems for Camino: the school isn't willing to make exceptions to help her stay in school on a scholarship. This is devastating news for Camino, who has dreamed for some time of immigrating to the U.S. to attend college and study to be a doctor. Losing this dream at the same time as she loses her father compounds Camino's grief and her sense that she's entirely out of control.*



When Carline has a day off, she insists she needs fresh air and drags Camino to a small touristy strip mall. Camino knows Carline really just wants to get Camino out of the house. The girls window shop until Camino, noticing how fatigued Carline is, steers her friend into an ice cream shop. Camino only has a bit of money, but they need ice cream. However, the lady at the counter sees Carline and Camino and, winking, gives them ice cream (with extra sprinkles) for free. The gesture makes Camino want to cry. Everyone here is so kind; how can Camino ever think about leaving?

As Carline and Camino walk home arm in arm, their fingers sticky from ice cream, Camino feels like they're six again and dreaming about their futures. Papi put Camino in the International School after Mamá died, but she and Carline stayed friends outside of school. They've spent so much time together that they can understand a lot from each other's silences. For instance, Camino knows Carline is thinking that she's afraid to have a baby and hates her job, where she has to put up with her boss's sexual harassment. Camino commiserates silently with Carline and asks where they can go that they'll be safe. Inwardly, Camino tells her worries to leave her and Carline alone. They'll be fine, and they'll survive.

## CHAPTER 6. YAHAIRA: FOURTEEN DAYS AFTER

Everyone knows Yahaira has been skipping school off and on. When she starts going to class again, her classmates are taking finals, and Yahaira is totally out of the loop. Everything feels fake, and it seems like nothing matters—not an essay on [The Tempest](#) or a trigonometry exam. None of those things will explain why Papi's plane crashed and why Yahaira can barely breathe. Maybe Yahaira will survive if she pretends that Papi is gone like normal and will be back in the fall.

Yahaira isn't the only one skipping; Mami hasn't been to work in two weeks. The owner of the spa Mami manages called the house phone and left a voicemail last night. So, this morning, Yahaira wakes Mami, brushes her hair, repaints her nails, and helps her into a dress that fits looser than it once did. She orders Mami a Lyft and sends her off to work. Mami looks lost as she gets into the car. Yahaira stops herself from chasing after the car and begging Mami to never leave.

*Camino in no way hates the Dominican Republic, even though she wants to leave the country. In fact, she clearly loves the people and the general culture of people being so willing to help each other—a culture she fears she won't find in the U.S. This highlights the difficult spot Camino is in, as she has a choice to make: figure out how to leave the country for a better life, or make do with people's random kindnesses here and hope that's enough to get by.*



*The free ice cream offers Camino a brief respite from her troubles—an adult is taking care of her in a way that few do anymore. Still, everything has changed for Camino: she and Carline aren't kids anymore, and they're both facing major struggles currently and in the near future. It's interesting, though, that Camino silently asks where she and Carline can go to be safe. This implies that as wonderful as the Dominican Republic is, ideally, both Camino and Carline would leave and find safety and a better life elsewhere.*



*Yahaira is totally checked out. She's living in her grief and fails to see why anything else matters right now. All she wants is for something to explain to her satisfaction what happened—and why. She mirrors Camino when she suggests that it might be easier if she pretends Papi will be back in the fall; Camino thought it might help her to remember that Papi isn't usually around.*



*Here, Yahaira steps into the role of the “dutiful daughter” by ushering Mami off to work—it's what needs to be done to keep the family afloat. It's not easy to do this, though: if Yahaira lets Mami out of her sight, there's a chance, however small, that Mami won't come back, just like Papi didn't come back.*



Yahaira is used to managing time and “using time to succeed.” But they say the plane went down too quickly for safety measures like life vests to make a difference, or even for the Coast Guard to mount a rescue—the plane had been underwater for hours by the time they got there. These days, if Yahaira goes to school, her teachers send her to the guidance counselor. She says nothing when the counselor asks her how she’s doing. Yahaira almost wants to share that some mornings, she wakes up with her nails digging dents into her palms—and that on the mornings she doesn’t, she’s angry at herself for taking a break from grieving. But Yahaira just eats the counselor’s mints and waits to be dismissed.

When Yahaira doesn’t go to school, she goes to Dre’s house, where Dr. Johnson welcomes her (she’s between teaching spring and summer classes right now.) Today, Yahaira is organizing the Johnsons’ living room library. Dr. Johnson always lets Yahaira borrow books or games, or sugar for Mami. Now, Yahaira tells Dr. Johnson she wishes she could “borrow time, / or space, or answers.” Dr. Johnson advises Yahaira to let herself mourn or the grief will chase her forever. Instead, Yahaira returns to the books.

When Mami gets home that night, she’s pale and trembling—she doesn’t tell Yahaira “how much it must have cost her to smile.” Later, Yahaira and Mami go to their neighborhood association’s grief counseling session. A Spanish-speaking counselor and a priest are there. People are crying before it even starts, and the room seems to hum with pain. When the counselor asks the group about loss, Yahaira realizes she doesn’t know how to say “I am a graceful loser” in Spanish. She’s made many mistakes that have cost her a win, but did God win this match? Did Papi lose it? It sure feels like Mami and Yahaira lost.

Attendees explain that they lost parents retiring to Santo Domingo, couples going on their honeymoon, or little girls visiting grandparents. More than 80% of people were connected to the Dominican Republic; most were “Returning.” When Mami speaks, she softly says that Papi went back every year, and she feels like she’s losing him again every morning. Yahaira feels suddenly enraged. Will Mami finally learn what Yahaira knows, what she hasn’t been able to bring up to Mami? Yahaira has been protecting Mami, certain that revealing the secret would change everything. If Mami never finds out, will Yahaira be the only one who knows the truth? When it’s Yahaira’s turn to speak, she just shrugs. She and Mami silently agree they won’t return for the next session.

*When she’s playing chess, Yahaira can use time to her advantage. But in the context of Papi’s death, time isn’t something Yahaira can use to help herself win or even feel better. Indeed, when she learns that there was no time for passengers on the plane to take any safety measures, time begins to look like Yahaira’s enemy: it didn’t give Papi a fighting chance to survive. What makes Yahaira feel marginally better is acting like she’s grieving, as when she appreciates that she’s hurting herself at night as a result of her grief. Digging into her palms, of course, doesn’t actually do much to help, and refusing to talk to the counselor about it means that Yahaira continues to shut herself off and deal with her emotions all on her own.*



*Dr. Johnson subtly encourages Yahaira to open up to people about what she’s feeling—the alternative is that she’ll never get over this grief. For now, though, Yahaira is too caught up in trying to control her emotions to do such a thing. Organizing the books is a comfort, as it’s a mindless task that requires all of Yahaira’s concentration (and doesn’t require talking to anyone about Papi).*



*Mami is going through much the same thing as Yahaira is; she lost her husband, after all, and it’s difficult to put on a happy face at work. But Yahaira doesn’t ask Mami how she’s doing or how she’s feeling—their relationship is a quiet one, where they don’t talk about feelings like this. When Yahaira doesn’t know how to say that she’s a graceful loser in Spanish, it symbolizes her inability to make sense of her grief. She literally doesn’t have the words to describe the pain she feels.*



*The descriptions of the crash’s victims highlight that this was a routine flight: people were going about their business, visiting relatives or getting away for a vacation. And those who died have connections to the Dominican Republic, just like Yahaira—though Yahaira hasn’t ever been there. Yahaira may experience this flash of anger here because she fears, on some level, that she doesn’t need to be keeping her big secret—she might not be helping anyone by staying quiet. Again, when Mami and Yahaira silently agree not to go back for more sessions, they decide they’re not willing to connect with others who might be able to help them process their grief.*



Yahaira is doing dishes after the counseling session when her old **chess** coach calls. In the voice he uses to console newbies when they lose to little kids, Coach Lublin tells Yahaira that he and the team are thinking about her. Yahaira worked with Coach for two years, but he wasn't surprised when she quit. He still smiles at her and invites her to come to practice, though he never pressures her to rejoin the team. Hearing his voice makes Yahaira's heart squeeze. She wonders what the phone would do if she dropped it in the sink; would it sink or float? How does water know to let an object in? Could they stick it in rice after and revive it? But Mami interrupts Yahaira's reverie with a look, so Yahaira thanks Coach. Death is "so damn polite."

Mami and Yahaira's apartment has leather sofas covered in plastic and frilly curtains over the windows. They host summer barbecues in the courtyard. Unlike the neighbors, Papi and Mami own the apartment in the co-op; they bought it when they found out Mami was pregnant with a girl. These days, Yahaira sits on the fire escape so she can breathe. The house feels like "a choked-up throat" and like a "National Geographic shrine" to Papi. It is "a living sadness" and it weeps as Mami paces at night.

*Fifteen Days After.* It's late afternoon on Saturday when the doorbell rings. Yahaira listens as Mami lets multiple people inside, but she keeps her eyes closed when someone opens her door. Yahaira wants the guest to be an intruder who will steal her pain, but it's Dre. Dre tells Yahaira to scoot over and holds Yahaira close. As Mami and Dr. Johnson chat in the living room, Yahaira allows someone to hold her for the first time since Papi died.

Yahaira is surprised when Dre (whose nails would be covered in dirt if it weren't for Yahaira) grabs the acetone bottle and removes Yahaira's nail polish. Yahaira just did this for Mami yesterday, but she didn't notice that she's bitten the polish off of her own nails. When her nails are clean, Yahaira grabs Dre's face and kisses her, trying not to cry.

*Yahaira knows that everyone who calls to offer condolences means well—and yet, she senses that there's a power imbalance at play here. She doesn't feel like it'd be appropriate to, say, voice her internal monologue about how water behaves, even though it's questions like these that she thinks about all the time. She has to follow a script and, as she notes here, be "so damn polite" as people express their grief and try to comfort her. For now, at least, Yahaira doesn't find this comforting at all.*



*Yahaira's financial situation comes into view a bit more when she reveals that Mami and Papi are (were) homeowners—they're better off than their neighbors with the apartment as an asset. Still, this doesn't make the apartment feel welcoming or soothing now. Rather, it just reminds Yahaira of Papi and of her grief. And she can't escape Mami's either, though neither Mami nor Yahaira can talk about how they're feeling.*



*Notably, Yahaira doesn't really want to interact with anyone right now—rather, she just wants her pain to go away. When Dre is able to push past Yahaira's defenses and give her a safe place to grieve, Yahaira seems to appreciate it. This implies that Yahaira might benefit from connecting with others over Papi's death, though she can't make this connection for herself yet.*



*Dre just wants to make Yahaira feel better, and she knows Yahaira well enough to know that having clean nails will help Yahaira's outlook. But the tenderness and unexpectedness of Dre's actions catch Yahaira off guard—she can't verbally thank Dre, she can only kiss her.*



Papi's body has been identified by his gold tooth. Within the hour, relatives arrive: Tío Jorge and his wife, Tía Mabel; Tía Lidia and her son, Wilson; Papi's cousins. They bring Bibles and food. The men drink and talk quietly, while Tía Lidia takes Mami into the bedroom to pray. With Mami gone, Tía Mabel does what Mami hasn't been able to do: order flowers, research caskets, call a church, speak to a relative in the Dominican Republic, and publish an obituary. Wilson sits on hold with the airline, hoping to figure out when they can collect Papi's remains. When Mami returns from the bedroom, the discussion turns to whether Papi should be buried here or in the DR. Even in death, Papi is the one bringing the family together.

When Tío Jorge notices Yahaira standing in the living room doorway, he leads her to Papi's favorite chair, and they snuggle together. Tío Jorge and Mabel don't have children, but they would've been great parents. Yahaira sits with her uncle for a long time, knowing they're hurting in the exact same way.

In the middle of the funeral discussion, Yahaira gets up and puts one of Papi's favorite bachata records on the old record player. Everyone goes quiet as the music starts, and though it's a breakup song, the singer advising the listener not to cry or think about another man feels apt. But Mami slams her hand down on the disc, stopping the music in the middle. This also seems fitting. Yahaira knows the music is inappropriate for mourning. She just needed to remember life before this for a moment.

As they sit around the table, trying to choose a photo to laminate for mourners, Tía Mabel asks Mami where they'll bury Papi. Privately, Yahaira has been making a mental list of the things she doesn't want to forget about Papi, such as his laugh or his smile, or his chopped-off finger. She wants a photo that captures the fact that Papi was "the big hot boiling sun / we all looked to for light." She wants to forget the last year and remember the good things that happened before, but none of the photos are quite right.

*Up until now, Papi's death hasn't felt real to everyone. But with his remains identified, the family immediately comes together to grieve and make arrangements. This means that for the first time in days, Yahaira isn't the one who has to take charge when the phone rings: her aunts and uncles are here to deal with that stuff for her. She can grieve as Papi's daughter, rather than forcing herself to keep moving forward and keeping her and Mami's life together.*



*That Tío Jorge is also a quiet man suggests that Yahaira's family (aside from Papi) is just quiet: they can be together and help each other feel better, and they don't necessarily need to voice their pain or their thoughts for this to work.*



*It's worth noting that different people grieve in different ways—and here, Yahaira and Mami's different methods of grieving leap to the forefront. Yahaira wants to remember a happier time and finds some comfort in the lyrics, while Mami shows through her actions that she finds non-funerary music totally inappropriate. This sets up a possible conflict to come between Yahaira and Mami.*



*The plot thickens a bit here as Yahaira notes that Papi was missing a finger—just like Camino's father. She also uses very similar language as Camino did to describe her father when she likens him to "the big hot boiling sun" who essentially kept everyone else going with his presence. Yahaira's father, too, was larger than life, and now his family is having to figure out how to keep going without this major force in their lives.*



When Tía Mabel asks her question, something—not sadness—flashes in Mami’s eyes. She spits angrily that Papi’s real family is here, so he’ll be buried here. Yahaira can’t help but wonder if Mami knows. Tía Mabel clearly wants to say something, but she stays silent. Tío Jorge, though, shakes his head and says that Papi always wanted to be buried “back home.” Mami says that she was Papi’s wife, and she refuses. Yahaira’s heart pounds; does everyone know? Tío Jorge pulls out a folder and says that Mami can’t change Papi’s will. He also reminds Mami that she agreed to “The other matter.” Mami straightens the papers and says that Papi can be buried in the Dominican Republic—but they won’t go to the funeral.

Yahaira wants to agree with Mami, but she loved Papi and knows it’s not so simple. She says she wants to go to the DR for Papi’s funeral; he died alone, thinking of them, and it’s not right to not pray over his grave. Yahaira thinks it’s absurd that she and Mami would miss Papi’s funeral. But Mami turns around and icily says that Papi wasn’t a saint. She says she will never let Yahaira go to the DR, no matter what. Yahaira smiles at Mami, remembering Papi’s advice to never let them see you sweat. Anyone who’s paid attention to how Yahaira plays **chess** knows that if she smiles, they should watch out.

Mami is a good, good woman. She’s smart, attends school events, and always makes dinner. She never forgets to pick Yahaira up and she mends all of Yahaira’s clothes, and she’s wonderful at buying presents. Yahaira knows she’s failed her mother. Mami wanted a girl to raise to be like her, but she got Yahaira instead, who has always been so much like Papi. A better daughter would’ve told Mami the things that Yahaira still keeps secret. So, Yahaira is Papi’s daughter—a bad daughter.

What Yahaira learned about Papi is like a stain on a white dress. You hope it won’t spread and try to ignore it, but it’s always there, “A glaring fault.” Yahaira learned that Papi had another wife, whom he married a few months after he married Mami in the U.S. Yahaira found the envelope containing the marriage certificate and a photo of them on their wedding day. Mami clearly didn’t know; she’s not the sort to stay while Papi saw someone else. The other woman destroyed Yahaira’s family; she made Papi leave Yahaira every year and she made him ignore his family in New York. When he got home last year, Yahaira didn’t know how to pretend things were fine, so she stopped speaking to him. It was the only way to not poison the whole family.

*This sudden change in Mami is confusing for Yahaira, as it implies that Mami might know whatever secret Yahaira has been keeping—and that it greatly upsets her. Tío Jorge’s mention of “The other matter” is also intriguing, as it makes it clear that there will be more to deal with than just burying Papi’s body. Mami’s insistence that she and Yahaira won’t go to the funeral drives home how emotional this is for her; this sounds like an emotional snap judgment that, perhaps, she’ll later change when she’s not so agitated.*



*Yahaira isn’t entirely sure if Mami is serious—her refusal to go to Papi’s funeral seems like an overreaction. Mami’s insistence that Papi wasn’t a saint, though, suggests that she may know about the secret that Yahaira is trying to hide from her. When Yahaira smiles at Mami rather than backing down, though, it suggests that Yahaira isn’t content to sit at home and miss Papi’s funeral. And the implication is that Papi, not Mami, watched Yahaira play chess—so Mami is missing a clue that Yahaira may try to undermine her authority.*



*Yahaira clearly idolizes her mother: Mami, in her eyes, is perfect, and Yahaira will never be able to keep up. However, it’s unclear where Yahaira’s shame comes from when she describes herself as a bad daughter. One possible explanation is that Yahaira sees secrecy as a character flaw, so she resents herself for keeping Papi’s secret as much as she resents Papi for having a secret in the first place.*



*Finally, Yahaira reveals her big secret: that she knew Papi was married to another woman in the Dominican Republic. Learning this forever colored how Yahaira saw her father, as it told her that he was deceitful and was willing to hurt Mami and Yahaira to get what he wanted. However, Yahaira is assuming a lot of things here—such as that Mami didn’t know, and that voicing Papi’s secret would’ve destroyed everything. In fact, from Mami’s odd behavior surrounding Papi and his burial in the Dominican Republic, it seems likely Mami did know—and that she’s more complex than Yahaira gives her credit for.*





## CHAPTER 7. CAMINO: NINETEEN DAYS AFTER

Camino hasn't spoken to El Cero since he last approached her. But today, after Camino finishes swimming, El Cero walks up to her on the **beach**. Vira Lata didn't accompany Camino to the beach today, but Camino scans the trees for him anyway. El Cero smiles boyishly, but he's not an innocent boy. And it doesn't matter right now that Camino is grieving, orphaned, and poor. She's "a girl a man stares at." El Cero offers to give Camino a ride home, points to his motorbike, and then grabs her wrist.

Just as Camino pulls her arm away, her cell phone rings. It's Tía: they've found Papi's remains, and he's going to be buried here. Camino knows there's no more reason to hope for a miracle; there were no survivors. Camino will need to light candles and make arrangements. She puts her phone away and tells El Cero that she has nothing for him. She feels sick since she got this news here, in a location she loves with a man she hates. As Camino hurries away, El Cero yells that she owes him a lot—and he has a lot to offer her.

At home, Tía has already lit the candles. Papi wasn't her brother, but she's known him his whole life—she was seven years old and a healer's apprentice when she sat in on his birth. She watched him fall in love with Mamá and was the first to hold his child. Papi always treated Tía with the utmost respect. Before this moment, Camino hasn't thought about what Tía lost when Papi died. He was like family to her.

Tía is plucking feathers from a chicken, her sharp machete by her side, when she says that she's heard rumors. Camino wishes *she* could carry the machete. Tía continues that Don Mateo and a fruit seller have seen El Cero waiting for Camino after school or on the **beach**, and the Saints have warned her to be cautious. Camino wants to say it's true and admit she's afraid—but Tía angrily says that she raised Camino to be smart. She raised Camino to have a future and choices, and she did everything to make that so. Camino's heart sinks: Tía thinks Camino is *asking* for El Cero's attention, not that he's stalking her.

*Camino hopes, on some level, that being overwhelmed with grief and an orphan might make her less of a target for El Cero—but realistically, she knows what she's going through doesn't matter to him at all. Ultimately, she's just a body he'd like to exploit for profit. This is also why El Cero grabs her here. This isn't an innocent, kind offer to drive her home: he wants to overpower her and make her feel indebted to him.*



*With Tía's phone call, Camino can no longer hope that Papi might've survived the crash. The beach has positive associations for Camino, but getting this news here with El Cero watching changes how she views the beach. With Papi confirmed dead, Camino is in danger from El Cero and perhaps from other men like him—and nowhere, even her favorite places, are safe.*



*Camino is already pretty mature, but here, she takes a step further toward coming of age. Realizing that Tía is grieving too—that Tía lost someone important to her, and that Tía herself isn't just a caregiving robot—shows that Camino is developing more empathy for the adults around her.*



*At first, this conversation seems like exactly what Camino needs and wants: Tía sees what El Cero is doing and may have advice for how to stop it. However, when it becomes clear to Camino that Tía thinks Camino is soliciting El Cero's attention, things take a sinister turn. Blaming Camino for what El Cero is doing implicitly makes it Camino's responsibility to make El Cero stop stalking her—but without help, Camino has no way to evade El Cero.*



Camino wishes she could tell Tía that she hasn't encouraged El Cero—he just won't leave her alone. Camino wants to say that she's afraid El Cero will corner her somewhere and that she won't know what to do. But what would Tía do? Though the community she serves loves and respects her, she's also older and poor. El Cero doesn't care about healers—and he cares less about girls who are just “dollar signs” to him. Don Mateo is too old to help, and Tío Jorge doesn't know Camino. There's no one to stop El Cero anymore. Camino can't even think about what El Cero might do to Tía if she tried to stand up for Camino.

*It's interesting that Camino, when Tía accuses her of wanting El Cero's attention, clams up rather than tell Tía the truth—perhaps she fears that Tía won't believe her. But even worse is that Camino knows that telling the truth wouldn't actually do anything. Both she and Tía are powerless against a wealthy, dangerous man like El Cero, and the last thing Camino wants to happen is for her beloved aunt (or Don Mateo) to get hurt. Noting that Camino has a Tío Jorge creates more intrigue—do Camino and Yahaira have the same father, who has a brother named Jorge in New York?*



Camino explains that she's “from a playground place.” The oceans residents need to fish are cleared of fishing boats so tourists can kite surf. Developers buy the lush land and build luxury hotels on it. Her island exports its crops while kids go hungry, and other countries worsen global warming, putting the island in danger. Women and girls like Camino are “branded jungle gyms”; foreign men pick them to play with. El Cero is involved in all of this. If you're not from an island, you don't know what it means to be “of water.” You don't know what it's like to learn to deal with hurricanes and “quench an outside thirst” while all the water you need to survive disappears. Camino knows what Tía isn't saying: that the women involved in sex work here aren't the ones who benefit.

*Camino frames the Dominican Republic as a place where tourists come to “play,” while locals starve and are forced to sell various aspects of their homes or themselves (their land and their bodies) to please the tourists. Islanders, Camino insists, must constantly change how they behave to serve these outsiders—all while giving up the things they need in order to survive. Camino then applies this framework to sex work (at least, sex work where pimps control women's activities and money): it's the tourists and the pimps who get the good deal, not the women who are doing the dangerous work.*



Tía doesn't think girls should wear all black, so Camino had to wait until she was 13 to buy her first black dress. Now, she pulls out the black dress that she got for middle school graduation so she can meet with the priest. Tía wears white, signifying that the Saints protect her. The priest will raise a brow, but priests don't want to know about what people do in secret. Now, Tía and Camino stand and look at themselves in the mirror. Camino wipes away Tía's tears, and Tía accepts the gesture. Tía doesn't think girls should wear black, but Camino feels like a woman today.

*Now, Tía and Camino must throw themselves into planning Papi's funeral. This is a big moment for Camino as she dons her black dress: she's had this dress for several years now, but she only now feels like she's a woman who has every right to wear such a garment. Papi's death, this shows again, is forcing Camino to grow up. The novel again highlights how Tía's belief system exists alongside Catholicism, offering practitioners multiple ways to worship and make sense of painful events (like Papi's death).*



Camino asks if Papi's brother, Tío Jorge, is coming with Papi's body. Tía hesitates and says she doesn't know. However, her body language suggests she knows more than she's letting on. Camino asks how they're supposed to plan a funeral or plan to host people without knowing who's coming, but Tía refuses to answer any of Camino's questions.

*Tía's caginess here creates more tension—as does the fact that Camino asks if Tío Jorge will accompany Papi's body. It's seeming increasingly likely that Camino and Yahaira do have the same father (and that Tía knows this), but that this is a secret from both of Papi's daughters.*



In the middle of the night, Tía shakes Camino awake, interrupting a bad dream about Papi. Camino realizes Tía has her healer's bag, so she gets dressed; she can tell this is an emergency. Outside, Nelson is waiting for them. There's only one reason he'd be here. They navigate the uneven streets to the small yellow house. The power is out, so a few candles illuminate the one-room house. It's clean, but too small for Maman, Carline's father, Tía, Camino, Nelson, and Carline. Carline is on the couch, red-faced and sweaty.

As Camino wipes Carline's forehead, Tía asks questions about when the contractions started and how long ago Carline's water broke. Carline should really be in a hospital, but Maman explains that the baby is coming too fast, and everyone panicked. Camino explains to readers that there's a lot of tension in the DR about who deserves medical care, so it's a scary thing for a Haitian parent to take their child to a hospital to give birth. Camino and Nelson tidy the room and lay out towels and sheets to protect the couch while Tía coaches Carline through pushing. Carline's father's hands tremble: maybe he, like Tía, is praying.

Camino sits behind Carline, supporting her and trying not to think about how badly premature labor can go. Tía tells Carline to push, but Carline is exhausted. Camino tells her friend that she's worked too hard to not birth this baby. Finally, a small body falls into Tía's hands. It's a boy, and it's silent. Tía is a miracle worker. People are afraid of her, but they still call for her in emergencies because she can negotiate with the dead to bring people back. It doesn't always work.

Tía calls for the baby's life to return as Carline weeps. She presses her fingers into his chest and blows air into his blue lips. Suddenly, the baby breathes—just as the electricity returns, filling the house with light. Camino has been so caught up in death and funerals that it's amazing to see this baby—who shouldn't be alive—live. Everyone is crying. Tía gives instructions for teas and ointments to make, and she says she'll come back if Carline needs help. Maman hugs Camino on the way out, gives her some pesos, and promises to wash and return the sheets. Carline's father is silent, but he cries as he walks Camino and Tía out.

*Carline has gone into labor, seemingly too early. Camino's description of Carline's home reaffirms that Carline's family is struggling to make ends meet. But this passage also highlights that lots of people in the neighborhood struggle, as everyone—except Camino and Tía, who have a generator—are without power right now.*



*The Caribbean island of Hispaniola features the Dominican Republic on one side and Haiti on the other. Haitian people have been crossing the border into the Dominican Republic since it was formalized about a century ago, and they make up the largest ethnic minority in DR. As such, Haitian people are subject to racism and discrimination—this is why Maman is too afraid to take Carline to the hospital. They trust Tía, a beloved family friend, to help them where they have little reason to trust a hospital to give Carline appropriate care.*



*As Camino explained earlier in the novel, Tía taught her that it's inappropriate to dwell on worst-case scenarios, specifically death. This is why Camino throws herself into supporting Carline: it gives her something to calm her scared mind. In this passage, Tía is able to use her faith to perhaps work a miracle, rather than grieve for Papi.*



*It certainly seems miraculous when Carline's baby takes his first breath just as the lights come back on. This miraculous moment shows Camino that there is hope and good things can still happen, even after Papi's death. In a way, witnessing Camino's baby live helps Camino deal with her grief, as it rips her out of her sadness and shows her that life does indeed go on.*



## CHAPTER 8. YAHAIRA

There's a memorial now outside of Papi's pool hall, where the bouncers stand. There's a big picture of Papi. Dre stands behind Yahaira as Yahaira touches all the flowers that people have left for Papi (Papi, however, thought flowers were silly). There are knickknacks, too: a lottery ticket, a Dominican flag, and a baseball card. In history class, Yahaira learned that the Greeks tried to die with a coin in their pocket so they could pay to cross over to the other side. This inspires Yahaira to give Papi a queen **chess** piece to guide him.

Standing outside the pool hall, Yahaira remembers her last time here. She'd just won a match and Papi, though he didn't think a pool hall was appropriate for a child, brought Yahaira to show her off to his friends and employees. He surprised her with a cake and a slightly alcoholic drink, and he made the jukebox play bachata for free all night. He left the country a few weeks later, and Yahaira quit **chess** soon after that.

Yahaira leans silently against Dre's shoulder on the train ride home. Dre knows Yahaira hates riding the train alone, which is probably why she insisted on coming tonight. The last time that Yahaira played **chess**, she beat a boy named Manny. Manny always smiled, held Yahaira's hand too long when they shook, and lost (and won) gracefully, but this story isn't about Manny. Yahaira felt on top of the world as she carried her trophy to the platform to go home. She was alone, as Papi was in the DR at the time. She got on the train and turned her back to a man who leaned against the doors.

Yahaira thought it was an accident when she felt the man squeeze her leg. She thought she was mistaken when he ran his hand up her thigh and touched her between her legs. Yahaira dropped her trophy but didn't scream. She couldn't win. She was stuck, feeling angry—though “anger has no place on the board.” She tried not to let him see her sweat, but she was sweating. It lasted about three stops, and her body wasn't her own. When the man finally got off the train, Yahaira didn't pick her trophy up. She didn't do anything until she got home. Dre climbed through Yahaira's window, saw her trembling, and somehow knew. Dre ran a bath and hid Yahaira's skirt far back in her closet. Yahaira wanted to talk to Papi; he'd know what to do. But he didn't answer when Yahaira called.

*Visiting Papi's pool hall and the memorial there is a huge step for Yahaira. Finally, she's beginning to grieve communally—and she does seem to find some solace in this. The memorial also highlights that people have very different ways of grieving. Some think flowers are best, even though Papi wasn't a flowers person. Yahaira can also give Papi something that's meaningful to her: a chess piece, to represent their relationship.*



*The last time Yahaira was here seems especially significant now, since everything has changed since then—Yahaira now knows Papi had a second wife, and he's also died. Still, Yahaira isn't being entirely forthcoming yet, as it's still a mystery why exactly she quit chess.*



*Finally, Yahaira steps back in time to share with readers the reason why she quit chess. From the moment she begins, her story seems to be about men (or boys) who make her uncomfortable: first Manny with his overly long handshakes, and then, possibly, the man leaning against the train doors. Also noteworthy here is that Yahaira is on her own; Papi isn't here to protect her. For several months out of the year, Yahaira has to take care of herself—and she seems to be uncomfortable with this.*



*Yahaira describes her assault and her thought process in excruciating detail. As she describes what the man does to her alongside all that she's learned through playing chess, it becomes clear that Yahaira is trying to rationalize what's happening and fit it into a framework (that of chess) that makes sense to her. But being assaulted doesn't make any sense, no matter how hard Yahaira tries—all she can do is attempt to move on afterward and ask Papi and Dre for help. However, while Dre is there to comfort Yahaira, Papi isn't—and this makes Yahaira feel abandoned and alone.*



Yahaira tried everything to get ahold of Papi, hoping that somehow, the most protective man in her life could undo what happened to her. She had a match coming up and for some reason, she wanted his permission to not go. When he didn't get back to her for three days, Yahaira dug through his cabinet of business papers and found the sealed envelope.

After that, and after what happened on the train, Yahaira skipped two tournaments that she'd worked hard to qualify for. The night of a third tournament, Papi called. He was angry after getting an email informing him that Yahaira had been disqualified from summer matches. He didn't ask if everything was okay, and Yahaira didn't ask why he read the **chess** email and not any of her emails or texts. In fact, he wouldn't let her speak, and he never asked why she answered the phone so angrily.

Yahaira isn't sure if she would've told Papi the truth about the man putting his hand in her underwear or about the marriage certificate that day. But now, she'll never know what she might've said, since he lectured her instead of asking what was wrong. When he hung up, Yahaira whispered how disappointed she was in Papi, and she vowed that she wouldn't speak to him. When he got home a few weeks later, she'd just leave when he started ranting about how stubborn she was.

*Twenty-One Days After.* It's the last day of school, and Yahaira feels like an alien has invaded her body. It's hard to pick up her report card or sign herself out. Dre appears beside Yahaira and reminds her that she can do this and to keep breathing. Breathing is so much work now, though. Yahaira feels like maybe, if she stops moving, remembering that Papi is dead won't hurt as much.

Tío Jorge and Tía Mabel come to support Mami when insurance representatives for the airline come to visit. Nobody listens to Yahaira when she suggests that they should get a lawyer who practices here (Jorge has only practiced law in the Dominican Republic.) The representatives go over the findings from the National Transportation Safety board and then look around expectantly. Yahaira translates for Mami: the airline wants to give them an advance payment of a half-million dollars. Mami weeps.

*Prior to Yahaira's assault, Papi made her feel safe and secure, as though nothing could hurt her. Now, she must accept that she's vulnerable—and that Papi won't always be around when she needs him to be. And finally, Yahaira explains why quitting chess and becoming disillusioned with Papi is tied up with discovering his other wife: Yahaira found the marriage certificate while trying to figure out how to contact him.*



*Yahaira has the whole story about why she skipped these two tournaments. Papi, however, doesn't—and he shows here that he's unwilling to listen to Yahaira and ask for more information. This highlights for Yahaira that when Papi is in the Dominican Republic, she isn't his first priority. The fact that he doesn't even acknowledge her other emails or texts makes this abundantly clear to her.*



*Because Papi never decided to ask Yahaira what happened, he continues to see her as a headstrong, misbehaving teen—when really, Yahaira feels (understandably) hurt and betrayed. Their unwillingness to speak openly with each other prevents them from resolving this conflict, meaning that Papi ultimately dies not knowing the truth about his daughter.*



*For now, Yahaira is accepting a bit more help and support than she was a few days ago: she allows Dre to guide her through the final days of school and make sure she gets home okay. Still, Yahaira struggles to voice any of her grief, which means she's still dealing with it mostly on her own.*



*Yahaira suspects that the airline insurance representatives aren't necessarily coming in good faith: it was their failure that killed Papi, after all, so she's naturally distrustful of them. However, given Yahaira's youth, nobody takes her seriously. The half-million dollar payment is a bombshell for Yahaira's family, which is well off but seemingly not extraordinarily wealthy.*



The airline representatives say things like “grievance” and “mechanical failure” and “insurance policy,” but they won’t say Papi’s name or that he’s dead. They don’t say they’re sorry, either—even when Yahaira asks them to. You can buy a lot of things with a half-million dollars, like a fancy car, a mansion, four years of college, and a lot of flights to the Dominican Republic. Apparently, that much will also buy a father. Thinking of game shows, Yahaira wishes she could phone a friend. This is more money than Mami and Papi ever made. It’s more than Yahaira and Mami can understand.

Tío Jorge says they should still sue the airline, since they’re due a settlement. He offers to handle the finances, sell the pool hall, and set up a trust fund for Yahaira. They can set money aside from taxes, pay for the funeral, and they shouldn’t tell “the family” about the advance. At this, Mami cuts him off. She says that she appreciates his advice, but Papi needed his advice when he was still alive. Yahaira is confused; what is her family not saying here? Do Mami and Tío know about the certificate? Mami backtracks and says that she really means that she and Yahaira will figure this out themselves. She’s never been so brisk with Tío Jorge. He leaves silently.

Dre isn’t answering her phone or at home, so Yahaira knows she’ll find her at the community garden. It’s Dre’s happy place, and Dre is Yahaira’s happy place. Yahaira sits on a bench and watches Dre work. Dre is probably listening to Nina Simone, her favorite artist who, according to Dre, is appropriate for every situation. Nina’s the answer when Dre misses her dad, or when she sees videos of black boys shot, or when LGBTQ kids are hurt or bullied. Yahaira wants to scream and tear the world apart, but Dre would rather repot everyone in a better, happier world—watered and warmed by Nina Simone. At this thought Yahaira snorts, which attracts Dre’s attention. Dre sticks one earbud in Yahaira’s ear and goes back to her basil.

## CHAPTER 9. CAMINO

Tía is on the phone again, whispering angrily and trying to keep Camino from overhearing. When she’s done, Camino goes outside and sits in a rocking chair with her. They rock in silence for a long time. Tía has never lied to Camino; she’s always answered questions about boys or sex or the Saints. Suddenly, Tía stops rocking. Camino knows that whatever Tía says is going to have an impact.

*A half-million dollars is a lot of money—but as Yahaira sees it, it doesn’t make up for Papi’s death. And it hurts even more when the representatives refuse to acknowledge that they’re talking about a person who died, someone whom Yahaira wants to remember and keep alive through her memories. Yahaira also recognizes that the money will fundamentally change her life and make things much easier for her in the future—but the question remains of whether this is a fair price for a person’s life.*



*For now, it’s somewhat unclear who Tío Jorge is referring to when he says they shouldn’t tell the family about the money. Is he referring to the rest of the family in the New York area, or is he perhaps referring to Tía and Camino as well? When Mami dismisses Tío Jorge so forcefully, it implies again that she knows more than she’s letting on. For the time being, Yahaira remains in the dark about what her family members know—and with Mami being unwilling to speak about anything, she has no real way of finding information out for herself.*



*Though Yahaira seems to find Dre’s love of Nina Simone somewhat ridiculous, it’s worth noting that listening to music seems to give Dre a healthy outlet to deal with her difficult emotions. Yahaira, on the other hand, wants to get upset and break things, though she never actually does this. This suggests that Yahaira habitually keeps her feelings inside and hasn’t yet found an outlet for her emotions when things get rough. She can coexist with Dre and borrow Dre’s outlet in this passage, but Yahaira doesn’t seem to feel much better with Dre’s earbud.*



*While Yahaira’s household is silent and full of secrets, Camino believes that Tía will, in time, tell her anything she needs to know. And this is the case even though Camino herself still feels like she has to keep secrets from Tía, such as that El Cero is stalking her.*



Tía explains that she was on the phone with Tío Jorge. The airline is offering a half-million advance to ward off lawsuits; it can be split among dependents. But this is complicated. Tía says she never wanted to lie, but Papi was complex. She explains that Papi has another daughter in New York City. The girl is two months younger than Camino, and Papi married the girl's mother, Zoila, before he married Mamá. Tía says that Camino can apply for money as one of Papi's dependents, but Zoila might try to fight the claim. Zoila has connections at the consulate and made it difficult for Papi to help Camino—he needed her citizenship papers to get Camino a visa. Camino barely hears what else Tía says, fixating instead on the fact that she has a sister.

Learning a truth you didn't want to know can do terrible things to a person. It can make one's stomach mold, make everything taste bad, and can even put a collar around a person's neck and lead them into a place full of monsters. There's someone else in the world related to Camino; Papi lied to Camino every day. Camino isn't alone, but the rest of her family aside from Tía are strangers. She wants to touch her sister's face and ask if she hurts like Camino does. Does Camino's sister know she has a sister? Would Papi have told her everything while he lied to Camino? Or would she understand what Camino is feeling? If Camino finds her sister, will Camino find a piece of herself she didn't know was missing?

There are a variety of items on Tía's altar, from a shot glass filled with rum to a bouquet of flowers. There are photos of Tía's parents, Mamá, and other relatives. Camino has been putting bills on the altar too, under the tablecloth. The bill for school is one of them; it arrives in June and Papi usually pays it in July. Tía doesn't make enough money to pay it. Camino has no idea how an "overeducated orphan" becomes a doctor here, where girls her age get pregnant by 10th grade. But now, Camino might have money coming. How does Camino finish school and go to college in the U.S.? She refuses to let her dreams pop like bubbles.

Later, as Tía cleans red kidney beans, Camino says that according to Papi, the paperwork for her visa was in order. She asks if she can still go to the U.S. and maybe live with Tío Jorge. Tía pauses and explains that the papers were going to be approved because Papi was bringing Camino on Zoila's papers, citizenship, and income. Now, Zoila will have to sponsor Camino for Camino to get a visa—and, Tía adds, Zoila isn't a "forgiving woman." Camino thinks that she's not forgiving either. She asks what Papi's other daughter's name is. Carefully, Tía says the girl's name is Yahaira.

*Finally, Tía confirms that Camino and Yahaira do indeed share a father, and that this was the big secret that Papi kept for his daughters' entire lives. With this, things fall into place: Papi was always with one of his daughters, and this helps explain why Papi didn't seem excited about Camino coming to New York (especially since Zoila—Mami—clearly resents that her husband married and fathered a child with another woman). But all of this pales next to Camino's realization that she has a sister, someone who may be experiencing much the same grief that she is.*



*Camino struggles to organize her thoughts. Learning she has a sister is a lot to take in, and Camino can't quite figure out if she's excited to have a living relative who's about the same age, or if she's enraged that Papi spent so many years lying to her. And, as Camino acknowledges, there are a lot of things she doesn't know, such as if Yahaira is in on the secret (readers, of course, know that she isn't). Still, first and foremost, Camino seems to see this revelation as a gift: she might find someone who can empathize, or a "piece of herself" that will help make her whole again.*



*Despite Camino and Tía's relatively open relationship, Camino is now keeping secrets of her own: that the school bills are soon going to be due (though, of course, Tía is likely aware of this fact). Things seem slightly more hopeful now that Camino believes she might be able to get some of the airline's settlement, though it's unclear how many hoops she'll have to jump through to do this. But she's determined, as she knows achieving her dreams depends on getting the money.*



*Camino feels like there's hope for her now: she'll soon have money, and that will make getting to the U.S. easier. But Tía implies that it's not actually that simple, mostly because Zoila, as she understands it, wants nothing to do with Camino and isn't likely to offer any help. Camino, though, isn't ready to give up: describing herself as just as unforgiving as Zoila suggests that Camino will go to great lengths to achieve her dreams.*



*Twenty-Two Days After.* Camino is still processing all she learned about Yahaira and Papi when she stops by Carline’s house the next day. Carline looks exhausted, but Camino still almost lets herself cry in her friend’s arms. Camino tells her friend she already looks like a mother, but Carline complains that she’s sore and so thirsty. Then, she says she’s heard that girls have seen Camino at the **beach** with El Cero. Carline says she won’t judge Camino, but El Cero is dangerous. Camino can only nod. She knows he’s dangerous; that’s why Papi paid him to stay away. But Carline can’t help Camino. Then the baby starts to cry, prompting a subject change. Carline explains that the old ladies warned her not to name her baby since he might not make it, but she named him Luciano anyway. Camino holds Luciano and prays that love is enough.

The next time Camino sees El Cero, she treats him like a stray. She tries to give him just enough attention to placate him and get him to leave her alone. But El Cero won’t leave. At the **beach**, Vira Lata sits on Camino’s clothes and watches El Cero. It’s nice not to be alone. But as Camino is gathering her things, El Cero approaches and says that a man asked him for Camino’s address—and he didn’t seem like a good man. El Cero says he told the man he didn’t know Camino’s address, but Camino understands the subtext: he could give anyone her address, and nobody would be able to keep Camino safe.

When Camino doesn’t respond, El Cero whistles. An older man walks onto the **beach**. He smells like a sewer mixed with cologne. El Cero introduces the man as a friend of Papi’s and grabs Camino’s arms. The man suggests he and Camino go talk in his car—and suddenly, Camino is enraged. She screams, pulls away, and shoves the man. This excites Vira Lata, whose barking distracts the men while Camino races away. Sobbing, Camino feels like her skin is electric as she runs home.

It’s only upon returning home that Camino remembers that there’s a ceremony tonight. Tía taught Camino to dance and move her spirit, not just her body. Camino remembers watching Tía dance and learning how to roll her body. Everyone knows that Tía and Camino’s house is one “blessed by saints.” Most people are afraid of that kind of spirituality, but that doesn’t stop them for asking Tía for help, prayers, or remedies—especially when doctors are too expensive or say they can’t help. This means that when Tía hosts a ceremony, lots of people come. The *santero* (priest), practitioners, and drummers come, and though the attendees are grieving, the music is “full of light.” Camino dances like she’s pushing El Cero away, and she “pray[s] herself free” of pain and fear.

*Camino doesn’t want to burden Carline so soon after Carline’s difficult and emotionally taxing labor—but she desperately wants to talk to someone and let someone comfort her, as evidenced by her almost collapsing in Carline’s arms. Carline’s warning about El Cero lands much the same way Tía’s did: Camino knows exactly what she’s dealing with, but it’s not like Carline is in a position to help her either—Carline is similarly poor and young, and she also has to worry about protecting her new baby. That Luciano is expected to die is heartbreaking—but the fact that he’s still alive offers some hope that things will be okay, and that miracles will continue to happen for Camino and her loved ones.*



*Camino described Vira Lata earlier as not very aggressive, but he certainly seems protective—and aware that El Cero is dangerous and means Camino harm. El Cero’s threat is intended to get Camino to agree to work for him; if she does, presumably, he’ll want to protect her, as she’ll be one of his many “investments.” This is intended to make Camino feel increasingly vulnerable and unsafe by refusing to go along with El Cero.*



*Wherever this man came from, he immediately reads as bad news due to his smell and his desire to talk to Camino in his car—an enclosed space where she’s vulnerable. In this instance, Camino’s rage is able to save her, giving her the burst of energy she needs to escape. But the men’s message is clear: Camino is at risk, and she might not be lucky enough to escape next time.*



*It’s a relief for Camino when she remembers that Tía is hosting a ceremony tonight. The ceremony gives her the opportunity to leave her troubles behind for a bit while she dances and spends time with other grieving people. This scene demonstrates the power of grieving communally. When Camino is on her own, she’s lost, tight, and afraid. But being surrounded by other people who are grieving enables her to mentally and spiritually free herself from El Cero and from the pain she’s experiencing in the aftermath of Papi’s death.*





## CHAPTER 10. YAHAIRA

Both Yahaira and Mami are in odd moods, so they tiptoe around each other. Mami writes checks for bills, “spending money / on a promise.” They don’t even have the money yet. Mami doesn’t go to work and misses appointments, which makes her unrecognizable to Yahaira. Still, though, Yahaira doesn’t want Mami to leave, so she keeps making Mami meals (which Mami never touches). Yahaira climbs through the Johnsons’ window sometimes, just to hear noise and escape the tension in her house.

*Twenty-Three Days After.* With school out for the summer, Yahaira can walk without caring where she ends up. She spends her days wandering the neighborhood and ends up on Dre’s front door every evening. Dr. Johnson always hugs Yahaira as she lets her in, and it feels nice to be in a house that feels no different than it did a month ago. Yahaira “let[s] the noises of a whole family lull [her] into sleep.”

Dr. Johnson asks Yahaira questions—has Yahaira has been sleeping? And has she spoken about her grief to anyone? Yahaira tries to deflect Dr. Johnson’s questions and suggestions to return to grief counseling. Then she returns home to escape the questions. Yahaira used to eat with Dre’s family about once per week, even though Mami and the neighbors didn’t like it. Yahaira liked how she fit in with the Johnsons. But though Yahaira loves them, she’s not sure she can go back now. It’s too hard to look at Dr. Johnson’s “soft, sad eyes,” and it’s hard to be in a place where it seems like Papi never existed.

*Twenty-Five Days After.* Wilson stops by, hugs Mami, and compliments her hair—Yahaira isn’t sure Mami’s washed her hair in weeks. Then, Wilson takes a deep breath and says he wants to marry his girlfriend, but he’s afraid to ask her. He asks what a *campesino* (peasant farmer) has to offer her. Wilson, though, has lived in New York since he was 10; he wears designer clothes and has expensive cologne and whiskey. He’s not a *campesino* anymore. But he says he can’t afford the ring he wants. Yahaira wants to know what a bank teller like him wants to spend, and if his girlfriend really cares that much. Mami, though, gets up and writes him a check for four figures.

*Mami is clearly banking on getting the money from the airline. For now, she seems to see it as an excuse to not worry about going to work, as they’ll have enough money to coast for a while. Yahaira is dealing with her own anxieties: she still seems to fear that Mami might disappear like Papi if she leaves the house. And though it’s comforting for that reason to have Mami at home, things remain tense, and Yahaira’s still not comfortable in her own house.*



*These days, Yahaira feels best when she can simply forget about Papi’s death and her grief. This is also why, at the last family gathering, she put on one of Papi’s bachata records—the comforting, familiar rhythm helps her feel secure and as though everything is going to be okay.*



*With Dr. Johnson’s questioning, suddenly, the Johnson home becomes less of a safe space for Yahaira. She wants to forget her grief, not talk about it—and especially not return to grief counseling, which both she and Mami found devastating. As difficult as this is for Yahaira in the moment, though, it suggests that she’s turned a corner: she’s perhaps becoming more ready to address her grief and try to remember Papi.*



*Yahaira’s suspicion shines through here, beginning when Wilson compliments Mami’s clearly dirty hair. The impression Yahaira gets from Wilson’s request is that family members have found out about the airline’s payout—and they now will come to Mami, asking for money even if they don’t technically need it. Wilson, for instance, is someone Yahaira believes should be able to afford a ring on his own, given where else he spends his money.*



Yahaira wants to call Mami's family *cucarachas*—"cockroaches." All the cousins who called Yahaira ugly, and the aunts who said Mami should've married someone else, have been appearing out of nowhere. They compliment Yahaira's beauty and tell Mami about wanting to get liposuction or help paying their hospital bills or throwing a dream wedding. Soon, Yahaira feels like her tongue is a broom: she tells people to go away—that she and Mami aren't a bank. Mami tells Yahaira she's being rude, but Yahaira says people are rude for asking for money. Mami insists family helps each other and then says that Yahaira loved Papi and "ignored the signs." She says that she wishes she'd stopped loving Papi a long time ago. She says Yahaira doesn't know how much he embarrassed her. If this money will "unshame" her, Mami says, then that's just the way it is.

*Yahaira finds her relatives' requests for money particularly offensive since, in her experience, none of them have been all that nice to her or to Mami. They expect Mami to be generous when they themselves have never been kind or compassionate. Mami, though, sees things differently. She realizes that Papi was an imperfect man and partner, and she perhaps believes her relatives were right—that she should've married someone else. Mami is clearly very embarrassed, both by Papi's behavior and by the fact that she chose to stay when he cheated on her. Now, her relatives' requests for money are a convenient way for her to buy her way out of the shame that has ruled her life for years.*



## CHAPTER 11. CAMINO: TWENTY-EIGHT DAYS AFTER

Camino has been avoiding the **beach**. Instead of swimming, she spreads her body and hair out on her bed. She feels like something inside of her has shrunk. She wants to take up all the space around her—though she knows it might not be her space for long. The bills have been coming in, and Camino keeps thinking about Columbia and New York City. Apparently, Zoila, Papi's "secret wife," is going to pay for the funeral. Papi had a secret life. It feels like all the things Camino has worked for are slipping away.

*Camino has always felt like she had every right to belong in her home, in her neighborhood, and in her country. But now, she's slowly being pushed out: she and Tía might not be able to afford the house soon, El Cero haunts the beach, and it's looking increasingly unlikely that Camino will be able to get to the U.S. with Zoila standing in her way.*



Camino is pretty sure Yahaira has the same last name—Zoila was married to Papi, after all. Yahaira is a lovely name, and Camino wonders if Papi chose it. It means "to light, or to shine." Maybe Yahaira was so bright that he kept going back to her instead of staying with Camino. Camino knows that Papi left Yahaira to see her in the summers—but Papi left Camino for Yahaira for most of Camino's life. Camino doesn't want to hate Yahaira, but she's angry. What girl gets a half-million dollars and doesn't think about her sister across the ocean? Unless, that is, Yahaira doesn't know about Camino. Camino has so many questions about Yahaira and the family members who have ignored her. But the Saints taught Camino that when a crossroads appear, you must choose a path. Yahaira will have to learn this, too.

*Both Camino and Yahaira have described Papi as the sun around which they and their mothers orbited—but now, Camino wonders if Papi was orbiting a different "sun," Yahaira herself. And while Camino can understand that Yahaira probably feels like Papi abandoned her every year, just like Camino does, she also believes that their situations aren't exactly equal: Papi is only around for Camino for a fraction of the year, after all. Now that Papi's secret has come out, Camino is set on finding out answers, and saying that both Camino and Yahaira will have to choose a path suggests that Camino has figured out her next step.*



Finding Yahaira on social media seemed like a good idea, but Camino has been scrolling through girls named Yahaira Rios for two hours. Finally, she finds a profile picture that's black with Papi's date of death. Some people have written on the private profile saying that Tío Yano was great, or that they'll miss Pops. Shaking, Camino writes a message and sends it. She immediately begins refreshing the page. Camino busies herself washing dishes and dusting the altar, but Yahaira doesn't respond. It's the same time zone in New York, so maybe Yahaira is just busy "being rich." But when Yahaira still hasn't even opened the message, Camino turns off her tablet. She almost wishes she could take the message back, but she deserves to "know and be known."

Tía and Camino go to the boardwalk, carrying molasses, a watermelon, and honeyed rum for La Virgen de Regla, who loves sweets. They pray over the offerings, kiss them, and then they pour some homemade *mamajuana* (an alcoholic elixir) into the water. Camino even takes a sip, as she's feeling guilty—the message might be a lot for Yahaira to process. At least Camino heard the truth from Tía, not a profile picture. Camino imagines pouring her guilt into the water, thinking of how the ocean's patron saint is known for being many things, like a nurturer and a defender. This reminds Camino to be kind, but fierce. When Camino gets back home, she immediately checks her tablet, but there's no notification. She's not a patient person.

Camino packs a bag with rice and beans. She and Tía will be struggling to eat soon, but for now, they still have enough to share. Camino enjoys the sunny walk to Carline's house and gives the bag to Maman when she arrives. Maman looks exhausted and Carline has been crying, but Maman still hugs Camino so tight it seems like she's trying to comfort Camino. Once Maman has gone out to the open fire in back, Camino gently takes Luciano from Carline. A few moments later, Carline says she was fired. They wanted her to go back to work, but she couldn't leave Luciano so soon.

Camino just nods and hums to Luciano. She's not Papi; she can't get Carline another job. Carline says she wishes she could make miracles like Tía and stay with Luciano. Tía already has an apprentice—Camino. Camino can't work miracles yet, though. So, to distract her friend, Camino describes reaching out to Yahaira. Carline says Camino did the right thing. Though Camino doesn't usually seek approval, a weight lifts from her chest.

*It's interesting to note that Camino knows nothing about Yahaira aside from who her father is, and yet she assumes outright that Yahaira is out gallivanting with her half-million dollars and so doesn't have time for social media. This will be important to keep in mind going forward: Camino is naturally suspicious and assumes the worst of her sister. On some level, Camino realizes that she may have dropped a bombshell in Yahaira's lap—readers, after all, know Yahaira knows nothing about Camino. But Camino justifies her actions, insisting that just as she has the right to get answers from her family, they also have the right to get answers from her.*



*Camino doesn't reveal to readers what the real purpose of taking these offerings to the sea is—if this is a normal occurrence, or if this has to do with grieving for Papi's death. In any case, though, Camino still finds solace and some comfort as she sips the mamajuana and reminds herself to be kind and fierce at the same time. This highlights how rituals like this one can give a person purpose and help them deal with difficult life events. Still, Camino continues to struggle with not getting an immediate response from Yahaira—it's impossible for her to know if Yahaira just isn't checking social media, or if she's purposefully rejecting Camino.*



*This visit to Carline's house highlights again how vulnerable Carline's family is: they relied on her income, and because Carline needs to be at home to feed Luciano around the clock, she can't feasibly keep working. That Maman looks so exhausted and upset too highlights that this isn't just Carline's problem. Losing her job affects the whole family, and this is even harder to deal with now that there's one more mouth to feed.*



*Camino is far too practical of a person to feel okay giving Carline any false hope. All she knows how to do is try to distract Carline, which incidentally ends up helping Camino feel better about her choices too. This suggests that Camino does want to connect with others and process her grief (and her choices) with loved ones—but normally, she feels unable to do so.*



## CHAPTER 12. YAHAIRA

Yahaira was small the last time she saw her parents kiss, but it's still hard to learn that Mami wasn't happy. Papi always seemed happy, though, so Yahaira wishes she knew what caused them to grow apart. She used to think it was that Mami was jealous of how Yahaira and Papi bonded over **chess**. But even when Yahaira became more interested in nails and Mami's job, Mami still acted like she didn't like Papi. Now, Yahaira wonders if Mami *did* know about the other woman, even if she never saw the certificate. "Unhappy" can contain so many questions.

*Thirty-One Days After.* On Monday night, Tía Lidia comes for dinner. They eat in silence until Tía Lidia asks about Yahaira's college essay. Yahaira shares that she's thinking of applying to different schools. At this, Mami perks up and sharply says that they only have each other, so Yahaira should've said something. She says that Papi always had more people than he needed in his life. Then she storms away from the table. Tía Lidia gently tells Yahaira that Mami is having a hard time. Her marriage was difficult, and though Papi was a great father, he wasn't always a good husband. It's confusing that Papi could've been so many things. Yahaira almost asks if everyone knows—but if nobody knows, she can't "reveal the dirt on [her] father's name."

Yahaira keeps thinking about a **chess** tournament she went to in Memphis with both Mami and Papi. It's a happy memory, both because she won, and because the Mississippi River boat tour was amazing. The guide spoke about how the river stays constant, even as the world around it changes. People have lost gold and boats in it, and cities have risen and fallen on its banks. But the river just keeps rising and falling. Yahaira thinks about this as Mami angrily storms around the house. Anger might be like a river, crumbling things and hiding skeletons.

*Thirty-Five Days After.* Yahaira logs on to social media for the first time in weeks. She peruses the messages and notifications—and finds a friend request from a Camino Rios in Sosúa, Dominican Republic. Her skin's a bit lighter than Yahaira's, but Yahaira can't take her eyes off the profile picture. Yahaira is in a red bathing suit, Papi's arm around her shoulders. There's a sinking feeling in Yahaira's chest; she can barely breathe.

*Yahaira learns once again that she was assuming a lot about her parents—in this case, that Mami was happy enough in her marriage. Still, even with this out in the open, Yahaira doesn't feel comfortable prying further or trying to understand how Mami felt by talking to her. In Yahaira's family, it seems, keeping secrets and staying quiet is the norm—but this passage shows that this leaves everyone with lots of questions and no way to get them answered.*



*Mami seems to believe that with Papi gone, she and Yahaira need to grow closer and learn to trust each other more. Further, her anger and perhaps even disgust with Papi shines through when she describes Papi having more support than he ever needed—this may be a reference to his other wife and to Camino. Tía Lidia tries to help Yahaira make some sense of this by clearly laying out that Papi was a complex man, and that it's possible for him to have been a good dad to Yahaira without being a good husband to Mami. But for Yahaira, all this brings up is more questions—and it highlights how ashamed she is to know Papi's secret, and not know if she's the only one who knows.*



*Bringing up Papi (and the fact that Yahaira is trying to change her plans without consulting Mami) clearly brings up a lot of emotion for Mami. Again, though, Yahaira's family doesn't habitually talk about their feelings, so all Yahaira can do is watch and think back to her boat tour on the Mississippi. Now, she realizes that Mami's anger might be hiding other things—like Papi's secrets, or even perhaps that Mami did genuinely love Papi despite his faults.*



*Readers, of course, realize that Camino is indeed Papi's other daughter, but Yahaira has no idea what she's seeing as she studies Camino's profile picture. Camino was right: this is a bombshell moment for Yahaira, as Yahaira discovers that Papi kept even more secrets from her than Yahaira had already uncovered.*



The feeling in Yahaira's chest grows and chokes her. She yells for Mami, who runs immediately into Yahaira's room. Yahaira asks who the girl is, if she's a cousin, and why Papi is with her. Mami slaps a hand to her chest. She says that she knows Papi was Yahaira's hero, and she's gone out of her way to let him stay that way. But the girl, Mami says, is Papi's other daughter from his other family.

Yahaira, shaking, closes her laptop so she doesn't throw it. She wants to shatter the picture of the girl and Papi. How could nobody have told her she had a sister? And Yahaira has been holding what felt like a huge secret for a year now, but she never imagined Papi could have another child. It seems like everyone knew about his other family, even Mami—the very person Yahaira tried to protect by staying silent. Yahaira has spent a year trying to come to terms with Papi's other life, but she didn't even have the whole story. She pulls away from Mami's comforting hand, thinking that the lies her whole family has swallowed must be rotting in their stomachs.

Yahaira admits that she knew about Papi's other wife, and she can't believe that nobody told her. Mami says they didn't want to burden her, but Yahaira gasps that she only now found out about "This—person." Mami gently reminds Yahaira to breathe. But Yahaira feels like she's falling apart. She has a sister.

Yahaira listens, confused, as Mami explains that Papi's other wife was actually her friend; Mami met Papi through her. Papi married the other woman after Mami, so it wasn't legal—but the other woman didn't learn that until later. Mami explains that she defied her father's wishes to marry Papi, and she almost died when she learned Papi betrayed her. Then, her voice breaking, Mami says that Papi's other wife died 10 years ago, and she and Papi never got over it. Mami says she always wanted her to go away, but she died horribly. Yahaira wants to hate "this dead woman" for making Mami so obviously upset. It's that woman's fault that Papi left every year, had a child, and died. But Yahaira realizes she wants to hate a dead woman—and a girl who probably hates Yahaira for keeping Papi away from her.

*To her credit, Mami speaks frankly with Yahaira about Yahaira's discovery. She explains why she's kept Papi's second family a secret: she didn't want to color Yahaira's perception of her father. However, what Mami doesn't know is that Yahaira already stopped thinking of her father as a god a year ago—so this scene highlights how keeping secrets doesn't always work out as planned.*



*In this passage, Yahaira clearly lays out the consequences she's suffering as a result of Papi and Mami's secret, and as a result of keeping quiet that she knew Papi had another wife. Keeping it a secret that she knew, Yahaira realizes, was perhaps futile—she wasn't protecting Mami at all, which was her main goal in staying quiet. When she describes the lies as rotting in their stomachs, Yahaira unwittingly echoes what Camino said earlier about lies poisoning people or leading them to dark places.*



*Again, Mami tries to impress upon Yahaira that she and Papi were just trying to protect her. They feared that this information would be too much for her to handle. However, there's no saying how Yahaira might have reacted differently hearing this news from Papi, for instance—it may hurt more hearing it now, after he's dead.*



*Finally, Mami honestly explains the situation, and it again turns out to be more than Yahaira realized—Yahaira had no idea that Papi's other wife died years ago. This reinforces that Yahaira wasn't helping anyone by keeping her own secret, as she was protecting no one and keeping herself from getting important information. Then, Yahaira recognizes her impulse to hate the other woman (Mamá) and Camino—but she realizes that hating them is actually kind of silly. There's been hurt in both of Papi's families, and Yahaira recognizes that Camino might even have more legitimate grievances about the situation than Yahaira does.*



Yahaira asks Mami why Papi would do this to them. Mami says that Papi once said he felt like he had to perform and prove he was good enough for Mami. He never felt like that around his other wife, who was a childhood friend. Mami was the smart choice, while the other woman let Papi be a dreamer. She continues, explaining that Papi sacrificed everything for his other daughter, and that he loved both Yahaira and Camino. Papi probably even loved both Mami and his other wife; he was a complicated person. Mami says that when the other wife died, she refused to bring the girl here, but Papi refused to abandon her. Mami knows she never should've asked him to. This led Papi to "create[] a theater of his life" and lose himself in his various roles.

Mami looks just as exhausted as Yahaira feels. Yahaira doesn't want to talk anymore, so Mami kisses her goodnight and leaves the room. Deep down, Yahaira knows this isn't Mami's fault—but she's tired of everyone lying to her, and Mami is here to be mad at. Yahaira stares at Camino's message and at Papi hugging another girl. Yahaira should delete the message and ignore this girl. She decides to decline the friend request.

## CHAPTER 13. CAMINO

When Camino returns home after getting her report card, she has a social media notification. She sent the message days ago and assumed Yahaira wouldn't respond—but she has responded. Tía offers Camino something to eat, but Camino feels nauseous. She opens the message. Yahaira has sent questions, and she seems shocked. She clearly didn't know about Camino. She asks how old Camino is, where in the Dominican Republic she lives, if she has any siblings, and if Papi lived with her when he visited. In closing, Yahaira says they should video chat.

Tía, and sometimes Papi, have been the only family Camino has ever known. She's never wanted siblings and seldom misses Mamá. It's weird to suddenly see another person with the same face. Yesterday Yahaira was just a name, and she represented the future Camino wants. Now, she's a real person—and she's family, like Tía.

Camino doesn't reply. Instead, she takes a minute to figure out what she wants to say. She's nervous to tell Tía that she contacted Yahaira. Tía looks up from her book and seems already to know what happened. Camino explains that she reached out to Yahaira and that Yahaira wants to talk. It surprises Camino when she starts sobbing, but Tía doesn't seem surprised at all. Tía just pulls Camino close and rocks her. Camino responds to Yahaira, saying that they should speak.

*In this passage, Mami humanizes Papi, perhaps more than Yahaira ever thought possible. She casts Papi as a man who kept trying his best—and eventually, he got caught up in his lies and in trying to be someone he wasn't. In this way, he resembles Yahaira, who pretended to love chess just to maintain her close relationship with Papi. This correlation, however, suggests that now that Yahaira has given up chess (and now that Papi's big secret is out), Yahaira can begin the process of figuring out what life looks like now that she knows the truth.*



*Though Yahaira is able to look logically at her emotions and who she wants to blame, in this moment, she allows her emotions to get the better of her when she decides to decline the friend request. For now, it's too huge of a thing to accept that she has a sister, since doing so means accepting again that Papi deceived her.*



*Despite deciding at the end of the last section to ignore Camino, Yahaira has clearly come around and decided to reach out. Still, her message sounds as hurt and angry as she did while narrating the last section—but here, Yahaira's hurt and anger only helps her as it shows Camino that Yahaira hasn't been willfully ignoring her for years.*



*Camino marvels at the fact that magically, her family is expanding—just when she thought it was shrinking down to just her. As Yahaira becomes more of a real person in Camino's mind, she also becomes more sympathetic.*



*Camino's emotional outburst suggests that she's been keeping a lot of emotion inside for some time now—something that she's implied to readers for weeks now but hasn't been able to acknowledge to herself. Crying with Tía gives her some relief and some support. It also helps her feel ready to take the next step in building her relationship with Yahaira.*



## CHAPTER 14. YAHAIRA

When Papi taught Yahaira to play **chess**, he taught her that every piece got its own space and had to move in a certain way. Each piece had a specific purpose, and nothing overlapped—the only time two pieces can be in the same square is when one piece is taking the other off the board. Now, Yahaira knows Papi was like a chess piece. He couldn't move between his two families. He was Yahaira's when he was in New York and Camino's when he was in the Dominican Republic. It makes sense now why Yahaira never heard from him when he was gone: his inability to combine his lives is why Camino had to confirm Yahaira is also Papi's daughter. Papi always said that everything has a purpose—but why did he keep this huge secret?

*Thirty-Six Days After.* Yahaira and Mami eat (or pretend to eat) in front of the TV and have since Papi died. Mami hasn't worn makeup in weeks. There's nothing to distract Yahaira from the silence. She's surprised, though, when Mami mutes the TV to say that they need to make plans for Yahaira's future, since they're the only family they have now.

Mami doesn't want to fight Papi's will, so once Papi's remains are released, they'll be buried in the Dominican Republic. Mami refuses to talk about it. But after Mami goes to bed, Yahaira starts researching what traveling would cost. Money opens lots of doors, and Papi got Yahaira a passport years ago when it seemed like she'd be competing in **chess** competitions abroad. Yahaira uses Mami's credit card to buy her ticket and checks the bank account first to make sure they have enough money. Yahaira isn't sure she has the courage to go through with this, but she knows she needs to be there for Papi's funeral—and meet Camino.

Yahaira isn't sure why she wants to meet Camino. It could be that it's just so shocking to suddenly learn she has a sister. It could also be that Yahaira feels like Camino is a "piece / of Papi," that will be able to answer the questions Papi never answered. How have Camino and Yahaira gone all these years not knowing about each other? Nothing has made sense since Papi died, but Yahaira is certain that she has to go to the Dominican Republic to find answers.

*In this situation, chess does allow Yahaira to make some sense of the situation. Lkening Papi to a chess piece helps explain why Papi was so totally gone when he was in the Dominican Republic, so Yahaira gets some sense now of why Papi never returned her calls or emails. However, the big mystery is still why Papi thought it was so important to keep this secret in the first place. Importantly, this is a question nobody can answer, now that Papi is dead—but it also suggests that Papi's choice to keep the secret may have been for naught. Indeed, it seems to have caused a great deal of harm.*



*Mami is ready to move forward and start thinking about the future—but specifically Yahaira's future. It's perhaps too painful for her to think about where she goes or what she does next, so she channels her energy into making sure Yahaira is taken care of.*



*Yahaira realizes how lucky she is to have access to a lot of money—and to have a passport that makes international travel on short notice possible. This is a mark of how privileged she is, particularly compared to Camino. Yahaira's choice to defy Mami and go to the Dominican Republic for Papi's funeral suggests that she's ready to grieve with other people who will all be feeling the same things she is—most notably, Camino. She's still staying quiet and keeping secrets, but she has a plan to stop doing so when she leaves the country.*



*Tía would probably say that the Saints are the ones guiding Yahaira toward the Dominican Republic for her answers. Indeed, going there will help Yahaira figure out who Papi was, while also giving her an opportunity to figure out how her Dominican identity works in practice. She noted earlier that she's not sure how Dominican she can be without ever having been there—so this will be an important identity-forming step for her.*



*Thirty-Seven Days After.* Mami hasn't said anything about Camino's message, and Yahaira hasn't offered anything. Yahaira tells Dre about her sister, and Dre is shocked Papi "had it in him." But then, she suggests that it's better that Yahaira didn't know. Yahaira wonders privately how she can lose someone, and then "gain a part of them back / in someone entirely new." Yahaira says she needs to go meet Camino, and Dre immediately says that's the right thing to do. This isn't comforting. How is it so easy to identify the right thing when everything is so confusing?

*It's a mark of how well Papi played his role in New York that Dre is shocked Papi could father a child with another woman. As Dre sees it, it may have been better for Yahaira to grow up in the dark, as it allowed her to idolize Papi and have a close relationship with him. Of course, there's no way to know how things might've gone had Papi been open about his other wife and daughter. Yahaira picks up on this tension when she notes that it feels impossible to pick out the right thing in such a muddy, confusing situation.*



## CHAPTER 15. CAMINO

Camino is pretty sure she hates Yahaira when Yahaira messages that she bought a plane ticket. She says it so easily; she didn't have to fill out a bunch of paperwork or deal with people wondering if she'd overstay her visa. Papi worked for years to get Camino to the States, but Yahaira has it so easy. She has a "blue book," "an entire welcome mat to the world." Zoila won't let Yahaira come, so Yahaira plans to sneak out. Camino knows that if she did that, Tía would kill her, ask the Saints to bring her back, and then kill her again. Camino wants to hate Yahaira, but she has to admire her guts. She only hopes that Yahaira will admire what Camino knows she must do to "get there."

*Camino resents her sister for being so much more privileged than she is. It seems like nothing to Yahaira to have access to money and a passport—but these are the very things that are keeping Camino from achieving her dreams of attending college in the U.S., so she's very attuned to how powerful these two things are. It creates tension when Camino hopes that Yahaira will admire Camino for what Camino must do—presumably, Camino has some plan to get herself to the U.S., the "there" she refers to.*



*Forty Days After.* Carline gave birth three weeks ago, but Camino still visits her every few days, carrying bundles of vitamins and diapers on her head. Mamá used to talk about carrying mangoes like this, so Camino pretends she's Mamá. Camino is wearing a hand-me-down pair of Jordans she thinks were probably Yahaira's—Papi probably brought Camino lots of Yahaira's old clothes. At the house, Carline is alone with sleeping Luciano. If they lived elsewhere, Luciano would still be in the ICU—but Carline's family are "Kreyòl-speaking folk" who can't afford the money or stress of a hospital stay. Carline won't say it, but she clearly expects her tiny baby to die.

*Once again, Camino can't help but see how privileged Yahaira is next to her, and next to the other people in Camino's neighborhood. It's not a direct correlation, but Camino isn't privy to the racism and sexism that Yahaira experiences in the U.S.—so for now, Camino is unable to see that she, her community members, and Yahaira experience some of the same kinds of racism and discrimination (though to different degrees).*



Carline accepts Camino's gift and nods when Camino asks to check Luciano, though Camino can tell she's nervous to let even her friend touch and potentially hurt her baby. Tía has taught Camino how to check babies for fever and infection. Carline says that Nelson is working hard, trying to save enough for a new place to live. He might drop out of school. This is so common: it's a fairy tale here that things turn out all right. So, instead of offering platitudes, Camino does chores.

*Carline and Camino imply that in the Dominican Republic, there's really very little hope: Luciano will likely die, and Carline and her family will never escape their crushing poverty no matter how hard Nelson works. Camino sees this as realistic, not fatalistic, and this suggests that she's losing hope that she's ever going to get out of the Dominican Republic.*





Around here, it's also common for men like Papi to have two families. Yahaira seemed totally blindsided and betrayed to learn this about Papi, but Camino knows that men can "have many faces" and make silly decisions and keep secrets. Camino doesn't say any of this to Carline as she hands Luciano back and promises to check in next week. When Carline asks if Camino heard back from Yahaira, Camino doesn't know what to say—she doesn't want to burden Carline, and she's ashamed. Papi is a secret now.

Camino just wants Papi back. She wants him to laugh, knock on the door, and pepper his speech with odd English phrases. There are bits of Papi all over the neighborhood—and all over the Dominican Republic. He's even all over New York City, but Camino can't bring all those pieces together and bring them to life in some form that resembles Papi.

The news has moved on from covering the plane crash. But people in the neighborhood keep candles lit in their windows, and people often ask Camino if they need anything. The rest of the world has moved on, but people here are still waiting for more information—or to learn that this is a nightmare, and they'll eventually wake up.

*Forty-Two Days After.* Camino's skin itches because she misses the ocean so much, but she forces herself to help Tía make cough syrup and go on her rounds. Finally, Tía accuses Camino of daydreaming. Tía asks when Camino last swam and says that Camino is just like Mamá, who was happiest near the water. Camino knows she can't avoid the **beach** forever. The smell of her freshly washed swimsuit is comforting.

Camino's arms feel like wings as she swims through the "liquid sky." She swims quickly until she's exhausted and needs to rest, and then she floats on her back and watches the moon in the afternoon sky. But when Camino looks at the sand, El Cero is there. He notes that Camino was swimming really fast. Camino ignores him as she puts her shorts on. She tries to ignore that he's staring at her backside.

El Cero asks if Camino wants him to beg. Camino thinks that bodies are "a funny piece of meat." A body deflates or inflates, and certain words can fill a person up or make them go flat. El Cero gives Camino goosebumps, and not the good kind. They're the kind of goosebumps that scream for her to run away. Camino tells El Cero she wants nothing from him, but he says Camino needs him.

*Thanks to Camino's lived experience, she realizes that people—men specifically—keep secrets, so she's not so surprised to find out that Papi had another wife and daughter elsewhere. In this sense, she may be coping better than Yahaira. But as she decides to keep her conversation with her sister a secret from Carline, Camino begins keeping secrets herself—and her shame suggests that this isn't healthy or helpful.*



*Finally, Camino admits outright that she's still grieving. She has in no way moved on from Papi's death, and she's still trying to figure out some way to bring him back or keep his memory alive. Being willing to admit this suggests that perhaps Camino is becoming more open to speaking about her grief.*



*While the tragedy is old news for newscasters, it remains current, relevant, and painful for everyone in Camino's neighborhood (and for everyone in New York, as well). This highlights that people grieve at different rates—and people don't stop grieving just when their loved one's death stops making the news.*



*Readers know that Camino is avoiding the beach because she fears running into El Cero there, but Camino doesn't feel comfortable telling Tía this. The weight of keeping this secret, combined with the stress of not being able to swim, makes Camino irritable and causes her to lose focus.*



*Note the language Camino uses: Camino describes flying through a kind of sky while she's in the water enjoying her swim, but she seems to abruptly and painfully come back to earth when she notices El Cero. He's causing the beach to take on negative connotations for her, as she can no longer comfortably blow off steam there.*



*Camino knows instinctively that El Cero is dangerous; this is why he manages to cause her to "deflate" and gives her awful goosebumps. Her body, perhaps helped along by Tía's Saints, is trying to protect her from the harm she knows he poses to her.*



Camino gets caught in the rain. When she gets home, Tía is stirring a huge pot of stew. Tía points to the tablet and says it's been chirping; Camino needs to turn the volume down on it. Camino realizes that she hasn't asked Tía how she's doing since Papi's death. On the tablet, Camino finds notifications that she's missed video calls from Yahaira. Camino's palms sweat. Is she ready to speak to Yahaira?

Camino and Yahaira are supposed to talk after dinner, but Camino dawdles in the kitchen past the appointed time. Then, once Tía has gone to her room, Camino takes the tablet to the porch, where the Wi-Fi is faintest. She almost wants a reason not to talk to Yahaira. Camino has already missed two calls, but Yahaira calls back five minutes later. When she comes into focus, Camino's heart stops: she looks almost exactly like Papi. She's also pretty and well-fed, but best of all, Camino knows she and Yahaira look like sisters. Neither girl says anything. Camino traces Yahaira's face with her finger. She doesn't feel like she's experienced a loss. Rather, she feels like Papi's death has given her a sister.

## CHAPTER 16. YAHAIRA

Camino looks like Yahaira, but golden. When Camino explains that she was swimming at the **beach**, this makes sense: she's long and lean, like a swimmer. But Camino doesn't smile much. Yahaira is shaky, but she tries to hide her nervousness as she studies her sister's face. She can see Papi's face in Camino's, but she doesn't say this aloud—Camino doesn't seem to want to connect. Since Camino doesn't seem like the sort to deal well with emotions, Yahaira tells her her plan and what she'll need to attend the funeral. Camino's forehead wrinkles like Papi's used to, but she agrees.

*Forty-Three Days After.* Yahaira doesn't remember the last time that she and Mami went shopping. They don't have the same taste in clothes—whenever Mami buys Yahaira rompers or low-cut shirts, Yahaira always wears them with leggings or a button-up. Mami is “a showpiece of a woman” who wears tight clothes, though it's hard to remember how beautiful she is when she's been wearing sweats and slippers for weeks. But as men watch Mami walk, it's impossible to forget that she's “every kind of feminine.” Camino would probably look more like Mami's daughter than Yahaira does, but Yahaira grabs Mami's hand so it's clear that Mami belongs to her.

*Here, Camino briefly experiences a moment of great maturity as she suddenly realizes that Tía is, like her, grieving for Papi. Camino is already more mature than Yahaira in many ways, but both girls are going through the same process of realizing their adult caregivers have rich inner lives, just as they do.*



*The call is emotional for Camino—she has no idea what Yahaira is going to be like, and she's already come up with lots of reasons to dislike her sister. However, when Camino finally comes face to face with Yahaira, all she can see is what she's gaining. In a way, she is gaining a connection to Papi, since Yahaira resembles Papi so much. But more significantly, Camino is suddenly able to see something good coming from Papi's death. Finally, she knows the truth—and she has the opportunity to form a relationship with her sister, someone she had no idea existed.*



*Interestingly, both girls see Papi in each other's faces—but neither is willing to mention it, so they lose out on an opportunity to connect over that observation. Yahaira, however, senses that Camino doesn't actually want to form a relationship—despite the fact that in Camino's narration of this moment, Camino expressed awe and excitement at putting a face to her sister. Put simply, the girls are keeping so much inside that they're struggling to connect.*



*Now that Yahaira has met Camino over video chat, she's contending with some jealousy—she feels territorial about her mother, since she thinks Camino looks more like Mami. But part of this has to do with the fact that Yahaira is forming her own identity separate from Mami's; even if they both are interested in makeup, nails, and beauty, Yahaira's personal style is less showy than Mami's is. For now, Yahaira's jealousy causes her to feel like this is perhaps a negative thing, not a neutral fact that reflects that she and Mami aren't the same person.*



Yahaira asks Mami if she ever wishes Yahaira looked more like her, so that nobody questioned if they're related. Surprised, Mami says that Yahaira's being ridiculous: she has Papi's dark skin and hair, but otherwise Yahaira looks just like Mami. Mami looks annoyed (pinching her jaw is, incidentally, what Yahaira also does when she's annoyed). Yahaira notes that everyone says she looks like Papi. Mami stops, agrees, and says that Yahaira always loved to hear people compare her to Papi. But she's still an amazing, beautiful daughter, and they don't have to have the same style. Yahaira is clearly Mami's daughter, no matter what.

Mami continues to insist that she's not going to the funeral in the Dominican Republic, but she still visits the morgue and decides what to do with Papi's remains. When she gets home, her face is gray. She hugs Yahaira and says, "Thank goodness / for that damn gold tooth." She calls relatives in DR and says the funeral needs to be closed casket; "the girl" (who is clearly Camino) can't see the body. Yahaira doesn't understand her parents' relationship, or how Mami must feel losing Papi again. Mami tenderly irons his pocket square, so she must've loved him—right?

Papi will have two funerals, and people in two different countries will say goodbye to him. He had two lives—and has two daughters. He was split in two and he played a game against himself. The issue, though, is that when you do that, you always win—and lose.

Yahaira just wants Papi back. She wants him to stomp outside her door, say silly things, and speak rapid Spanish. There are pieces of him all over the house and even all over the Dominican Republic, but Yahaira can't bring them together into anything that resembles her father.

## CHAPTER 17. CAMINO: FORTY-FIVE DAYS AFTER

School has been out for weeks now, but Camino has hidden three school bills beneath a candle on Tía's altar. Hopefully, Tía won't see them, and the Saints will step in. Also, Zoila and Yahaira are rich and owe Camino. In just over a week, on July 29, Camino will turn 17. Papi will be buried that day, too. Camino has no idea if Yahaira knows it's her birthday. She spends her days swimming and ignores El Cero, who takes phone videos of her from the shore. She helps Tía visit patients like the lady with cancer, and she visits Carline.

*Mami makes the case that it's not really a contest as to which parent shows up more in Yahaira's physical appearance. It's totally fine for her to resemble both her mother and her father, and the fact that she has Papi's coloring and hair doesn't make her less Mami's daughter. The warmth in Mami's voice shines through in this passage, helping Yahaira feel more secure in her relationship with Mami. This is also one of the first times that Mami and Yahaira speak openly about a difficult subject, which suggests they're forming a healthier, more open relationship.*



*Mami may resent Camino, but she shows here that she still feels some need to protect her from pain and suffering. This is why she makes it abundantly clear to (presumably) Tía that the funeral must be closed casket. Watching Mami is confusing for Yahaira, as she doesn't yet realize how complicated relationships can be. It is possible for Mami to have loved (and still love) Papi deeply, while also feeling betrayed by him. But Yahaira immaturely still believes things should be simple and black and white.*



*Here, Yahaira begins to experience some sadness for all the things that Papi lost out on by keeping his two families secret from each other. There's no way of knowing what might have been, but Yahaira believes that Papi still lost out on some things by keeping his lives separate.*



*Camino has already said almost the exact same thing about wanting Papi back, just switching out the places in this poem. This highlights that Camino and Yahaira are feeling the exact same emotions, even if they're not yet ready to voice them to each other or anyone else.*



*That Camino is hoping the Saints will step in to help with the bills suggests that she's hoping for a miracle—implying too that she doesn't necessarily trust Zoila and Yahaira to come through with the money Camino is entitled to from the airline settlement. Camino is becoming marginally more comfortable around El Cero; at least, she no longer seems to fear he'll assault her at the beach and in comparison, the phone videos seem comparatively inconsequential.*



*Forty-Six Days After.* Four days before Yahaira will arrive, Camino works up her courage and calls her sister. Camino refuses to share any details about the funeral unless Yahaira transfers money. It almost hurts to see Yahaira's face fall, but Camino is desperate. She has to leave here after Papi's funeral, no matter what. Yahaira's face goes blank, but she says it's Camino's money too and asks how much Camino would like her to transfer. Camino flinches, guilty, but she knows nobody gets anything for free—a **chess** player like Yahaira should know that. She asks for \$10,000, swallows bile, and gives Yahaira the information to wire the money. Then, Camino hangs up without saying goodbye. She doesn't want to give Yahaira any reason to get attached.

Yahaira sends money and her flight details, and then she asks Camino to pick her up from the airport. Camino is offended: does Yahaira really think she has a car, or is Yahaira treating her like an errand girl whose compliance she purchased? Either way, it annoys Camino—but she also knows the taxi drivers will cheat Yahaira, and she couldn't live with herself if something happened to her. Papi's ghost—and Yahaira's ghost—would haunt Camino. Camino already feels awful about the money, which she taped to a photo of Papi on the altar. She agrees to pick up Yahaira, though she doesn't know how she'll do that. Is this what being a sister is? Making things that are impossible, possible?

## CHAPTER 18. YAHAIRA

Mami won't let Yahaira see the "real remains," but Yahaira studies the photos of bone, hair, and things from Papi's suitcase that the airline sent. She thinks about Papi's things that won't be buried, such as all the questions he left, his "huge absence," and all the pieces of her life that broke before he died. Yahaira knows that Papi's remains aren't just in a casket: they're all around them.

*Forty-Nine Days After.* Mami decides to hold a wake before Papi's remains return to the Dominican Republic. Tío Jorge still seems upset with Mami, but he picks Mami and Yahaira up for the wake and sweeps Yahaira into a huge hug. Yahaira can barely look at him, as she wants to pretend that Tío Jorge is actually Papi. But when he tells Yahaira he loves her, using the same pet name Papi did, Yahaira realizes Papi is still here with them. As Yahaira kneels at his casket, she thinks of his smile, throws her shoulders back, and remembers his advice to "Never let them see [her] sweat," even if she loses.

*Readers know that Camino dreams of leaving the Dominican Republic and studying to be a doctor in the U.S. With Papi dead, that dream seemed out of reach—but with Yahaira able to wire money immediately, Camino feels like her dreams are a bit closer. However, Camino also feels like she's entering morally questionable ground here as she sets up an ultimatum to get the money from Yahaira. She knows this isn't kind, but she's too desperate to be willing to prioritize politeness right now. This contrasts with Yahaira, who earlier was scolded to be polite on the phone with her coach when she really just wanted to lash out.*



*Camino is reading a lot into Yahaira's request to get a ride home from the airport—Yahaira has never been to the Dominican Republic, so she doesn't have any idea what's customary there. So, while Camino reads the request as entitled, it's possible Yahaira doesn't mean it this way at all. This shows that Camino is essentially looking for reasons to dislike and distrust her sister, which she noted earlier is in part because she plans to betray Yahaira in some way with her nebulous plan to get to the U.S.*



*In this passage, Yahaira essentially realizes that putting Papi's body in the ground doesn't actually signal that she and her family will be done grieving. They'll still have to work to answer the questions Papi left unanswered and to make peace with his actions and his legacy.*



*The fact that Tío Jorge picks Mami and Yahaira up for the wake suggests that Yahaira wasn't purposefully being entitled when she asked Camino to fetch her from the airport—it's just what one does, in her experience. Kneeling beside Papi's casket gives Yahaira something she's been missing: the opportunity to grieve with other people who are feeling the same thing, and the ability to remember more of the good times than the bad. Even if she never fully forgives Papi, she can remember his advice positively and use it to guide her in the future.*



Mami and Yahaira sit in the front row, and people approach them to “pay their respects.” Yahaira finds this phrase odd, as it suggests that suffering is a debt that people can pay by nodding or hugging. Dre and Dr. Johnson sit next to Yahaira, ready to rescue her if need be. Wilson and his fiancée stand in the back. Yahaira thinks that she can’t make people’s respects into a bouquet or put them in her pocket. Their respects disappear quickly. Meanwhile, Yahaira is left to trudge through her grief alone.

Wilson is wearing all black. Any other day, Yahaira would tease him, but things are different now that Papi is dead. Papi always liked Wilson, and Yahaira thinks that Papi probably wouldn’t have been upset that Wilson asked for money. Papi was so generous, and maybe Yahaira shouldn’t be angry either. Still, Yahaira isn’t sure. She always felt like she could tell what Papi’s next move was going to be. Now, though, she’ll spend her life imagining what he’d say in any given situation.

Tomorrow, the funeral director will ship Papi’s body to the Dominican Republic, just like it’s an Amazon order. People come and go from the wake, but Dre stays until the end. Finally, Dre offers Yahaira carnations. Yahaira knows Dre bought them outside the train station and carried them on the bus, just to give them to Yahaira. It makes Yahaira’s throat swell, and with her eyes, she says that the flowers are beautiful, and that Dre is the only part of her life that doesn’t hurt right now.

Yahaira doesn’t want to tell Dre she’s going to the Dominican Republic, but she can’t keep a secret, so she tells her anyway. Dre shakes her head. She knew Yahaira was going, but asking her to lie to Mami is too much; they’re not white girls in movies, and Yahaira’s plan sounds reckless and dangerous. Yahaira wants to agree—but it seems even odder to Yahaira that the family would let Papi’s remains fly alone. So, Yahaira says nothing as she and Dre gather cards and Mami decides what to do with all the flowers. Finally, Dre grabs Yahaira’s hand, and Yahaira asks to sleep over tonight. Dre says Yahaira can, but she suggests Yahaira talk to Mami first (Mami hates sleepovers).

*Throughout the novel, Yahaira has expressed confusion about why grief rituals are the way they are—since in most cases, she doesn’t find them particularly helpful. In this situation, she recognizes that the people who “pay their respects” think they’re doing a good thing and that attending the wake helps them feel better. But she also knows their actions are, in theory, supposed to benefit her—and yet they don’t make her feel much better.*



*What does make Yahaira feel marginally better is thinking about Papi and what he’d think of everything. This helps her come to terms with the fact that the family has been asking for money, something that she sees as distasteful and rude. Still, Yahaira recognizes that she perhaps didn’t know her father as well as she thought she did, as she knows now that he kept massive secrets from her.*



*Papi’s body has to get to the Dominican Republic somehow, but Yahaira takes issue with the fact that “shipping” Papi’s body seems to trivialize the whole thing. He was a person, after all, and her beloved father—and it doesn’t seem appropriate to describe moving his remains using this kind of language. However, Dre manages to make Yahaira feel marginally better, though Yahaira still isn’t able to voice any of her pain (or her thanks).*



*Yahaira doesn’t seem to pick up on it, but she differentiates herself from Papi in a huge way here: she can’t keep a secret, while he spent his whole life keeping secrets. As Dre sees it, Yahaira’s plan is foolish and unsafe—and after all of Papi’s secrecy, Dre doesn’t really want to keep a secret and doesn’t think Yahaira should either. However, Yahaira feels like she has no choice but to hide from Mami that she flies out tomorrow, as she knows Mami will never let her go—and attending Papi’s funeral is too important to Yahaira to allow that to happen.*



Yahaira knows exactly “what ugly looks like,” when ugly is cruel words. Ugly words can create distance between people. So, she hopes that Mami stays silent during the cab ride home. But Mami says that they should take a trip for Yahaira’s birthday, since Papi would want her to celebrate. Yahaira doesn’t say that Papi would want them at his funeral. She knows Mami is angry, but she also knows Papi was big on “commemorations.” Yahaira has never heard anything so “dumb”; it’s absurd to think of her birthday at a funeral. She tells Mami that the idea is “stupid,” which causes a “picket fence” to go up between Yahaira and Mami. They can see through it, but it’s too high for them to climb.

Yahaira tells Mami she’s sleeping at Dre’s house. Mami says nothing, so Yahaira climbs through Dre’s window with her duffel bag. Dre asks if Yahaira told Mami about her plans and says that Mami deserves the truth. Yahaira starts to cry. Everyone has been lying to her for years, but now they expect her to be truthful? She tells Dre that she doesn’t need Dre to lie for her. She just needs time, and she’s certain this is the right thing to do. Dre says nothing in response, she just holds Yahaira all night.

*Fifty Days After.* Yahaira tries to act cool in the airport check-in line. She knows that she can fly as an adult as a 16-year-old, but she may run into problems if the clerk asks for a signed letter of parental consent. Yahaira tries to get her ticket electronically, but the machine won’t give it to her. Now, she has to talk to a clerk. The clerk checks Yahaira’s passport and asks if Yahaira has a guardian. Sadly, he says they can’t let her go without one. Yahaira fights back her panic. Noticing how young and new the clerk is, Yahaira tells him Papi died on flight 1112, and she’s accompanying his body. She says Mami didn’t know Yahaira would need a guardian. The clerk says Yahaira is almost old enough, so he can let her through.

## CHAPTER 19. CAMINO

While Tía is visiting a patient, Camino starts to make *sancocho*, an involved dish traditionally made to welcome visitors. Camino isn’t sure she really wants Yahaira here, but making the *sancocho* seems appropriate. When Tía gets home, she observes what’s going on in the kitchen. She knows Camino prefers to make quick meals, but she says nothing and steps in to help. Tía never says much, and she has few friends. Only the Saints know all her secrets. Yahaira is on the same flight as Papi’s body, and over the last 16 years, Camino has memorized this flight. Still, Camino is so worried about Yahaira. She knows she should tell Tía, but Tía would tell Zoila, and Zoila would find out about the money and what Camino is planning. So, Camino lights a candle on the altar, prays for safe passage, and makes a phone call.

*Yahaira knows how ugly looks because she and Papi discovered exactly that during their phone conversation last summer—the conversation led to Yahaira and Papi barely speaking for a year. Though Yahaira keeps it all inside, she’s beginning to see the purpose of big events like weddings and funerals: it’s important to “commemorate[e]” these big life events, and this is especially true when she’s honoring Papi’s death. In this moment, Yahaira feels like she knows Papi better than Mami does, and so she remains firm in her resolve to go to the Dominican Republic.*



*Dre clearly doesn’t agree with Yahaira. She still believes that it’s more important to speak up and tell the truth, perhaps even if that means that Yahaira doesn’t then get to go to the Dominican Republic for the funeral. Yahaira, though, is too caught up in her grief and in her insistence that her parents haven’t been fair in keeping secrets from her. From her perspective, it’s her turn to keep a secret and nobody should begrudge her that.*



*Up until this point, Yahaira hasn’t really been willing to voice that Papi is dead. To her surprise, she finds that it’s somewhat cathartic (as well as practically useful) to put into words that Papi died in the plane crash. This is her first indication that perhaps speaking up is better than staying quiet—at least, it gets her more of what she wants. Leaving Mami like this also symbolizes Yahaira’s coming of age, as she’s physically moving away from her mother and asserting her independence.*



*Camino realizes on some level that making sancocho is a dead giveaway that someone important is coming, and that Tía might put two and two together. However, Tía continues to respect Camino and allow her to keep the secret that Yahaira is coming. This secret is, notably, uncomfortable for Camino to keep—she’s overcome with worry and angst as she considers whether she wants Yahaira to come and what might happen if Tía and Zoila find out.*



The entire way to the airport, Camino berates herself for agreeing to Yahaira's plan. Don Mateo was his usual gruff self when he picked Camino up, but even he seems worried: the last time he drove Camino to the airport, "the world ended." Camino told him she was meeting Papi's body, knowing he'd tell Tía if she told him the truth. To distract herself from her increasing nausea, Camino plans for Yahaira's visit. Yahaira will have to share Camino's bed, and Camino will probably have to translate her sister's awful Spanish. Yahaira is probably also conceited and will expect to be waited on. Camino vows to throw Yahaira back to the U.S. if she's impolite.

Camino is sure that Yahaira isn't actually conceited; she seems kind and looks like she hurts in the same way Camino does. Camino is terrified of liking her and of having her heart broken again. Realizing she's anxiously bitten most of the polish off of one finger, Camino tries to bite the rest to make them match. However, now her nails just look terrible. Finally, Don Mateo pulls up to the terminal. Camino finds she can't get out of the car, and her breath sounds loud in her ears. He offers to take Camino back home, but Camino refuses. She's faced worse. But when Camino gets out, she feels stuck again. The last time she stood here, it felt just like today—but everything changed. Camino isn't sure she can go inside.

As soon as Camino gets inside, the grief hits her. She checks the information screen—the plane will land in 20 minutes—and notices a crowd of happy, excited people waiting for passengers. Camino feels like she's looking at two different pictures. She knows Papi won't walk through the door, but she's not sure if Yahaira actually will. Also, what if something happens? Camino watches the board for 20 minutes—and then the board goes blank. Breathing heavily, Camino grabs an employee and gestures at the board. He gently pats her hand and says that everything is fine; they're just updating the gate.

Soon, people emerge from customs. Everything seems normal, like people have moved on—or never cared. Finally, a pretty brunette with a pink duffel appears. She seems like she's not sure anyone will be there for her. Her eyes pass over Camino, and then she looks back. Camino looks at the ceiling, fighting back tears, and then looks at Yahaira.

*Camino continues to keep secrets, this time from Don Mateo—and this only contributes to Camino's anxiety. As Camino mentally plans Yahaira's visit, her stress is palpable. She expects the worst: that Yahaira will invade her space, not be able to communicate on her own, and expect Camino to treat her like royalty. It seems likely that Camino's negative, spiraling thoughts all stem from the fact that she's doing something traumatic in returning to the airport, the place where her "world ended" when she learned that Papi died. On some level, she expects tragedy again.*



*Camino experiences a moment of clarity here as she reminds herself that Yahaira isn't all that bad—and in fact, that Yahaira understands pretty well what Camino is currently feeling. Don Mateo becomes a comforting presence here, as he offers to support Camino and get her out of a place where he knows she's uncomfortable. This reflects that he's almost family, as well as what Camino has suggested is normal Dominican kindness and care for other people.*



*Seeing the normal, happy airport is a jarring experience for Camino. She still associates the airport with tragedy, so accepting that life goes on and flights continue to arrive and depart from the airport per usual is difficult. However, revisiting the airport, especially to meet Yahaira, is something that the novel suggests will help Camino deal with her crushing grief. She'll remind herself that life goes on (as she was reminded when Luciano was born), and she'll connect with her sister.*



*This is an emotional moment for Camino, as she simultaneously realizes how few people at the airport probably knew and cared about Papi and as she meets her sister for the first time. As the girls connect and figure out their relationship, their definition of what family is—and who that includes—will necessarily expand.*



## CHAPTER 20. YAHAIRA AND CAMINO

Yahaira has never been afraid of flying, but on this flight, she keeps her eyes closed the entire time. Her heart drops when the plane touches down, but then the passengers applaud. In Spanish, the lady next to Yahaira says that this doesn't happen as often now; the passengers must be mostly Dominican people returning home, as it's tradition to thank God by clapping when you land. Yahaira smiles.

Yahaira has flown domestically, but never internationally. She observes the bilingual signage, fills out her customs form, and pays for her tourist visa. The customs agent's eyes soften when Yahaira says she's here for Papi's funeral. Then, Yahaira walks through the doors. She's here—and so is Camino.

Camino touches Yahaira's cheek and says she looks just like Papi. This is true—but Camino also looks just like him. The girls aren't really mirrors of each other, but Yahaira still almost wants to slap Camino for having the same face. Yahaira feels guilty knowing that Papi left Camino for Yahaira every year; she wonders what Papi saw when he looked at Camino. Yahaira notices that Camino's eyes fill with tears but don't overflow. Once more, Camino says that Yahaira looks like Papi. Camino can hide her feelings better than Yahaira. Yahaira knows Camino can sense her anger bottled up inside, so she forces herself to become "blank-faced" like when she played **chess**. In response, Yahaira says they both look like Papi, but Camino must've gotten her skin color from her mother. At this, Camino steps back and looks suddenly hard.

Camino grabs Yahaira's duffel and leads her outside into the crowd, toward a man leaning against a shabby car. The man's smile, Yahaira knows, would've bothered Papi—he looks like trouble. So, Yahaira says she's happy to pay more for an official taxi. She does so, and an older man with a nice smile puts Yahaira's duffel in the trunk and opens the door for the girls. Yahaira tries to ask Camino in Spanish about the scenery, but Camino smirks and responds in English. Her English is impeccable; she must've worked hard. Spanish is Yahaira's first language, but she doesn't speak it nearly as well. It already feels like Yahaira is losing her sister.

*Neither girl is aware how anxious they both are about this flight. The fact that they're both so anxious about it highlights how alike they are—and yet, if they continue their current habit of not voicing these thoughts, they'll never discover just how alike they are. The lady's explanation of clapping when you land also makes Yahaira feel like she's coming home, like the other Dominican passengers on the flight.*



*It doesn't seem to quite register for Yahaira, but her privilege shines through in this passage. Recall that Camino hasn't been anywhere, so Camino has nothing to compare her airport to like Yahaira does.*



*The girls' first meeting is tense: it's almost as if they're fighting over who looks the most like Papi. To Yahaira, seeing her face reflected in Camino's feels almost like Papi is betraying her all over again. But as has happened previously, neither Camino nor Yahaira is willing or able to voice exactly what they're thinking, and they both go out of their way to hide their emotions from the other. Yahaira goes "blank-faced," while Camino looks "hard" after Yahaira brings up her mother, suggesting that Yahaira has inadvertently offended her sister with a comment that she seems to have meant kindly.*



*Readers have no way of knowing if the man with the shabby car is Don Mateo—but given how offended Camino is, it seems likely. So, though Yahaira is Dominican, she discovers in this first hour or so with Camino that she doesn't have the cultural knowledge to comfortably navigate the country. And this all makes Yahaira feel even worse and less secure in her relationship with Camino, as she knows she's offending Camino but doesn't know how to behave differently to fix this.*





The cab stops in front of an aqua house with a fenced front porch. Yahaira quickly pays the driver, hoping that will make Camino feel better—but Camino hops out of the car, clearly offended. Yahaira can't imagine Papi living in this house. He loved luxuries, and this is a "barrio house." It's dirty here, and stray dogs roam the street. Papi would've hated getting his shoes dirty. The old woman in the garden straightens up and drops her herbs. Cursing, she asks Camino what she's done. Tía Solana embraces Yahaira, her eyes wet, and asks where Mami is. Camino shrugs. After giving Camino a dark look, Tía leads Yahaira inside and serves her *sancocho*. She tells Yahaira to tell her everything, after she eats "what your sister made for you."

Yahaira helps Camino pick herbs for tea, which reminds her of Dre. Vira Lata asks to enter the yard, and Yahaira asks if the dog follows Camino everywhere. She doesn't mention how much Papi resisted getting a dog. Camino explains that Vira Lata doesn't go far from here; he's afraid of the busy street, and she and Don Mateo look out for him. However, Yahaira notices Vira Lata perk up when Camino looks like she'll turn left. Camino says he likes coming to the **beach** with her. Just then, Yahaira notices a man watching Camino. He looks like he'd like to be Camino's dog—and bite her. But before Yahaira can point him out, he disappears.

That evening, the phone rings. As Yahaira and Tía sit on the couch like they've been friends forever, Camino answers the phone in a testy voice. Zoila sounds exactly how Camino imagined she would: demanding and fake. Camino passes the phone to Yahaira, and Zoila immediately begins yelling at her daughter. Tía comforts Yahaira, but Camino is angry. Yahaira has everything: a mother, choices, food, and Camino is certain nobody ever forgets her birthday. Tía has probably forgotten Camino's in a few days. Camino reminds herself that she's being unfairly bitter, but she feels out of control, like she's careening toward "something bigger & madder."

*Fifty-One Days After.* Mami is enraged and is coming to the Dominican Republic tomorrow. She went to the Johnsons' house, and Dre eventually told her the truth. Yahaira is surprised Dre didn't call Mami immediately. Despite Mami's anger, Yahaira is relieved. Nobody can force her to go home. She'll be here for at least the next three days. She has three days to figure out Camino, Papi, and herself.

*What Yahaira doesn't realize is that this house is luxurious by local standards—Camino described earlier how the house is a beacon of light and modern appliances in a neighborhood of dirt floors and spotty electricity. This highlights Yahaira's cultural incompetence, and it also suggests she didn't know Papi as well as she thought she did. Still, Tía's welcome makes Yahaira feel somewhat better about her choice to come. And the sancocho speaks for itself: Camino might be conflicted about Yahaira's presence, but she went out of her way to do this one thing that would make Yahaira feel welcome.*



*Yahaira isn't entirely comfortable, but she can already start to see how her Dominican roots and her life in New York intersect: Tía and Dre would clearly get along. Though Camino neutrally mentions going to the beach with Vira Lata, the man who emerges (who is presumably El Cero) creates tension. He's clearly seen Yahaira now, suggesting that Yahaira, like her sister, might also be in danger.*



*Camino is beginning to feel insecure about her position in her quickly expanding family—the way she describes Yahaira and Tía suggests she thinks Yahaira is usurping her position, and she's not excited to finally put a voice to the woman who kept Papi in New York for most of Camino's life. This manifests as feeling jealous of Yahaira and everything Yahaira has, from a living parent to money. And though Camino realizes she's being unfair and emotional, her anger and her desperation also shows that she struggles to control how she thinks and acts—suggesting she may soon lash out.*



*Yahaira has essentially forced the issue; now, she and Mami will definitely be in the Dominican Republic for Papi's funeral. From a thousand miles away, Mami can't make Yahaira go home—all she can do is give in to her daughter's will and come herself. Yahaira confirms that she views this trip as an opportunity to figure out her identity—and where she fits into her family.*



Yahaira and Camino discuss ghosts. Though Yahaira doesn't believe in them, Camino insists there are spirits everywhere—but maybe not in New York City. They wonder whether Papi's ghost will live here or in New York City. Camino thinks his ghost will live wherever they want him to. She insists that Papi's ghost, of all ghosts, can live in two places at once—he had enough practice when he was alive.

*Fifty-Two Days After.* Yahaira has been waiting for Mami for a full day. She's been getting to know Tía (who insists Yahaira call her Tía), and she knows Camino is watching her. Nothing here is familiar. Neighbors keep visiting to hug Camino and talk about Papi. The Dominican Republic is like Yahaira imagined it—and not. The shouts of the fruit seller wake Yahaira up, and pink and green salamanders run on the walls outside. Everything is so colorful. Yahaira takes pictures and sends them to Dre. She can't imagine growing up here—or how Papi kept going back and forth.

Tía suggests that Camino take Yahaira to the **beach**, and Yahaira pretends not to notice that Camino acts like someone hit her. Camino quietly explains to Yahaira that there's a guy who hangs out there, so it's not safe to go. This is the first time Yahaira has seen Camino look uncertain. Figuring this is just another “disrespectful dude[.],” Yahaira says she knows the type. But Camino recoils and says that Yahaira knows nothing. As Camino stalks away, Yahaira wonders where her sister learned to judge people.

Camino knows she was too hard on Yahaira, but what right does Yahaira have to show up out of nowhere and pretend they have a lot in common? Yahaira has no idea what El Cero is like or what it means to give up your dreams. Right now, it seems like everyone but Camino knows she won't be a doctor. She'll just be a girl who helps her aunt with herbs, and that'll be her life. Becoming a doctor has only ever been a dream, and now, Camino is waking up. But Yahaira will never have to wake up.

Mami pulls up to the house in a little Prius. Yahaira had no idea Mami even had a license. Yahaira tries not to grab Camino for protection as Mami races out of the car and runs to pull Yahaira into a hug. Camino doesn't move at all as Mami steps back and kisses Tía. Yahaira realizes that Mami must know Tía—she was Mamá's friend, after all. Then, Mami looks at Camino. It's clear that Mami is studying how much like Papi and Yahaira Camino looks. Taking a deep breath, Mami kisses near Camino's cheek and says that though they don't know each other, she'd like Camino to know that Papi loved her a lot.

*Camino sounds a bit bitter when she notes that Papi's ghost should be able to exist in two places at once, but there may also be some comfort in believing that Papi can stick around for both his daughters, even if they stay in their respective homes. Yahaira, meanwhile, learns more about her family's beliefs and perhaps what Papi believed but didn't talk to her about.*



*Yahaira is experiencing some culture shock; that is, she's struggling to figure out how the Dominican Republic works and how to function here. This is made even more difficult because Yahaira is also trying to figure out how the Papi she knew fit in here. Clearly, he did—that's why neighbors keep coming to talk about him with Camino.*



*Camino is clearly talking about El Cero, who readers know is much more than a “disrespectful dude[.]” This highlights how different the girls' experiences have been, particularly when it comes to men harassing and threatening them—Camino is experiencing harassment on a totally different scale than Yahaira has. However, being unable to voice this means that the girls miss yet another opportunity to connect.*



*The girls, of course, do have a lot in common. But Camino is currently feeling desperate and emotional, and this makes her much less willing to look for the similarities between herself and Yahaira. Right after Papi's death, Camino is grieving again, this time for her dream of becoming a doctor, which she now believes will never come true.*



*Though Yahaira is terrified of Mami's wrath, Mami seems far more interested in making sure Yahaira and her other family members know she loves them than in scolding anyone. Indeed, Mami seems to have undergone a transformation as she greets Camino so kindly and gently. There's definitely still tension between them, but Mami acknowledges Camino and Camino's relationship with Papi, offering hope that they'll be able to move past the pain that Papi caused them.*



While Mami and Tía sit inside, Yahaira sits outside on the porch with Camino. Camino has been smoking a cigar, and she passes it to Yahaira. Yahaira immediately begins coughing and choking as she inhales. Camino, laughing, rubs Yahaira's back and tells her to breathe. Suddenly, Yahaira can hear Papi saying the same thing; she starts wailing and sobbing. Camino continues to rub Yahaira's back. Camino's eyes look teary too, but Yahaira could be imagining it.

Camino has never been an older sister. She never even cuddled or named the chickens growing up, so the feeling of needing to comfort Yahaira is odd. Camino knows nothing about comforting people, but she seems to know enough because Yahaira melts into Camino and keeps sobbing. Oddly, Camino doesn't even want to smack her for ruining this nice blouse with tears.

*Fifty-Three Days After.* The next day, Camino leads Yahaira on a long walk to the river. Yahaira thinks about how Papi split his love between his two daughters and gave each of them something he loved. Camino swims like she's a dolphin, and for a moment, Yahaira wants to say that she'd beat Camino at **chess**. But that's petty, and it's nice to see Camino almost happy—swimming seems like stress relief for her. Chess was also very stressful for Yahaira. Yahaira reminds herself that she and Camino aren't enemies, but it's hard to believe it.

*Fifty-Four Days After.* The wake for Papi in New York is tiny compared to what Tía and Camino have planned. Mami looks disapproving as drummers show up, followed by dozens and dozens of people. They all process down the street. Camino and Yahaira walk arm in arm. Yahaira doesn't recognize the music, but she's sure Papi would've loved this. At the grave, Yahaira watches the casket sink into the ground. Mami heaves, while Tía rocks. Camino holds Yahaira's hand. They don't let go. Dirt covers the casket, making the ground whole again. But it's not the same.

Soon after, Tía begins the *novena*, the nine days of prayer. Mami just sits in a corner, crying silently. Yahaira is sure it's difficult for her to be here, with all the painful memories she must have. It's hard not to feel guilty for making her come, but it's also hard for Yahaira to see Mami flinch at all the reminders of the other life Papi led. People come from everywhere to pray, eat, and help Papi's spirit get to heaven. This makes Yahaira wonder where Papi's spirit has been, if they're only officially praying for him now. Has he been watching his family struggle for weeks?

*Things seem to be settling down between all of Papi's female family members. And finally, Yahaira finds that she can't keep her tears in anymore. It's too much being in Camino's presence and being reminded of Papi, and so Yahaira has no choice. As Camino comforts her sister, the girls grow closer—it's clear to both of them now that they both share the same hurt.*



*Camino may insist that she doesn't know how to comfort people, but this isn't entirely true: Tía has taught her over the years how to comfort and offer support to patients. It may be different to perform this now for a family member, but this just highlights that Camino's idea of who counts as family and worthy of her attention is expanding.*



*On some level, both Camino and Yahaira are treating this time together as a competition: who did Papi love more, and which daughter is more like Papi? Who has the better life? For her part, Yahaira seems to be trying harder to meet Camino in the middle, but it's also worth noting that Yahaira has less to lose. She has exactly what Camino wants (a passport and access to American colleges), so it's not so hard for her to see Camino as an ally and not an interloper.*



*As Papi's funeral progresses, Yahaira realizes what the true purpose of communal grieving rituals like funerals is: to bring people together to feel the same things and find solace in that fact. Camino and Yahaira seem closer and more supportive than they've ever been, while Mami and Tía seem to mirror each other in their grief. It's also noteworthy that Yahaira thinks Papi would like this—this helps her feel better about defying Mami and coming to the Dominican Republic.*



*Yahaira continues to see Mami as increasingly human, with feelings and memories that Yahaira can't grasp. This is part of Yahaira's process of growing up, and it also strengthens her relationship with Mami. As she wonders if Papi's spirit has been watching the family since his death, she considers essentially what Papi would think of all that's happened. She can't answer any of her questions, but it helps her grieve to wonder what he sees when he looks at his family—is his secret coming out a gift, or is it a curse?*



Once the prayer is over, guests—all except Mami—eat. Mami sits by the window, staring into space. Camino approaches, but she doesn't know what to say to this woman who probably wishes Camino didn't even exist. Suddenly, Mami turns and stares at Camino. Awkwardly, Camino says that she noticed Mami rubbing her chest, and Yahaira has mentioned that Mami has lost weight. At this, Mami's eyes flick to Yahaira. Not wanting to look like she's sucking up—Camino is genuinely concerned for Mami, who's clearly hurting—Camino says that it's clear Mami is really stressed. She offers Mami a plate of food and suggests that she try to take deep breaths and sleep tonight.

Surprisingly, Mami accepts the plate from Camino and even smiles. She says that Papi always said Camino would make a great doctor. He talked about her attending Columbia, where she'd be close; they live near the school. Camino is shocked to hear that Papi felt this way about her future. Mami, too, seems surprised at herself for saying any of this. Camino hurries away, not wanting to ruin the moment. She hopes this becomes a happy memory for Mami.

That night, Yahaira tells Camino to stop smoking the cigars and asks where Camino even gets them. Camino explains that Tía uses the cigars in ceremonies. When Yahaira acts confused, Camino asks if Yahaira never wondered about all the jewelry Papi wore. Yahaira explains that Papi only wore a ring. The girls observe that Papi was like two different men, splitting himself in half and keeping a toe in each country.

Guests don't leave until after 11 p.m. Mami grumbles about sleeping in a house Papi shared with another woman, but she won't leave Yahaira, and Yahaira refused to go to a hotel. Now, Camino and Yahaira are on the patio, observing the gathering storm. Tía approaches, hugs Camino, and says it's sad that Camino spent her birthday like this. Yahaira is shocked and asks why they'd plan a burial on Camino's birthday, but Camino just shrugs. Yahaira feels awful for not having a gift for her sister. She digs through her suitcase, looking for anything she can give as a gift. She only has some hair products, her travel documents, and some of Papi's papers, but none of those things is a good gift.

*Camino may resent Mami for keeping Papi away from her for most of the year, but this doesn't stop her from caring about Mami's health and wellbeing. With this overture, Camino begins the process of knitting the entire family together, now that Papi isn't here to perform that role himself. She also makes it clear to Mami that she and Yahaira have a relationship that Mami doesn't mediate, and that they talk—so essentially, she lets Mami know that Yahaira is looking out for her, but that Yahaira is willing to ask for help in helping Mami feel better.*



*Mami's kindness and the admission that Papi planned to bring Camino to attend Columbia University comes as a shock for both of them—it challenges Camino's understanding of how Papi wanted her life to go, and Mami seems to question whether she should really resent Papi's other daughter standing in front of her.*



*Camino implies that Papi wore lots of jewelry when he was in the Dominican Republic, while Yahaira never saw him wear much at home. This is more evidence that Papi fundamentally changed who he was depending on where in the world he was—highlighting again how much he lost out on when he chose to keep both his families secret.*



*Yahaira, of course, had no way to know it was Camino's birthday, since Camino kept this information a secret. That Yahaira feels so terrible about not having a gift shows how seriously she's taking her relationship with Camino—she seems to fear that this is yet one more thing that Camino might hold against her, just as Camino resents her for her money and for Yahaira's insistence that they take an official cab. However, Camino does get proof that Tía in no way forgot her birthday, as she feared might happen earlier in the novel.*



It's almost midnight. Soon, Camino's birthday will be over—and it will no longer be Papi's burial day. Yahaira is clearly worried that soon, the girls will need to mourn their relationship too. Sometimes, Camino remembers that Yahaira is the only person who feels the way she does. But Yahaira is also part of the problem. Mami has barely looked at Camino all day, so Camino knows she'll have to carry out her plan. Today, she's 17. Yahaira heads to bed; Mami and Tía are already asleep. Mami has looked lost and confused all day. Earlier, she reminded Yahaira that they're both going home in three days. Camino thinks about how Papi left Yahaira money. He left Mami with a real marriage license. They'll both leave soon, and trying to forgive Papi is exhausting.

Sensing that Camino wants to be alone, Yahaira goes inside and stops at the altar. She doesn't know much about the Saints; she's just heard rumors about killing chickens and voodoo. Camino has called it something else and insisted that praying and sacrifices are important to building relationships with the Saints. The Saints, according to Camino, open doors for people. There's a small plate of food on the altar. Yahaira can't imagine Papi praying here, but she remembers how Papi carried a silver coin. An identical one is on the altar. He talked about San Anthony—and there's a statue of the Saint by the door. Papi hid his spirituality, but Yahaira could've noticed it if she'd paid attention. She picks up Papi's photo and finds the money taped to the back. Does Camino intend to survive off of this?

Moonlight shines through the storm clouds and illuminates Yahaira's beautiful face. She's almost Camino's twin. Camino feels gutted, but when she's sure Yahaira's asleep, she rummages through her sister's duffel bag. She finds Papi and Mamá's marriage certificate at the bottom, dated after both girls were born. Yahaira's family, Camino realizes, has always come first. Camino's has always been secondary. She rips up the certificate. Papi kept so many secrets and promised so much. He never did anything. His papers won't help, and his regrets won't pay the bills. Camino finds what she's looking for and leaves.

Yahaira wakes up alone, certain something is wrong. It's raining outside and on the floor is the torn-up marriage certificate. It had been at the bottom of Yahaira's bag. Suddenly, Yahaira realizes she doesn't know Camino at all. If Camino were anyone else, Yahaira would know how to help. Yahaira doesn't know how to help, but she knows that if she were Camino, she wouldn't have been looking for the marriage certificate.

*Camino finds herself at a crossroads, and though it's not yet clear what she's planning, what is clear is that her plan will require her to betray Yahaira and possibly Mami and Tía, as well. Though Camino knows that she and Yahaira have things in common, such as their father and the pain they're both feeling after his death, in this passage, she decides that carrying out her plan is more important than honoring those similarities. In this passage, Camino also begins to feel real anger and resentment toward Papi, whom she believes left her with nothing. This marks another turning point in her grief, as it seems like she's going to leave behind all her family members, living and dead.*



*The novel never shares outright what religion Tía practices, but regardless, Yahaira is struggling to understand this belief system and its importance. However, she discovers in this passage yet again that she didn't know everything about Papi. In addition to keeping his other family secret, he also withheld his real religious beliefs—and Yahaira, in her youth and naivete, didn't bother to dig any deeper into the clues he did leave her. When she finds Camino's envelope of money, Yahaira starts to realize how precarious Camino's situation is: she won't be able to keep going for long, even on \$10,000.*



*Interestingly, Camino has a similar reaction to finding Papi and Mamá's marriage certificate as Yahaira did: both girls feel their father betrayed them by entering into this second marriage. This passage also highlights how Camino's rage is beginning to take over. She's no longer willing to give Papi the benefit of the doubt in anything, and she believes it's time to figure things out for herself and stop hoping that other people will help her. It's not entirely clear what she steals from Yahaira—but the fact that she's stealing from her sister suggests that Camino is ready to give up this relationship in order to improve her situation.*



*Almost immediately, Yahaira realizes that something is wrong, and that Camino has been hiding things from her. Readers have gotten clues that Camino has been planning to do something that will allow her to immigrate to the U.S. on her own, and Yahaira may realize that this is what Camino's plan was here—in that case, Camino perhaps stole Yahaira's passport.*



Camino leaves the house silently, trying not to cry. She's known for a while now that it would end this way. There's a note for Tía on the altar. It's still the middle of the night, so it's too early to begin the four-mile walk. Vira Lata whines as Camino decides there's one last place she must visit before she leaves. Camino isn't dressed for travel; she'll attract attention at the airport without luggage or a guardian. All she has is money and "the gift Yahaira does not know she's given to [Camino]." Camino will have to bribe someone to buy her ticket, and someone else to pretend to be a parent. She'll explain that her parents are dead and hope it works.

Camino isn't dressed for the **beach**, but she has to come here to the place that has always welcomed her. She and Mamá used to stand here, and Mamá would tell Camino to wave at Papi. They'd have picnics here and dance to the music coming from the resort. Soon, Camino is crying. By dawn Camino will have to stop, but now, she sobs and says goodbye to Mamá and to the Dominican Republic. It starts to rain.

The branches rustle. How does El Cero always know where Camino is? As he steps onto the **beach**, he says that Yahaira looks like Camino, but she's clearly American. He'd like to meet her. Camino steps back as Vira Lata growls. She's shaking, but she tries to tell herself it's the rain and not that El Cero's threat to Yahaira that's making her shake. Camino knows that she looks like a helpless girl. Her only "key to freedom" is in her purse: money, and Yahaira's passport.

Camino left money at home for Tía and Carline with a note. She can barely hear El Cero asking her something, and she doesn't want him to know how much money she has—but perhaps she can fix things. She offers to pay him what Papi owed, half tonight and half tomorrow. Camino doesn't want to make him angry. El Cero says that this might work, but Papi owed him \$2,000—and he doesn't believe Camino has that kind of money. Shaking, Camino tries to count out the right amount and shoves the bills at El Cero. She begins to edge around El Cero, but he grabs Camino's sleeve. He asks if Camino is meeting someone here and if she has more money, and then he yanks her purse from her.

*Camino as much as confirms here that she stole Yahaira's passport, which is "the gift Yahaira does not know she's given." This in turn confirms that Camino plans to leave the country, using the money from Yahaira and hoping that she can pass for her sister. That Camino believes this is her only option speaks to how desperate she is to leave the Dominican Republic. She's already acknowledged that she'll almost certainly run into problems with customs or immigration officers, and the risks of this happening with a stolen passport raise the stakes even higher.*



*Coming to the beach before leaving the country allows Camino to revisit all her happy memories of Mamá and of Papi, highlighting again that this her happy place. However, she now believes that her only choice for a successful future is to leave the country, so even her happy memories at the beach aren't enough to convince her she should stay.*



*El Cero's arrival highlights how dangerous the Dominican Republic (and the beach specifically) has become for Camino. That El Cero threatens Yahaira shows how much power he believes he has over the girls, implying that the Dominican Republic isn't safe for Yahaira, either. Mami was perhaps right to forbid Yahaira from coming, though her reasons presumably had to do with Papi and Camino and not her daughter's physical safety.*



*This is an extremely difficult situation for Camino. El Cero has already made it clear that he has no qualms about trying to assault or kidnap her in broad daylight, when she doesn't have thousands of dollars on her. And it's night now, and no one knows where Camino is. So, Camino's attempt to protect herself by paying what Papi owed seems to backfire, as this just shows El Cero that Camino has more money than he expects.*



El Cero pulls out Yahaira's passport and the envelope of money—Camino's future. He scolds Camino for trying to run away without paying a debt and holds the items above his head, like this is just a game. Vira Lata races away, barking, as thunder sounds. Suddenly enraged, Camino says that El Cero is a monster. Emily must be spinning in her grave. Lightning illuminates El Cero's face, which is twisted in anger. He grabs Camino's blouse, curses her, tells her to never say Emily's name. He shoves Camino, causing her to twist her ankle and fall, and puts the money and passport in his back pocket.

Thunder rumbles as Yahaira picks up the pieces of the marriage certificate. She knows Camino isn't here, but she's not sure what she's supposed to do. Camino is supposed to be happily celebrating her birthday, not alone and angry somewhere. Yahaira goes to the altar and asks Papi to help them both, "For once." She notices a new envelope with Tía's name on it, just as Vira Lata begins barking outside like he's being attacked. The dog is alone, though. Yahaira is sure Camino needs help. As she turns to grab her phone, she runs into a lamp. The noise wakes Mami and Tía, who rush out of their bedroom. Tía is pale and asks where Camino is.

The earth seems to spin as El Cero chases Camino through the mud and into the trees. Camino wants to leave her body as she hears El Cero laugh and kneel beside her. She feels sick and tries to push him away, but all she can do is cry for help.

Yahaira helps Tía sit down and then admits she sent Camino money a few days ago. Mami gasps, and Yahaira asks if Camino would've gone to the capital. Tía says there's no family there. Feeling like she's betraying Camino, Yahaira admits that her passport is missing. Mami leaps up and says that Camino is headed for the airport, but Tía says it doesn't open for hours—and Camino is too smart to try to walk at this time of night. She suggests Camino is with Carline, but Yahaira notes that Camino tries hard to protect Carline; she wouldn't have made Carline complicit. Then, they all hear Vira Lata whine. Tía and Yahaira lock eyes: they know where Camino went.

Yahaira leaps out of the car before Mami even stops it. She races for the water, but she hears a moan. Camino is on the ground, trying to fight off El Cero kneeling over her. Yahaira is glad she's taller and thicker than her sister as she rushes El Cero and knocks him down. As Yahaira crouches over Camino, whose shirt is ripped open, Camino clings to her. El Cero tells Yahaira to mind her own business, but Yahaira makes fists like Papi taught her and tells him to leave Camino alone. Just as El Cero charges, headlights illuminate the **beach**.

*This passage makes abundantly clear one of the reasons why Camino insisted she must leave the Dominican Republic. Staying would, at some point or another, land her in this position with El Cero or another man like him who simply wants to take advantage of her. Without Papi to protect her, she's extremely vulnerable. However, Camino does hit on the fact that El Cero has become this "monster" due to his grief for his sister, which he seemingly hasn't dealt with in the decade since her death.*



*Like Camino, Yahaira is new to being a sister, so she's not sure what responsibility she has to Camino. When she asks Papi to help them both "For once," it's noteworthy that she specifies that Papi should help both of his daughters. This is an acknowledgement that Papi tried to help both girls, but he mostly ended up helping one at the expense of the other (as when he wouldn't respond to Yahaira's texts when he was in the Dominican Republic with Camino). In turn, this shows how Yahaira's priorities have changed: she's now thinking about herself and Camino.*



*Camino—and readers—discover just how bad things will be if she stays in the Dominican Republic. Her desire to leave, this shows, was for her own safety and not just so she has a better chance of becoming a doctor.*



*The discussion of where Camino might have gone highlights one issue with keeping secrets. In this situation, where Camino's safety is clearly at risk even without El Cero lurking, Camino's family members have to work much harder than they might otherwise to figure out where she's gone. They're eventually able to put together the pieces, but readers know that Camino is currently fighting for her life with El Cero. So, it's not clear if her family has been fast enough.*



*Yahaira is able to successfully interrupt El Cero's attempt to rape Camino and, hopefully, give Mami and Tía enough time to come to their aid. As Yahaira mentions making fists like Papi taught her, it suggests that she's starting to see Papi's legacy in a new light. He made mistakes, but he also gave Yahaira the skills she needs to protect her sister.*



Tía leaps into the clearing with her machete. El Cero steps back, trying to look innocent. Yahaira knows he'll lie to protect himself. Tía prays as she stands by Yahaira, and Yahaira helps Camino up. The girls cling to each other. Mami steps out of the car with only her cell phone, but she walks like the military general's daughter she is. She stares El Cero in the eye and tells him that Camino doesn't exist for him anymore. Tía prays louder, and though Yahaira doesn't know the words, somehow she does. It feels like Tía has silenced everything but the wind, which rips at El Cero. Yahaira knows that Tía is a bishop, Mami is a knight, the girls are queens, and that Papi did in fact "build that castle." They will all protect Camino.

Camino flinches when El Cero reaches for his back pocket, but Mami says that El Cero doesn't want to mess with her—her family will find him. Camino tells El Cero to give her back what he took. When Tía hisses, El Cero throws a packet onto the ground. Yahaira picks it up, not entirely sure how they convinced him to back down. They stand there, shaking, until El Cero turns away. Mami looks suddenly relieved as she waves Yahaira and Camino toward the car. Tía, though, watches El Cero walk away, and Yahaira's afraid she'll chase him. But she winks at Yahaira and says that everyone gets what they deserve.

Camino clings to the person who came to rescue her, noticing bright blue lights behind the person. She can hear the wind humming, telling her to breathe. "they are here / to take [her]." Camino realizes Yahaira rescued her as Tía and her machete step forward. Tía is calling the Saints, and all these women are here to take Camino back home.

Back home, Yahaira helps Camino out of her top and tries to help her out of her jeans, but this makes Camino sob even harder. Yahaira takes off Camino's shoes, helps her sit, and then gets a towel to wipe the mud off her feet. When Camino vomits, Tía says she's in shock—they don't know how long Camino tried to get away. Tía makes a cup of tea and helps Camino sip. Not knowing what else to do, Yahaira climbs into bed next to her sister and holds her close, so Camino knows she's safe.

*Finally, Tía is able to shift her thinking and realize that El Cero is stalking—and trying to assault—Camino, rather than believing Camino is asking for his attention. This allows Camino's family to finally come together as a unified front to defend and protect her. Yahaira, of course, puts what's happening in chess terms, which is another way of honoring Papi. Even if she doesn't play chess anymore, she still finds some solace in applying its logic to her lived experience. In this situation, assigning each person a role in chess helps her feel secure and powerful. It turns them into a team—and suggests they can win.*



*It's not clear if Mami's threat is bluster or not, but it has the desired effect. Her choice to defend Camino in this moment highlights that she, like Yahaira, has also decided to set aside Papi's past actions and focus on what her responsibility might be to his other daughter. Tía offers some hope that, with the Saints' help, El Cero might one day get his comeuppance and will no longer be able to harass and abuse girls in the neighborhood.*



*Jumping back to Camino's perspective shows that while Yahaira saw this standoff in chess terms, Camino sees the Saints at work. Each girl's belief system guides her to understand what's going on. In both interpretations, though, Camino and Yahaira come to the same conclusion: that they, Mami, and Tía are a family of four, brought together by Papi's mistakes.*



*As Yahaira and Tía converge on Camino to get her cleaned up, they show Camino that she's safe and supported. And importantly, they don't hold it against Camino that she stole Yahaira's passport and tried to leave the country on her own. That transgression pales next to the fact that Camino was assaulted. Further, they all now know how desperate Camino was to leave, which may sway Mami to try to help.*





Camino dreams that Yahaira is a strangler fig wrapped around her body. She wants to tell Yahaira that she's sorry, but before she can, Camino is dreaming that Tía's face is close. Tía puts her hand on Camino's cheek. Then, Camino dreams that Papi is sitting on the bed, his head in his hands. He's not supposed to be here; is he actually gone? When Camino wakes up the last time in sunlight, Yahaira is holding her close and is making her sweat. Camino wants to pull away, but she also wants to "bury in the safety." Hearing Tía's steps slow, Camino knows Tía knows she's awake. Camino squints at the pile of wet clothes in the corner, but the pile is actually Mami, dozing.

*Fifty-Five Days After.* In the morning, Yahaira finds Mami drinking coffee in front of the Saints. Yahaira says that Camino has to come back with them because it's best for Camino, not because it's what Papi wanted. They all need this to happen. Mami says nothing. When she finishes her coffee, she drives away. Yahaira wishes she'd gotten to say more, such as that maybe a bad husband can be a good parent. Maybe Papi tried his best. He hurt Mami and there's no excuse, but he's not here anymore. It's just Mami, Yahaira, and Camino now.

Soon after, Camino stumbles in; she looks terrible. Yahaira knows that Camino's pride keeps her going. Camino told no one about the tuition bills or El Cero's stalking. She's been keeping quiet about it all, not realizing that her silence was poisoning her. Yahaira doesn't know what comes next, but she knows she's not leaving without Camino.

Around midday, Mami gets back. Camino is ready for a lecture about how she stole and is unworthy. She hopes Mami says these things so she can say angry things back. But Mami only sits silently next to Camino in a rocking chair. She's really a beautiful woman. Finally, Mami says that Camino needed a mother—and she couldn't bring herself to be Camino's mother. She was friends with Mamá, and she expected to look at Camino and see betrayal. She was just trying to protect herself.

*Strangler figs are any number of tropical vines that, as the name suggests, grow around trees and strangle their host trees—but some scientists believe that the vines' support may also help the host trees withstand tropical storms. Yahaira's presence, in this context, is perhaps a constraint as well as a help. Camino's thought when she wakes—that she wants to "bury in [Yahaira's] safety"—suggests that she now trusts her sister. And Mami's presence in the corner suggests that Mami also feels loyalty to Camino and wants to ensure Papi's other daughter is alright.*



*Yahaira fully grasps the gravity of Camino's situation: if she stays, she's condemned to poverty and will be fighting El Cero for the rest of her life. She seems to see Mami's silence as Mami uncaring, which Yahaira finds offensive. Finally, Yahaira has reached the point where she can see Papi as a nuanced, complicated man. She has also decided that what's more important than judging him is focusing on what he left them: another sister to care for.*



*Here, Yahaira also hits on some of the major reasons the novel suggests keeping secrets like this is a bad idea. Camino tried to take on way more than she could handle by insisting on dealing with things on her own. And now, it's clear that Camino's desperate attempt to leave the country on her own was likely to fail anyway. However, Yahaira has also decided that what's most important is loyally supporting Camino going forward, so that Camino doesn't feel she has to keep secrets like this again.*



*Camino is overcome with shame, but she's also angry. On some level, she seems to feel that Mami and Yahaira (and perhaps Papi too) pushed her to the point where she felt stealing a passport was her only option, and ideally, she'd like to accuse Mami of being cruel. However, Mami's quiet tone and her admission that she was being selfish suggests that Mami isn't going to condemn Camino.*



Mami passes Camino a folder. The top sheet confirms an emergency visa appointment in three days. Mami explains that Camino will come home with her and Yahaira. Camino can't stay here, as El Cero will come back angrier than ever and it's not safe. Tía agrees, and it's what Papi wanted. Mami reveals that she scheduled Camino an interview for later in August anyway, but she was able to arrange an earlier appointment. Camino is finally getting what she wanted—but her “realized dream” tastes bittersweet.

Camino wonders if anyone wants to leave home, where fresh fruit drops in the backyard and neighbors who wiped your nose when you were younger are everywhere. Will it help to pretend that this is temporary and that one day, she can return? Will Camino ever be able to hold Luciano before he's big? There aren't palm trees in New York, and nobody there knew Camino as a baby or helped her when she scraped her knees. This place is her home, though it has “bad & ugly” parts. Now, Camino wishes she could stay.

Camino joins Tía on her neighborhood rounds. Though they haven't seen El Cero in days, they keep an eye out for him. Their last stop is the old woman with cancer, and Camino is afraid of what they'll find in her home. Tía pulls a key out when they get there and explains that a neighborhood boy installed a lock and gave the woman's helpers keys. The woman is safer now. Things are neater inside; the woman has clean sheets and a vase of fresh flowers. Camino touches the woman's forehead and then her stomach—the lump is smaller. Camino shakes her head, confused, but Tía just squeezes her hand.

That night, Carline comes over with a birthday gift for Camino. Camino introduces her to Mami. Then, Carline says Luciano is breathing better, and he's even started crying. Nobody says “miracle,” but Camino is certain that Tía worked a miracle and Carline has been nurturing it. An idea occurs to Camino. Tía won't leave her home, but she'll need a new apprentice when Camino is gone. Carline's house is so full, while this one is mostly empty. Carline could be Tía's apprentice, and Nelson would be a huge help. Tía also loves babies and feeding people. Camino decides to suggest it to Tía tomorrow, and the Saints whisper to Camino that she's doing the right thing.

*Though Mami wouldn't say so to Yahaira earlier, she came to the same conclusion her daughter did. Papi's actions caused problems and hurt them, but now, what's most important is supporting the family that Papi inadvertently left them. This is an odd moment for Camino, who never expected Mami of all people to help her. She realizes she must leave the country (if only for her safety), but as she's noted throughout the novel, she loves her home and the culture.*



*As Mami pointed out in the previous passage, Camino must leave the country for safety reasons (and so she can achieve her dreams). Still, leaving will inevitably be sad, even if it's a good thing in the long run. What's hardest is leaving her community and the chosen family Camino has developed over the years, particularly since she doesn't yet feel entirely secure with Mami and Yahaira.*



*That it was necessary to install a lock on the old woman's door highlights how unsafe Camino's neighborhood is becoming. However, the boy's willingness to do so also shows why Camino is so sad to leave the country: people look out for each other. Finding the woman's cancer improved suggests that the Saints have worked some sort of miracle. Camino can do nothing but accept that occurrences like this are mysterious—but good.*



*Despite his rough start to life, Luciano seems to be thriving—more proof that the Saints, and Camino's close-knit community, have come together to help one of their own. As Camino comes up with the idea for Carline and Nelson to come live here, she does what she can to help the people she's leaving behind. This isn't much, but she (and the Saints) realizes that it will ease Carline and her baby's way forward. Life will still be hard for them; there's no getting around that. But it will be better.*



Mami takes Camino to get a health report, a copy of her birth certificate, and a copy of Mami and Papi's marriage certificate, which proves she's Camino's legal stepmother. They spend hours in the car together while Yahaira naps or helps Tía at home. Zoila and Camino don't speak much, but Zoila turns up the radio when Camino hums with a song, and Camino fans Zoila in the clinic waiting room. These family ties are awkward, but they're figuring it out. Yahaira helps where she can.

Camino puts on her graduation dress—which is also her “priest meeting dress”—for her visa interview. The dress seems lucky and unlucky, a dress for beginnings and endings. Zoila stays in the room while her cousin asks Camino questions. Camino explains she wants to study premed at Columbia. The cousin says it'll take a few days to process the visa, but he winks at Zoila.

Every day, Mami and Camino go out. Yahaira refuses to go with them; she wants them to learn to be with each other. She spends the days in Tía's garden, thinking of Dre. Carline comes over twice, once with Luciano. When Yahaira strokes his cheek, he stares at her. Carline gasps and explains that she's been afraid he won't make it. Privately, Yahaira is certain Luciano is a “warrior” and will live. One morning, Yahaira walks to the **beach**. She feels like someone is watching her, but she walks to the water anyway. Her toes in the water, she can see Papi as a boy, running and diving. She pretends the water is Papi, apologizing and welcoming her home. Yahaira forgives Papi.

The night after Camino's visa interview, Yahaira says there's someone she wants Camino to meet. Camino knows this person must be in the U.S., so she politely says she's happy to meet Yahaira's friends when they get there. Firmly, Yahaira says this is her girlfriend, Dre. Camino knows Yahaira expects her to condemn her for being gay, but Camino just says that they should video chat. Immediately, Yahaira pulls out her phone and calls Dre. A dark-skinned girl appears on screen, grinning at Yahaira. Yahaira turns the phone a bit, and it surprises Camino to see her own face pressed up against her sister's.

Suddenly nervous, Camino realizes that if Dre doesn't like her, Yahaira might not love her either. So, she greets Dre, and Dre greets her in perfect Spanish. Then, Dre abruptly starts walking and climbs through a window. Camino can hear cars and yelling people, and then Dre flips her camera so it points at green buds in a planter. Dre says that Yahaira told her about Tía, so she thought an herb garden would help Camino feel at home. Tears spring to Camino's eyes. In a fake whisper, Camino asks Yahaira where she found Dre, and if there's a clone for her to marry.

*Things are still awkward between Mami and Camino, but Camino can tell that it's getting better and that they're both trying. Their relationship with each other is still pretty new. However, they both seem committed to making the best of what Papi left them, and that means starting with these small actions to show they care (while also, of course, completing these big tasks that will allow Camino to join Mami in New York).*



*Recall that earlier, Camino noted that the dress made her feel like a woman, rather than a child. As she wears it to this meeting, she symbolically comes of age and can, finally, look forward to her grown-up future in New York.*



*Yahaira seems to not know exactly what's happening between her mother and Camino when they go out, but the previous passage revealed that her refusal to go with them is working. They're forming a relationship that doesn't require her mediation. When Yahaira walks to the beach, Camino's happy place, the beach's symbolism changes a little bit. Now, it seems to symbolize Papi and the Dominican Republic. Here, Yahaira is finally able to move through her grief and forgive Papi by imagining his apology.*



*Dre is a huge part of Yahaira's life, so it's important to her to make sure that her sister and her girlfriend know about each other (and that Camino in particular is going to play nice). Camino grasps what's going on to some degree, or at least realizes that it's important to show Yahaira she cares by agreeing to meet Dre now. Camino's surprise at seeing her face pressed against Yahaira's, meanwhile, highlights that having a sister is still new for both girls.*



*Finally, Camino realizes just how monumental this moment is. Yahaira has been so concerned with impressing or offending Camino up to this point, but now, the tables have turned. Dre shows how caring and compassionate she is when she shows Camino the budding herb garden. She's supportive of Yahaira, and now, she's supportive of Yahaira's sister in the best way she knows how to be.*



*Fifty-Nine Days After.* On the night before Yahaira, Camino, and Mami leave the Dominican Republic, they sit around the table with Tía. Vira Lata sits by Tía; he hasn't left her side since that night. Mami suggests that they resume the counseling sessions when they get home. Yahaira knows Mami is scared of how huge their grief is—big enough to cause Yahaira to disobey, Mami to forget herself, and Camino to seek out danger. Tía says little, but she wipes Camino's mouth and passes Yahaira food as though she's been feeding Yahaira her whole life.

*Sixty Days After.* Tía doesn't cry at the airport, but Camino can't stop sobbing. As usual, Tía is like a mountain: she'll always be here if Camino decides to return. Before they part, Tía touches the beads around her neck and then Camino's chest. Camino knows that Tía is saying that she's always with Camino, and the Saints are, too. Tía watches Camino go through security, but Camino stops. How can she leave this woman who is her home? But Tía, as though she senses Camino's thoughts, shoos Camino forward. Camino blows her aunt a kiss, whispers blessings, and imagines dividing her heart so Tía can keep a piece. She knows Tía is doing the same thing.

As the plane takes off, Yahaira grabs Camino's hand. Camino's eyes are shut tight and she's mouthing prayers. The girls hold hands until the pilot tells them the beverage service will start soon. Camino looks down at the water below the plane, and Yahaira says that people might clap when they land. Yahaira imagines that clapping is like giving thanks. This could end so many ways. But it won't end with Camino and Yahaira in the sky or the water. It'll end with them together, safe on solid ground.

*With Carline and Nelson presumably moving into the house soon and Vira Lata guarding Tía, Camino can rest easy that things will be safe for Tía in her absence. Finally, everyone in the family has accepted that subsuming grief isn't effective. It led each family member to act out in cruel or dangerous ways. Now, Mami, as the head of the family, is insisting that they all learn to talk about their feelings, offering hope that things will be healthier and more communicative in the future.*



*As Camino knew it would be, her parting with Tía is extremely bittersweet. She knows she must leave for a variety of reasons, but that doesn't numb the sting of leaving the woman who raised her. This highlights for Camino that even if she's leaving now, she'll always have a place in the Dominican Republic. Someday El Cero might not pose such a threat, and she may then choose to return—a trained doctor.*



*Recall that Camino has never flown, so she's possibly never heard about clapping when the plane lands. This is a new tradition to Yahaira, too, but passing it on to Camino allows her to help her sister feel more secure and part of a larger community. Yahaira also seems to accept here that Papi's death was unpredictable and rare—the same won't happen to her and Camino. Rather, the girls will be able to take what they've learned from Papi's legacy and move forward into a happier future.*





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