

I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ERIKA L. SÁNCHEZ

Born and raised in Cicero, Illinois, a working-class suburb of Chicago, after her parents immigrated from Mexico to America, Erika L. Sánchez was feisty and bookish as a child. After graduating Phi Beta Kappa and Magna Cum Laude from the University of Illinois at Chicago, Sánchez received a Fulbright Scholarship to study and write poetry in Madrid, Spain. Following her time there, Sánchez earned an MFA in creative writing from the University of New Mexico, and went on to publish her first book of poetry, *Lessons on Expulsion*, in 2017. Later that same year her young adult debut, *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, premiered to great critical acclaim, and became a finalist for the National Book Award for young people's literature.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter is set in modern-day Chicago, and through Julia's biting and adroit point of view, it explores many issues facing not just the city of Chicago, but those experienced by immigrant families as well. The unfair conditions undocumented immigrants in the U.S. are forced to experience—poverty, labor exploitation, and living in constant fear of discovery and deportation—are a part of Julia and her family's daily lives. Julia's parents crossed the border illegally, at the mercy of predatory coyotes who, Julia learns, raped her mother while holding a gun to her father's head. Julia's friend Lorena, too, daily feels the impact of the violence and cruelty at the border: her father did not make it across after getting lost in the desert with his coyote and their group. When Julia travels to Mexico to visit her family, she witnesses the violence of the narcos, or bosses and dealers with tied to the drug trade, and understands for the first time how much her parents have sacrificed in order to give her a better life.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Julia, an avid and discerning reader, would rather get lost in the worlds of [The Catcher in the Rye](#) or [Adventures of Huckleberry Finn](#) than experience her own painful and impoverished life on the south side of Chicago. Books are a major symbol throughout the novel, and Julia devours novels, plays, and philosophical texts with wild abandon as a way of seeing the world beyond her small neighborhood. Julia's own story bears echoes of other great contemporary titles—Ned Vizzini's *It's Kind of a Funny Story* also features a depressed and suicidal protagonist, while Reyna Grande's [The Distance Between Us](#), a

memoir, focuses on the ways in which the traumas and scars of immigration threaten to split apart a young woman's family.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*
- **When Written:** 2010s
- **When Published:** 2017
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young adult literature; coming-of-age tale
- **Setting:** Chicago, IL
- **Climax:** Overwhelmed by grief in the wake of her sister Olga's death, consumed by poverty, and entrapped by her strict parents' impossible rules, Julia Reyes—the novel's narrator and protagonist—attempts suicide by slitting her wrist, but fails.
- **Antagonist:** In many ways, Julia's deceased, saintlike sister Olga—whose example Julia is failing to live up to every day—is the antagonist. Though it's also possible to argue that societal factors around the treatment of immigrants.
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Set for the Screen. *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* has been optioned for the screen by Anonymous Content, the same company that produced teen megahit *13 Reasons Why*.

Feisty Idols. While Julia looks up to heroes of fiction like the adventurous Huck Finn and the irreverent Holden Caulfield, Erika L. Sánchez herself looked up to Lisa Simpson as a young girl.



PLOT SUMMARY

The novel opens as fifteen-year-old Julia Reyes and her parents, whom she calls Amá and Apá, are looking into the casket of Julia's recently-deceased older sister, Olga. Olga, who was always the prim and proper "perfect Mexican daughter" and Amá and Apá's favorite, was recently run over by a semi on the streets of Chicago while crossing the road to transfer buses. Amá was supposed to pick Olga up from her job at a medical office on the day of the accident, but when the hotheaded Julia got in trouble at school, Amá was forced to get Julia instead, and so Olga was left to take the bus home. Though Julia is saddened by her sister's death, she's put off by her mother's crazed emotional display, and by the attention-seeking grieving she sees her nosy aunts engaging in. Julia's

best friend Lorena shows up to comfort her, and as Julia hugs her friend, she sees over Lorena's shoulder a strange man who she assumes is a very distant uncle.

After Olga's funeral, Amá takes to bed and doesn't get up for several weeks. There's no **food** in the house, there are roaches everywhere, and Julia's father will barely look at her. Julia tells Amá that she needs to get up and get on with her life, and though she initially balks at Julia's telling her what to do, she does indeed get out of bed, shower, and make some tea. She sits Julia down at the kitchen table and tells her that she's planning on throwing Julia a **quinceañera**—a festive celebration which marks fifteen-year-old Latina girls' transition into womanhood. Julia says she doesn't want the party—the family doesn't have the money, and she's going to be sixteen soon, anyways. But Amá is firm. She never had the chance to give Olga a quince, and she is not going to make the same mistake twice. That night, unable to sleep, Julia gets out of bed and wanders into Olga's room. She begins looking through her sister's things and finds a few mysterious items: a note that reads "I love you," a box of sexy lingerie, and a key card to a hotel downtown called The Continental. Julia finds Olga's laptop under her bed and tries to enter the password, but can't guess it. She stashes the laptop back under the bed and falls asleep in Olga's room. In the morning, knowing Amá will be angry to find her in her sister's room, Julia tries to sneak back to her own bed, but she is caught and grounded.

Julia hates being grounded, and yet finds herself in trouble all the time for even small infractions. She daydreams about getting away from her strict mother and living a freewheeling, independent life as a writer in New York, but every new punishment just demoralizes her further. On the day her punishment is lifted, Julia heads downtown after school to visit The Continental in hopes of getting some answers about Olga. The concierge, though, refuses to release any information about hotel guests, and Julia leaves feeling defeated. She visits the art museum on her way out of the city, and gazing upon her favorite painting—the brutal *Judith Slaying Holofernes*—reignites her determination to find answers about Olga. Julia searches for answers from Olga's best friend Angie and even uses the internet at Lorena's house to try and Google information about Olga, but everything is a dead end. However, when Julia meets one of Olga's high school friends Jazmyn at a masquerade party she's attending downtown with Lorena and her new flamboyant friend Juanga, Jazmyn mentions that Olga was "in love" the last time she saw her a few years ago. Julia becomes determined to follow this new lead. Julia becomes obsessed with tracking down old high school classmates of Olga's. But as Julia's mental state visibly deteriorates, her kindly English teacher Mr. Ingman begins to worry about her. Julia insists she's fine—even as the holidays approach and her nonstop detective work causes her to stay out later and later and get grounded by Amá more and more often.

The holidays pass in a blur, and Julia's erratic behavior and fiery diatribes continues to confuse her friends and family members. She alienates Lorena and Juanga when she attacks them for criticizing her aloofness one day during a field trip, and continues to refuse help from Mr. Ingman. Julia visits the community college where Olga took classes in hopes of securing her sister's transcripts, but the registrar is unhelpful and refuses to share any of Olga's information. Julia and Lorena reconcile, but Lorena, who's worried about Julia, urges her to give her search for more information about Olga a rest—maybe, Lorena says, Olga really was "perfect." Julia tries one last time to get some intel by asking Juanga to help her get Jazmyn's number, but when Julia calls her sister's friend up, Jazmyn can't remember anything about Olga's secret boyfriend other than the fact he had a "good job."

Julia's quinceañera arrives. The event is a disaster. Julia is uncomfortable in her frilly, ridiculous party dress, and wishes that she could spend the night reading a **book** alone in the corner rather than dancing. When her Tía Milagros mentions something about Olga while talking to Julia in the bathroom, Julia flies off the handle and begins excoriating Milagros for her nosy, passive-aggressive ways, and at the end of the night Amá and Apá confront Julia about her hateful ways. Amá suggests that if Julia could just have learned to keep her mouth shut, Olga might still be alive—referencing the incident at school which pulled Amá away from Olga and forced her to take the bus home on the fateful day of her death.

Julia spends the summer cleaning houses with her mother. In the fall, she allows Mr. Ingman to help her prepare for standardized tests and college admissions essays, determined to get out of Chicago. One afternoon, when school gets out early, Julia heads to downtown Chicago to visit a bookstore. There, she meets a cute boy named Connor who flirts with her about literature and takes her out for coffee. When Julia tells Connor about Olga, and her fruitless search to find out more about the secret life her sister might have had, she mentions Olga's locked laptop, and Connor offers to help her hack into it. As the weeks go by and fall turns to winter, Julia spends more and more time with Lorena and Juanga, and meets up with Connor whenever she has the chance. She is genuinely happy, even though a year after Olga's death, memories of her sister still haunt her. Connor invites Julia to his parents' fancy house in the affluent suburb of Evanston and they have sex for the first time, even though Julia feels embarrassed and apprehensive about the cultural and class divides between them. After returning home from Connor's, Julia goes into the freezer to heat up some waffles—the only food in the house—and finds the key to Olga's room—which is kept locked—stashed inside. That night, she goes into Olga's room and removes her laptop, the lingerie, and the hotel key card. She stashes the laptop in her backpack but puts the lingerie in a box in her closet. The next day, when she arrives home from

school, she finds that Amá has gone through her things and found the underwear—she believes it is Julia’s, and Julia doesn’t try to convince her otherwise. She is placed under the most intense grounding of her life, and resorts to contacting Connor using a pay phone near school. Each day she complains to Connor about how bad things are at home and how hopeless she feels, and one day he admits that he doesn’t know how to help her. Feeling lost and alienated, Julia wanders around downtown Chicago in the snow, hungry but out of money, and considers how hopeless her life is.

Julia attempts suicide by slitting her wrists and wakes up in a hospital bed the next morning with her concerned parents standing over her. A psychiatrist, Dr. Cooke, meets with Julia privately and asks her to speak about all the things that have led her to the brink. Julia describes her unhappy home life, her contentious relationship with her mother, her feelings of hopelessness that she’ll ever be able to achieve her dreams and escape poverty, and her grief over Olga’s death. Dr. Cooke admits that Julia has a lot on her plate—but says that if she agrees to a weeklong outpatient intensive and weekly therapy thereafter, she can go home the next day. Julia agrees, and starts the outpatient program a few days later. Each day, Julia meets several teens her age who are struggling with serious problems, too. Each night, she goes home to have dinner with Amá and Apá. One night, they tell her that they’re sending her to Mexico the following week to get some time away and reconnect with family. When complaining about the trip to another girl in her outpatient program, Tasha, Tasha remarks how lucky Julia is to be able to get out of Chicago for a while, and Julia begins looking forward to the trip. The night before she leaves, Julia sneaks into Olga’s room one more time. She goes through papers in Olga’s desk, hoping to find Olga’s laptop password written down somewhere. After a few minutes of looking, she does. She enters the code and is able to get into Julia’s laptop and email—where she finds hundreds of emails sent back and forth over the course of several years with an anonymous married man; her lover. Julia keeps the piece of paper with Olga’s information written on it, hoping to be able to use it at an internet café in Mexico; the bumpy flight there, however, jostles her water bottle and ruins the paper.

In Mexico, Julia reunites with her family: Amá’s mother, Mamá Jacinta, a warm and gregarious woman; her aunts Fermina and Estela, who tenderly dote upon her; her good-humored Tío Chucho; and her cousins Belén, a beautiful girl about Julia’s age, and Andrés, a kind young man in his early twenties. Julia feasts on delicious food, spends warm summer nights outside with her aunts and cousins, and attends local football matches with Belén, who introduces her to a handsome young man named Esteban. There is trouble in her family’s small village of Los Ojos, though; the local narcos, or drug lords, have begun inciting violence in the neighborhood, and Chucho must bribe them regularly to prevent them from recruiting the innocent

Andrés into their service. In Mexico Julia feels both comforted by her family’s presence and hyperaware of the violence lurking just beneath the surface. One day, on a trip into town, Fermina asks her how things are going at home. When Julia reveals that she and Amá have a difficult, contentious relationship, Fermina tells Julia a secret: when Amá and Apá left Mexico and crossed the border illegally into America, Amá was raped by the coyote leading them through the desert while Apá was forced, at gunpoint, to watch. The stunned Julia realizes that not only has her mother been hiding this secret from her all these years, but that Olga is not truly Apá’s daughter—the timing of her birth nearly a year after their arrival in the US means she was the product of Amá’s rape. As the violence in Los Ojos worsens, Mamá Jacinta tells Julia she must return to Chicago—before Julia leaves, Mamá Jacinta begs her to take good care of Amá. The day before she leaves, Julia discovers a cache of beautiful drawings done by Apá when he still lived in Los Ojos, and stashes a couple in her bag to bring back to her father.

Back in Chicago, things are slightly easier. Amá is happy to have Julia back, and apologizes for how tough things have been between them. Julia can barely look at her mother, pained by the secret knowledge she now has but doesn’t want her mother to know she’s learned. Julia gets her cell phone back, and is able to contact Connor, who reveals he has been worried sick about her for over a month. They make a plan to meet up downtown later in the week. Julia sneaks back into Olga’s room on her first night back in town and resumes reading the email chain she never got to finish—the final email, sent just a day before Olga’s death, reveals that Olga was pregnant with her lover’s child. Enraged and confused, Julia goes to hunt down Angie at the hotel where she works, and confronts her about Olga’s secret. Angie takes Julia out for coffee and reveals that though she knew the truth about Olga all along, she didn’t feel it was her place to tell anyone, especially after Olga’s death—the truth, she says, would only hurt everyone. Later, Julia meets up with Connor, and the two of them agree to see one another casually until they both leave for college.

One afternoon, Julia takes the bus to Olga’s old office, where she sits in the waiting room, unsure of what she’s hoping to find. She has deduced that Olga’s boyfriend must have been one of the doctors in the practice. When the mysterious man from the funeral walks in and is greeted by the receptionist as “Dr. Castillo,” Julia slips out and waits for him in the parking lot. She confronts him when he emerges at the end of the night, and he offers to take Julia to a diner and explain everything. At the diner, while Julia orders a huge dinner, Castillo explains that he did truly love Olga and wanted to leave his wife for her. Julia berates him for his inaction, but Castillo insists that one day Julia will understand just how complicated relationships can be. He gives Julia Olga’s ultrasound photo, and the disgusted Julia leaves.

Julia is doing well in therapy and feeling better than ever thanks

to her new medication. She is accepted to NYU on a full scholarship, and excitedly tells her parents she wants to go. Though they're sad she's leaving, they support her decision. As the weeks go by, Julia spends time talking through her issues with Dr. Cooke and hanging out with Connor in secret on the weekends. Soon, it's time for her to leave for New York. She bids tearful goodbyes to Lorena and her parents, and as she boards the plane that will take her to her future, she embraces the nervousness and uncertainty she feels about what's to come. She reflects on how her journey to understand her sister better has actually taught her more about the "beautiful and ugly" pieces and parts of herself.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Julia Reyes – Julia Reyes is the fiery, **ravenous**, ambitious, contrarian narrator and protagonist of the novel. A year ahead in school and in possession of wit and smarts beyond her years, Julia's acute intelligence and love of the world of books marks her as different from the rest of her large, loud, working-class immigrant family—and her black-sheep status, exacerbated by the untimely death of her "perfect" older sister Olga, pushes her further and further into fantasies of moving away and living in New York as a famous writer. Julia resents her parents' poverty, her mother's restrictive rules, her working-class neighborhood's shabbiness and monotony—and in many ways, her sister Olga, for dying and leaving Julia alone, forever in the shadow of Olga's perfection. Determined to dig up some dirt on Olga, Julia begins going through her sister's possessions—and discovers that Olga was not who her family thought she was. As she learns more and more about her sister, and eventually discovers that Olga was pregnant at the time of her death with a married man's child, Julia is forced to reconsider the role secrets and lies have played in her family—and is pushed to the brink of sanity by the burden of keeping her sister's final secret. Julia, depressed due to inescapable and abject poverty, intense pressure to fill Olga's shoes, the fear that she won't get into college, even with the help of her kind English teacher Mr. Ingman, and the failure of her first relationship with a wealthy white boy named Connor, attempts suicide and fails, alerting her parents to just how difficult things are for the sensitive and intense Julia. After a brief outpatient program and a trip to Mexico, where she learns even more of her family's secrets and reconnects with her roots, Julia returns to Chicago, understanding more about her difficult Amá and aloof Apá and yet determined as ever to escape her circumstances and make the most of the life they've given her.

Olga Reyes – Julia's saint-like older sister Olga is already deceased at the start of the book, run over in the street by a huge truck after she was forced to take the bus home when Julia's trouble at school required Amá to pick her up instead of

Olga one fateful September afternoon. Julia's guilt and grief over her sister's death are immense, but she's unable to really emote or express her sadness. Julia lived her whole life in Olga's shadow, slipping further and further into rebellion, sarcasm, and introversion as she felt mounting pressure to be just as unimpeachable as the lovely Olga, who did all the things a "perfect Mexican daughter" should—stayed close to home and devoted to her parents while ignoring attention from boys and focusing instead on community college classes and a job at a medical office. After Olga's death, Julia is desperate to learn more about the sister she always felt so distant from—but as she plunders through Olga's things, she discovers much more than she bargained for. The discovery of sexy lingerie and a hotel key card pique Julia's interest, and as she begs Olga's old friends for answers, she discovers that Olga was not the person everyone thought she was—not by a long shot. Though Olga is not an active character in the novel, her presence looms over everyone and everything, pushing Julia onwards to uncover her family's deepest secrets and understand her roots more clearly, with a more open heart.

Amá/Amparo Montenegro Reyes – Julia's strict, overbearing mother has very firm ideas about who her daughter should be—ideas that Julia doesn't understand, respect, or accept at all. For Amá, a housecleaner whose years of hard labor have taken a toll on her once-great physical beauty, a "perfect Mexican daughter" should aspire to marry well, work a job in an office, and spend time with her family—not run away to New York to become a writer. Amá constantly tries to press Julia into a certain mold—feminine, obliging, and family-oriented—but the rebellious, ambitious Julia resists her at every turn. Because of their constant struggles, Julia and Amá have an intense, distrustful, and antagonistic relationship. Nevertheless, it's clear that Amá loves Julia fiercely—and is desperate to do anything she can to protect her from the unpredictable and often cruel world, especially in the tragic wake of Olga's death. It is eventually revealed that Amá's overprotective nature stems from a trauma she suffered while crossing the border—she was raped by the coyote taking her and Apá across the desert while Apá was forced to look on at gunpoint. Olga was not Apá's child—she was the product of the rape in the desert—and for this reason Amá has long been determined to shield both her daughters from additional pain and trauma. Once Julia learns the truth about Amá, she's able to extend greater empathy to her occasionally neurotic and old-fashioned mother—but remains determined to go out into the world and face whatever may come her way.

Apá/Rafael Reyes – Julia's quiet, aloof, and hardworking father came from Los Ojos, Mexico to Chicago to build a better life for his family. Apá works long, grueling hours in a candy factory, toiling and missing out on time with his family to secure the shallow pleasures of people who can afford to spend money on nonessential **foods**. The judgmental Julia never thinks about

what her father might be going through, or why he's so disconnected—she only resents him for not being more present. Once Julia travels to Mexico and learns the truth of what her parents suffered at the border—and realizes that her father gave up his passion for art when he arrived in Chicago—she develops more empathy for her father, and understands just how many of his dreams were stolen in the process of ensuring that his children would be able to realize theirs.

Lorena – Julia's best friend Lorena is a saucy, sarcastic, and daring young woman. Though the boy-crazy Lorena and the quiet, aloof Julia couldn't be more different, they've been best friend since childhood, and have stood with one another through thick and thin as the years have gone by. Lorena is self-centered but fiercely protective of Julia, always looking out for her around her nosy, judgmental family—and later in the novel, around Connor. Lorena supports Julia in her lowest moments, but also calls her out when she's being the worst version of herself—something that Julia resents. Lorena is herself struggling with many of the same issues Julia is, though for different reasons—disconnection from her mother, resentment and anxiety about structural poverty, and feelings of grief and loss, albeit due to the death of her father rather than her sister. Lorena and Julia always have one another's backs, and when they tearfully part ways at the end of the novel as Julia prepares to head off to New York City for college, Lorena is sure to remind Julia just how much she loves her.

Connor – Julia meets Connor, a white boy from the affluent suburb of Evanston, at a used bookstore in downtown Chicago. After bonding over their love of literature, Connor and Julia begin seeing one another regularly, even in the face of Julia's mother's restrictive rules. Though Julia is worried that Connor will look down on her or judge her because of the poor, working-class neighborhood she comes from, Connor is always kind to Julia—if slightly insensitive about her background. Julia believes she loves Connor, and she loses her virginity to him. As Julia's home situation worsens, she's grounded and banned from going into the city or using her cell phone. She calls Connor from a pay phone each day, but when her depression intensifies, Connor admits that he doesn't know how to help Julia. Julia feels abandoned by Connor, and their estrangement contributes to her suicide attempt. After the attempt, an outpatient program, and a trip to Mexico, Julia is relieved to come home and find that Connor has been trying to get in touch with her for weeks—she doesn't tell him all she's been through, but they begin casually dating once again. After they're both accepted into schools in New York for college, Julia takes comfort in the fact that they might see each other even after leaving Chicago, but doesn't pin all her hopes on Connor, demonstrating a healthy detachment from him and an investment in her own independent growth. Julia's intense but conflicting feelings for Connor—combined with her desire to

keep him at arm's length—are a large part of her shame over her working-class roots and her cultural background.

Angie – Olga's best friend. Angie is a complete wreck after Olga's death, and the level of pain and dishevelment she's experiencing doesn't make sense to the unemotional Julia. After Julia finds lingerie and a hotel key card in Olga's room, she goes to Angie to try to find out more about who Olga really was—and what she may have been hiding—but though Angie clearly knows something, she refuses to let Julia in. Later on in the novel, after Julia hacks Olga's emails and discovers that Olga was pregnant when she died, she confronts Angie once again—this time, Angie is more open, and reveals that though she knew about Olga's years-long affair with an older man (and her resultant pregnancy,) she believed that telling Olga's family about her less-than-perfect personal life would only hurt them. Angie is important to Julia's reluctant understanding of the fact that sometimes, the secrets people keep and the lies they tell help more than they hurt.

Juanga – When Lorena befriends the flamboyant and charismatic Juanga—a gay classmate—Julia begins feeling jealous of their relationship. Juanga is petty and sarcastic from time to time, but good at heart. His sexuality has alienated him from his family, and his parents frequently kick him out of the house, forcing him to crash on friends' couches or stay at one of his many lovers' homes. In spite of his surface frivolity, Juanga ends up being a real friend to Julia, and shows her empathy and compassion after her suicide attempt.

Mr. Ingman – Julia's senior-year English teacher. Mr. Ingman sees real promise in Julia, and becomes dedicated to helping her apply to colleges and harness her painful experiences into college essays that demonstrate the heart of who she is. Mr. Ingman is attuned to Julia's moods, and tries talk to her and help her to find a counselor when he senses that her mental health is in decline—but the stubborn Julia at first refuses his attempts to get closer to her.

Jazmyn – One of Olga's high school friends. When Julia runs into her at a party, Jazmyn excitedly asks how Olga's doing, and remarks that she was “in love” the last time Jazmyn ran into her. Julia must explain that Olga is dead, much to Jazmyn's shock and chagrin. Julia later gets Jazmyn's phone number through one of Juanga's friends and calls her to beg her for anything else she can remember about the last time she saw Olga.

Tía Fermina – Julia's aunt, and Amá's sister. Fermina is a kind, sensitive woman who dotes on Julia—and who eventually reveals to her the horrible secret about Amá's rape and Olga's true parentage in hopes of helping Julia to better understand who her mother is, where she's coming from, and why she's so overprotective of Julia.

Dr. Castillo – A wealthy, married doctor, and Olga's longtime boss—and lover. Julia discovers Dr. Castillo's identity when she visits the office where Olga used to work and recognizes

Castillo as a mysterious man who showed up at Olga's funeral without introducing himself to anyone. Dr. Castillo seems to be in real turmoil over Olga's death, and though Julia lambasts him for stringing Olga along for years, he insists that adult relationships are complicated and that one day Julia will understand what he and Olga went through together.

MINOR CHARACTERS

José Luis – Lorena's mother's boyfriend. José Luis is only ten years older than Julia and Lorena, and exhibits predatory behavior towards them whenever they're alone in Lorena's apartment.

Carlos – Lorena's boyfriend.

Ramiro – One of Carlos's cousins. Lorena and Carlos set Julia and Ramiro up on a blind date, and Ramiro ends up being Julia's first kiss.

Doña Ramona – Angie's mother.

Pasqual – One of Julia's classmates at school.

Tío Bigotes – Tío Bigotes—whose name means “Uncle Moustache”—is one of Julia's uncles. He is a kind man, but given to drinking too much and making a fool of himself during family celebrations.

Tía Paloma – Tío Bigotes's wife.

Tío Cayetano – One of Julia's uncles. A predatory man who used to stick his finger in Julia's mouth when no one was looking until once, when she was twelve, she bit him.

Tía Milagros – One of Julia's aunts. Milagros is a gossip whose passive-aggressive, tongue-in-cheek remarks get on Julia's nerves.

Victor – One of Julia's young cousins.

Vanessa – One of Julia's cousin. Though Vanessa is only a year older than Julia, she already has a young daughter.

Freddy – One of Julia's distant cousins, and the only member of her family to have graduated from college. Freddy is kind to Julia, and encourages her to reach out to him with questions and updates about her college application progress.

Alicia – Freddy's girlfriend. Alicia works at a prestigious theater company in Chicago.

Mamá Jacinta – Julia's grandmother. A benevolent and doting woman whose family is her whole world. Mamá Jacinta takes good care of Julia when she visits Los Ojos, making sure she's always stuffed with **food** and surrounded by family members who love her.

Tío Chucho – One of Julia's uncles. Chucho is a kind and fun-loving man who does his best to stay positive, even in the face of droughts, violence, and poverty threatening his beloved hometown of Los Ojos.

Belén – One of Julia's cousins. A gorgeous young woman who's

keenly aware of her beauty. Belén is cool and aloof, and brings Julia with her on shopping trips and outings to football games in order to make her feel more at home in Los Ojos.

Andrés – One of Julia's older cousins. It is eventually revealed that the entire family is working together to come up with bribes for the local narcos to keep them from recruiting Andrés to their service.

Tía Estela – Julia's aunt, and one of Amá's sisters. A sweet, tender woman.

Esteban – A handsome young man who lives in Los Ojos. He and Julia have a brief flirtation while she is visiting Mexico.

Dr. Scheinberg – A disgusting and lewd man whose home Julia and Amá clean together one winter day.

Dr. Cooke – Julia's therapist. A sensitive and inquisitive woman who is the first person in Julia's life to express true empathy for all that she's going through.

Tomás – A translator who works at the hospital where Julia is admitted after her suicide attempt.

Ashley – The group therapy instructor in Julia's outpatient program.

Erin – A girl in Julia's outpatient program.

Tasha – A beautiful and emaciated anorexic girl, and Julia's closest friend in her outpatient program.

Luis – A young man in Julia's outpatient program who cuts himself.

Josh – A suicidal, acne-scarred member of Julia's outpatient program.

Antwon – A flirtatious tween in Julia's outpatient program.



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.



SECRETS AND LIES

The most potent theme throughout Erika L. Sánchez's *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* is that of secrets and lies. As the novel unfolds and Julia digs deeper into the secrets her recently-deceased older sister Olga left behind, she comes face-to-face with more and more unsettling truths about her family's past. In the end, Sánchez ultimately suggests that some secrets are too painful to share—and that some lies are actually a mercy, meant to protect people from hurtful, devastating truths.

When Julia's sister Olga dies in a tragic freak accident, Julia is

left with many pressing questions about her quiet, saint-like sister's life. She wonders whether Olga could really have been the "perfect Mexican daughter"—and, if she wasn't, how she was able to hide the truth from so many people. As Julia digs into Olga's past for clues, she discovers secrets more confusing and painful than she bargained for—and then, as she continues down the rabbit hole, she winds up encountering secrets about other members of her family that threaten to tear them all apart. Olga's secret unfolds slowly as Julia pieces together the strange objects she finds in her sister's room—a box of sexy lingerie and a key card to a fancy Chicago hotel called The Continental. Julia learns due to slips-of-the-tongue from Olga's best friend Angie and another one of her acquaintances, a school friend named Jazmyn, that Olga had a secret lover. When Julia, desperate to learn more about what Olga was hiding, hacks her way into Olga's laptop, she discovers that her sister was sleeping with a married man for years—and later learns that Olga was even pregnant with his child at the time of her death. As Julia slowly uncovers the truth about the life Olga was living—surely a lonely, strained, and even dangerous one—she feels almost vindicated in learning that her sister wasn't the "perfect" girl everyone knew her to be. There's a part of Julia that wants to tell her family the truth about Olga—partly to take the constant scrutiny and spotlight off herself and her own mistakes—but something inside of Julia holds her back from telling her parents the truth. Julia's conflict over keeping Olga's secret, combined with the pressures of school, home life, and her faltering first relationship with Connor, leads her toward self-harm—Olga's secret threatens to buckle Julia's entire life, and yet she remains committed to maintaining the lie, for reasons she can't yet understand.

The second huge secret Julia uncovers is one she learns while visiting Mexico shortly after her suicide attempt—an attempt she made because she became too overwhelmed by the weight of Olga's secret compounded with all the other struggles in her life. While in Mexico, Julia's relatives all urge her to be less combative with her parents and more understanding of her mother Amá especially—and then Tía Fermina, Amá's sister, reveals that during the border crossing Julia's mother and father made many years ago, Amá was raped by a "coyote" while her father Apá was held at gunpoint. The secret is terrible enough in and of itself, but as Julia considers the timeline of her parents' arrival in the US and Olga's birth about nine months later, she realizes that Olga was not Apá's biological daughter but rather the product of the rape Amá suffered. This secret comes to dwarf Olga's in scope and terror. Julia had allowed her life to become ruled by the need to discover the truth about Olga, but once she learns her mother and father's secret, she is forced to confront the utility, or even value, of such large, painful lies. She begins to understand that perhaps the secrets people keep are kept for a reason. Just as Amá and Apá knew it would hurt Olga and Julia to burden them with such a terrible truth, Olga knew that to shatter her parents' image of her as

the "perfect Mexican daughter" by telling them about her affair and resulting pregnancy would be to cause them pain they might not be able to endure or recover from. As Julia considers the weight of these two secrets—and whether she will ever be able to have an open discussion with her parents about either of them—she comes to realize that sometimes truth and lies are not black and white. Not all lies are cruel, and not all truths are freeing.

Though Julia enters some dark places discovering the many hidden truths which define her family's past history and present struggles, she ultimately learns a very important lesson about the moral ambiguity of what it means to keep a secret or tell a lie. It's difficult to understand when keeping someone's secret is actually the right thing to do—especially in a family like Julia's, in which, perhaps due to the dark secrets stitching them together, privacy and secrecy have always been villainized. Over the course of the novel, though, Julia comes to see that sometimes a lie is a mercy, and keeping someone's secret is the greatest gift one can give.



RESTLESSNESS AND AMBITION

Julia Reyes is desperate to get out of the working-class Chicago suburb she and her family call home—she dreams of being a famous writer, of seeing the world, and of living all alone in a big, beautiful Manhattan apartment. Julia's fierce restlessness and boundless ambition, however, are threatened by several factors beyond her control: her overbearing mother's strict rules, the poverty that boxes her and her family into a shabby apartment and a dilapidated neighborhood, and the overwhelming grief Julia feels over her sister's death, a grief that seems ready to swell up and crush her at any moment. As the novel progresses and Julia weathers hardship after hardship, Erika L. Sánchez argues that one must deal with the issues, traumas, and circumstantial difficulties facing them before moving on—otherwise, no amount of grit or drive will be enough to sustain someone through new, unfamiliar challenges.

Julia is fiery, fierce, intelligent, and opinionated—she feels too big for her small, gritty Chicago suburb, and too good for her stifling public school and her shallow classmates. Julia believes she's destined for bigger things: a glamorous life in New York City, a career as a writer, an existence unimpeded by her overbearing parents and untethered to what she sees as her embarrassing, working-class roots. Her ambition and drive often make her come off as snobby or judgmental—but more importantly, she clings to her goals and aspirations as a way of ignoring the pressing problems in her present life at home and at school. When Julia's best friend Lorena confronts her at a pivotal point in the novel about her inability to engage meaningfully with her friendships or her community—an inability which stems from her judgmental attitude and her belief that she's better than everyone around her—Julia admits

that she does believe she's better than everyone, and deserves to move on already. She states, point-blank, that she feels "too good for everything" about her life in Chicago. This frank admission reveals that Julia would rather ignore her current feelings and problems and focus only on getting out of her present situation rather than deal with the reasons why she feels stuck, out of place, or desperate for escape. She is disdainful of everything in her life, and raring for a chance to get away from her parents' grief, her own descent into Olga's harrowing secrets, and her uncertainty about her academic future. Julia wants the idealized life she's been dreaming of, but doesn't understand that the things she wants won't come easily to her—and that if she refuses to confront her worst impulses and darkest prejudices, she won't ever be able to have the life she wants. Julia's suicide attempt is a culmination of her restlessness and ambition taken to the extreme. With nowhere to go, and nothing to do with her misplaced forward-moving energy, Julia becomes overwhelmed by the gulf between the life she wants and the life she has. Julia's suicide attempt—which she realizes, immediately upon waking up afterwards, was a "dumb" thing that she never wants to do again—represents the moment in which she understands that if she doesn't fix the problems in her present life, she won't even make it to the next stage. Julia's ambition rockets her into a brick wall, and that collision ultimately forces her to slow down, take stock of who she is, what painful truths she's been ignoring, and how she's let down those around her, then reckon fully with all those things.

Ultimately, Julia's unshakeable ambition does end up serving her well. She works hard on her standardized test prep and college admission essays, and wrangles her frustration with her family, her fear of wasting her potential, and the painful loss she's suffered into an essay which gains her admission to NYU. As Julia boards a plane to New York at the end of the novel to at last pursue her dreams, though, she is finally able to live in the present. She's unsure of what the future holds, but she's okay with that—she's at last learned to slow things down, take stock of her feelings and actions, and understand that blindly trying to escape from pain, discomfort, and uncertainty will only end badly.



FAMILY, IMMIGRANT CULTURAL IDENTITY, AND THE SELF

Julia Reyes has a large, overbearing, and occasionally abusive family. From her judgmental and gossipy Tía Milagros to the predatory Tío Cayetano to Julia's impossibly strict mother and aloof, silent father, the extended Reyes clan often brings Julia more confusion than comfort. Julia is embarrassed not just of her family, but in many ways, of her cultural identity as well, and of her status as the daughter of immigrants—she feels disconnected from her family's traditions, and disdainful of the idea that she needs to

do certain things to be seen as the "perfect Mexican daughter." As the novel progresses and Julia learns more about her family during a long trip to visit her mother's relatives in Mexico, Erika L. Sánchez argues that taking the time to learn more about one's family, roots, and cultural identity helps one to better understand themselves in the end.

From the beginning of the novel, Julia is self-conscious about her failure to be the "perfect Mexican daughter" her parents always wanted. Her older sister Olga stayed at home and cared for their parents while working a part-time office job and taking classes at a community college, while the rebellious Julia always nursed dreams of moving far away, making a career in the arts, and shirking the burdens of marriage and motherhood. Julia won't even let her mother teach her to make tortillas—that's how afraid she is of falling into the trap of familial and cultural duty. Julia has issues with judgement and superiority in her life at school and with her friends—issues that stem from her desire to escape her present life. The root of those issues is a feeling of not belonging in her family. Julia has always been the black sheep, overshadowed by the unimpeachably good Olga, and when Olga dies, her memory is canonized even more. In death, Olga is truly perfect—she can never make a mistake. In living and, inevitably, making mistakes, Julia becomes more and more flawed. Her self-consciousness about the mistakes she's making, the outspokenness she's unable (or unwilling) to tamp down, and the ways in which her beliefs about the goals of life increasingly diverge from those of her parents, all cause Julia to want to distance herself from her family. Little does she know that in distancing herself from her family—her roots, her culture, and her only sources of unconditional love in the entire world—she's actually only growing farther and farther from the truth of herself.

As the novel continues and Julia wrestles with depression, anxiety, and an attempt at suicide, those around her realize that her grief, insecurity, and self-hatred are not merely growing pains: Julia is truly at sea, disconnected from her family, herself, her past, and her future alike. When Amá and Apá send Julia to Mexico to get some air, some space, and some distance, they're actually hoping she'll be able to reconnect with her roots—Julia always loved summer vacations to Mexico, and in spite of her ambivalence about her culture and her family in Chicago, they believe a break from the everyday will help Julia recover and reconnect with who she really is. Indeed, in the warm and small desert town of Los Ojos, Julia is able to reconnect not just with her family but with herself. She learns things about her parents she'd never known—terrible secrets, but also beautiful hidden parts of their personalities, such as Apá's past success as a painter—and by understanding more about who her parents are and the things both good and bad that have made them that way, Julia understands more about her own journey. She sees at last that in spite of whatever conflicts or grievances she has with her parents, she has as much of a responsibility to them as

they have to her. She must honor their sacrifices, remember their origins, and embrace the people life has made them into—relationships are a two way street, and as Julia returns to Chicago, she works hard to see her parents, her culture, and even the more difficult members of her extended family through a more forgiving and empathetic eye. Julia understands her family in a new way, and is able to see herself through a new lens as well: she knows she'll never be the "perfect Mexican daughter" her parents want her to be, but at last has some confidence in her choices and less shame about her shortcomings.

For Julia's family, many of whom have left behind loved ones and sacrificed their passions in order to make a life in the United States, culture is a way to connect to the past. For Julia—for most of her life, anyway—her family's hard adherence to tradition and ritual has been impossible to understand, and she's always felt like an outsider looking in. By the end of the novel, Julia has come to understand why her parents want her to carry on their family's culture and traditions, and is able to see that her role in those traditions is special, and even sacred. Though Julia remains on track to pursue her dream of becoming a New York writer, her ability to talk about her responsibility to her family as the central component as her college admissions essay shows that she has come to better understand not just her parents, but herself.



POVERTY AND ENTRAPMENT

Julia Reyes and her parents live in a roach-infested apartment in a working-class neighborhood on the south side of Chicago. Stomping roaches dead and mopping up their guts is a regular necessity—and outside of the apartment, things are sometimes even worse. Julia must endure threats and harassment from neighborhood men as well as a chronic lack of money for public transportation and **food**. Her friends from school, Lorena and Juanga, face similar problems, and often have to resort to theft to get by or endure homelessness due to problems at home. Julia's difficult circumstances make her feel trapped, and make her dreams of attending a prestigious college and making a life as a writer are all but impossible. On a visit to Mexico, Julia encounters poverty on a vastly different scale, and is forced to consider the ways in which poverty forces desperate people to do terrible things. Throughout the novel, Erika L. Sánchez examines the structural problems that threaten to hold Julia and her friends back, and ultimately suggests that extreme poverty is a cycle which only a fortunate few are able to escape.

The truly abject circumstances Julia has grown up in have always just been considered a given. As undocumented immigrants, her parents have limited opportunities to bring in an income: her father is a factory worker and her mother is a housecleaner. Because Julia is so ambitious and self-centered a lot of the time, she begins resenting her parents for entrapping

her in poverty rather than taking a hard look at the mechanisms which are keeping them down, and extending to them empathy and assistance rather than judgement and vitriol. There are several moments in the novel that force Julia to reckon with the cyclical, systemic poverty which plagues her family, and to see that while her circumstances are difficult, the very idea that she has a chance to escape is more than so many people in her community have. When Julia goes with her mother to clean houses one winter day, she witnesses firsthand the sacrifices—both physical and moral—her mother has to make every day just to make ends meet for Julia. From employers who speak smugly and condescendingly in Spanish to her to those who sexually objectify her and force her to clean disgusting, almost purposefully dirty parts of their homes, Amá never knows what kind of house she's walking into. Julia sees firsthand the repetitive and difficult nature of her mother's work life, and begins to understand that her mother is trying her hardest to make the best of a system that's rigged against her.

When Julia visits Mexico and discovers several beautiful drawings that Apá made when he was still living in Los Ojos, she understands even more deeply the sacrifices required of a life lived in pursuit of escaping cyclical, systemic poverty. Though Apá was widely regarded as the best painter in Los Ojos, he gave up his art entirely once he arrived in America. When Julia herself returns to Chicago and asks her father why he gave up drawing and painting, he explains that continuing to make them would have been "a waste of time," nothing more than a painful reminder of all the avenues in life that closed to him the moment he crossed the border. Apá's aloof, resigned nature makes sense to Julia in a new way all of a sudden—she sees that within the trap of poverty, there's barely any opportunity to escape, let alone to stop and breathe.

Julia's most personal reckoning with the nature of poverty comes when she begins dating a boy she meets at a used bookstore in downtown Chicago. The cute and smart Connor has grown up in Evanston—a wealthy suburb of Chicago—and has lived a life which is almost the opposite of Julia's. When she goes to visit Connor at his parents' sprawling house, which is the size of the entire apartment building Julia and her family live in, she sees at last the vast gulf between her life and Connor's. Though fewer than twenty miles separate their homes, an unspeakable ocean of experience lies between them. Julia's parents work hard, subject themselves to humiliation, and give up their dreams each and every day just to scrape by within a system which ignores or outright exploits them, while Connor has never known what it's like to open the fridge and find nothing but condiments or stomp out roaches when they scatter at the flick of a light switch. Julia begins to understand in a more acute way just how difficult it might be for her to achieve her dreams—and how worth, dedication, and sacrifice rarely have any relation to success in America.

Julia is still just a teenager at the end of the novel, but wise beyond her years. As she boards a plane to fly off to NYU on a full scholarship, she is acutely aware of just how lucky she is to be given the opportunity to escape the south side of Chicago. She has seen in action the systems of oppression, debt, and labor which keep the poor impoverished while the rich get richer, and understands that her escape from it represents a responsibility to honor the sacrifices her parents have made for her, and to never forget the combination of hard work and dumb luck that have allowed her the chance to be the first in her family to break the cycle.



SYMBOLS

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



FOOD AND HUNGER

Throughout *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, the teenage protagonist Julia Reyes struggles with an insatiable appetite for food. Because her family is poor—and because her parents are distracted by their overwhelming grief in the wake of their eldest daughter Olga’s death—there’s rarely anything in the house for Julia to eat. Julia’s ravenous hunger, and the food she consumes which never seems to sate it, become, throughout the novel, a symbol of Julia’s desire to escape her circumstances, make her mark on the world beyond her hometown, and live the life of plenty she’s been dreaming of for years. Conversely, just as Julia’s *desire* for and love of food represents her desire for more than she has, *actual* food symbolizes the ways in which Julia is being held back from happiness and satisfaction by the circumstances of her unhappy present: her parents’ poverty, the ways in which she feels strangled by her family’s Mexican culture, and her insecurities about her body, her sense of style, and her femininity more generally. Food doesn’t ever allow Julia an escape—even after eating a large meal she often still feels hungry, and this constant ache is symbolic of her boundless ambition and deep restlessness, and of the larger ways in which society has made her feel constantly deprived.



BOOKS

Whereas **food** represents Julia’s restlessness, ambition, and desire for more than she has in the present, books serve as a symbol of escapism throughout the novel. Julia reads books when she wants to zone out of overwhelming or uncomfortable family gatherings, when her home and school life become too difficult to navigate on her own, or when she simply wants to get out of her own head for a little while. Even reading difficult or existential books comfort

Julia in tough times, such as when she retreats into reading Albert Camus’s *The Stranger* after having a big fight with Lorena and Juanga. Books allow Julia to feel like she can get away from her present circumstances, even just for a little while.



JULIA’S QUINCEAÑERA

The large, gaudy, and rather sad quinceañera party Julia’s Amá and Apá throw for her is a symbol of their desire to transform Julia into the “perfect Mexican daughter” they believe her deceased older sister Olga always was. Shortly after Olga’s death, when Amá announces that she plans to use her savings to throw Julia the traditional party (which takes place on or around Latina girls’ fifteenth birthdays and symbolizes their entry into adulthood,) Julia is scandalized and even disgusted. She points out that she’s already almost sixteen, and doesn’t want the party to boot; Amá and Apá, however, insist on throwing it, explaining that they never got the chance to give Olga a party and are not going to make the same mistake twice. During the party, Julia is dressed up in a frilly and ridiculous peach gown, made to perform ritual dances and ceremonies, and has to put up with her entire family: all things she hates. Throughout the party Julia is visibly uncomfortable. She gorges herself on **cake** and wishes she had a **book** to read so that she wouldn’t have to greet so many people. The party comes to symbolize, both for the reader and for Julia, the ways that her family want to push her into being a “perfect Mexican daughter,” the fact that she never will become such a thing, and the pain and discomfort that this clash between what her parents blindly want and what she is will always produce.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Knopf edition of *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* published in 2017.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☝ Saint Olga, the perfect Mexican daughter. Sometimes I wanted to scream at her until something switched on in her brain. But the only time I ever asked her why she didn’t move out or go to a real college, she told me to leave her alone in a voice so weak and brittle, I never wanted to ask her again. Now I’ll never know what Olga would have become. Maybe she would have surprised us all.

Related Characters: Julia Reyes (speaker), Olga Reyes

Related Themes:    



Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Julia and her family are at the funeral of her recently-deceased older sister Olga, who died tragically when struck by a semi while she was crossing a busy street in downtown Chicago. As Julia peers into her sister's casket, she feels a strange mix of emotions—profound, debilitating grief, frustration, and also resentment. Olga has always been the “perfect Mexican daughter,” while the fiery, opinionated, loudmouthed Julia is called a “malcriada”—spoiled creature—and feels that all her flaws are exacerbated in the face of her sister's perfection. Julia never knew her sister very well, and now, as she considers the permanent, devastating loss of Olga, she must come to terms with the idea that she's missed out on that chance forever. She regrets the resentment she felt for her sister, and the distance that arose between them as a result—but can't help feeling a twinge of those same emotions now. In Olga, she had a potential ally in hopelessness over the poverty facing their family, over the question of how to make the right choices in life, and in the struggle to be a good daughter—now, Julia must face all these things alone. Further, this passage foreshadows the fact that over the course of the book Olga *already* had secrets that were not in keeping with being a “perfect Mexican daughter,” and, more broadly, the way that people's surface perceptions of each other affect their ability to connect.

●● Olga's friend Angie comes running in, looking like she was the one hit by a semi. She's beautiful, but, damn, is she an ugly crier. Her skin is like a bright pink rag someone has wrung out. As soon as she sees Olga, she starts howling almost worse than Amá. I wish I knew the right thing to say, but I don't. I never do.

Related Characters: Julia Reyes (speaker), Amá/Amparo Montenegro Reyes, Angie, Olga Reyes

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the novel, one of Julia's most profound struggles will be her seemingly pathological inability to say “the right thing.” The fiery Julia can't keep her mouth shut for very long, and when she does fall quiet, it's only because she doesn't know how to relate to other people. Julia's social troubles—and her superiority complex—will be some

of her greatest challenges in the pages to come, and her inability to put on a brave or polite front in a moment when it's what's needed of her shows just how unprepared she is to do so on a normal daily basis.

Chapter 4 Quotes

●● “You know, Julia, you're always causing trouble, creating problems for your family. Now that she's dead, all of a sudden you want to know everything about her? You hardly even spoke to her. Why didn't you ask her anything when she was alive? Maybe you wouldn't have to be here, asking me questions about her love life.”

Related Characters: Angie (speaker), Olga Reyes, Julia Reyes

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Julia has come to Angie's house after finding a love note, sexy lingerie, and a hotel key card in Olga's bedroom. Julia is full of questions about who her sister really was, and whether her “perfect” personality was just a façade hiding a deeper and darker true self. When she confronts Angie with these questions, however, Angie lashes out, accusing Julia of “creating problems” for her family out of spite or boredom and also of failing to really get to know Olga when she was still alive. Angie is taking Olga's death particularly hard, and seems not to have left the house in weeks—Julia knows that Angie has something she's not sharing, and is determined to get to the truth no matter the cost, even if she fulfills Angie's prophecy that doing so will only create more problems for the Reyes family.



More broadly, Angie's comments attest to two ideas that will become important in the book. The first is that secrets and the truth are complicated, and are not always best shared. The second is that you only have the chance to connect with someone, to know them, in all their complication, when they are alive, and that such connection is vital.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☞☞ The sky is still dark, but it's beginning to brighten. There are beautiful, faint streaks of orange over the lake. It looks like it's been cracked open.

I think of Jazmyn's face when I told her about Olga. Everywhere I go, my sister's ghost is hovering.

Related Characters: Julia Reyes (speaker), Lorena, Juanga, Olga Reyes, Jazmyn

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis



In this short passage, Julia is in the back seat of her friend Juanga's car on the way home from a party the two of them and Julia's best friend Lorena have attended. At the party, Julia ran into Jazmyn—an old high school friend of Olga's—and was forced to deliver the news that Olga had died. Doing so plunged Jazmyn—and Julia, too—into a profound sadness, and profoundly impacted the way both girls experienced the party. Now, slightly buzzed and heading home, Julia fears that she'll never be able to get away from Olga's "ghost"—she doesn't fear that Olga is literally haunting her, but instead laments that even in death, Olga overshadows her, beloved and missed by all while Julia remains obscure, unspecial, and unloved.


Chapter 10 Quotes

☞☞ "Sometimes it's like you think you're too good for everything. You're too hard on people." Lorena doesn't make eye contact.

"That's because I am too good for everything! You think this is what I want? This sucks. This sucks so hard, I can't take it sometimes." I swing my arms, gesturing toward I don't know what. I'm so angry my ears feel as if they're on fire.

Related Characters: Julia Reyes, Lorena (speaker), Juanga

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

During lunch on a field trip to a state park on the lake, Julia finds herself in a confrontation with Lorena and Lorena's

new friend Juanga. Julia and Lorena have been close as sisters since elementary school—and Julia feels threatened by Lorena's new friendship, and hurt by Lorena's accusation that Julia feels she's too good for "everything" and everyone. The brutally honest Julia chooses not to reject Lorena's characterization of her, but rather to admit that she does feel "too good" for the lot she's been dealt in life. She hates her present circumstances—the poverty her family faces, the lack of intellectual stimulation she feels in school, and the inescapable shadow of her "perfect" older sister—and isn't afraid to say so. Julia's ravenous, insatiable nature—and her restless ambition—are in many ways her biggest obstacles, and yet in this scene she wears these flaws almost like a badge of honor. While that may feel good in the moment to Julia, however, the novel makes clear the way that such behavior isolates her from others, including those she loves.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☞☞ Amá just shakes her head. "You know, Julia, maybe if you knew how to behave yourself, to keep your mouth shut, your sister would still be alive. Have you ever thought about that?" She finally says it. She says what her big, sad eyes were telling me all along.

Related Characters: Julia Reyes, Amá/Amparo Montenegro Reyes (speaker), Olga Reyes

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

After her disastrous quinceanera—a traditional fifteenth-birthday celebration, one that Julia never wanted and that Amá and Apá only threw her because they never got the chance to give one to Olga—Julia and her parents return home to their bleak, roach-infested apartment. As they argue about Julia's appalling behavior at the affair—behavior which included Julia yelling at her aunt Milagros in the bathroom—Amá offers a particularly devastating indictment of Julia's loud mouth and short temper. Amá suggests that if Julia had learned to keep her mouth shut long ago, Olga would still be alive. On the day of Olga's death, Amá was supposed to pick her up from work—but was called away to pick up Julia after Julia got into a verbal altercation with a teacher at school. Julia has never articulated the fear that the unfortunate coincidence

led to Olga's death—but as Amá articulates it now, Julia fears that it is true.

Ironically, in speaking to Julia vindictively and out of anger, Amá is adopting the very behavior she most resents in her youngest daughter.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☝☝ Connor's house has a giant wraparound porch and enormous windows. It's as big as our entire apartment building. Part of me wonders if I should go back home. I feel nervous and start tugging at my hair.

Related Characters: Julia Reyes (speaker), Connor

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 196


Explanation and Analysis

As Julia visits the home of her wealthy white boyfriend Connor in the affluent Chicago suburb of Evanston for the first time, she is overwhelmed by the manicured lawns and sprawling facades of the homes in the neighborhood. Julia really likes Connor, but throughout their relationship, she's been feeling a deep insecurity that he'll learn the truth of her poverty-stricken background or see her parents' roach-infested apartment. Julia is going over to Connor's house presumably to have sex with him—his parents, he's told her, are out of town for the weekend—but it's not losing her virginity that Julia's most nervous about. She's made uncomfortable by the displays of wealth all around her—reminders that she and Connor, however much they care for one another, are from completely different backgrounds. Julia has been keeping the truth of how poor her family is a secret from him, but she's afraid that now that their relationship is moving into a new stage, he'll soon discover how she really lives.

☝☝ I walk toward the ice-skating rink as the sky begins to darken. I wish I had a few dollars for a cup of hot chocolate, but I barely have enough to get back on the bus. I'm tired of being broke. I'm tired of feeling like the rest of the world always gets to decide what I can do. I know I should go back home, but I can't seem to move. I can't keep going like this anymore. What is the point of living if I can't ever get what I want?

Related Characters: Julia Reyes (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 210

Explanation and Analysis

This passage represents one of the lowest points emotionally in the novel—Julia, grounded after her mother found Olga's lingerie in her bedroom, deprived of her phone, and having had Amá ransack and destroy her beloved journal, wanders around downtown Chicago in defiance of her curfew, wishing she could buy herself a snack—she's always hungry, but almost never has enough money for food. Julia is at the end of her rope—the grief, clashes with her parents, secrets she's keeping on her dead sister's behalf, and crippling poverty her whole family is subjected to are all beginning to be too much for her. Julia has no idea what to do, or how she'll ever manage to achieve her dreams when things seem so bleak. What Julia does next—attempt suicide—will change the course of her year, and indeed her life.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☝☝ What if I'm wrong about my sister? What if she was the sweet, boring Olga I always knew her to be? What if I just want to think there was something below the surface? What if, in my own messed-up way, I want her to be less than perfect, so I didn't feel like such a fuck-up?

Related Characters: Julia Reyes (speaker), Olga Reyes

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 237

Explanation and Analysis

As Julia searches for information about her sister Olga, she keeps coming up against dead end after dead end. Conversations with Olga's friends, internet searches, and trips to a hotel Olga may have frequented as well as her community college's registrar office all leave Julia feeling just as in the dark as she ever has. As Julia stops her rabid, ravenous searching for a moment to consider what the goals of her amateur investigation are, she wonders what her true motivation is. She is beginning to second-guess herself, and it occurs to her that perhaps her search is more out of spite than out of a desire to truly understand her sister better. Julia realizes that perhaps she wants to

dismantle Olga's "perfect" image so that her own failures seem less painful or serious in comparison. Julia has always wanted the love and respect Olga had in life—but doesn't want to do the things a "perfect Mexican daughter" does, like stay close to home, learn how to cook, and get married and make babies. Julia wants to expose Julia so that her parents can stop holding her to such an impossibly high standard—a standard that Julia believes Olga herself never even truly met.

●● How could I have been so dumb not to notice anything? But then again, how would anyone have known? Olga kept this sealed up and buried like an ancient tomb. My whole life I've been considered the bad daughter, while my sister was secretly living another life, the kind of life that would shatter Amá into tiny pieces. I don't want to be mad at Olga because she's dead, but I am.

Related Characters: Julia Reyes (speaker), Amá/Amparo Montenegro Reyes, Olga Reyes

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 240

Explanation and Analysis

After Julia does indeed discover incriminating emails on Olga's computer—emails that reveal Olga had been having an affair with a married man for years and years—she realizes that she was right all along. As the information soaks in, she wonders how Olga was so good at fooling everyone around her—and why Julia hasn't been able to put on the same "perfect" façade her sister was able to wear so well. Julia is full of renewed anger and resentment at the fact that Olga got away with her bad behavior right under their parents' noses—while every mistake Julia makes is discovered right away and held against her in unfair ways. Julia knows it's wrong to be mad at her dead sister—but she can't help but to feel an intense resentment over the unequal, unfair way the two of them have been measured against one another for years.

Chapter 22 Quotes

●● My body feels like it weighs a thousand pounds. I picture my mother's face streaked with tears and dirt, my father bowing his head in defeat. "And Olga? What about Olga? She was . . . She was ..." I can't get the words out.

Tía Fermina clasps her hands to her chest and nods. "See, mija, that's why I want you to know. So when you and your mother fight, you can see where she's come from and understand what's happened to her. She doesn't mean to hurt you."

Related Characters: Tía Fermina, Julia Reyes (speaker), Apá/Rafael Reyes, Amá/Amparo Montenegro Reyes, Olga Reyes

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 274-275

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Julia's Tía Fermina—her mother's sister—has just revealed a devastating secret about Amá. After asking about Amá and Julia's relationship and hearing that Julia resents her mother for being so overprotective, Fermina attempts to explain the truth—and in the process, divulges that while Amá and Apá were crossing the border years ago, Amá was raped at gunpoint by the coyote leading them across the desert while Apá was forced to look on. This fact also means that Olga was not Apá's daughter, but a product of the rape Amá suffered. This secret—known to other members of the family, but kept from Olga and Julia for years—rocks Julia to her core. It also, however, explains a lot of Amá's overprotective behavior towards Julia and overt doting on Olga as a way of compensating for the awful truth lurking just below the surface. Julia is already keeping Olga's secrets—and is now burdened with yet another huge, terrible secret. She is learning that secrets are everywhere—and that keeping them is, sometimes, a kindness.

●● The sun begins to set as we finally approach the city. The colors are so beautiful they're almost violent. I feel a pang in my chest and remember a line from a poem I read a long time ago about terror being the beginning of beauty. Or something like that. I don't quite remember.

There's a dead donkey in a field behind a barbwire fence. Its legs are bent and stiff, and its mouth is open, as if it had been smiling when it died. Two vultures circle above it.


Related Characters: Julia Reyes (speaker)

Related Themes: **Page Number:** 281**Explanation and Analysis**

As Julia's bus to the airport in Mexico City approaches the city's boundaries, she looks out in the desert and is shocked by the competing beauty and violence she takes in. Julia has just spent several weeks with her family in Mexico—and though there have been many beautiful, tranquil nights spent braiding hair and sipping hibiscus tea, there have also been the revelation of terrible family secrets and devastating gang violence in the streets just beyond Julia's grandmother's home. Julia is coming to see that there is beauty in even terrifying things, and vice versa. This lesson is tied in intimately with the things she's learning about secrets and lies—things aren't always as they seem, and many gray moral truths can exist at once.

Chapter 23 Quotes

☹☹ I can't look at Amá without thinking about the border. I keep picturing her screaming on the ground, Apá with a gun to his head. I don't think I can ever tell her that I know. But how do we live with these secrets locked within us? How do we tie our shoes, brush our hair, drink coffee, wash the dishes, and go to sleep, pretending everything is fine? How do we laugh and feel happiness despite the buried things growing inside? How can we do that day after day?

Related Characters: Julia Reyes (speaker), Apá/Rafael Reyes, Amá/Amparo Montenegro Reyes**Related Themes:** **Page Number:** 284-285**Explanation and Analysis**

After returning from Mexico with the knowledge of Amá's terrible secret about what she endured at the border crossing, Julia finds herself in a strange situation. Part of her feels closer to her mother—she understands her and her motivations more intimately now—but another part of her feels more estranged from the woman than ever, unsure of how to even make eye contact without letting the truth of what she now knows pour out. The final chapters of the novel are largely concerned with the theme of what it means to keep a secret or tell a lie—and whether the secrets one keeps and the lies one tells can actually be forces of good. Julia is learning that to be an adult is to have to reckon “day after day” with these hard truths and complicated

ideas—and she is going to have to figure out how to find happiness, fulfillment, and peace without telling the secrets that threaten to tear her family asunder.

Chapter 24 Quotes

☹☹ “I understand that it hurts, believe me, but this isn't about you. [...] Why would you want to cause your family more pain? “Because we shouldn't be living lies,” I say. [...] “I'm tired of pretending and letting things blister inside me. Keeping things to myself almost killed me. I don't want to live like that anymore.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Forget it.” Part of me wonders if Angie is right—who am I to do this to my family?—but I hate this feeling, like the weight of this will make my chest collapse.

Angie wipes the tears from her eyes with her palms. “Some things should never be said out loud, Julia. Can't you see that?”

Related Characters: Julia Reyes, Angie (speaker), Apá/Rafael Reyes, Amá/Amparo Montenegro Reyes, Olga Reyes**Related Themes:**   **Page Number:** 295-296**Explanation and Analysis**

After finding out the truth about Olga's affair and pregnancy, Julia confronts her sisters best friend Angie to find out what she knew. Angie, it turns out, knew about everything all along—and was the keeper of Olga's darkest secrets. Now Julia and Angie are bonded together in this lonely knowledge—and though Julia tells Angie she doesn't want to be any part of keeping Olga's lies locked up forever, Angie insists that “some things should never be said out loud.” Julia is dealing, too, with the revelation of several of her parents' deep dark secrets—and now, as the unhappy keeper of their darkest truths, must admit that perhaps Angie is right. Julia is learning a complicated lesson, and for sure the book's most potent message: that things are not always as they seem, and that sometimes keeping a painful or dangerous secret inside is the largest sacrifice and deepest kindness one can do for another person.

Chapter 26 Quotes

☝ “What do I do with this?” I say to myself aloud. “How do I bury this, too?”

“What do you mean?”



“I mean, how am I going to keep this secret? Why do I have to be the one living with this shit?”

“Please, don’t tell your parents. Olga never wanted to hurt them.”

“Why wouldn’t I? And why should I listen to you?”

“Sometimes it’s best not to tell the truth.”

Related Characters: Dr. Castillo, Julia Reyes (speaker), Apá/Rafael Reyes, Amá/Amparo Montenegro Reyes, Olga Reyes

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 312



Explanation and Analysis

After discovering that Olga was not only having an affair at the time of her death, but was pregnant when she died, Julia tracks down and confronts Dr. Castillo, Olga’s lover. As he tells her how much he loved her sister, and assures Julia that he did plan to leave his wife for her, Julia can’t pay attention to his simpering claims—she can only focus on the burden that has been laid upon her shoulders, and the double-bind she finds herself in. To keep the secret to herself would be to strain herself when she’s already dealing with so much—but to tell her parents would be to shatter their image of their “perfect” daughter and perhaps estrange herself from them even more. Dr. Castillo urges Julia to keep Olga’s secret—he tries to explain to her how complicated adult relationships are, and how sometimes, in spite of how it may seem, the truth is only a weapon that wounds.

Chapter 27 Quotes

☝ There are times the secrets feel like strangling vines. Is it considered lying when you hold something locked up inside you? What if the information would only cause people pain? Who would benefit from knowing about Olga’s affair and pregnancy? Is it kind or selfish for me to keep this all to myself? Would it be messed up if I said it just so I don’t have to live with it alone? It’s exhausting.

Related Characters: Julia Reyes (speaker), Olga Reyes

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 314

Explanation and Analysis

As Julia considers all the secrets she’s been tasked with keeping—the truth about Olga’s affair and pregnancy, about Amá and Apá’s violent border crossing, about Olga’s true parentage—she wonders whether they will one day strangle her like “vines.” Julia feels boxed in by the truth rather than freed by it—but at the same time, knows that to share the burden with others might be too cruel for her to do. Julia must consider seriously deep moral gray areas now for the first time in her life—she wonders what the more “selfish” thing to do is. There’s no easy answer, but Julia is slowly coming to understand that this “exhaustion,” too, is part of adult life. The novel itself ultimately suggests that it is “kind[er]” to keep painful truths inside—and the loudmouth Julia has had to learn this lesson several times on a smaller scale through her interactions with Milagros, Lorena, Juanga, and others in order to become fully prepared to keep the bigger secrets which threaten to tear her family apart.

Chapter 28 Quotes

☝ “She opened the vault, the box in which she kept herself—old filmstrips of her life, her truth. Broken feathers, crushed mirrors creating a false gleam. She takes it all apart, every moment, every lie, every deception. Everything stops: snapshots of serenity, beauty, bliss, surface. Things she must dig for in her mesh of uncertainty, in her darkness, though it still lies in the wetness of her mouth, the scent of her hair. She digs and digs in that scarlet box on the day of her unraveling, the day she comes undone.”

Related Characters: Julia Reyes (speaker), Dr. Cooke

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 330-331

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is part of a poem Julia shares with her therapist, Dr. Cooke, in their last session together before Julia heads off to college. Julia and Dr. Cooke have discussed everything plaguing Julia—her relationship with Connor, her struggles with her mother, the distance she feels from her father, the secrets about Olga and her

parents she's been forced to keep locked inside. As Julia reads this poem out loud, its title—"Pandora," a reference to the girl of Greek myth who opened a mysterious box and released evil, sin, greed, and more into the world—and the lines it contains reveal a new side to Julia. Though Julia has struggled with the pressure to keep her family's secrets, and has felt regret over the ravenous digging she did to get to many of them, she reveals through this poem that she knows it is only through this incessant digging that she has been able to understand the hardest parts of her own personality.


Chapter 29 Quotes

☝ How can I leave them like this? How can I just live my life and leave them behind? What kind of person does that? Will I ever forgive myself?

"We love you, Julia. We love you so much," Amá says, and presses some money into my hand. "Para si se te antoja algo," she says, in case I crave something when I get to New York. "Remember you can come back whenever you want."

Related Characters: Amá/Amparo Montenegro Reyes, Julia Reyes (speaker), Apá/Rafael Reyes

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 


Page Number: 338

Explanation and Analysis

As Julia says goodbye to her parents at the airport on her way to New York to attend NYU, she is overcome with grief, guilt, and regret. All Julia has wanted for so long is to get out of Chicago—away from her mother's strict, overbearing presence and out from under the thumb of the chronic poverty their family has endured for years. At the moment she's finally "free," though, Julia realizes that perhaps her parents have always genuinely loved and wanted to understand her—maybe they weren't her antagonists all along. This is symbolized by Amá giving Julia money for a snack when she lands in New York—for much of the novel, and years before its start, Amá has criticized Julia's ravenous appetite and junky eating habits. Now, though, she accepts her daughter as she is—and wants her to be the version of herself she is rather than some false "perfect" idea of a daughter.

☝ I still have nightmares about Olga. Sometimes she's a mermaid again, other times she's holding her baby, which is often not a baby at all. Usually, it's a rock, a fish, or even a sack of rags. Though it's slowed, my guilt still grows like branches. I wonder when it'll stop, feeling bad for something that's not my fault. Who knows? Maybe never.

Related Characters: Julia Reyes (speaker), Olga Reyes

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 339

Explanation and Analysis

As Julia boards her flight to New York, she finds herself feeling wistful for all she's leaving behind. She's made it to the future she's always dreamed of—but at the same time, now that she's here, it doesn't look the way she thought it would. She's burdened by Olga's secret, and even her subconscious can't escape the truth only she, Angie, and Dr. Castillo carry each day. It's unclear whether Julia will ever tell her parents the truth about Olga, or whether doing so will even accomplish the goal of putting an end to the "guilt" she feels about keeping the secret. What is clear is that Julia no longer feels like the pressure of the secret is going to buckle her—she has come to understand that sometimes lies are merciful, and the truth will only cause deeper wounds.

☝ I pull out Olga's ultrasound picture from my journal before we land. At times, it looks like an egg. Occasionally, it looks like an eye. The other day I was convinced I could see it pulsing. How can I ever give this to my parents, something else to love, something dead? These last two years I combed and delved through my sister's life to better understand her, which meant I learned to find pieces of myself—both beautiful and ugly—and how amazing is it that I hold a piece of her right here in my hands?

Related Characters: Julia Reyes (speaker), Apá/Rafael Reyes, Amá/Amparo Montenegro Reyes, Olga Reyes

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 340

Explanation and Analysis

As Julia's plane to New York begins its descent and Julia is able to peek out at the city's iconic skyline, she is full of apprehension and excitement about what her life will soon hold. In spite of all the hardships and obstacles she's dealt

with in the last two years, she has made it to New York like she always dreamed she would—and yet the achievement of her goals is shadowed by the weight of the secrets she’s learned. As Julia wonders how she should approach this new stage of her life, and how it will be affected by the things she’s keeping inside, she realizes that her journey

over the last two years hasn’t been about Olga after all. In trying to get to know her dead sister, Julia has really come to know herself: what kind of woman she is, what kind of choices she makes in desperate times, and how she will gracefully, bravely bear the very grown-up burdens she’s become saddled with.



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

Julia Reyes and her family are attending the funeral of Julia's older sister, Olga. As Julia peers into her sister's casket, she is surprised by the "lingering smirk" on Olga's face, a smirk which stands in contrast to the "meek and fragile" disposition Olga displayed in life. Olga is dressed in an "unstylish" floral frock representative of her typical matronly look—though Olga died at just twenty-two, she was always dressed like she was "either four or eighty years old." Julia feels that the pretty Olga wasted her beauty—and her body—and, pretty much, her whole life. Olga lived at home, worked part-time in a medical office, and took just one class each semester at a local community college, making few friends and dedicating her days to spending time with her and Julia's parents instead.

Julia, who dreams of being a famous writer, was both jealous of and confused by the saint-like Olga while she lived—Olga was "the perfect Mexican daughter," while Julia is far from this ideal. Julia is snapped from her mean thoughts about her sister by her Amá pushing past her and wailing, screaming "my daughter" over and over in Spanish as she "practically climbs inside the casket." Julia, exhausted, sighs and waits for her mother to "tire herself out." She wishes she could comfort her mother, but their strained relationship doesn't really allow for that sort of thing. Olga has always been the favorite daughter, while Julia has always been the odd one out.

Julia isn't alone in being unable to express emotion about Olga's death—her father, Apá, also hasn't cried yet. Julia insists that she feels a deep grief, but her body won't let her shed tears for some reason. Julia knows her grief is just going to "build until [she] explode[s] like a piñata." As aunts and uncles rush forward to comfort Amá, Julia can't help but feel skeptical and bored—"Once you're dead," she thinks, "you're dead."

The opening passage of the book shows Julia, the protagonist, in a state of mourning—but Julia's grief doesn't look or feel the way one might expect it to. Julia both laments her sister's wasted potential in life and demonstrates the jealousy she feels, seeing Olga's "smirk" as a direct commentary on the ways in which Julia doesn't measure up to her sister, and perhaps never will.



Julia is surprisingly unemotional about her sister's death—or at least unable to properly express what she's feeling. She seems almost jealous that her sister, even in death, is still the sole focus of their mother's emotions and attention.



Julia admits here that she misses Olga and has strong feelings about her death—but her stoic personality and her desire not to make a spectacle of herself overwhelm whatever's stirring beneath the surface.



Julia thinks back on the day Olga died, wishing she had been able to keep her sister from leaving the house. The day was boring and uneventful like any other: Julia went through the motions at school, cheekily faking a lie about her period to get out of swimming in the disgusting pool during gym class and getting sent to the principal for replying to her skeptical teacher by offering to let the teacher “check” her for proof. Julia’s frequent trips to the principal’s office always result in scoldings—and groundings—from Amá, who doesn’t understand why her once-obedient daughter has become a troublemaker who enjoys living “la mala vida”—the bad life.

Because Julia got in trouble at school and had to be picked up by Amá on the day of Olga’s death, Olga had to take the bus home from school rather than get picked up—then, while transferring buses, Olga walked across the street looking at her phone and was hit by a huge semi truck. Olga was killed almost instantly, and two witnesses said she was smiling down at her phone when she was run down.

Julia can hear her aunts whispering about her, and is relieved when her best friend, Lorena, shows up. Though Amá thinks Lorena is wild and slutty—which Julia admits she is—Lorena has been Julia’s best friend since grade school. The two are vastly different now, but still inseparable, and as she embraces Julia she whispers words of support and solidarity before “shooting eye-daggers” at Julia’s nosy aunts. As Julia looks at the back of the room, she sees a man she doesn’t recognize sitting there and crying. Julia assumes the man is a distant uncle or cousin. Julia briefly wonders who the man could be, but is distracted when Olga’s best friend Angie enters the room, wailing and “howling” in grief. Julia wishes she could comfort Angie, but “never” knows what the right thing to say is.

CHAPTER 2

After Olga’s funeral, Amá doesn’t leave her bed for nearly two weeks. She only gets up to go to the bathroom and eat stale pastries from the funeral. Her behavior begins to worry Julia—Amá is usually clean and put-together, no matter the circumstances. Apá, meanwhile, continues working all day every day, and comes home to sit silently on the sofa with a beer. He never communicates his feelings to Julia, and has barely even spoken to her since the funeral.

Julia is opinionated and a hothead with a fiery tongue. She’s often in trouble, even though her transgressions are relatively minor. Julia feels she should be able to express herself in the ways she wants to, and feels intellectually superior to those around her. These aren’t bad or dangerous traits and behaviors, per se, but the more Julia resists the molds people try to put her in, the more difficult her life gets.



Julia understands that in a roundabout way, her most recent transgression impacted her sister’s life in terrible, irrevocable ways. This fact pains her, but she doesn’t seem to let the full emotional weight of the coincidence hit her.



This passage shows how out of place and alone Julia feels within her own family—she thinks everyone is antagonizing her all the time for her differences. She finds comfort in Lorena, whom her mother dislikes—though Lorena and Julia have been best friends for years, there’s something about Lorena’s wild ways that allows Julia to embrace her own rebellious side. Even though Julia feels better than everyone around her, this passage also shows that she does feel a twinge of regret over the fact that she also feels distant and is never able to comfort anyone, to fit in, or to use the right words.



Julia’s parents are clearly taking Olga’s death terribly hard. Julia is almost jealous, as she wants them to show up for her—but their grief overwhelms everything, and leaves Julia feeling more alone than ever.



The Reyes's roach-infested apartment on the south side of Chicago has fallen into particularly bad shape over the last couple of weeks, and there is hardly any food in the house. Julia tries to **cook** for herself, but can't even make beans right—she's never learned how to cook, out of fear of becoming “a submissive Mexican wife” who does nothing but clean and prepare meals.

One afternoon, Julia peeks into her mother's room and asks if she's planning on eating or taking a shower. Amá yells at Julia for being “suddenly concerned with cleanliness,” remarking that Olga was always “the clean one.” Julia flatly states that Olga is gone before taking five dollars from her mother's wallet and leaving the apartment. In addition to a ghost sister, she thinks, she has a ghost father and a ghost mother. At a nearby taco shop, Julia orders some **food** and eats ravenously, wolfing down three tacos and a large horchata in minutes.

When Julia arrives home, her mother is sitting in the kitchen sipping some tea, freshly showered. Julia is shocked when Amá—who always demands to know her whereabouts—doesn't ask Julia where she's been. Julia is even more shocked when her mother announces that Julia is going to have a **quinceañera**—a traditional party which marks the entry of fifteen-year-old Latina girls into womanhood. Julia is confused—she's already nearly sixteen. When she brings this up as a way of protesting against the party, Amá replies that she is full of regret that she never got to give Olga a quincé—and isn't going to make the same mistake twice. Julia insists she doesn't want the party or any of the frivolous celebrations that come with it, but Amá's will is solid—she tells Julia not to say a bad word against the idea, threatening to “break [her] teeth.”

Whenever Julia can't sleep lately, she gets out of her own bed and goes to crawl into Olga's, even though Amá has forbidden her from entering her sister's room. Julia is comforted by Olga's familiar scent, which lingers in the bedclothes. As she lies there, her thoughts swirl around in her head: she is afraid of not getting into college and being stuck in her working-class neighborhood forever. Julia tries to distract herself with a **book**, but even reading—her favorite activity—doesn't work. Julia spies a picture of her and Olga on vacation in Mexico at their grandmother Mamá Jacinta's house—they used to go together every summer. Julia studies the picture, wondering who her sister really was, and realizing that maybe she didn't know her at all.

Julia is constantly hungry—a symbol of her restlessness and ambition—but hasn't learned to cook as a way of rebelling against her mother. Julia is trying to overcome the cycles and gender roles which permeate her community and family, but in the end, she's really cheating herself out of a lot of experiences and a connection to her family and cultural traditions.



Julia is lonely and restless, with no one to talk to or to comfort her. She's angry at her parents for emotionally abandoning her, and is clearly ready for the grieving period to be over. Her strained interactions with her family often lead to her voraciously eating—a symbol of her thwarted desire for more than she is allowed to have.



Though Julia is off-put and even disgusted by the idea of a lavish, indulgent quince party, Amá insists on making one happen for Julia since she never could for Olga. Julia resents not only the wasteful party, but the fact that it's not even being thrown out of love for her, and rather Amá's lingering regrets about Olga. Julia is second-best to her sister, even after Olga's death, and the constant reminder of this fact makes her feel hurt, angry, and unloved. This interaction points to the circular struggle between Julia and her parents: they want to make her be something she isn't, which leads her to rebel.



Julia does miss Olga, and is in the process of grieving: she just shows it differently. She regrets not having gotten to know Olga better or trying to be closer to her while she still had the chance. Julia is left with a ton of questions about who Olga was and what she wanted—they were close, this passage and the picture it describes shows, in their youth, but never really understood each other as young women.



Olga has always been the favorite, taking their mother's side in arguments—of which there have always been many, because of Julia's contrarian views and feisty personality. Stuck in a thought spiral about all the ways in which she's failed to measure up to Olga, Julia turns over and tries to sleep—but as she lays her head on the pillow, she feels something poking her. She reaches into the pillow case and pulls out a note scrawled on a sticky note bearing the name of a prescription: the note says "I love you." Julia's mind begins racing. She knows that Olga hasn't had a boyfriend since she dated a skinny, wimpy guy back in high school.

Julia gets out of bed and begins going through Olga's closet. She finds old pictures and clothes stuffed in boxes—but in one box, finds a cache of sexy underwear. Julia is scandalized, and knows that if their mother ever found these things, she would "flip the hell out." Julia begins searching for Olga's laptop, and eventually finds it under the mattress. She becomes frustrated when she can't guess Olga's password, and goes back to looking through Olga's things. In her sister's dresser she finds a hotel key card from a hotel called The Continental. Angie, Julia knows, works at a hotel—but not The Continental. As she hears sounds of someone waking up, Julia flicks off the light, stashes the laptop, and gets into bed.

In the morning, Julia wakes up in Olga's bed. She panics, knowing that if she gets caught in the room she'll be in trouble. She hurriedly makes the bed and tiptoes back to her own room—but as she twists the knob, she hears her mother come up behind her. Full of dread, Julia turns to face Amá, who has her hands on her hips and looks deeply angry.

CHAPTER 3

Julia has been grounded for going into Olga's room—Amá took away her phone and has forbidden her from closing her bedroom door. Julia has protested, saying she needs privacy, but Amá only scoffs at the concept of privacy. Amá has also installed a lock on Olga's bedroom door—a lock to which Julia, despite looking everywhere, cannot find the key. Julia has taken to daydreaming nonstop about living a life away from her parents in Paris or New York, but is always snapped back to her reality—which feels to her like a "living death." Julia hates her mother entirely lately, and wonders if something is wrong with her for feeling such intense feelings.

The discovery of the first piece of a larger puzzle about Olga sends Julia down a rabbit hole which will consume her over the course of the novel. She already has regrets about not knowing her sister better, and about failing to live up to Olga's example. Finding dirt on Olga, then, is both a way for Julia to make herself feel better about her own failures, and to learn her sister's private secrets—though what Julia will learn about herself in the process will be more important than the truth about Olga.



As Julia finds more and more incriminating things in her sister's room, she is excited and overwhelmed. There is a whole side to Olga she never bothered to see, having assumed her sister was boring and perfect—and Olga skillfully maintained the façade for years, a fact that surely makes the trouble-prone Julia even more jealous.



Even though Olga is dead, For Amá the preservation of Olga's things—and the perfect vision of her Amá always had—is more important than Julia's grief.



Julia is indignant about being punished so severely for the simple act of going into Olga's room. She is full of anger towards her mother and longs to escape—she wants to get out from under her mother's thumb, away from the poverty that defines their lives, and escape the perfect image of Olga which lives on in Amá's mind, making it impossible for Julia to ever do anything right. The locked room is another indication of the way that Amá tries to protect her idea of what is right by maternal force, and her continued focus on Olga at the expense of Julia.



As the school year begins, the only class Julia really enjoys or succeeds in is English, which is taught by the “dorky” but kind Mr. Ingman. Mr. Ingman encourages the students to think about how they express themselves through language—and understand that language can be a tool that can help them empower themselves and get ahead in life.

Lately, Julia never knows whether Amá will, on any given day, be in a good mood or a bad one. One Saturday morning, Amá shouts for Julia to wake up early and help out in the kitchen, where Amá is making **tortillas**. Julia begrudgingly begins helping, but struggles to form the dough into circles and even burns a couple on the stove. Eventually Amá kicks Julia out of the kitchen, telling her she can’t be a real woman if she can’t make a tortilla.

On the day her grounding is lifted, Julia decides to go downtown to The Continental after school to look for some answers about Olga’s connection to it. Julia dresses flamboyantly and feistily for the day in fishnets and Chuck Taylors. Instead of focusing on the lecture, she drifts off in math class, writing poems in the leather journal Olga gave her the previous Christmas. When her math teacher calls on her to answer a question, Julia admits she hasn’t been paying attention. Her teacher commands her to come up to the board and solve the problem. Feeling trapped and embarrassed, Julia picks up her backpack and leaves class—and then heads off-campus altogether and catches a bus into Chicago.

Julia is **hungry** and stops at a diner. She only has eight dollars in her pocket, and though she’s ravenous, resigns herself to a coffee and a danish. When the waitress asks Julia why she’s not in school, she vents about math class—and her sister’s death. When it’s time for Julia to pay the check, the waitress tells her it’s already been taken care of by a fellow patron who overheard their conversation.

Julia heads to The Continental, where she shows the front desk associate a picture of Olga and asks whether the staff has ever seen her in the hotel before. The concierge says that hotel staff aren’t allowed to give out any information about guests, and though Julia begs them to tell her, no one will offer her anything. When Julia asks if the hotel is connected to the Skyline—the hotel where Olga’s friend Angie works—the associate reveals that they’re owned by the same parent conglomerate.

Words are important to Julia, a voracious reader who loves to argue. Finding herself in Mr. Ingman’s class gives her hope that at least some part of her year will be educational and joyful, and allow her to escape even if for just a little while.



Julia loves food—but resents being asked to make it. She sees preparing food as a part of femininity she doesn’t want to participate in—a duty meant to trap her rather than a skill meant to allow her to fend for herself and be even more independent. This complex relationship to food mirrors her complex relationship to her own past and community, which is something that helps define her but which she primarily sees as a something she wants and needs to escape.



Julia can’t stop getting in trouble—she’s too restless and snarky for her own good. The same day her last punishment ends, she puts herself in danger of earning a new one by talking back in class and then ditching school. Julia feels too good for everything around her, and doesn’t know how to cope with the feelings of entrapment she has deep inside of her. She escapes; she never engages.



Julia’s hunger crops up at moments where she’s feeling particularly fired-up, frustrated, or restless. After the confrontation with her math teacher, she’s all three. The other patron paying her bill shows how others can recognize Julia’s legitimate pain—but at this point those others are strangers, which only highlights the way her own loved ones fail to see it.



Julia wants to find out the truth about her sister—but this encounter at the hotel is just the first of many dead ends she’ll run into. How deep and how far she wants to go will be tested in the weeks and months to come as more and more people resist giving her information about her sister.



Julia leaves the hotel, but before going home, decides to stop at the art museum to see her favorite painting—*Judith Slaying Holofernes*. This is her fourth time this year visiting the painting, and Julia loves that every time she's come to see it, she's noticed something new about it. Julia wishes she could stay in the museum forever, and looks forward to the day when she can run around Paris looking at art and **eating cheese** until she bursts.

As Julia rides home on the crowded train, she delights in looking at all the different people and train performers. She gives money to a homeless woman, and feels so happy to be out in the real world that she doesn't even care that she'll probably be in big trouble with Amá when she gets back home.

Looking at her favorite painting enlivens Julia in a moment of sorrow and reconnects her to her dreams. In spite of her rebelliousness and anger, Julia is a sensitive soul, and she dreams of the freedom to run at her desires without being impeded by forces beyond her control.



Julia wants to get out of Chicago—badly—but at the same time has a genuine love for her city and the slice of life it offers her. Giving money to the homeless woman also shows Julia's empathy—she has so little, but she feels for people who have even less.



CHAPTER 4

On Saturday afternoon, Julia tells Amá that she's going to the library to study—but secretly heads for Angie's house instead. She's called Angie several times, but her sister's best friend won't return her calls. Julia hopes that Angie can tell her something about Olga that she doesn't know. As she walks down the street, she laments the chilly weather—Julia hates the bitter Chicago winters and the depression they bring. She also thinks about Angie, who is, like Olga was, the perfect Mexican daughter.

At Angie's house, Julia is welcomed inside by Angie's mother, Doña Ramona, who is cooking some **spicy food**. Julia's mouth and eyes water at the smell. Julia sits down in the tackily-decorated living room and waits for Angie—who emerges from her room after several minutes dressed in a ratty bathrobe and looking as if she's been crying. Angie apologizes for her appearance, but Julia lies and tells Angie she looks “as pretty as always.” Julia asks if they can go into Angie's room so that they can talk in private. Angie agrees, and leads her down the hall.

Julia sits down on the bed in Angie's room, the walls of which are covered with photos of her and Olga. Julia immediately begins peppering Angie with questions about Olga—whether Olga was texting Angie when she was hit by the bus, and what her connection to The Continental might be. Angie insists she doesn't know what Julia's talking about, and when Julia brings up all the lingerie she found in Olga's room, Angie accuses Julia of trying to “caus[e] trouble” for everyone. Angie tells Julia that she never cared about her sister's life while she was alive, and is only trying to dredge things about her “love life” up now that she's dead.

Julia is determined to get to the bottom of Olga's secrets—after striking out on her own hasn't proven useful, she decides to go directly to someone who knew Olga well. At the same time, the book never paints Julia's search as being a purely good thing. Instead, it's complicated: a result of Julia's simultaneous desire to know her sister and make herself feel better by revealing her sister's secrets; a hunt for the truth, but also a kind of way of escaping her own pain. Julia is determined in her search, but there is a desperation in the search as well.



Angie is still in the throes of grief. Though Julia—and even her parents—have managed to pull themselves together, Angie's still deeply disturbed. This signals to readers—and to Julia—that she is processing Olga's death in a different way, and perhaps knows something more that's contributing to her hopeless state.



Though Angie professes not to know anything about what Olga may or may not have been up to—and even tries to accuse Julia of cruelty to throw her off the trail—a slip of the tongue clues Julia into the fact that perhaps there was a part of Olga's life that no one but Angie knew about.



Julia is intrigued by Angie's voluntary admission that something was up with Olga's love life, and asks her to say more about it—but Angie becomes upset, and tells Julia she needs to leave. Julia tells Angie that though Angie lost her best friend, Julia lost her sister—and her life “fucking sucks” because of it. Julia storms out of the room, and though Doña Ramona offers that she can stay and have some **food**, she ducks her tear-stained face and heads for the front door.

Julia is frustrated that there's clearly something Angie's hiding from her. She wants to know more about her sister—but because Angie believes that Julia's just trying to make trouble like always, Julia's barred from the thing she wants most (and forced to consider whether Angie's right.) Refusing the offer of food is another instance of Julia failing to connect to her community.



CHAPTER 5

After school one day, Julia calls Amá and lies to her, telling her she needs to stay late to work on a project—when really she's planning on going to Lorena's to do some “internet snooping” about Olga, since there's no internet at the Reyes home. Julia knows that even though she and Lorena have been friends for years, Amá doesn't see the importance of having friends—to Amá, family is the only thing that matters.

Julia is angry that her mother doesn't respect the things she values—exploration, freedom, and friendship—but is determined to get around her mother no matter how much trouble she might get in if caught. The pattern of Amá's overprotectiveness and Julia's resulting rebellion against it is again evident here.



At Lorena's, Julia and Lorena devour a bag of **nacho chips** drenched in hot sauce. Even after finishing the whole thing, Julia remains starving. Even though Apá works in a candy factory, junk food is forbidden in the Reyes house—Julia can only eat junk in secret on the way home from school or at a friend's house.

Julia is ravenous for both food and information as she arrives at Lorena's free to explore the internet and eat however she wants outside the confines of her parents' home.



Julia tells Lorena about the things she found in Olga's room—the lingerie and the hotel key card. Lorena doesn't think the items are such a big deal, but Julia insists that something is “not right.” On Lorena's old, hand-me-down laptop, the girls search the internet for clues about Olga. They can't find any social media profiles for her, though, and soon give up.

Lorena is skeptical of Julia's mission, but because she's Julia's friend, she volunteers to help her anyway. Lorena's skepticism serves to highlight both Julia's determination in finding the truth, but also Julia's desperate desire that there be a secret truth to find.



Julia eyes the altar set up in the corner of Lorena's living room—her mother worships Santa Muerte, a skeleton saint (another reason Amá is so skeptical of Julia hanging out with her best friend.) Lorena's mom is glamorous and always dressed in skintight clothing—her boyfriend, José Luis, is several years her junior. Lorena's father died many years ago in an attempt to cross the US-Mexico border, but Lorena never talks about the incident or her dad.

Julia's home life is sad and often difficult—but Lorena has her own set of struggles, some of them worse or just as bad as Julia's. This forces Julia to see that she's not alone—and also that things in her life could be even worse.



Lorena offers Julia some weed, and Julia accepts. As the weed kicks in, Lorena feels herself growing “light and heavy at the same time,” and she realizes she’s higher than she’s ever been. As the girls laugh and joke together, José Luis walks in the front door from one of his restaurant jobs. Julia is made uncomfortable by his presence—he’s only ten years older than them, and is always asking them personal questions and trying to hang out with them. The girls try to ignore José Luis by watching a reality show set in New York—where Julia hopes she’ll someday live—and eventually fall asleep. When Julia wakes up, she sees that José Luis is crouched in front of her, taking a picture on his phone. She realizes her skirt is up over her hips, and she quickly pulls it down.

The next night, when Amá goes out to her prayer group at church, Julia asks Apá if she can go out with Lorena. The indifferent Apá shrugs, and Julia hurries out the door to wait for Lorena and her new boyfriend Carlos to pick her up. Carlos’s cousin Leo is a cop, and they are going to his house, hopeful he’ll be able to help them track down some information about Olga. When the car pulls up though, Julia sees there is a young guy in the backseat. Lorena introduces him as another of Carlos’s cousins, Ramiro, and states that they’re not going to Leo’s as planned—they’re all going to hang out in the city by the lake instead.

At the lake, Lorena and Carlos run off to have sex, leaving Julia alone with Ramiro, who only speaks Spanish. She laments that though she can passably speak the language, she can’t express herself as well as she can in English. Nevertheless, as she talks and flirts with Ramiro she finds herself having a good time. He asks about her sister and expresses sympathy for Julia’s loss, and then leans in to kiss her. Julia was not expecting to receive her first kiss from a relative stranger, but allows Ramiro to kiss her anyway. Soon, Julia hears hooting and cheering—she turns around to see Carlos and Lorena coming towards her, smiling and congratulating the two of them.

CHAPTER 6

Amá, Apá, and Julia are getting ready to go to Julia’s cousin Victor’s seventh birthday party—a party that Julia believes is just an excuse for Victor’s father, whom she calls Tío Bigotes, and the other men of the family to get together and get drunk. Julia asks if she can stay home and **read**, but Amá insists she come along.

José Luis’s creepiness is, like the predatory nature of so many other men in the book, something that’s just a given for the women they prey upon. Julia is learning that, for many men, her body is a commodity to be scrutinized and appraised—something that further contributes to her feelings of entrapment and helplessness even outside of her parents’ home. The behavior of José Luis and other men toward Julia foreshadows the biggest secret to be revealed later in the book, and also suggests to the reader (if not to Julia) that Amá’s overprotectiveness is not entirely without justification.



Julia is so desperate to find any new information about Olga that she’s grasping at straws—here she runs into yet another dead end. Lorena would rather set Julia up on a date and encourage her to have some fun than fan the flames of her Olga obsession. Julia’s focus is on her dead sister; Lorena’s focus is on her living friend.



Wild-child Lorena celebrates Julia’s first kiss, grateful that her friend is stepping out of her box, connecting with someone, and focusing on something other than her obsessive grief over Olga’s death.



Julia would rather escape into the world of books than deal with her boisterous, nosy family. She’s disdainful and contemptuous of them, and in spite of her parents’ attempts to get her to connect with her family, she only wants to retreat further into herself. Often novels portray such bookishness as purely virtuous, and this novel certainly sees value in it as well. But the novel also shows the way that such bookishness is an escape, and how that escape cuts off possibilities of connection.



Tío Bigotes's house smells, and Julia is overwhelmed by the number of children running wildly in and out of the house. Amá forces Julia to greet and kiss every one of her relatives hello—even Tío Cayetano, who used to stick his finger in Julia's mouth when no one was looking. The last time he did it, she was twelve, and she bit him—hard. After Julia gorges herself on some **party food**, one of her aunts, Tía Milagros—a mean gossip—congratulates her on being such a good eater. Julia thinks about how no one in the family used to tease Olga the way they tease her.

Julia watches her cousin Vanessa—who, at sixteen, is barely a year older than Julia herself—feed her infant child. Julia pities Vanessa, and looks away. She heads outside to greet some cousins, Freddy and Alicia—Freddy is the only member of the family who has gone to college, and his girlfriend Alicia works at a prestigious theater company in the city. Freddy and Alicia tell Julia about their travels around the world, and ask her what she's thinking about doing for college—they offer to help her with anything she needs for her application.

Julia heads back inside, where she sits on the sofa and begins **reading *The Catcher in the Rye***. Amá often yells at her for reading at parties, but Julia is able to read for a full half hour before being interrupted by Apá, Tío Bigotes, and Tío Cayetano, who reminisce about their lives in Mexico as they get drunk on tequila. The men call her over to harass her about her book, her quince, and her poor Spanish. Julia reels with shame, unsure of what to say, until Bigotes stands up and waddles to the bathroom where he begins audibly retching.

That night, Julia has an upsetting dream in which she's back in Mexico at Mamá Jacinta's house—but the house is on fire, and when Julia jumps into a nearby river to escape, she sees a mermaid version of Olga who keeps swimming away from her.

There are creepy men everywhere in Julia's world—even within her own family. Surprisingly, though, Cayetano's predatory nature rankles Julia less than her gossip aunt does, showing just how used to and unfazed by unwanted male attention she is.



Vanessa and Freddy represent two paths: the path of binding oneself to family, motherhood, and domesticity, and the path of academic and cultural education and independence. Julia wants what Freddy has—and is terrified of ending up like Vanessa. Nonetheless, it's interesting that over the course of the books she never takes Freddy up on his offer. Her disconnection from other people—especially her family—seems to apply even to those who are purely and generously trying to help her.



*Julia wants to escape her overwhelming family—even a pleasant conversation with Freddy stresses her out. Even books, though, don't allow her to escape for long in the face of her family's antics. Also notable here is Julia's choice of book. In *Catcher*, the protagonist Holden Caulfield sees himself as superior to others (everyone else is phony, to him), and ends up in a mental breakdown. The novel here is foreshadowing how Julia's own judgmental isolation is pointing her down the same path.*



Julia fears she'll never catch up with the truth about Olga, and will remain in pursuit of her sister's secrets all her life. Interestingly, the same dream also seems to imply that she senses the way that her connection to her past—her grandmother's house in Mexico—is also becoming lost to her.



CHAPTER 7

At school, Lorena has made a new friend—a boy who is “gay as a rainbow-colored unicorn.” The boy goes by the nickname Juanga, and Julia hates him immediately. In history class, Lorena tells Julia that Juanga has invited them to a big masquerade ball in downtown Chicago—it’s going to be huge, and Lorena wants to go. Julia refuses, blaming her overprotective mother. Lorena passes Julia a surprisingly well-forged permission slip for an overnight field trip on school letterhead, telling Julia that if she misses the party, she’s going to be sorry.

Julia brings the fake permission slip home to Amá, who tells Julia she can’t go on the trip without even looking at the form. Julia begs her to just take a look at it, but Amá replies that Julia, who can’t even “make a **tortilla**,” is not ready for “grown-up” things. Furious, Julia complains about never being able to get out of their “stupid neighborhood.” Amá vindictively states that Olga never felt the need to go out and see the world—she was content at home. Crying, Julia stalks off to her room.

On Friday night—the night of the masquerade—Julia reads in the living room until her parents are asleep, and then stuffs pillows into her bed and sneaks out to meet Juanga and Lorena on the street. When Juanga pulls up, he tells Julia that though he doesn’t have a driver’s license, he’ll get them to the party in one piece.

At the party in a large warehouse apartment in a trendy neighborhood, Julia finds herself dreaming of having a place like it to herself one day. Juanga and Lorena socialize with lots of people and drink, but Julia nurses a single beer and gets lost in thought. A young woman in a catsuit approaches her and asks if she’s Olga’s sister—she introduces herself as Jazmyn, a high school friend of Olga’s. Julia feels a hazy memory of the girl return to her. Jazmyn effusively recalls how close she and Olga were, and then asks Julia how Olga is—she hasn’t seen her, she says, in few years, since she ran into Olga at the mall and listened to Olga go “on and on about this guy she was in love with.”

Julia and Lorena have always been best friends—and when Lorena finds a new friend, Julia feels both jealousy and a desire to keep up and not fall into second place. To do so, she knows she has to deceive Amá and risk getting in even more trouble—but is determined to do whatever it takes to remain Lorena’s number one.



This passage shows just how deeply distrustful and contentious Julia and Amá’s relationship really is. Julia resents her mother for keeping her trapped at home—and for constantly comparing her to the saint-like Olga, made even more perfect in death. The pattern thus far in the book is constant, and destructive, but neither can break out of it.



Julia is determined not to miss out on fun with Lorena and Juanga. She even puts herself in danger—allowing the unlicensed Juanga to drive her—to avoid being left out because of her parents’ restrictive rules. Again the novel shows how restrictions naturally lead to rebellion, while also hinting at how that rebellion, while understandable, can be destructive.



Julia has been feeling stagnant and hopeless when it comes to learning more about Olga—but this chance meeting with one of Olga’s high school friends, and the revelation that Olga was “in love” with somebody, reignite Julia’s hopes of learning the truth about whatever her sister was hiding. Meanwhile, this revelation also makes clear that Amá’s view of Olga is also incorrect, and that, more broadly no one is a saint, and everyone is complicated.



Julia, stunned, tells Jazmyn that Olga is dead. She is intrigued by the idea that Olga was in love with someone—Julia knows Olga certainly didn't have passionate feelings for her nerdy high-school boyfriend. Jazmyn, though, is so devastated by the news of Olga's death that she begins weeping, and doesn't respond to Julia's questions. Feeling sick, Julia runs to the bathroom, but doesn't throw up. She rushes out of the bathroom, determined to ask Jazmyn more questions, but can't find the girl anywhere. After the party, as Juanga drunkenly drives Lorena and Julia home, Julia thinks about how her "sister's ghost is hovering" over her no matter where she goes or what she does.

Julia distracts Jazmyn from her memories of Olga by sidelining her with news of Olga's death. Julia becomes overwhelmed by sadness—and by the fear that no matter where she goes in life, whom she meets, or what she does, she will always be in Olga's shadow, even more than she was when Olga was still alive. Meanwhile, thinking about Olga's ghost while she gets driven home by someone who is drunk again foreshadows the danger that Julia is constantly courting with her behavior.



CHAPTER 8

One Saturday, Amá, a housecleaner, forces Julia to come work with her cleaning fancy homes in Chicago's wealthy Lincoln Park neighborhood. There are three houses to clean—the first two are relatively clean and easy, but at the third house, a pretentious man named Dr. Scheinberg greets the women and shows them around briefly before telling them he's leaving, and will return later. As Julia cleans the museum-like home, she's disturbed by pieces of art and artifacts which depict strange sexual positions, and by the disgusting bathroom—Scheinberg has left a turd in the toilet.

As Julia tags along with her mother to clean houses, she witnesses firsthand—and for the first time, it's implied—the humiliation and hardship her mother must endure each day just to make ends meet for their family. Julia's journey towards empathy for her parents is one of the novel's central plot points, and in many ways, it starts here. There is an implication that Scheinberg purposely left the turd in the toilet, as a show of the power that he has over these immigrant women who serve him.



While cleaning the bedroom, Julia and Amá have a stilted and uneasy conversation, and Amá asks Julia about how she's doing in school. When the conversation transitions to Olga, Julia timidly asks if Olga had a boyfriend—Amá insists angrily that Olga was not the kind to run around with boys.

This passage shows that even as Julia and her mother do things that help them understand one another, there is still a deep rift between them. This rift centers around their conceptions of Olga, but more broadly those conceptions are colored by their cultural values—Amá's ideas about Olga are driven by her beliefs about what it means to be a good Mexican daughter.



Dr. Scheinberg returns home and thanks the women in practiced Spanish—on their way out, Julia notices that he's staring appraisingly at Amá's body. As the women step outside into the snow, Julia is grateful—for once—to be out in the open air and away from the house. On the bus, Julia's muscles begin to ache from exertion, and she thinks silently to herself about how hard her mother's life must really be.

Julia understands her mother a little better now—and feels sorry for how hard she has to work and how much she has to put up with. At the same time, this experience makes it clear to Julia that she doesn't want to end up like her mother, even though she is learning to appreciate Amá's sacrifice.



CHAPTER 9

The school dance is approaching, and though Julia normally wouldn't go, she's determined to get to the afterparty, where she hopes she'll run into the sister of the host—a girl who went to high school with Olga. Amá surprisingly agrees to let Julia go to the dance, but insists on helping her pick out a suitable new dress for the occasion. The two of them go shopping at an outlet mall, but the trip is a disaster—the one dress Julia likes is a red-and-black number which Amá claims is revealing and unladylike. Frustrated, Julia locks herself in the dressing room and cries, embarrassed by her body and desperate to escape her mother's constant judgement.

The night of the dance, Julia borrows a dress from Lorena, and the two of them go to the event with a group of friends—Juanga has gone MIA after running off with an older man. Julia looks down on the girls she and Lorena are going to the dance with, seeing them as stupid, and when a guy from her grade tries to flirt with her and she shoots him down, he accuses her of thinking she's "better than everybody." Julia is angry, but briefly wonders if he's right.

After the dance, the girls head to the afterparty—even though Julia knows doing so will get her in trouble with Amá for staying out late. At the cramped, steamy afterparty at a house nearby, Julia begins trying to scope out the host's sister. Though Lorena encourages her to relax and have fun, Julia can focus on nothing else. As the party gets sloppier and there's no sign of Olga's classmate, Julia finds Lorena and says she wants to go home. Lorena is flirting with a guy, and tells Julia to wait for her on the couch—they'll leave, she promises, in five minutes. Julia sits down and falls asleep, and by the time Lorena wakes her up, it's three in the morning—and she's going to be in deep trouble.

The next morning, after receiving her punishment, Julia calculates that she's spent forty-five percent of the last two years grounded. Though she knows she's not the ideal daughter, she's hurt by the fact that her parents—especially Amá—treat her like a "degenerate." When under severe punishment, and banned from even going to the library—like she is now—Julia feels painfully alone, and "hate[s] the life that [she has] to live."

Julia is determined to continue her search for people who might know things about Olga she didn't—she's learning that more and more individuals were in on parts of her sister's life that Julia herself was never privy to. Meanwhile, her relationship with Amá continues to be just as contentious and complicated, making Julia feel even more isolated in her search for answers. The conflicts, it's important to note, often revolve around sex and what it means to be "good" or, in this case, "ladylike."



Julia is becoming aware, slowly, of her reputation for being aloof and judgmental. She's not just this way with her family—she even acts coolly and contemptuously towards her peers. Perhaps there are ways in which she has more potential than her peers, but nonetheless the way she hides behind her sense of superiority isolates her.



Julia is so desperate to find more information about her sister that she risks getting in serious trouble with Amá. She is discouraged when she hits yet another dead end, and basically sinks into hopelessness as she falls asleep at the party. Note how Lorena is interacting with others in the world, while Julia is once again alone.



Julia can't stop getting in trouble—and almost seems to relish the opportunity to get herself grounded, if only to languish in the unfairness she feels her mother is constantly leveraging against her. At the same time, this pattern is destructive, as Julia's loneliness and hatred for her life shows.



As the days go by, Julia suffers feelings of self-loathing and struggles with insomnia. She bottles everything up, though, and shares none of her feelings with her parents or Lorena. One day, after class, Mr. Ingman pulls Julia aside to ask if everything's okay. She insists she's fine, but feels tears threaten to leak from her eyes. Mr. Ingman asks Julia if she's really doing well, and Julia lies and says she's emotional due to her period. Mr. Ingman, seeing through the excuse, tells Julia that she can't blame herself for her sister's death, and reveals that his own mother died spontaneously when he was just ten. Julia is comforted by the story, and by Mr. Ingman's kindness.

Julia is having a hard time with her family, her friends, and indeed with her own grief. Other people know something's wrong, but Julia is so staunch and stubborn—and surrounded by so few models of anyone else discussing their emotions—that she's loath to accept help, guidance, or comfort from anyone else. Mr. Ingman, though, doesn't want to let Julia slip through the cracks, and Julia briefly allows him into her world.



At home, the tired Apá is soaking his feet on the couch. Julia feels bad for her father, who always told her and Olga how important it was to get a good job in a nice office with air conditioning. Julia sits beside him on the couch and does her homework. When Amá comes home, she tells Julia she's looking poorly, and asks if she's been eating **junk** in secret. She tells Julia that she can't be looking sallow for her **quincé**—she has to be “pretty for [her] family.” Julia feels a cramp in her stomach and goes to the bathroom—she has gotten her period a week early, which she sees as punishment for lying about it to Mr. Ingman.

Julia is under a lot of pressure both at home and at school, and she's making things worse for herself in a lot of ways by constantly lying to everyone around her. She knows that she's digging herself into a deep hole, but isn't prepared to change her ways. Meanwhile, Amá's behavior isn't much wiser. Amá treats family like an inescapable obligation and the only source of meaning, while Julia treats it like an anchor that must be escaped in order to live.



CHAPTER 10

Winter is over—Christmas and New Year's have passed by in a sad, slow blur. No one mentioned Olga during the holidays, but her absence hovered around everyone. As spring arrives in Chicago, Julia and her classmates get ready for their annual outdoor field trip—a chance for city kids to get out of town and see some nature. This year, the class is going to the Illinois Beach State Park.

The fact that the holidays are glossed over in the narration suggests that they were too painful for Julia to process, let alone filter through narration.



On the day of the field trip, Julia wanders around with Lorena and Juanga—back from his love affair, and still inseparable from Lorena. While Lorena and Juanga gossip and laugh, Julia is distracted by thoughts of her sister, and Jazmyn's words about her. When Juanga complains that he hates nature, Julia snaps out of her reverie and becomes incensed, accusing Juanga of having no “inner life.” When Juanga seems genuinely hurt, Julia apologizes, and the three of them walk a little farther before sitting down to eat their packed **lunches**.

Julia is lost in upsetting thoughts about her sister, and the puzzle she may never solve, when Juanga's words pull her back to the present. Stressed and upset, she lashes out cruelly. Julia's fiery, loudmouth personality is shown, here, to be exacerbated whenever she's feeling personal frustration or pain.



As Juanga, Lorena, and Julia **eat**, Juanga begins talking about sex, and Lorena teases Julia for being a virgin. Julia is hurt that Lorena is making fun of her, and begins retaliating, but when Lorena accuses her of being too “stuck-up” to make a connection with a boy, Julia becomes truly enraged. She says that she is stuck-up, and proud of it; she’s better, she says, than the life she’s been dealt. Julia abandons her lunch and walks away from Juanga and Lorena, down to the shore.

In this passage, Julia reveals her true feelings about her friends, and about being stuck in high school in a place she hates: she feels she deserves (and is destined for) more. Julia’s anger at her situation is legitimate, the book suggests. And yet the way she responds to that unfairness is nonetheless destructive. It is tempting at first to read the book as one in which Julia is not her parent’s idea of a perfect Mexican daughter, but is still “perfect in her own way.” But the book seems to have a more complicated message. It never portrays Julia as perfect, and seems to argue that there is no such perfection. All of the characters are imperfect, all of them make bad decisions. Much of Julia’s growth will come from learning that there is no perfect that she must try to be, while much of Amá’s growth will be about the same thing.



Julia sits alone for a while, and then a classmate named Pasqual approaches her and begins asking her about Olga. His questions become more and more invasive, and though Julia asks him to leave her alone, he tells her she shouldn’t hate herself so much—everyone, he says, is messed up. Julia says she doesn’t know what Pasqual is talking about, but Pasqual insists she does before walking away.

Pasqual’s appearance in this scene is an odd one—Julia never states how she knows him, and he doesn’t show up again throughout the novel. This lends his appearance a mystical quality, making it seem as if he’s speaking aloud a truth about Julia she won’t allow her innermost self to verbalize or even understand.



Julia sits down and pulls out Camus’s *The Stranger*. She gets lost in the **book** until Mr. Ingman approaches her and asks her about what she’s reading. When she reveals the book is teaching her a lot about “existential despair,” Mr. Ingman asks her once again if she’s okay—Julia admits she doesn’t know what it would be like to feel “okay” or “normal.” Mr. Ingman suggests she talk to someone—maybe a professional—but Julia says she’s fine. Mr. Ingman asks Julia gently not to let him down, and she promises him she won’t.

*Things are so bad for Julia that even a difficult, existential book like *The Stranger* offers her a sense of escape—though at the end of the *Stranger*, the isolated narrator greets his coming execution with gladness, which perhaps also foreshadows Julia’s coming suicide attempt. Mr. Ingman continues to try and be invested in Julia’s life and well-being—and she continues keeping him at arm’s length. She won’t connect to anyone.*



CHAPTER 11

Julia is barely halfway through the second semester of her junior year, but all she can think of is going away to college. When she’s home alone—a rarity—she occupies herself by searching for the key to Olga’s room, but hasn’t been able to find it anywhere. She feels as if she’s hit a dead end when it comes to more clues about Olga’s life, but has come up with three last ways to try to get some information: visit Olga’s work, try to get her transcripts from the community college, and ask Juanga to help her get in touch with Jazmyn.

Julia will not give up hope on her quest to get more information about Olga. It’s become less and less clear, though, what her goal is—whether she really wants to understand, for her own satisfaction, who her sister was, or whether she’s simply looking for dirt on Olga as a way of making herself feel better about her own continually-mounting mistakes and failures.



One day after school, Julia takes the train to Olga's drab and dreary community college. She finds the registrar's building and approaches the record desk, repeating the script she's written for herself in her head. When she gets up to the desk, she introduces herself, explains that Olga is dead, and asks for her transcripts. The woman behind the desk asks for Olga's dates of attendance, and Julia gives them to her. When the woman enters the numbers into the computer, though, she seems puzzled. Julia asks what's wrong, but the woman behind the desk says she can't tell her anything or release any of Olga's records until a year after the date of her death.

Julia is furious, and begs the woman to make an exception—the registrar is staunch, though, and asks Julia to step aside and let the other people in line have their turn. Julia begins screaming at the woman, accusing her of being soulless and ugly to boot. It is only when the registrar threatens to call security that Julia storms out of the building.

Just as Julia failed to convince the concierge at The Continental that she needed to know what her sister's association with the place, she is failing to get the registrar to give her any information—though it seems as if perhaps the registrar has uncovered something strange, anomalous, or unsettling.



Julia is not going to simply walk out of the college the way she walked out of The Continental—she's desperate, deteriorating, and angrier than ever, and launches into a trademark tirade before making an exit. The desperation that drives her search—a desperation not even Julia seems to fully understand—is in full evidence here.



CHAPTER 12

Julia feels as if the date of her **quinceañera** is hanging over her “like the blade of a guillotine.” She's been forced to take waltz classes though she's hopeless at dancing, and dreads the “bland **food**” and “odious music” which will be part of her celebration, as they're hallmarks of all quinces. Julia won't even be able to sneak in a **book** to distract herself, as she'll be the center of attention. Julia has learned, through eavesdropping on her parents' conversation, that they're paying for the party with money from Olga's savings and life insurance. Though Julia wishes they'd use that money to send her to college or find a better apartment, she knows any mention of these things would be fruitless.

One Sunday morning, while Julia is helping Amá put together party favors, the doorbell rings. Julia opens the door and finds Lorena standing there—she apologizes for being a “bitch” to Julia, and says she hates not being able to talk to her best friend. Julia doesn't accept Lorena's apology so easily—she demands to know if Lorena really thinks she's stuck up. Lorena says she doesn't really think Julia is stuck-up—though she wishes she were less judgmental sometimes.

Normally, a quinceañera would be a cause for excitement and celebration—but for the aloof, rebellious, and tradition-averse Julia, there's absolutely nothing about the party to look forward to. She knows her parents are wasting their money on her—but is powerless to say anything that would convince them to cancel it, since she also knows that the party is more for Olga than it is for her. It is not just Julia who is disconnected from her family. Her family is also disconnected from her.



For all her pettiness in recent weeks, in this passage, Lorena shows that she does truly love Julia. She's invested in Julia's growth—she wants her friend to learn to be more open-minded and stop closing herself off from people and experiences.



Julia expresses jealousy over Lorena's friendship with Juanga, but Lorena begs Julia to have some empathy—Juanga has a terrible home life, and his father often beats him up because of his sexuality. Julia, suddenly feeling badly, promises she'll be nicer to Juanga. Lorena invites Julia out to go get some pizza, and Julia happily agrees to go.

At a pizza parlor in a nicer neighborhood, Julia orders **two slices** for herself. When Lorena asks if she's seriously going to eat them both, Julia admits that she would've ordered three if she didn't think doing so would "embarrass" Lorena. After eating, Julia is still hungry, but she tries to tell her stomach to quiet down rather than ordering herself another. As she sits digesting her food, she feels a deep sadness creeping over her. Lorena asks her what's wrong, and she admits that sometimes—actually, "like, all the time"—she hates her life. Lorena is shocked and seemingly angry, and urges Julia not to say such things. Julia begins to cry, and admits that she doesn't even know if she'll "make it to college." She doesn't feel anything makes sense, and the already painful parts of her life have been made worse by Olga's death.

Lorena encourages Julia to remember that she's almost out—she's not going to have to live the way she's currently living forever. Lorena begs Julia not to say "anything stupid like that" again, and Julia agrees. She then changes the subject, telling Lorena about her failed attempt to get Olga's transcripts from the community college. She says it doesn't make any sense that Olga never even earned an associate degree given how long she was taking classes, and is determined to find out what it is that "isn't right" about the situation. Lorena suggests that Julia's imagination is getting to her—she says that Olga probably did just live a normal, boring life. Still, Julia asks Lorena to get Jazmyn's number through Juanga. Lorena agrees, though she says she doesn't see the point in digging any deeper.

After taking Lorena home, Julia begins the walk back to her own apartment. On the way, though, a car full of men pulls up beside her, and a couple of them start shouting lewd things at her. Julia tries to ignore them, but their comments become more and more aggressive. As the men's shouts get louder, Julia sees an elderly man walk out of an apartment just ahead. She makes eye contact with the man, who stops to ask her what's wrong. Julia gestures at the car, and the old man begins shouting at the boys. The car speeds away, though the driver threatens to "find [Julia] again" as he hits the gas. The old man walks Julia all the way to her door, and makes the sign of the cross as he leaves her—Julia feels comforted.

Julia's journey to become a more empathetic person is one of her main trajectories throughout the novel. Though she was jealous of Juanga, and judged him for his promiscuous and flamboyant ways, she sees now that she was wrong—Juanga has his own problems, and Julia needs to see things through other people's eyes if she's ever going to make any lasting friendships.



Julia is starving—which indicates symbolically that she's in emotional turmoil. As she reveals the depths of her depression to Lorena, Lorena becomes concerned for her friend. Julia, though, has never spoken any of this out loud to anyone, and needs a sounding board if she's going to keep her sanity. This passage makes it clear that Julia is in a state of deterioration—and that if she's going to "make it to college," she's going to need to learn how to ask for help from the people who love her. While Lorena is a good friend, she also doesn't know how to deal with Julia's revelation of her depression, as is made clear when her response is to tell Julia not to talk in that way.



Though Julia at last opens up to Lorena, Lorena is not very receptive to Julia's feelings—out of fear, she seems to want to deny the depths of Julia's depression and push aside what she's just heard. She also suggests Julia abandon her search for more information about Olga, perhaps believing that spending so much time thinking about her sister is what's slowly driving Julia to the brink (which isn't such a bad diagnosis, though it misses the deeper issues in Julia's family that are driving Julia to be so obsessed with the search in the first place).



Julia's mother's overbearing nature and strict rules start to make more sense in light of this passage—it's clear that Julia's working-class neighborhood is not the safest place, and the fear and helplessness she feels when confronted with yet more predatory men are acute and disorienting. Just as the book is nuanced in the way it dissects the idea of anyone being perfect, it is similarly nuanced in the way it handles people being wrong. Amá isn't wrong to worry about Julia, men, and sex, but the controlling way she shows that worry has its own negative impacts.



On Monday, Juanga gives Julia the number for one of Jazmyn's friends. Julia calls the girl, Maribel, and gets Jazmyn's number from her. At home, Julia hides in her bedroom closet as she calls Jazmyn—when she gets the other girl on the line, she nervously introduces herself, and apologizes for resorting to getting her number from a friend. She asks Jazmyn to tell her more about what Olga said about being “in love” the last time Jazmyn ran into her. Jazmyn says the encounter was a long time ago, though, and she doesn't remember much. Just as Julia hears the apartment door open, Jazmyn remembers that Olga said her new boyfriend had a “good job.” Julia thanks Jazmyn for her help and hurries off the phone, worried that her own life is “a stupid puzzle” she'll never be able to figure out.

Though Julia pushes on and on in the face of dead end after dead end, she's starting to doubt whether she'll ever have an answer to the truth about Olga—or about herself. Julia is starting to consider that even if she does find out what Olga was hiding, bit by bit, she won't actually understand anything more about the “puzzle” of her sister. This demonstrates that there's a difference between learning information and understanding the truth—Julia is starting to realize that gathering facts about Olga won't bring her any closer to the person she's lost.



CHAPTER 13

It is the night of Julia's **quinceañera**. She is dressed in a “tight and tacky dress covered in frills, ruffles, and sequins.” Beneath the dress she wears a girdle, which makes her feel constrained and short of breath. Julia is fully aware that the party is more for her “dead sister” than for her—there is no part of the night that she's enjoyed, and knows her parents have poured thousands of dollars “down the toilet.” Julia moves through the ritual dances and ceremonies of the party almost on autopilot. When there's a break in the program, she asks Lorena to go with her to the bathroom and help her lift her cumbersome dress so that she can use the toilet.

Julia has been dreading her quiceañera for months—and seems almost determined to make it as difficult and dreadful as possible for herself rather than just putting on a happy face for her family. Julia knows that her parents aren't really throwing the party for her—they're throwing it for Olga—and the constant inability to escape her sister's shadow is weighing on her more heavily than ever.



In the bathroom, Lorena and Julia run into Julia's gossipy Tía Milagros. She greets Julia by remarking that Olga must be “so happy” for her right now—Julia flatly replies that Olga is dead. Milagros asks Julia why she's so angry all the time, and Julia begins flying off the handle. She asks Milagros who she is to judge Julia or treat her like a “disappointment.” She accuses Milagros of being bitter because her husband “left [her] ass years ago.” Milagros begins crying and storms out of the bathroom, while Lorena quietly chides Julia for being so mean.

Julia is in a sensitive place—forced to be the center of a party that she doesn't want by parents who aren't hearing, or listening to, her—and even though Tía Milagros's comment isn't particularly mean-spirited, Julia takes any mention of Olga as a personal slight. She lashes out in anger, shocking even the wild-child Lorena.



The rest of the night, as Julia dances with boys and greets guests, she can't stop worrying that Milagros will tell her parents about what happened in the bathroom. When Angie shows up late with a gift in tow, Julia corners her and demands to know if Olga had a boyfriend when she died—Angie deflects the question, claiming that Olga wouldn't have had time for a “secret relationship,” but Julia's suspicions only grow. Julia demands that Angie tell her what she knows, but when Angie continues deflecting, Julia tells her to leave the party, and walks away. As she does, she sees Milagros talking to a concerned-looking Amá and Apá. Julia sits down at her table and gorges herself on a piece of **cake**.

Even at her quincé, Julia can't give up her quest to discover more and more information about Olga. The blindsided Angie clams up, and Julia lashes out at her, too. As the party begins spiraling out of control, the restless and anxious Julia once again turns to food for comfort—she wants more, wants something, she can't find or get, and food replaces it.



When Amá, Apá, and Julia arrive home at their apartment that night, they flick on the lights to find roaches scurrying in every direction. Julia and Amá begin their practiced routine of stomping every roach they can get, and Julia ruins her fancy white shoes. After cleaning themselves up, Amá and Apá confront Julia about what she said to Milagros, and accuse her of “embarrass[ing]” them in front of their guests. Amá asks what she has done to deserve such a disrespectful daughter, and wonders aloud if she should send Julia back to Mexico. Julia protests that life would “suck even harder” in Mexico. Amá shakes her head and tells Julia that perhaps if she could only “keep her mouth shut” and behave, Olga would still be alive.

In spite of Amá and Apá’s attempt to give their family a nice night, they themselves must return home to a filthy, roach-infested apartment. Julia’s anger at her parents spending thousands of dollars on this party doesn’t seem out of place. Meanwhile, Julia is exhausted, disgusted, and humiliated as she helps kill the roaches, and so is Amá. The exchange to end the chapter shows both Julia and Amá so stuck in their pattern of anger that they lash out at each other, saying things that are as hurtful as possible. Julia denies her Mexican heritage; Amá explicitly blames Julia for the death of her “perfect Mexican daughter” while also making clear that Julia is no such thing.



CHAPTER 14

After summer break, Julia starts the fall semester of her senior year off by meeting with Mr. Ingman every Thursday after school so that he can help her to prepare for standardized tests and college applications. Julia is grateful for the help of Mr. Ingman—“one of the smartest people [she’s] ever known.” Julia is determined to pull her grades up enough to get in her dream colleges in New York, Boston, and Chicago. Julia has been saving money all summer, cleaning houses with Amá in hopes of earning enough to cover a one-way flight to wherever she gets into school.

Julia has been sidelined by grief and distraction, but as the school year begins, she’s more determined than ever to get herself out of her working-class neighborhood for good, and in into the college of her dreams. Julia is focused on escape.



As Julia writes her admissions essays, Mr. Ingman encourages her to play up the fact that her parents are undocumented immigrants. Julia is afraid to do so, fearing that someone will report her parents and have them deported—Mr. Ingman assures Julia this won’t happen, and promises her that he would never lead her astray. He tells her that she’s one of the best students he’s ever had, and he’s determined to help her secure a bright future for herself.

Mr. Ingman knows that Julia should use the limitations she’s faced and the structural poverty she and her family have endured as a part of her story—but Julia is protective of her parents, even in the face of all the strife that’s been between them lately. This is an interesting moment in the book, as it acknowledges the way that certain disadvantaged minorities can, in some ways, use that disadvantage to their own advantage, while at the same time making clear that those disadvantages (such as potential deportation) are nonetheless extremely real, profound, and destructive.



After school gets out early for a half-day one day, Julia takes the train to Wicker Park, where she visits a used bookstore. She has seventeen dollars saved from her lunch money, and is hoping to treat herself to a couple **books**. While browsing the poetry section, she picks up a book by Walt Whitman. She smells the pages and reads some of it, getting lost in the world of the book. She hardly notices when a cute white boy approaches her and begins making conversation about how much he loves Whitman. Julia is grateful to have someone who wants to discuss literature with her, and she begins gushing about all her favorite novels.

Things are stressful both at home and at school—Julia has a lot of exciting things going on, but is also facing a lot of pressure. She has scrimped and saved lunch money so that she can go buy some books as a way of escaping into a fictional world for a time—this shows that books are more important to Julia than even food.



After flirting back and forth about their favorite—and least-favorite—books for a few minutes, Julia and the boy, whose name is Connor, introduce themselves to one another. Julia feels an intense attraction to Connor, and isn't sure what to say to him. Julia buys her **books**, but when she's finished checking out, Connor follows her out of the store and invites her for a coffee so they can continue talking. At a hipster coffee shop nearby, they make fun of the other patrons, and Julia wonders if she's on her first real date or not.

Connor asks Julia where she's from, and she tells him she's from Chicago. When he asks where she's "from from," she jokingly accuses him of being racist before telling him that she's Mexican—and that if he wanted to know her ethnicity, he could have just asked. As Julia and Connor continue talking he reveals he lives in Evanston—a wealthy suburb of Chicago. They continue flirting and discussing literature, and Julia feels so happy she wonders if she's dreaming.

Eventually, Julia blurts out that her sister died last year—she tells Connor that though she feels she never knew Olga, she finds herself wishing lately that there was still a way to get to know her. She tells Connor about the strange things she's heard about Olga, and expresses frustration that she can't get onto her sister's laptop to hunt for more clues. Connor expresses sympathy for Julia's situation—and tells her that he's a whiz with computers, and might be able to help her hack into Olga's laptop if she can bring it to him. Connor and Julia leave the coffee shop and wander the city for hours, talking and flirting. When it's time for Julia to go home, Connor walks her to the train station and kisses her goodbye before telling her he wants to see her again soon.

A few days later, Julia meets up with Connor in the city again after lying to Amá about a field trip to the Cultural Center downtown. As Julia approaches the restaurant where she's meeting Connor and sees him standing outside, her legs turn to rubber—she wonders if she's in love. The two go inside and eat—Julia experiences **Indian food** for the first time, and gorges herself on the delicious spicy food. Afterwards, they return to the used **bookstore** and then walk to the park, where they sit on a bench and make out. Julia is happy and grateful for how kind and tender Connor is.

Julia's blind "date" with Ramiro was more about peer pressure than it was about attraction—with Connor, though, Julia finds herself genuinely connecting with someone she both thinks is cute and who shares her interests. In fact, it is notable that Connor is the first other teenager portrayed in the book who does share Julia's interests.



Julia and Connor are from very different worlds—Connor is white and affluent, and rarely meets people who aren't like him. This makes him slightly insensitive to Julia's cultural and socioeconomic background, but Julia is willing to overlook this fact because they seem to have a deeper connection of shared interests. This tension, between the way that their backgrounds make them unable to connect, even as their shared interests offer a connection, will continue throughout their relationship.



Connor truly likes Julia—and she likes him back. In spite of the differences between them and the small hiccups in their conversation that result from this fact, Connor feels empathy for Julia and wants to help her on her quest—something no one else in her orbit is doing for her at this point.



Julia's relationship with Connor is flourishing at the expense of her relationship with Amá. As Julia lies more and more often to get away from home and indulge in the luxury of food and the escape of books, she's trying to abandon—at least temporarily—who she is and where she comes from. Julia has escaped from her community and family through books; now she is doing it through a relationship.



CHAPTER 15

It's been a year since Olga's death, and Julia admits that sometimes she still catches herself looking at the front door, waiting for Olga to walk in. Amá still cries often, but always in private, and Julia is afraid to talk to her mother about the things they're both feeling. Julia has continued trying to find out more about Olga, contacting her college and The Continental several times, but she can't get any information out of anyone—and she still can't find the key that unlocks Olga's room, so she has no access to Olga's laptop.

Julia has been having nightmares about Olga, and intense waking flashbacks to their shared childhood. She feels mired in grief—her only moments of joy come when she sees Connor. The two of them talk on the phone every single night, and though Julia knows Amá must be aware something's up, her mother doesn't speak English well enough to understand Julia's phone conversations.

One wintry afternoon, Lorena insists on going sledding in the city with Julia and Juanga. Julia hasn't hung out with the two of them very much lately, as they've been drinking more and more, but she's excited to spend some time with them—even though she's never been sledding in her life. The three of them take the train into the city and, unable to afford real sleds, buy some plastic mats from a hardware store. The three of them then climb to the top of a hill in a local park and push off together. They scream and laugh all the way down, and Julia feels true happiness as she lies in the snow at the bottom of the hill and listens to church bells ringing in the distance.

Connor has asked to visit Julia in her neighborhood, but she's embarrassed to bring him around her parents' roach-infested apartment, so she deflects his inquiries. Instead, she volunteers to meet up with him in the city more and more often. One afternoon, Connor takes Julia to a thrift store, and leads her up and down the aisles pointing out the crazy old clothes. Julia feels itchy and uncomfortable in the store—thrift-shopping has never been a hobby for her and her family, but rather a necessity. Julia grows more and more upset until finally she asks to leave. Outside the store, she tells Connor she's just emotional because she's getting her period, and Connor takes her to a fancy organic grocery store to pick out some special **chocolate**.

Julia is at a true dead end. A year has passed since Olga's death and Julia's not any closer to uncovering anything substantial about who Olga really was or what her life was truly like. She's haunted by the sense that there are still secrets to discover, and yet her grief over her sister's loss seems to be growing sharper rather than duller as she learns more and more.



Julia's state of mind is slowly but surely deteriorating. She can't get Olga out of her head—even in dreams—and is becoming reliant on others to buoy her moods, given how sullen and haunted she herself has become. Connor, and the escape from her family and community that he provides, is her only source of joy. But the fact that her joy comes from cutting herself off from her community suggests this is not a tenable situation.



This brief scene with Juanga and Lorena is a respite from the near-constant anxiety and grief Julia fears. She's still able to pull herself together and have fun with her friends—but as the novel progresses, it will become clear that even these small moments of joy aren't enough for Julia.



In spite of the joy her blossoming relationship with Connor brings her, Julia is forced to reckon with the fact that they come from completely different worlds. Connor is so wealthy that he's able to act like a tourist in places like thrift shops—places where Julia and her family, out of necessity, shop for the items they need to scrape by. Julia doesn't know what to do about her sadness, anxiety, and shame over the gulf between the two of them, but she certainly doesn't want Connor to learn the truth about who she is and where she comes from. Her relationship with Connor forces her to hide the truth of her life.



That Saturday, Connor invites Julia to come to his parents' house in Evanston. He tells her that they'll be out of town, and the two of them will have the house all to themselves. Julia is stunned that Connor's parents would leave him home alone—Amá and Apá would never let Julia or even Olga stay by themselves—but tells herself that “white people are different” and accepts his invitation. Julia is anxious as she wonders whether Connor expects the two of them to have sex on Saturday—she doesn't know if she's ready, or what it would even feel like to be.

Julia calls Lorena for some advice. Lorena offers Julia only one piece of wisdom: “shave [your] pussy.” Julia protests that women always have to pick and pluck at themselves for men, but Lorena insists that if Julia doesn't follow her advice, Connor will be “grossed out” by her. Julia asks Lorena if sex will hurt; Lorena tells her it will, at first, but will “get better.”

On Saturday, Julia lies to Amá about going downtown to an art gallery for a school project. Amá seems suspicious, and warns Julia that if she's lying, she'll find out—she always does. Julia hurries out of the house and stops at the pharmacy to buy condoms before boarding the first of three trains that will take her out to Evanston. When she arrives in the neighborhood, she's stunned by the giant houses and tree-lined streets. She finally arrives at Connor's house—which is as big as the entire apartment building Julia and her family live in.

Connor answers the door and invites Julia in, telling her she smells like Mexican food. Julia is “mortified,” but laughs anyway. Connor shows her around the house, and Julia takes in their beautiful, clean, expertly decorated home with awe and anxiety. Through photographs, Connor shows Julia his mother, brother, and stepfather, and then the two of them order **Thai food** and watch YouTube videos.

Julia is experiencing a lot of firsts with Connor—and in spite of her overprotective mother's strict rules, she wants to spread her wings and explore her sexuality. Julia doesn't feel she can talk to her mother about sex, and because Olga is dead, she has few people to turn to discuss her feelings about this new part of her life.



Lorena is there to offer Julia advice, but the advice she gives is sort of bleak. Lorena clearly sees sex as an act of feminine submission, as something that is more aimed around pleasing a man. Julia, though, has no one else to turn to.



As Julia travels to Evanston, she is unable any longer to ignore the glaring cultural and socioeconomic differences that separate her world from Connor's. He comes from a place of wealth and privilege, and sees the world through that lens. Julia is more overwhelmed than envious, unable to believe that such a different world is a train ride away.



Connor again displays insensitivity towards Julia, both in commenting on her “Mexican food” smell and touring her around his lavish home as if it's no big deal. Still, Julia decides to stay with him, perhaps because she senses that his insensitivity is not willful (though one could also argue that it is his responsibility to work to see past his own privilege), and also perhaps because she wants to be a part of his world even at the expense of a measure of self-respect.



While they're watching videos, Connor tells Julia how beautiful she is. He begins kissing her, and soon he is on top of her on the sofa. Julia still has her shoes on, and knows she needs to take them off—but she's haunted by the memory of a time in grade school when a roach crawled out of her sneaker at a friend's house. Julia tells Connor to slow down for a minute—he asks her if she's a virgin, and she confirms that she is. He asks her if she's "positive" that she's ready to have sex, and she says she is. Connor pulls a condom from under a couch cushion, puts it on, and the two of them have sex. Julia is in pain for a little while, but soon she feels an "intense" kind of pleasure. When Connor finishes, Julia wraps her arms around him and buries her face in his shoulder.

When Julia gets back to her apartment, her parents aren't home, and she's grateful for the privacy. She's **starving**, even though she and Connor ate lunch, and she rifles through the pantry and fridge searching for something to eat. There's nothing in the house, though, but condiments and freezer-burned waffles. Julia pulls the waffle box out of the back of the fridge and hears something rattling in it—she pulls out a small bag which contains some of Amá's jewelry, as well as the key to Olga's room.

Late that night, after Amá and Apá are asleep, Julia gets up and opens the door to Olga's room. She takes out the laptop, lingerie, and hotel key card and hides the underwear and key in her room—the laptop she stashes in her bag, so that she can carry it with her to school in case she gets to see Connor afterwards.

The next afternoon, Julia comes home to find her mother crying on the sofa—the boxes containing Olga's lingerie are open on the living room floor. Though Julia insists that the items aren't hers, Amá refuses to believe her.

Julia's nervousness and discomfort in this chapter, this passage confirms, doesn't stem necessarily from her hangups about sex or her uncertainty about Connor, but rather from her own shame and trauma regarding her working-class roots and the poverty she's grown up in. Connor seems to be a genuinely nice guy, but as the book will make clear there is also a bit of laziness in his niceness. Also his readiness with that condom stashed in the cushion makes clear that he is more experienced than Julia. All of that aside, Julia's first sexual experience is mostly a positive one.



Even after having sex with Connor and eating Thai food, Julia remains ravenous—it's notable that reaching an important milestone with Connor has done nothing to satiate her. The only thing that will is more information about Olga—the fact that she finds the keys hidden in the waffle box is symbolic of what she's really been "hungry" for all along.



Julia doesn't know how to open Olga's laptop or what to do with her things, but decides they'll be safer in her own room, where she can examine them whenever she wants.



When confronted with Olga's racy underwear and hotel key card, Julia says the items aren't hers. But the fact that she doesn't place the blame on Olga or reveal her sister's secret indicates that Julia is unwilling to risk further devastating Amá. She is seeking the truth about her sister, but she senses that her mother would not want to know that truth. So even as she is punished, she protects her mother. Though one might also argue that she doesn't blame Olga because she is sure that her mother would never believe her.



Julia is grounded big-time—Amá takes away her cell phone, and her only way of contacting Connor is by using a pay phone near school. Three weeks have passed since Amá found the lingerie, and Julia hasn't seen Connor in all that time. Julia feels her life is falling apart. She complains to Connor on the phone almost daily, but one afternoon, as she airs her woes, he tells her that he doesn't know how to help her—he cares for her, but being unable to see her or even talk to her most days is weighing on him. Julia tells Connor that she doesn't know when she'll be able to see him again, or when things will get better.

Julia enumerates all the things that are bad in her life—her dead sister, her “shitty neighborhood,” her overbearing parents. Connor says he wishes he could understand what she's going through, but admits he doesn't. He says Julia should speak to a therapist or counselor, but Julia says no one cares about what she has to say, and hangs up the phone.

Julia is used to being punished all the time for things she's done. But being punished for something she didn't do is a whole new scenario—and with no one to turn to and no way of connecting to the one person who allowed her to forget her troubles, she sinks deeper and deeper into despair.



Connor is genuinely unprepared to deal with the issues Julia's facing—he's never had to confront loss, poverty, or frustration with a cultural background. There are a number of ways to read Connor's actions here. He's clearly overwhelmed, out of his depth, and still concerned. His advice that Julia see a therapist is not bad advice! And yet at the same time there is always a suggestion in the book that Connor never pushes past his comfort zone. He says he can't understand, and leaves it at that. For her part, Julia feels he's giving up on her, and so she doesn't hear the wisdom in his advice that she talk to a therapist. It's hard to say who's “right” in this scenario, which is one of the ways that the book is successful in showing the ways that cultural and experiential differences can lead to tension and misunderstanding between imperfect people.



CHAPTER 16

Julia isn't allowed to leave the apartment. After going through the rest of her things, Amá found Julia's diary—though Amá doesn't speak English very well, she knows a bad word when she sees one, and has ripped out every page containing a bad word or a reference to sex or desire. Julia feels like a husk—life without her writing “doesn't feel worth living.” Julia's diary wasn't just full of her feelings—her poems, too, have been destroyed, some of them representing months or years of hard work. Julia hasn't spoken to Connor in three weeks, and she misses him so much she can barely stand it—but refuses to contact him, knowing he doesn't want to “put up with all [her] problems.”

Christmas vacation goes by, and it is almost as bad as the previous year's. By the time Julia returns to school she's so depressed that she can barely make it through a day without taking a crying break in the bathroom. Lorena and Mr. Ingman have expressed concern about Julia's mental state, but she doesn't know how to explain what she's experiencing to either of them.

This passage shows just how little Amá understands Julia, and how little she tries to. Julia is devastated over the loss of all her hard work—unable to see or connect with her friends, unable to vent to her sister, and unable even to express her own thoughts in private, she feels completely boxed in.



Julia feels profoundly alone. Even when others who care about her reach out in an attempt to help her, she feels so demoralized that she doesn't see the point in talking about her feelings.



One day, after school, Julia decides to take the bus downtown. She's broke and cold, but needs some time to herself. In Millennium Park, she walks around the amphitheater and the ice-skating rink. She wishes she could go for a skate or buy some **hot chocolate**, but she's completely broke, and begins to contemplate what the point of living is if she "can't ever get what [she] want[s]." Julia stands shivering in the cold for hours, unable to calm the swirling thoughts in her head.

Cut off from her friends, isolated emotionally and intellectually, out of place in her family, and faced with cyclical, inescapable poverty, Julia buckles mentally and physically under the weight of all her stress and grief in this bleak, lonely passage.



CHAPTER 17

Julia wakes up in a hospital bed with Amá standing over her. She has a horrible headache, and begins crying as soon as she remembers where she is, and what she did. A young man and an older woman are also at Julia's bedside—the woman introduces herself as Dr. Cooke, and explains that the man beside her is Tomás, a translator. Julia asks Dr. Cooke if she can get out of the hospital, but Dr. Cooke insists Julia needs to stay a little longer. Julia apologizes for trying to kill herself and promises she'll never do it again. Dr. Cooke tells Julia that what she's done is serious, and that everyone present wants to find a way to help her. Julia asks if she's going to be locked up like in the **book** *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and Dr. Cooke applauds Julia for maintaining her sense of humor.

The lapse in narrative and omission of Julia's suicide attempt allows readers to fill in the blanks. Julia reached her breaking point in the park—unable to afford even a simple treat to soothe her worried mind and hungry stomach, she collapsed under the weight of all her stress and trauma and attempted to commit suicide. Now, surrounded by medical professions and loved ones, Julia realizes just how severe her actions were—and regrets having undertaken them.



An hour later, Julia is sitting in Dr. Cooke's office. Dr. Cooke asks Julia about what's going on in her life, and what has brought her to the brink. Dr. Cooke asks Julia how long she's been depressed and thinking about killing herself, but Julia insists the act was spontaneous. She just "lost it" the night before—she didn't really want to die. When Dr. Cooke asks what triggered Julia's "desperation," Julia replies that she simply reached a boiling point when she came home from the park **hungry** and couldn't find any food to eat.

Julia's constant ravenous hunger is a part of adolescence, to be sure, and is exacerbated by her family's food insecurity—but as a symbol of Julia wanting more out of life, her inability to find food in a moment of profound hunger means so much more. No food in the house, to Julia, represents more than an empty belly—it represents a dead end and a lack of hope.



Julia tells Dr. Cooke that she feels so far away from the life she wants—the things she yearns for feel impossible to reach. Dr. Cooke asks Julia to tell her about the things she wants. Julia says she wants to be a writer with independence—someone who has privacy and space to grow and breathe. She says she feels suffocated by her parents, by Chicago, and by her family's desire for her to be more like Olga—more perfect.

Julia has no interest in being the person her parents want her to be—she wants to live her own life, on her own terms. It's good that she's able to admit this rather than push herself into a mold she doesn't fit—but still is unable to deal with the pressure associated with her parents' wishes for her.



Dr. Cooke asks Julia more about her parents. Julia discusses the painfully difficult and distrustful relationship she has with Amá, and the distant, ghostlike way Apá moves through their house. When Dr. Cooke asks Julia about her parents' immigration to the US—and to consider whether their experience might have been traumatic or isolating for them—Julia breaks down and begins crying. She says she feels stupid and weak, but Dr. Cooke ensures her that she's neither.

Julia's parents are strict, demanding, and overprotective. In all her constant battles with Amá and haunting silences with Apá, Julia has only ever focused on how their actions affect her. She's never stopped to think about the reasons why they are the way they are, or why they treat her the way they do. Julia knows that her parents have hard lives—and in this moment, breaks down emotionally as she feels a rush of empathy for them, and shame at how her actions have hurt them. Meanwhile, though, Dr. Cooke engages with Julia in a different way than anyone else does: she listens, she does not want or need anything from Julia, and she affirms Julia's right to want the things she wants without shame.



Dr. Cooke tells Julia that she can be discharged from the hospital the next day if she agrees to an intensive weeklong outpatient program, weekly therapy, and a regimen of medication to help with her anxiety and depression. Julia is grateful that the pain and intense feelings she's been having have “an official name.” Julia returns to her room and gets in bed, looking forlornly out the window—until she spots Lorena and Juanga standing on the opposite corner, waving up at her like mad.

As Julia talks with Dr. Cooke about her future, she feels overwhelmed but full of hope for the first time in a long time. She's beginning to understand that part of what she's been feeling is beyond her control—that they have an “official name” and are not unique, meaning other people have dealt with them too, which in turn means that there are things she can do to help herself feel better.



CHAPTER 18

During the movement therapy portion of her outpatient program, Julia's instructor Ashley asks Julia how she's feeling. Julia says she's feeling “snacky.” The other members of Julia's program—the emotional Erin, the beautiful Tasha, the self-harm-scarred Luis, and the acne-ridden Josh—feel sort of like friends to her, and the members of the group often make one another laugh in spite of their difficult circumstances.

In group therapy, Julia is able to meet other teens like herself who are struggling with mental health, circumstantial stress, and overwhelming pain. She's able to feel less alone for the first time in a long time.



At lunch, a new kid named Antwon tries to get Julia to go on a date with him. She shows him her wrists and tells him jokingly that she's not trying to date, as she just tried to kill herself less than a week ago. Antwon promises he can “take care of [her,]” but Julia shrugs him off, telling him she can take care of herself as she heads to her next therapy session.

There are even moments of levity during Julia's time in her outpatient program, such as the wannabe-Romeo Antwon's shameless attempts to get Julia to go out with him.



Every day of the outpatient program follows a careful schedule: movement therapy, homework time, lunch, group therapy, art therapy, individual therapy, and then a “closing circle.” In between sessions, Julia and her fellow patients discuss the things that landed them in the program, how long they're each staying, and what their hopes are for when they're finished. When Tasha asks Julia one day at lunch if she really wanted to die, Julia says “not really.”

Julia is confronting her feelings every day in therapy, and thinking seriously about what she did and why. She's beginning to realize that she didn't want to die—though it's not exactly clear what she did want, and whether she was after attention, catharsis, or simply an escape from her circumstances.



That night, at dinner, Amá and Apá tell Julia that they think she should go to Mexico for a little while and spend some time at Mamá Jacinta's house once she finishes her outpatient program. Julia protests, believing that being "shipp[ed] [...] back to the motherland" won't be helpful. Amá and Apá insist that Julia will be able to relax and recover in Mexico—she always loved going as a little girl, and would enjoy it even more now. Julia is forced to admit that she did used to love her trips to Mexico—still, she tells her parents she's worried about missing so much school that she won't be able to go to college. They insist she could simply go to community college, but that's not good enough for Julia—she wants to get out and see the world.

On the last day of the program, Julia sits with Tasha on a break, and they both discuss how tired they are of the program. They discuss whether they'll ever feel "normal" again, and Tasha admits that she doesn't even know what it would look or feel like to be "normal." When Julia tells Tasha that her parents are sending her to Mexico after the program's over, Tasha's eyes get wide, and she tells Julia how lucky she is to be able to "get the hell out of here."

On Monday, Julia returns to school. She tries to ignore her classmates' stares and questions about where she's been—some people know the truth, but "some ding-dongs" believe Julia's lies that she's been on a long backpacking trip through Europe. When Julia sees Juanga and Lorena, they both embrace her and tell her how happy they are to see her. They make her promise never to do something so stupid again, and to talk to them if things ever get bad again. Julia is grateful for their concern, but tired of "having an audience" for her every feeling.

In a therapy session with Dr. Cooke, Dr. Cooke asks Julia about the day she tried to kill herself. Julia says that everything just became too much—things had been bad enough after Olga's death, but once Amá found Olga's things and grounded Julia, Julia started to feel like a prisoner. Dr. Cooke asks why Julia didn't tell the truth about the underwear, but Julia says that the truth might have "destroy[ed]" Amá and shattered her perfect image of Olga. Julia says that she feels her whole life is unfair, and she was born into the wrong family. She wants a normal life and a happy family—Dr. Cooke tells her she "deserve[s]" to have those things.

As Julia recovers from her suicide attempt, she must reconfigure her plans for her immediate future. Going to college and getting out of Chicago has been her primary goal for so long that she hasn't stopped to slow down and see how perhaps her ambition is stressing her beyond what she can handle. Her whole focus has been escape from her community. Yet what her mother proposes here is a reconnection to that community in the form of a trip to her grandmother's town in Mexico.



Julia is beginning to reconsider her life through other people's eyes. To Julia, being sent to Mexico feels like a punishment or banishment—but to Tasha, the chance to get away and see a new place is the stuff of dreams.



Julia returns to school, still in many ways her old haughty, fiery self. She makes up lies to disguise the real reason for her absence—and to feel superior when she successfully fools people—but her friends know the truth, and want to comfort her. After a week in outpatient therapy, though, Julia is exhausted and ready to move on.



As Julia continues working with Dr. Cooke, she discovers some important things about herself, and vents feelings she's been holding inside for far too long. Julia is sick of how things are at home—she feels trapped by the secrets she's keeping, and by the pressures she's facing as she struggles against Olga's shadow. Dr. Cooke empathizes with Julia and validates her feelings, leaving Julia experiencing relief at the fact that her emotions don't make her a bad person.



That night, Julia sneaks into Olga's room again to look for more clues. She's leaving for Mexico in the morning, and is looking for something before she leaves. She wonders if Olga has written down her laptop password somewhere, and begins going through notebooks and drawers. As she searches, she realizes that maybe Olga was the "sweet, boring" girl everyone knew her to be—that perhaps she just wants to find something incriminating about Olga so that she herself can feel like less of a "fuck-up."

When Julia finds a piece of paper with random letters and numbers written on it and enters the text as the laptop's password, it opens. There's nothing much on Olga's hard drive, but in her emails, Julia finds what she's been looking for: clandestine, angry emails to a boyfriend. The emails date back to 2009, and as Julia reads through years and years of them, she realizes that Olga had a boyfriend—a married boyfriend—who continually promised Olga that he would leave his wife for her. Before Julia can finish all the emails, the connection to the neighbor's internet cuts out, and Julia is left with a thousand unanswerable questions. She is even slightly mad at Olga for sealing up all her "bad" things and letting Julia get cast as the "malcriada" of the family for years.

Julia replaces the laptop under Olga's bed, knowing there's no use in taking it to Mamá Jacinta's house in Los Ojos. She does, however, keep the piece of paper with Olga's email username and password on it, in hopes of getting the chance to visit an internet café south of the border.

CHAPTER 19

After a bumpy flight to Mexico, Julia lands to find that water has leaked in her carry-on bag, soaking all of her belongings—and ruining the piece of paper with Olga's login information written on it.

Julia is beginning to admit to herself that part of the reason she's been so doggedly tracking down information about Olga is partially out of a desire to feel vindicated in her own messy, difficult behavior and attitude.



Julia finds what she's been looking for all along—definitive proof that even the sweet, "perfect" Olga had secrets, desires, and a double life. Julia wonders why her sister would never have shared these things with her—especially when doing so ultimately only made the both of them feel more guilt, shame, and loneliness over the years. But a reader can imagine that Olga also felt the pressure of being the "perfect" one, and couldn't bring herself to fail to live up to those expectations and hurt her parents in the process.



Julia has discovered a huge secret about her sister—but is not satiated, and still longs to find out even more.



Julia's chances to read more of Olga's emails are—for the moment, at least—thwarted. It's interesting that this occurs just as she lands in Mexico, and the reconnection it potentially offers to her past. For the time Julia is in Mexico, the quest to find out more of Olga's secrets are left behind.



Julia's Tío Chucho picks her up from the airport in his rusty and battered pickup truck. Tío has long been Julia's favorite uncle, and as they settle in for the four-hour drive to Los Ojos, they catch up on one another's lives. It becomes clear to Julia that Tío Chucho believes she's been sent to Mexico because she's been getting poor grades—he knows nothing about her depression or her suicide attempt. He encourages her to do well in school so that she can go to college and not have to work "like a donkey" like the rest of her family. Chucho laments the loss of Olga, calling her "la inocente"—the innocent. Julia winces as she remembers that no one in her family ever knew the real Olga. Not wanting to talk about Olga, Julia pretends to fall asleep against the window.

Hours later, Julia—who has fallen asleep for real—wakes up just as Chucho's car pulls up to Mamá Jacinta's house. Mamá Jacinta runs to the car with tears in her eyes and embraces Julia, who starts crying too. At the door to the house is a crowd of people—Julia's relatives and extended family who have come to greet her. Among them are her mother's sisters, Fermina and Estela, who wrap her in hugs and call her sweet nicknames. Julia is overwhelmed slightly by the attention, but not in a bad way like she is back at home.

Julia's relatives rush her to the kitchen and feed her a lavish dinner of **beans, rice, and beef tostadas**. Mamá Jacinta tells Julia that she's too skinny, and hopes she fattens up a little before it's time for her to go back to the States. Julia wolfs her food and asks for seconds, which she eats as her many relatives pepper her with questions about her life in America. She feels like a celebrity—at home she's the black sheep, but here, she's beloved. She laughs as she realizes that perhaps Amá was right after all—perhaps a trip to Mexico is just what she needed all along.

The next day, Mamá Jacinta teaches Julia how to cook **menudo**, a rich dish made from tripe. Though Julia hates Amá's cooking lessons at home, she finds herself enjoying the work of cleaning and preparing the meat and cooking the delicious food. As the women wait for the dish to simmer, Mamá Jacinta asks Julia about what's going on at home. Julia is reluctant to answer, but Mamá Jacinta assures her that whatever she says will stay between them—and won't make its way to Amá. Mamá Jacinta tells Julia that Amá was always the rebellious daughter, and tells Julia she shouldn't be so hard on her—she's been through a lot.

As Julia arrives in Mexico, she's happy to see the kind and amiable Chucho—but slightly horrified when she realizes that even in Mexico, she's not going to be able to escape Olga's shadow or the grief her entire extended family feels over her loss. At the same time, what Julia is starting to semi-realize is that Olga's status as the "perfect" one also cut her off so that no one truly knew her.



In spite of Julia's fears that she'll never be able to escape Olga's shadow, she feels genuinely happy and peaceful as she reconnects with this branch of her family. There's something about them that's more open and less judgmental than her family in Chicago—this foreshadows the journey towards increased empathy and love Julia will experience while here in Los Ojos.



Whereas at home food is scarce—and Amá is constantly berating Julia for eating junk—in Mexico, Julia's family is tripping over themselves to feed and nourish her. This symbolizes their support and love for her, and their desire to see her grow and flourish, but also the fact that, in this way at least, life in Mexico is less difficult than that for a poor immigrant in Chicago.



At home, cooking lessons with Amá are complicated and layered with lessons about traditional femininity and expectations. With Mamá Jacinta, however, cooking is about togetherness, happiness, and indulgence. It's a chance to grow closer to one another—and while the food cooks, Mamá Jacinta tries to talk to Julia about what's going on, and reassure her that any of Julia's secrets are safe in Los Ojos.



Julia asks Mamá Jacinta what she means, and Mamá Jacinta tells Julia about how Amá and Apá were robbed when they crossed the border. Julia says she already knows the story—she’s heard it several times over the years, and while it’s sad, she doesn’t see why it’s such a huge deal. Mamá Jacinta laments the bad luck her daughter has had in life, and Julia quietly sips a cup of tea.

This passage foreshadows that there is more to the story of Amá and Apá’s robbery than meets the eye, continuing on the novel’s theme of secrets, lies, and the morally ambiguous shades of gray which keep certain things buried for years.



CHAPTER 20

The next morning, Julia goes into the room which used to be her mother’s bedroom and looks around. She is aware of the irony of the fact that though she hates when her mother goes through her things, she’s now going through her mother’s old things. She doesn’t find anything exciting, though she does come upon a framed drawing of Amá when she was young. She brings the drawing to Mamá Jacinta and asks who drew it—Mamá Jacinta, surprised by the question, reveals that Apá drew it. Julia is surprised, and insists her father doesn’t draw, but Mamá Jacinta tells her that he was once known as the best artist in Los Ojos. Julia asks her grandmother why Apá would have stopped, and Mamá Jacinta suggests that Apá got too busy with work in the factory and other responsibilities once he got to America.

Julia’s journey towards becoming a more empathetic person starts with a reversal of roles. Normally, her mother is the one who does the snooping in hopes of figuring out who her daughter is and what she’s up to—now, wanting to know more about her mother and understand her better, she engages in that very same action. Julia is learning more about her parents, and beginning to see them as people—people with just as many hopes and dreams for their lives as she herself has, and also people with their own imperfections.



That night, in bed, Julia lies awake and wonders how long she’ll be in Mexico. She wonders if she’ll ever be able to find out who Olga’s boyfriend was, and as she thinks about what she knows so far, decides that he had to be a doctor at the office where Olga worked.

Julia is still unable to shake her desire to solve the puzzle of Olga’s life—but now in Mexico away from the constant quest to find more information she is able to put some of those pieces together to understand more about her sister’s situation.



Fermina’s oldest daughter Belén is “the town hot girl.” She is not much older than Julia but nearly a foot taller, and dresses in revealing clothing that makes everyone in town stare whenever she walks down the street. Belén decides to take Julia out and introduce her to everyone else in town—Julia is nervous about talking to so many strangers, but decides to go along. After a few of these walks, Julia begins to enjoy them, and loves listening to Belén’s constant gossip, even though she doesn’t know who any of the people her cousin talks about are.

Julia is bonding with her entire family, and learning to appreciate a different, slower way of life. Julia has been so obsessed with college and forward motion that she’s forgotten how nice it can be to just enjoy the present.



On one walk with Belén, Belén points out a “depressing park” as the place where a group of narcos—drug lords—beheaded the town mayor years ago. When Julia is shocked by the violence, Belén points out a nearby house that was burned down by a Molotov cocktail. Julia asks if she is safe in Los Ojos, and Belén insists she is—as long as she doesn’t stay out late, “especially alone.”

This passage foreshadows the terrible violence that has come to Los Ojos—and will come again. While in many ways her extended family’s life in Mexico is better than that of her life as an immigrant in Chicago, in other ways it is much more dangerous. After this passage, it is more clear why people would leave the town to go to the United States illegally, despite the risks. The destruction described here also points to the cyclical and often inescapable nature of poverty.



CHAPTER 21

One of Julia’s youngest cousins is turning three years old, and the family has planned a big pig roast at a venue in town. As Julia, Belén, and Mamá Jacinta walk over to the party, they pass a group of indigenous women and girls begging for alms—Belén rudely calls the women “typical indias” and orders Julia not to give them any money. After Belén moves on, Julia quickly reaches into her pocket and gives a young girl all of her change.

Julia’s desire to give some money to the indigenous women shows again her capacity for empathy. She sees Belén’s judgmental nature as cruel and hypocritical, and begins to understand the ways in which her own haughtiness has stood in her way before. Belén’s behavior may also be taken as pointing to the ways that prejudice is prevalent all over.



At the party venue—owned by the richest family in town, whose wealth, it’s rumored, came from selling drugs—the men are killing the pig for the barbecue. Julia is upset by the display, and Belén calls her a “delicate” American. Determined to prove Belén wrong, Julia chooses to stay and watch the pig get slaughtered rather than take a walk with Mamá Jacinta. After the pig is slaughtered and bled, as the men begin frying it up, Julia feels her mouth water almost against her will. She is “weird[ed]” out by the strangeness of the human body. After the pig meat has been used to make delicious **chicarrones**, Julia wolfs them down.

This passage symbolizes the often unpleasant nature of ambition. Food has always been a comfort for Julia, and she enjoys snacking on junk. To see where her food actually comes from, though, makes her reconsider what it means to gorge herself. In Mexico, Julia is learning to look her desires and ambitions in the face and see how destructive they can be—just as she understands now that for every dish of chicharrones, a pig must be slaughtered. This does not mean that she doesn’t enjoy the food by any means. But she is becoming more aware of the complexity of life.



The party gets into full swing, and there is dancing and eating as everyone celebrates. Julia’s cousin Andrés, who is just a few years older than her, asks her to come next door with him—he takes her out to a barn where there are two beautiful horses tied up, and asks if she wants to go for a ride. He tells Julia that the horses are in love, and cry when they’re separated. Touched by the beauty of the animals, Julia pushes her reluctance aside and joins Andrés on a peaceful ride through town.

Julia’s quick jaunt with Andrés allows her to see the beauty of Los Ojos from a new vantage point, and to have an experience she’d never be able to have in Chicago—or in her dreams about New York. Julia is seeing that there are other ways of life that are beautiful, and understanding that she doesn’t have to put so much pressure on herself to live only one way or in pursuit of only one thing.



After Andrés and Julia return to the party, Julia dances with the slightly drunken Tío Chucho and has a great time spinning around on the dance floor, unlike at her **quinceañera**. After a few songs, however, a group of men in black masks and rifles enter the venue—Chucho grows noticeably upset, and walks away from Julia towards the men. The party grows quiet and still as everyone watches Chucho pull an envelope from his pocket and hand it towards one of the men, who nods at Andrés briefly before leaving the party. Julia asks Belén what's going on, but Belén urges Julia to be quiet and stop asking questions.

The party takes a dark turn as the narcos show up and threaten to bring violence and discord to the celebration. Julia is seeing that there's a dark side to Los Ojos—and beginning to understand that she's lucky, in many ways, not to have to face pressure on this scale back in Chicago.



CHAPTER 22

Though Julia hates sports, she agrees to tag along with Belén to a local soccer match. Halfway through the match, a young man named Esteban comes to sit between Belén and Julia, and starts chatting Julia up. Belén and her friends are amused by Esteban's interest in Julia, and when the game is over, they depart in a pack, leaving Julia and Esteban alone. Esteban offers to walk Julia home and Julia accepts, remembering what Belén said about walking around alone at night. As the two of them talk and flirt, Esteban admits he's had his eye on Julia since she got to town. Julia is confused by the warm feelings of desire she's having for Esteban—she thought she was in love with Connor, and yet Esteban makes her feel “all goopy inside.”

Just as Julia pinned all her hopes on going to college in New York and becoming a famous writer, she pinned all her romantic hopes on Connor—even though there were many ways in which he wasn't a perfect match. When she meets Esteban, she understands that it's okay to want two things at once—or to ask for more when faced with something insufficient. Julia's both reconsidering the nature of ambition and the utility of it—it's not a bad thing, but there are ways to be an ambitious and hopeful person without pushing oneself too hard or closing oneself off to other things.



That night, Julia sits with Tía Fermina, Tía Estela, and Tío Chucho in Fermina's backyard. Julia admires the stars, and admits she hardly gets to see them in Chicago. Estela tenderly braids Julia's hair, admiring her thick and glossy locks as Julia eats figs and enjoys the warm night air. Tía Fermina goes inside and brings out a pitcher of cold hibiscus tea. As Julia sips the tea surrounded by her family and the warm breeze, she feels totally content and at peace.

Julia continues bonding with her family in the idyllic beauty of Los Ojos—and yet the threat of violence lurks just underneath the surface of even the most perfect, relaxing evening.



The next morning, Julia goes with Tía Fermina to a small market three towns over to buy some special cheese. On the ride over, Fermina complains about the drought affecting the countryside, and Julia is amazed by how familiar the scenery and passing towns look, though she hasn't been to Mexico in many years. As the women arrive in town and walk through the streets, Fermina asks Julia how Amá is doing, and Julia admits that things at home have been extremely difficult since Olga's death. Fermina laments that she can't do more for her sister, and expresses sorrow at the fact that Julia and Amá seem to have a difficult relationship. Fermina begs Julia to be kinder to her mother, and to try and make her life easier. Julia retorts that though she tries with Amá, her mother is strict, overbearing, and tries to control her every move.

Julia's family knows that things aren't right in Chicago—there's no other reason she'd come to Mexico alone. As Fermina asks Julia to tell her what's going on, she tries to help Julia see things from a different angle, and to understand that her mother is just a woman trying her best. Julia maintains that Amá is cruel, judgmental, and invasive, however—she hasn't yet learned to see that perhaps her mother's flaws and tics are part of something larger.



Fermina tells Julia that there's a lot she doesn't understand about her mother, then goes quiet and starts to cry. Julia asks what's wrong, and Fermina reveals tearfully that during Amá and Apá's border crossing, the coyote leading them through the desert raped Amá while his associates held a gun to Apá's head, forcing him to watch. Julia is so shocked by the news that she has to sit down on the ground. She can't help but picture the horrible assault over and over—and what's worse, she realizes that because Olga was born a bit under a year after her parents arrived in the state, it is likely that she was the product of rape. Fermina cries as she tells Julia that she wanted her to know, so that she can better understand where her mother is coming from—that she wants to protect Julia, not hurt her.

That night, Julia is distracted by thoughts of her parents and can't sleep. As the days pass by, they all blur together, and Julia begins feeling aimless and lost in thought. She spends most of her time with Belén and Esteban, and though she fantasizes often about Esteban, he's never tried to kiss her—but he does sometimes hold her hand when Belén isn't looking.

One night, Julia is inside Mamá Jacinta's house with her grandmother, Belén, and her aunts, watching telenovelas, when the women suddenly hear men's voices screaming obscenities at one another in the street. Belén mutes the TV and the screams grow louder—then, the women hear gunshots. All of them drop to the floor, and the distraught Mamá Jacinta begins crying. As everyone crawls towards the back of the house, Julia peeks outside the window, and sees two dead bodies in the middle of the street.

The next day, Tía Fermina performs a cleansing ritual on Julia to get rid of the bad luck and energy from the shooting. She uses an uncooked egg to gently touch different parts of Julia's body with the cool shell, whispering prayers and making crosses on Julia's extremities. At the end of the ritual, Fermina cracks the egg into a glass and holds it to the light; there is blood in the yolk. Fermina gasps, and asks Julia what's going on with her.

The narcos have plummeted Los Ojos into violence again, and Mamá Jacinta tells Julia it's time for her to go home. She books a flight for Julia back to Chicago, but tells her she'll need to take a bus to the airport as it's dangerous for Tío Chucho to drive her. Jacinta explains that at the party a few weeks ago, Chucho gave the narcos a bribe—they are trying to recruit Andrés into their service, but he doesn't want to work for them. Mamá Jacinta laments that her town is turning to "garbage."

With this shocking revelation, Julia is forced to reconsider everything she knows about both of her parents. Suddenly, so much of Julia's life makes sense—Amá's fearfulness and resulting strictness and overprotectiveness, Apá's disconnected, dissociative nature, and most of all, their obsession with praising and elevating Olga to compensate for the horrible truth about her conception.



Julia experiences a minor existential crisis as she slowly absorbs the revelations about her parents and Olga—but in the meantime, life goes on. Secrets and lies have the power to stop someone in their tracks—but keeping them tamped down allows real life to spin forward with surprising normalcy.



The violence in Los Ojos begins to escalate, with the physical shattering of Julia's bubble of safety and happiness in Mexico coinciding with the interior symbolic shattering of everything she thought she knew about her life back in Chicago.



Fermina's cleansing ritual shows that there's still a lot that Julia isn't dealing with. There's pain, confusion, and so much more lingering just below the surface—and Julia will need to deal with her problems if she wants to become whole.



Julia has long felt alone in her restlessness and desire to get out of her neighborhood. Now, she sees that the problems she's facing and the things she's feeling are universal—and that for some people, even members of her own family, things are much worse than they are for Julia herself.



The next day, Julia meets up with Esteban to say goodbye. He tells her he'll miss her—but that he might be crossing the border soon, and will perhaps see her again someday. Julia begs Esteban to be careful during the crossing, and expresses her anger about the “giant wound” the border truly is. Esteban takes Julia's face between his hands and kisses her deeply.

There are things that Julia and Esteban can talk about that she can't with Connor. Esteban understands Julia on a deeper level, and they share a common culture, a common hatred, and a common fear.



On the bus, as she pulls away from Los Ojos, Julia cries quietly. She has Apá's drawing of Amá with her, and has promised Mamá Jacinta that she will take care of Amá always. As the bus moves through the desert, Julia is struck by the intense beauty and colors of the place, even in spite of the drought. As the bus approaches the city, however, Julia spies a dead donkey in a field—two vultures circle above it.

The dead donkey Julia spies on her way out of Mexico serves as a visual metaphor for the journey she's undergone there. She is able to see that violence and beauty can exist in the same landscape—and that though there is always something ugly simmering just below the surface, life must carry on anyway.



CHAPTER 23

Back in Chicago, Amá picks Julia up from the airport and takes her to a restaurant in Chinatown. Julia can barely remember the last time she and her mother ate together at a **restaurant**. Chicago is beginning to thaw, and the city is “more alive” than it was when Julia left. When Amá asks about Julia's trip, Julia admits that she had a nice time, and didn't realize how much she'd missed Los Ojos and her relatives there.

Julia and Amá's trip to a restaurant—their first in years—symbolizes that both of them want to meet on even ground and enter a new, more open stage of their relationship. Still, there's a new barrier between them—albeit an invisible one.



Amá tells Julia that Mr. Ingman called the house last week and said he was worried about Julia and her whereabouts. Amá tells Julia that Mr. Ingman said Julia is the best student he's ever had, and asks why Julia wouldn't have talked more about her success in school. Amá apologizes for not paying more attention to Julia, and tells her she loves her “with all [her] heart.” She explains that she's so overprotective because she doesn't want Julia making stupid mistakes—she wants Julia to have a good life.

Amá and Julia are able to have their first real conversation in a long time—and Amá is clearly trying hard to communicate to Julia that though she hasn't always been there for her, she does truly love her daughter and want the best for her. It seems as if a new chapter in their relationship is beginning.



Julia can barely look at Amá without thinking about what she was forced to endure during the border crossing. She doesn't think she'll ever be able to tell her mother that she knows her secret—but at the same time, wonders how she, and everyone else, is able to go through life with so many secrets “locked inside.” Unable to say anything about what she's learned, Julia simply apologizes to her mother for hurting her.

Even though Amá is making a huge effort and trying to usher in a new stage of their relationship, Julia remains anxious and upset about the secret she's learned regarding the border crossing. Julia wonders what her relationship with her mother will look like now that there are so many secrets between them, even as so much has been revealed and renewed.



When Julia and Amá get back to the apartment, Amá lets Julia have her phone back. When Julia turns it on she sees that she has multiple calls and texts, all from Connor. She quickly calls him and tells him that she was in Mexico—when he asks why, she tells him it’s a “long story,” not wanting to share the truth about her suicide attempt. Connor says he’s relieved to hear Julia’s voice—he thought she’d hated him. Connor says he’s missed Julia, and she says she’s missed him, too. He invites her to meet him at the **bookstore** the following afternoon, and she says she will, determined to find a way there.

Julia goes out to the living room to ask Amá if she can go hang out downtown with Lorena tomorrow afternoon. She feels bad that she has no choice to lie—even in spite of their moment of connection earlier, she’d never tell her mother about Connor. Amá agrees to let Julia go, since she hasn’t seen Lorena in such a long time—as long as she’s back before dark.

Because she sees that Amá is making an effort, Julia decides to make one too—and agrees to go along with her mother to her church group that night. As the two of them arrive, Julia gorges herself on coffee and **cookies**, and then sits down in a circle with her mother and the rest of the attendees. The members of the prayer group talk and share stories of the difficulties they’re facing in their lives. When one man confesses that he’s having trouble “forgiving” his son for being gay, Julia angrily speaks up, thinking of Juanga, but manages to calm herself down before she says anything too hurtful. When it’s Amá’s turn to speak, she admits that she’s been neglecting Julia in the wake of Olga’s loss—and that she has a lot to learn about who Julia is and what she wants out of life.

That night, once her parents are asleep, Julia uses her key to get back into Olga’s room and finish reading her emails. She hops onto a neighbor’s internet and reads through the emails. The emails reveal that Olga’s lover had children in high school and has been married to his wife for over twenty years. Julia wonders why her sister put up with the man’s excuses for so long—and how she was able to hide the truth of what she was going through from everyone. As Julia gets to the last email, she learns a stunning truth—Olga was pregnant with her lover’s baby when she died.

Julia has thought for months that Connor was over her—uncomprehending of her problems, scared off by her emotions, and unable to connect with her. To learn that he has been thinking about her and worrying about her fills her with hope that there’s still a chance for them—and that she’s still lovable and worthy in spite of all she’s been through.



Even though Amá and Julia are being more open with one another than they’ve been in the past, this passage shows that Julia still doesn’t fully trust Amá to trust her. There are still going to be secrets and lies between them—and perhaps always will be.



As Julia accompanies Amá to her prayer circle, her opinionated, loudmouth ways are tested. Julia sees many parents discussing their struggles to be good to their children in spite of failing to understand them—Julia believes it’s cruel for a parent to reject their child, but at the same time, sees her own mother struggling with how to accept a daughter she doesn’t fully know how to approach. In seeing her mother talk about her uncertainty about what to do, though, she also sees that her mother is trying even if she isn’t always succeeding.



As Julia discovers one final, earth-shattering secret—Olga was pregnant at the time of her death—she is tested more acutely than she has been by any other secret she’s learned. She must now confront directly what it means to take a secret to the grave—to want to shelter loved ones from a painful truth even if it means creating a vast distance or rift.



CHAPTER 24

Julia calls the hotel where Angie works, and, once confirming that Angie's there, hops on a train to get downtown. She marches in the front door, and approaches Angie at the front desk. Angie is clearly nervous to see Julia, and tells her she can't talk right now, but Julia, faking pleasantness, says she must have some time to talk about her dead pregnant sister—and her married boyfriend. Angie, blanching, tells Julia that she'll take her out for a quick coffee.

At a nearby coffee shop, Julia asks Angie why she didn't tell Julia the truth. Angie insists that no one would have “gain[ed]” anything from learning the truth—Olga is dead, and the truth would only have hurt people. Sometimes, Angie says, “people don't need the truth.” Julia begs Angie to tell her the name of the man Olga was seeing, but Angie refuses, and asks how Julia learned all of this in the first place. When Julia says she went through Olga's emails, Angie calls her snooping “messed up.” Julia insists that nothing is more messed up than Angie's choice to keep Olga's secret for her. Julia wonders how she is going to keep the secret for her whole life—her parents deserve to know, and she doesn't want to live a lie. Angie, crying, implores Julia to understand that “some things should never be said out loud.”

Julia heads to Wicker Park to meet up with Connor at the **bookstore**. They don't hug or kiss as they see one another again for the first time, and Julia is surprised by Connor's short haircut. The two of them walk through the store and catch up on what's been going on, and then make their way to an outdoor park. Julia asks Connor if he's seeing anyone new, and though he laughs at the question, he doesn't say that he isn't. When Julia asks if he's gotten into any colleges, he reveals that he's been accepted to Cornell—his first choice. Julia congratulates him, and says that she's hoping to end up in New York, too. Connor says that if she does, he promises to come and visit her. Julia says she isn't sure if she'll get in, but Connor tells her to believe in herself.

Julia is determined to confront Angie and get the truth of what she knew about Olga out of her once and for all. Julia knows how to run her mouth—and is not afraid to confront Angie with it at her place of work.



Between Amá's secret and Olga's, Julia has a lot burdening her mind and her heart. She's beginning to see how naive she was about so many things, and how blind she's been to the turmoil that's been boiling just below the surface of the family. To the loudmouth, confrontational Julia, all of this seems like too much to bear—but Angie's perspective lets Julia see that perhaps the best, kindest thing she can do is keep these things to herself. Julia is learning the difficult and morally ambiguous lesson that, sometimes, airing secrets and lies can do more harm than good.



Things with Connor are different than they were before, but Julia still likes him and he obviously still cares for her. In the midst of all the insanity Julia's going through, having a kind (and oblivious) friend and outlet in Connor is a good thing—and Julia is, in a way, testing her secret-keeping skill out on him.



As the sun begins to set, Julia asks what happens next. Connor says he isn't sure—all he knows is that he's missed Julia terribly. He suggests that since they're both going away to college soon, they should enjoy their time together without overthinking things. Julia is slightly disappointed, but agrees with Connor's plan.

Julia and Connor are at a strange time in their lives—they're both preparing to move on to bigger and better things. Being communicative about their ambitions and their desires to take things as they come allow them to have a freer, more equal relationship, one that's open and giving even though it's shrouded in secrets and half-truths. Julia is learning how both of these qualities can exist in any given relationship. At the same time, Connor is content as always not to try too hard. His position is both pragmatic and just a tad lazy and selfish. Somehow in the book he always seems cocooned just a bit in his privilege. That doesn't make him bad, any more than Amá or Julia are bad for their failures, but it is a facet of his own human imperfection.



CHAPTER 25

A lot has happened since Julia left for Mexico. Juanga has a new boyfriend, Mr. Ingman is engaged to another teacher, and Lorena has missed her period—and believes she's pregnant. After school one day, Julia takes the train to a nearby clinic with Lorena so that she can have a pregnancy test. Julia can tell her friend is nervous, and asks what she'll do if it's positive. Lorena says there's no way she's having a baby—she doesn't want to get stuck in their neighborhood. Julia asks Lorena how she'll pay for an abortion, and Lorena says she'll steal a stash of money José Luis keeps in his closet.

The world has spun on without Julia, and she's experiencing a little bit of whiplash as she tries to catch up with all she's missed. Lorena's pregnancy scare brings back memories of Julia's cousin Vanessa and the way that to get stuck in their neighborhood with a baby is to get further entrenched in the cyclical, inescapable poverty that they've been working so hard to escape. Lorena's plan to steal money for an abortion further shows how poverty can lead to reckless, dangerous action.



Lorena's test reveals that she's not pregnant. She and Julia leave the clinic in high spirits, and Lorena says she wants to celebrate. Julia points out that they don't have any money—but Lorena reveals that she's already stolen five hundred dollars in cash from José Luis. The two girls head downtown to a fancy seafood restaurant overlooking the Chicago River, and gorge themselves on a **platter of seafood** as they discuss Julia's love life. Lorena says she wants to meet Connor, and Julia texts him, asking him to come join them.

The girls are high on the good news about the negative test, and full of restlessness and the feeling of potential. They decide to spend a ton of money on delicious fine food, cementing that for other characters in the novel—not just Julia—ravenous consumption of food is tied to ambition, dreams, and the desire for more.



Julia tells Lorena the truth about Olga—that she was pregnant when she died, and had been seeing a married man for years. Lorena can hardly believe that the innocent Olga had such a huge secret, and asks if Julia is going to tell her parents—Julia confesses she hasn't decided what to do. She says that learning Olga's secrets might just upset them, though she admits there are “too many secrets” in her family already. Lorena says she thinks Julia should tell her parents, but Julia isn't so sure.

Julia is aware of the power of the secret she's keeping—as well as the power of the other secrets within her family. She doesn't want to perpetuate a culture of lies anymore, but at the same time, is beginning to see that things are not so black and white—and that Lorena's perspective about radical truthfulness might not be useful for Julia's precarious familial situation. She sees how secrets can cause damage, but also how they can be a form of protection, too.



After lunch, the girls meet up with Connor in the city. Lorena clearly doesn't like Connor right off the bat, but when Julia pulls Lorena aside and points out that she was the one who wanted to meet him, Lorena softens and tries to make some conversation—though she's still pretty icy as they settle in at a coffee shop for some snacks. When Connor goes to the bathroom, Julia asks Lorena why she's still giving Connor such a hard time. Lorena points out that Connor probably looks down on the girls and sees them as “ghetto.” Julia insists Connor isn't like that, but Lorena argues that “they all are.”

Lorena is skeptical of Connor from the get-go. She's protective of Julia, just as Amá is—she doesn't want her to get hurt or to operate under false hopes. To Lorena, it's possible that Julia's relationship with Connor represents Julia's desire to escape the neighborhood and socioeconomic class she and Lorena share—a slight to Lorena for sure, and an ambition she wants to tell Julia might be too lofty. More broadly, though, Lorena is skeptical of the possibility of any cross-cultural, cross-socioeconomic relationships. She can't believe that anyone of Connor's class can fully avoid looking down on those of a “lower” class. It's interesting that the book never rejects Lorena's argument. Rather it simply lets it stand, as another complication in a complicated world.



CHAPTER 26

After school one day, Julia takes the bus to Olga's office. She sits in the waiting room, looking at the list of doctors who work there, but knows there's no way she can figure out who the mystery man is. When the receptionist asks Julia if she'd like to make an appointment, Julia knows she can't loiter any longer. Just as she's about to give up, a man in a dark suit enters the office—it is the mysterious man from Olga's funeral. The receptionist greets the man as Dr. Castillo. Julia hurries out of the office, but waits outside the building for Castillo to emerge.

The answer to the mystery of Olga's life has been hiding in plain sight since the start of the novel—the grieving man at the back of her funeral was her married lover, and seeing him again in the flesh fills Julia with dread and anxiety.



When Dr. Castillo comes out of the office, Julia follows him to his car—a shiny black BMW. Just as he's about to get in, she confronts him. When he asks who she is, she says she's Olga's sister. He replies that Olga was a “wonderful employee” and is missed by all. Julia says she is sure Castillo misses Olga most of all—seeing as he's the one who got her pregnant. Dr. Castillo tells Julia he can explain everything, and offers to give her a ride to a local diner so they can talk.

The hotheaded Julia, true to her nature, is violently angry with Castillo—she believes he hurt and exploited her sister carelessly. Castillo, however, wants to extend an olive branch—and Julia, surprisingly, accepts his offer to explain things to her.



At the diner, Dr. Castillo tells Julia that he truly loved Olga—and that when Julia's older, she'll be able to understand just how complicated things were between them. Julia asks Dr. Castillo how old he is, and he says he's forty-six. Julia tells him that he's older than her and Olga's father. Dr. Castillo tries to tell Julia that he really did want to marry Olga—especially after he learned she was pregnant. A waitress comes by to take their order, and though Dr. Castillo gets a coffee, Julia decides to take advantage of the free meal and orders a **grilled cheese**.

Julia's anger, confusion, and contempt towards Castillo rev her up. She is willing to listen to him, and anxious to hear the truth of what transpired between him and Olga. Her restlessness as she awaits the full explanation is symbolized by her sudden hunger—and she can't help but feel, as she orders, that she feels like ordering on Castillo's dime is like taking a miniscule revenge against him (and perhaps in general a revenge against all the rich people who exploit those less fortunate).



Dr. Castillo opens his wallet and takes out a picture—it is a folded-up ultrasound image. As Julia looks at the image, she wonders aloud how she'll manage to keep this secret. Dr. Castillo begs her not to tell her parents, claiming that Olga wouldn't want to "hurt" them—sometimes, he says, it's best not to tell the truth. Julia asks how she can possibly trust the man who strung her sister along for years—but Dr. Castillo begins crying, and insists he has been "ruined" by Olga's death. He reveals that since Olga died, he's gotten a divorce from his wife. Julia points out that he did what Olga wanted too late, then picks up her backpack and leaves.

There are two sides to every story—and as Castillo offers his, Julia feels sadness and rage combined. She can't believe that the man who strung her sister along for years could possibly have loved her—but as she has learned over and over again throughout the last several months, sometimes, things aren't what they seem to be. Castillo seems to be legitimately distraught, and to have left his wife when he realized what he lost. And yet, at the same time, he didn't do enough when Olga was alive. In some ways reminiscent of Connor when Julia was struggling, he never pushed past his own comfort when it truly mattered.



CHAPTER 27

Julia still isn't sure how to talk to Apá—there's so much she wants to say to him, but can't. The secrets she's keeping are beginning to "feel like strangling vines." Julia constantly questions whether keeping Olga's secrets is selfish, or whether the more selfish thing would be to share them with her parents, who have already suffered enough. Still, Julia decides that she needs to try to keep her relationship with her father alive. One morning, she sits down with him for some coffee and asks him about his art—she wants to know why he stopped. Apá reveals that he saw drawing as a "waste of time" once he got to the States—sometimes, he says, "you don't get to do what you want to do." Apá puts his coffee cup in the sink and leaves the kitchen.

Even after Angie's lesson, Julia is still struggling with how secret-keeping relates to morality. She knows that to burden Amá and Apá with Olga's secret would be selfish; but at the same time, she is not sure how much more loneliness she can take. She tries to connect with Apá in another way, but fails—the narrative suggests that while secrets and lies may chip away at a relationship, to reveal secrets might be to blast that relationship away altogether. It's also not clear what the book thinks of Apá's stance toward drawing. It makes sense why he gave it up in a practical way, but was it actually a waste of time? But the point that "sometimes you don't get to do what you want to do" does connect to the way the book treats the realities of life—as always complicated, always messy, and never perfect.



Since returning from Mexico, Julia has been having weekly sessions with Dr. Cooke. Their "number-one topic" is Julia's relationship with Amá. Julia is grateful that Dr. Cooke never seems to judge her, even when she admits things that are painful or embarrassing. When Dr. Cooke asks how things are going one afternoon, Julia reveals that she believes her mother is trying to let her have more freedom—even as she grows more and more anxious the closer Julia's departure for college gets. Dr. Cooke asks if Julia would ever consider talking to her mother about the border crossing, and suggests that discussing it would be a way for them to go closer—maybe not now, but in the future. Julia says she doesn't want to bring it up now, but is open to the fact that one day she might be ready to discuss it.

Julia's relationship to secret-keeping is complicated by another facet, too, which is that revealing that she knows a painful secret might do to her relationship with Amá. There's the chance that Amá is burdened by keeping the truth from Julia, and Julia revealing she knows it already might make things better—but Julia is too afraid to do more damage to her fledging relationship with Amá to reveal anything just yet. For now, Julia is leaving her options open—leaving a possibility for the future—which is a step in and of itself, and leaves space for a relationship to blossom in the meantime.



Julia's college acceptance letters begin to arrive. In one afternoon, she gets rejected from Boston University, Barnard College, Columbia University, and Boston College, and begins to lose hope that she'll be able to go away to school after all. Juanga and Lorena urge her not to get discouraged—and remind her that if all else fails, she can move downtown with them—but Julia remains determined to get to New York. The next day, two huge envelopes arrive in the mail—one is from DePaul University in Chicago, and one is from NYU. Julia has gotten into both places with full rides. Amá and Apá congratulate her, and though they're disheartened that she wants to choose NYU over the closer university, they are genuinely proud of her and promise to support her journey to New York.

The end of the school year approaches, and Julia is growing more and more restless about her impending move to New York. One sunny May afternoon, she attends an outdoor fair with Connor. As they share **food** and listen to music, she asks him what is going to happen to the two of them after the summer is over. Connor promises he'll visit her in New York, but Julia doesn't quite believe him. She starts to cry, overwhelmed by how quickly her life is changing. Connor tells her she looks beautiful and kisses her cheek. Julia smiles, believing him for the first time.

Julia is feeling a rollercoaster of emotions as her college rejections—and acceptances—begin to stream in. The letters represent her life's work, and determine whether she'll be one step closer to her dream of making it as a New York writer, or one step farther away. Julia's hard work is rewarded in the end, and she decides to pursue her dream without looking back—even though she knows that in leaving home, she'll truly never be the "perfect Mexican daughter" her parents have always wanted her to be. Having engaged with if not solved her issues at home, Julia's now prepared to fulfill her ambition and move on to the next stage of her life.



Julia has felt insecure in her relationship with Connor since the start—she's been afraid he'll be repulsed by or disdainful of her appearance, her heritage, or her attitude. Those feelings are evident here when she doesn't entirely believe his promise to visit. Her disbelief might also stem from the knowledge she's gained that the future is uncertain. At the same time, as Julia has dealt with some serious issues over the last several months, however, she's grown to understand and like herself more. And she's also learned that there is a value to live in the present, and to connect to people in that present. And so, when Connor kisses her and says she's beautiful, she is able to believe that even as their future remains uncertain.



CHAPTER 28

After months of adjusting to her medications and attending sessions with Dr. Cooke, Julia's depression and anxiety have lessened significantly. She keeps track of her low points in her journal, and finds that she's able to talk herself through even her worst doubts and insecurities about herself. At her final session with Dr. Cooke, she reads her therapist a poem she's been working on in which she imagines going into the "vault" of her life and examining everything—her dreams, her secrets, and the beauty in between.

Julia, who refused any and all help offered to her just a few months ago, has come a long way. No longer averse to letting people in, to admitting her shortcomings, or to seeking help, she has unlocked the "vault" within herself and learned to face and deal with even the most difficult parts of herself and her life.



After dinner that evening, Amá tries to engage Julia in a talk “about boys.” Though Julia tries to resist the sex talk, Amá tells her to be careful around boys and protect herself from them. She tries to warn Julia about drugs men put in women’s drinks, but Julia says she already knows all about roofies. Amá is confused by the word “roofies.” She warns Julia worriedly that if she has sex she could get AIDS or become pregnant, and Julia finally cuts her mother off—acknowledging that she’d rather learn how to make **tortillas** than continue talking about sex. Amá laughs heartily.

This passage shows that Amá is just as overprotective as ever—but Julia, and the readers, know now that at the end of the day all Amá wants is to keep Julia safe from harm. The two women are able to joke about the difficult spots in their relationship, now, having gotten better at seeing and understanding one another over the course of the novel. In some way the same pattern exists, but there is also a new faith and understanding of each other and their underlying love that makes it easier for those same old gears to grind without causing the same hurt.



CHAPTER 29

The morning before her flight to New York, Julia calls Freddy and Alicia to tell them she’s headed to NYU. They tell her they’re proud of her, and ask her to visit them over winter break. Lorena comes into the room as Julia is ending the call and sits on the edge of Julia’s bed, offering to help her pack. Lorena has been accepted to nursing school and is waitressing part-time; she and Juanga are hoping to get an apartment together soon, once they’ve saved enough for a deposit. Julia tells Lorena how proud she is of her and how much she loves her, and promises to call “ten times a day.” Lorena begins to cry—something she hardly ever does in front of Julia—and then heads off to work, telling Julia she loves her.

As Julia quickly ties up her loose ends in Chicago, there’s a bittersweet energy in the air. She’s excited for what’s to come and proud of what she’s achieved. But she also knows that in getting what she’s always wanted, she’s leaving behind some wonderful parts of her life in Chicago that she’d overlooked for years. This final meeting with Lorena in the book also attests to the enduring love and friendship between the two. Where there is uncertainty about Julia’s future with Connor, there doesn’t seem to be any about her relationship with Lorena.



The next day, as he prepares to take her to the airport, Apá dresses in the same faded blue shirt he was wearing the night he found Julia slitting her wrists. At the sight of the shirt, Julia feels a shameful pang, and wishes that she and her father could both un-live that night. Julia flashes back to a memory of hearing Apá pounding on her locked bedroom door as she took a knife to her wrists—she loved her father more “in that moment” than she ever had.

Julia finds herself triggered and plunged back into memory by the sight of Apá’s shirt. As she relives the night of her suicide attempt, she feels grateful beyond measure that Apá was willing to do whatever it took to save her from herself. He is as stolid and uncommunicative as ever, and yet behind that she can sense his profound love for her, and returns it.



At the airport, Julia bids her parents goodbye as she prepares to enter the security line. She can’t believe she’s leaving them, and feels terrible for going away to school. Amá hands her some money, telling her it’s in case she starts to “**crave** something when [she gets] to New York.” Julia begins weeping, and then opens her backpack. She hands Apá the drawing of Amá, and asks him if he’ll draw a picture of her sometime. He nods solemnly.

Julia has longed to leave home for so long, partially because she felt her parents never understood or supported her. Now, though, Amá makes it clear that she loves, knows, and supports Julia—even her bad habits—and Apá is promising to be more present and revisit the truth of who he once was. Julia feels sad as she leaves her parents, who have made just as much of an effort to change as she has.



Julia falls asleep on the plane and wakes up to see the New York skyline just outside her window. She can't believe how big the city is. As she looks down at the buildings, she wonders what her life there will be like. Though she doesn't know what the future holds—who she'll be, whether she'll continue seeing Connor—she's excited for what's to come. She finds herself thinking of Mexico, and of Esteban, and of all the unknowns in her future. Still, she's proud of how far she's come—and refuses to let herself get dragged down by the fear that her brain might “fail” her again.

Julia still has nightmares about Olga, and isn't sure if they'll ever stop—or if she'll ever stop feeling badly about carrying Olga's secret. She feels grateful and blessed to be able to make choices that her parents—and even her sister—were not able to make for themselves, and in fact wrote her college essay (at Mr. Ingman's suggestion) about how her drive to succeed in life was connected to her responsibility to making her family proud. As the plane begins its descent, Julia pulls out Olga's ultrasound picture and stares at it. She reflects on how, in the years she's spent combing through her sister's life to understand her better, she actually ended up finding “beautiful and ugly” pieces of herself instead.

Julia is nervous as she embarks on this new chapter in her life—but refuses to let fear, confusion, or uncertainty hold her back. She can tolerate that uncertainty, now, as a condition of life. She's learning more about who she is and what she wants every day, and developing a more holistic view of herself as a complex, full person. She is not interested in either being or rebelling against being a “perfect” person.



In the novel's final lines, Julia is able to articulate what the last two years have taught her. The whole time she was trying to uncover information about Olga, she didn't realize that she was actually getting closer and closer to uncovering, facing, and understanding the hardest and most painful truths not about her sister, but about herself. Even in the ugliness and uncertainty Julia has been able to find beauty and solidity, and feels empowered as she enters this next phase of her life.





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