The Book of Unknown Americans

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CRISTINA HENRÍQUEZ

Born in Delaware to an American mother and a Panamanian father, Henríquez is a graduate of Northwestern University and the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop. She is the author of two novels—2009's *The World in Half* and 2014's *The Book of Unknown Americans*—and one collection of short stories, 2006's *Come Together, Fall Apart*. Henríquez has written nonfiction for *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, among other publications. She lives in Illinois.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Book of Unknown Americans is set primarily in Delaware in 2008, in the months leading up to and directly following the election of the 44th President of the United States, Barack Obama. The financial crisis of 2007-2008 has gripped the nation, and several of Henríquez's characters live daily with the fear that they will lose their jobs—eventually, for Arturo Rivera and for Rafael Toro, those fears are realized. In tertiary characters' flashbacks, Henríquez transports her readers to, among other places: the hubbub of 1960s New York City, the tumult and violence of the December 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama (an invasion code named "Operation Just Cause," justified by the U.S. as a means of securing the neutrality of the Panama Canal and deposing the corrupt dictator Manuel Noriega), and to 1980s Guatemala, which was, at the time, in the middle of what would turn out to be a nearly-thirty-year-long civil war between the Guatemalan government and rebel groups. Through these detours into the past, Henríquez illustrates the often horrific and violent situations that have forced countless American immigrants to flee their home countries in search of safety. Henríquez complicates the term "American" by examining what it means to be stateless and displaced, in search of a welcoming place to call home—and what it means to find that America is a less-than-welcoming place for many.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Drawing inspiration from novels featuring multiple narrators, such as Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad* and Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Henríquez constructs a narrative that is built on many voices and many perspectives. As in Egan's novel, and Diaz's, Heníquez creates a narrative which is as much about voice and point of view as it is about story. Novels told from multiple perspectives or in interconnected chunks have become popular in recent years, reflected in the success of books such as Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, Paula Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train*, and Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*, for example. In addition, the core plot of *The Book of Unknown Americans*—the story of the Riveras' arrival in the United States and their new lives in a Delaware apartment complex populated largely by Latino and Latina immigrants—is reminiscent of Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, about coming of age in a Latino neighborhood in Chicago.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Book of Unknown Americans*
- **When Written:** 2009-2013
- **When Published:** 2014
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Literary fiction
- **Setting:** Newark, Delaware, U.S.A.
- **Climax:** Believing his daughter Maribel is in danger, Arturo sets out to confront the boy he believes is responsible and he is shot and killed along the way
- **Antagonist:** Garrett Miller
- **Point of View:** Several different characters—some minor, some recurring, almost all immigrants from South and Central America—narrate the events of the novel, or offer short bits of testimony on their lives as "unknown Americans."

EXTRA CREDIT

Lovestruck. Cristina Henríquez, in an article for *The New Yorker*, describes how she fell in love with writing: the "embarrassing" story is that she began writing "for a boy" in high school. After she spent "a lot of time" declaring her love for one particular classmate in person, he bought her a notebook and urged her to write down everything she wanted to say to him, and give it back to him at the end of the year. Henríquez agreed, and, in the process of writing "for" someone else, she found her true calling and "[hasn't] stopped writing since."

PLOT SUMMARY

Arturo and Alma Rivera bring their teenage daughter, Maribel, across the Mexico-U.S. border and up to Newark, Delaware to start a new life. Maribel has been involved in a mysterious accident and has suffered a traumatic brain injury which has left her with a flat emotional affect and number of impairments, such as short-term memory loss and difficulty remembering

certain words. Her parents are hopeful that by sending her to Evers, a school for learning-disabled or cognitively-impaired children, Mirabel will have an easier time learning and will soon begin to resemble her old self. Alma and Arturo settle into the Redwood Apartments and their new lives begin to take shape. Arturo takes a job at a mushroom farm, where he works on his feet for hours in the dark without breaks for food or water. Alma, who is mostly housebound, struggles to navigate her new neighborhood as she deals with intense homesickness. After connecting with a neighbor, Celia Toro, Alma learns the ropes of life in Newark—she begins taking English classes at a local community center and becomes excited about all life in America could offer.

Mayor Toro, Celia's son, is a stringy, geeky high-schooler who can't seem to live up to his father's dreams—or his soccer-star older brother Enrique, who has gone off to college in Maryland on an athletic scholarship. Mayor develops an interest in the beautiful Maribel and gladly accepts the challenge of attempting to communicate with and learn more about her. A bully from Mayor's school, Garrett Miller, teases Mayor over his crush on the "retarded girl" and, eventually, he follows Mayor and Maribel to their apartment complex, where he taunts and bullies the two of them further. After "rescuing" Maribel from Garrett's insults, Mayor begins to feel a "protectiveness" over her and the two spend more and more time together, growing closer and closer. Mayor's father, Rafael, is a hot-tempered man with big dreams for his son—he wants Mayor to be a soccer star, though, unbeknownst to him, Mayor has quit soccer and is only lying about having attended practices and games. Rafael is skeptical of Mayor's fascination with Maribel, and Alma Rivera, too, makes sure that the two are only allowed to spend time together while supervised, either at the Riveras' apartment or the Toros'.

One afternoon, Alma spots Garrett harassing Maribel outside the apartment—her shirt is lifted up over her bra and Garrett has her up against a wall. Alma frightens Garrett away, returns Maribel to the apartment, and does not speak a word of the incident to Arturo. At school, Garrett taunts Mayor further, and the two get into a fight. Rafael and Celia are called into Mayor's school for a conference, where it is revealed that Mayor has not been on the soccer team for some time. Furious, Rafael grounds Mayor—which means he is not allowed to spend any time hanging out with Maribel. At Christmas, the heat in the apartment complex goes out, and the Toros throw a large party in their apartment to welcome their neighbors—the Riveras, the Mercados, Quisqueya Solis, Benny Quinto, Nelia Zafon, and Micho Alvarez are all in attendance, and even the landlord, Fito, shows up. The tenants celebrate their cultures together, and Mayor and Maribel sneak off in the middle of the party. Mayor gifts Maribel a red scarf and kisses her.

Alma, still nervous about Garrett, attempts to report him to the police, but as no crime has been committed there is nothing that the authorities can do. Meanwhile, Celia Toro's sister, who is back in Panamá, finalizes her divorce and offers a large chunk of her settlement to Celia and Rafael, repaying them for all the money they have lent her throughout the years. Rafael decides to use the money to buy a **car**, and the family picks out a Volkswagen Rabbit. Mayor is still grounded, but he visits the Riveras' apartment anyway—he lies to Alma and tells her that his punishment has been lifted. In order to impress Maribel, Mayor offers to show her the inside of the car—he steals his father's keys, and the two make out in the parking lot.

Arturo loses his job at the mushroom farm, and he and Alma lament the futility of their carefully-laid plans for success in America. Arturo is the only member of the family authorized to work and he has only thirty days to secure a new job. Celia begins teaching Alma English, as Alma has stopped going to classes at Community House. Alma teaches Arturo some key English words, but they do not improve his job search. On their wedding anniversary, Alma and Arturo take Maribel out for "drinks." The family has no money, so they just order waters and enjoy sitting in the bustling restaurant. Maribel seems to have improved, and she laughs at her father's jokes. The Toros and the Riveras go ice skating at a local pond—Alma thinks she sees Garrett, and Arturo notices her anxiety. She denies that anything is wrong. Later that week, Quisqueya pays a visit to the Riveras—she informs Alma and Arturo that she saw Mayor and Maribel canoodling in the Toro family car. Meanwhile, Rafael Toro has lost his job as well—the financial crisis of 2007-2008 is hitting everyone hard. A few days later, Alma calls Celia and tells her what Quisqueya saw—Celia and Arturo reprimand him and forbid him from seeing Maribel anymore. The Riveras tell Maribel the same thing—Maribel grows "sullen," and the progress she has made in coming out of her shell seems to halt. Alma worries that she will never get her daughter back.

Rafael Toro gets a job as a newspaper carrier. During the first snow of the season, Mayor and his friend William steal Rafael's car, but Mayor abandons William so that he himself can go scoop Maribel up from school and show her the snow—the first snowfall she has ever seen in her life. Mayor drives Maribel a long distance from town, ignoring the messages coming in on his cell phone. He gets Maribel McDonald's and she loves it. The two drive on and eventually come to a frigid beach. They kiss and Maribel laments that the moment can't last.

When Maribel does not arrive home from school that afternoon, Alma grows worried. She visits Celia Toro, and Celia assures her that Mayor is out with William. The two attempt to contact Mayor, but he does not answer his phone. Alma calls Arturo to inform him that Maribel is missing and then calls Maribel's school, but cannot get in touch with anyone. When Arturo arrives home, Alma confesses that there has been a boy who has had it out for Maribel. Alma tells Arturo that she wanted to protect Maribel on her own after not having been

able to protect her when she took her fateful fall off a **ladder** at Arturo's construction site (the fall that led to her brain injury). Arturo tells Alma to forgive herself, and he calls the police—there is a patrol car out looking for Maribel already, but Arturo does not want to wait. Alma tells him that Garrett lives in a neighborhood called Capitol Oaks, and Arturo puts on his hat and heads out the door.

Mayor and Maribel make their way home in the snowstorm, but as the weather worsens, they are forced to pull over to the side of the road. When they wake up, it is dark. Maribel tells Mayor, seemingly out of nowhere, about her frightful encounter with Garrett, and the two head home. When they arrive back at the apartment complex, Rafael is waiting outside for them—he orders them to get into the backseat, and he drives them to the hospital. The three head inside, and Celia Toro tells them that Arturo is in surgery. Maribel is confused and upset, as is Mayor. Celia comforts both of them and they all wait for hours for some news. The Toros head home and Maribel stays at the hospital with her mother—Mayor feels responsible for whatever has happened. He begs his mother to tells him what is going on, and Celia tells him that Arturo was shot while trying to find Maribel. Over the rest of the day, as neighbors visit the Toros to offer support, the story unfolds: Arturo went to Capitol Oaks, became embroiled in a confrontation, and a man with a shotgun fired at him. Mayor imagines the scene over and over again in great detail, sick with worry and guilt. That night, the Toros receive a call: Arturo has died.

The next morning, Mayor and Celia go over to the Riveras' apartment to offer support. Celia and Alma embrace, while Mayor and Maribel sit together silently. Maribel asks Mayor if what happened was her fault, and Mayor assures her that it wasn't. In his head, he begins to wonder who, exactly, is at fault—trying to unravel such a random and "infinitely" complicated series of events causes Mayor to think perhaps Arturo's death has "nothing to do with any of [them.]"

Maribel and Alma make plans to return to Mexico. Mayor offers to come visit, or to come find Maribel someday, but Maribel tells him that she is not lost and does not need to be found. Alma recounts the circumstances of her husband's death—he was shot by Garrett Miller's father, who will be charged with his murder. The authorities promise Alma that they will get "justice" for her and for Maribel. Alma wants to bring Arturo's body back to Mexico, but the hospital tells her that it will cost five thousand dollars to transport the body. She knows that she and Maribel, having fallen out of status, must leave the country. As she and Maribel prepare to leave, their neighbors visit to offer flowers, food, and condolences. Celia comes over and tells Alma that the neighbors and the local community have taken up a collection—they have raised over five thousand dollars to help in getting Arturo's body back and to ease the long journey Alma and Maribel have ahead of them.

Two days later, Alma and Maribel leave in a black pickup truck driven by a quiet man who is an acquaintance of Rafael's. Alma suspects that Rafael has paid the man nicely to drive them across the border. Maribel feels sick a few hours into the trip and when they pull over to the side of the road, Maribel throws up and then remarks that she wants to cut her hair. Alma realizes that her daughter was never really "missing," and has always been who she was before the accident. The two get back in the car and the drive continues—Alma remembers something Arturo said months ago, as they made the trip toward Delaware: "Every place is beautiful if you give it a chance."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Alma Rivera – The novel's protagonist and the matriarch of the Rivera family, Alma is a loving wife and mother who is determined to make the best life possible for her daughter, Maribel. Maribel suffers from brain damage, and Alma carries with her the deep guilt of believing that she herself was responsible for Maribel's accident—she had been holding the **ladder** that Maribel was climbing at the time of her fall. Alma's guilt drives her to move the family to Newark, Delaware in order to secure a better, more specialized education for the brain-injured Maribel. Alma yearns to recover the "old" Maribel and she grows frustrated with the withdrawn, easily-confused girl her daughter has become. Though initially unhappy and a bit frightened, Alma (who is stuck at home all day while her husband Arturo goes to work at the mushroom farm and Maribel goes off to school) soon discovers a community of immigrants in Newark—specifically in her apartment complex, the Redwood Apartments—and forms deep friendships, most notably with Celia Toro. Alma remains isolated, though, in her grief over Maribel's accident and her fear of local bully Garrett Miller, whom she observes harassing Maribel. Alma, in this way, is perhaps the character most representative of theme of isolation vs. community—despite making a life for herself in America, she remains insular and repressed in many ways.

Arturo Rivera – Alma's husband and Maribel's father, Arturo is the only member of the Rivera family licensed to work, so he is the sole provider for his wife and daughter as they make their new lives in the United States. Arturo works in terrible conditions for little money at a mushroom farm, and his long hours mean that his interactions with Alma and Maribel are limited. His old self shines through, though, in the form of his sense of humor—he's always doing silly voices and cracking jokes. Arturo is the heart of his family and he is more than happy to work hard so that Maribel can receive the education she needs. After a series of unfortunate misunderstandings, Arturo confronts the Miller family because he believes they are hurting Maribel and he is fatally injured after an argument. Arturo is—throughout the entire novel, but especially in the

end—a martyr figure and an emblem of the futility of the American dream, though he remains optimistic until his death and finds his life, despite its hardships, beautiful.

Maribel Rivera – The daughter of Alma and Arturo, the teenage Maribel has suffered a traumatic brain injury which has impaired her ability to emote, communicate, and remember. Maribel was once, according to her parents, impetuous and a bit rebellious, but now her spunky attitude has been replaced with a flat affect and rampant confusion. Maribel is in many ways the catalyst for all that happens in the novel—longing to be able to give her a better, more specialized education, Alma and Arturo change their entire lives so that Maribel can attend the Evers School in Newark, Delaware. After the initial setback of being shunted into the public school system, Maribel arrives at Evers and begins to show some marked improvements—brought on both by her education and, arguably, by the friendship of the lovestruck and attentive Mayor Toro. Maribel's relationship with Mayor gets both of them into a lot of trouble—many believe that Maribel is not capable of having agency over her decisions any longer, and eventually, after Quisqueya Solis observes the two kissing in Rafael Toro's **car**, they are forbidden from seeing one another. Maribel most directly embodies themes of longing, isolation, trauma, and loss, though she is not a tragic figure. At the end of the novel, she has regained some of her personality and her mother, Alma, realizes that Maribel never really left—she just needed to be seen in a new light and accepted for who she was.

Mayor Toro – Mayor was a young child when his family left Panamá, and he has lived most of his life in Newark, Delaware. Mayor is a scrawny, slightly nerdy teen boy. His father Rafael dreams that Mayor will achieve soccer stardom just like his older brother, Enrique, who is off on a college athletic scholarship, but Mayor is a quiet, sensitive boy who is too concerned with his own self-image to endure failure. Mayor quits the soccer team but does not tell his father, and, soon after the Riveras' arrival, he develops a crush on Maribel Rivera. At first, he is conflicted about his feelings for Maribel, since he is aware of her brain injury, and does not want to take advantage of her or her time, but he soon realizes that he is truly the only one who sees Maribel for the complicated figure that she is, and one of the only people patient enough to help her negotiate the maze of her brain. Mayor's obsession with Maribel deepens and leads to trouble for both of them—Mayor sees himself as a romantic figure full of longing, and his belief that he and Maribel are "meant" for one another blinds him to the ways in which his infatuation with her is selfish and even dangerous.

Celia Toro – A resident of the Redwood Apartments and an immigrant from Panamá, Celia is a loving wife and mother, a dutiful, compassionate, and fun neighbor, and a devoted friend to Alma and to many others in the apartment complex. Celia weathers her temperamental husband Rafael's outbursts with grace and understanding, but she is perhaps too compliant with her husband as his behavior begins to edge toward violence—she warns him to go easy on their troubled and lovesick son Mayor, but Rafael does not heed her advice. Celia is a steadfast and loyal friend to Alma and she takes up a collection to bring Arturo's body back to México after his death. She clearly misses her family back in Panamá very deeply, and longs for the impossible—to return to a life, and to a country, that no longer exist.

Rafael "Rafa" Toro – An immigrant from Panamá and a resident of Redwood Apartments, the volatile Rafa is the patriarch of the Toro family—a role that he sees as both vitally important and constantly threatened. Rafael's outbursts often frighten and stun his family—mostly Celia, his wife. His strict, domineering ways inspire his son Mayor, who is ashamed of all the ways in which he cannot meet his father's expectations, to act deceitfully. Rafa comes from a war-torn nation and his survival instincts and drive for success—not just for himself, but also for his sons Mayor and Enrique—are born out of his difficult past. Rafa longs to visit Panamá, but his friends there tease him for being "gringo royalty" and Rafa himself admits that he and his family "are Americans now," so his fear of returning to a Panamá he can no longer recognize runs deep within him.

Garrett Miller – A local bully who views Mayor Toro as his "special project." Garrett skateboards around town between Redwood Apartments and his own community, Capitol Oaks, looking for trouble and harassing Mayor and eventually Maribel. When Alma sees Garrett harassing Maribel—he has her pushed up against the wall, and her shirt is up over her bra—she tells no one of the incident and instead tracks Garrett down herself to warn him to stay away. Alma's secrecy about her encounters with Garrett ultimately leads to devastating consequences when a misunderstanding results in Arturo confronting the Miller family—who have a dangerous reputation in town—and being shot dead. Garrett is a bully, but he is also the recipient of unfair treatment at the hands of his volatile family.

Quisqueya Solis – The busybody of Redwood, Quisqueya is a flamboyant and beloved figure in the community who lives for drama. She immigrated to the United States from Venezuela at the age of twelve when her mother fell in love with an American man from California. Quisqueya and her mother moved in with him and his son, but Quisqueya's stepbrother abused her and she left home for a shelter after her mother refused to believe her. Quisqueya is divorced and receives a monthly settlement which allows her to remain financially secure, and she volunteers at the local hospital twice weekly. Quisqueya does not want any of her neighbors to know the truth of her past, and maintains that though her life story is not a "wonderful" one, at least it is hers.

Benny Quinto – A Nicaraguan immigrant who once studied to

join the priesthood, but eventually came to the U.S. to make money. He worked as a smuggler to get out of Arizona, where he was forced to live in horrible conditions with other immigrants until he could pay off the debt he incurred in his journey over the border. Unable to cope with the "wicked" drug scene in Baltimore, Benny bought a ticket to Delaware and settled in Redwood Apartments. Benny still leads prayer circles for his neighbors—and still supplies them with weed.

Gustavo Milhojas – Half-Guatemalan and half-Mexican, Gustavo left Guatemala for México in order to escape violent military rule. Shunned in México due to his Guatemalan heritage, he eventually moved to the United States in 2000 after the death of his wife. He works as a janitor at two local movie theaters—the jobs are grueling, but he is "grateful" for what they allow him to offer his children, since he's sending money home and saving for his children's educations.

Adolfo "Fito" Angelino – Fito is the landlord of Redwood Apartments, the bustling complex where the novel's characters make their home. Fito is an immigrant from Paraguay who once dreamed of being a boxer. Slight and "sinewy," Fito took a job as the building manager of the apartment complex after losing an arm wrestling match against its former landlord. Years later, he now owns the building and is a compassionate and involved landlord who has earned himself the nickname "Fito Mosquito" due to his small frame and constant buzzing about.

Nelia Zafón – One of the Riveras' new neighbors, Nelia came to the mainland from Puerto Rico in 1964 to make it big as a dancer in New York City. Frustrated by her inability to score any roles due to her ethnicity, Nelia eventually left New York for Delaware where the cost of living was cheaper and opened up a community theater of her own. She still runs the theater, and is in a relationship with a "gringo half her age."

José Mercado – A transplant from Puerto Rico and a Navy man, José Mercado rejected his early artistic impulses in order to enlist in the military. He is still a lover of poetry and art, and though his eyes are failing him and he requires the help of a walker to get around, he is a staple of Redwood Apartments and a regular fixture at community gatherings.

Micho Alvarez – An immigrant from México who lives in the Redwood Apartments. He is frustrated by the unfairness of the immigration progress and the stigma against immigrants and Latinos. He is an advocate for legislation reform for immigrants and a skilled photographer who highlights the hardships of the immigrant experience through his photographs. Micho usually has his camera with him and he documents his neighbors' lives.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Enrique Toro – The eldest of the Toro children, Enrique is off at college in Maryland on a soccer scholarship. Though Enrique insists that Mayor is the golden child, Enrique is the apple of his parents' eyes, and Mayor feels that he is living in Enrique's shadow.

Ynez Mercado – José's wife and one of the Riveras' new neighbors, Ynez is a supportive wife and friend who comes from Puerto Rico.

Phyllis – The translator for the Newark school district who helps Alma Rivera to understand and communicate with Maribel's teachers. Phyllis also translates Maribel's daily school reports so that Alma can keep up with her daughter's progress.

Mrs. Shields – The English teacher at Community House, Mrs. Shields is enthusiastic and encouraging. She gives Alma Rivera, and the rest of the class, Spanish-to-English translation dictionaries and the dictionary becomes an important tool for Alma.

William – One of Mayor's friends from school.

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.

THE UNKNOWN AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

The American Dream—the idea that in America everyone, regardless of race, creed, or class, can enjoy prosperity, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—is a driving force in the lives of the characters in Cristina Henríquez's *The Book of Unknown Americans*. The pursuit of the American dream offers, in theory, the chance not just to be safe and sheltered in the United States, but also to be seen, known, and accepted. However, as Henríquez's characters—almost all immigrants from South and Central America, who occupy the same bustling apartment complex—make their new lives in the United States, they each find that the myth of the American dream does not offer quite what they thought it would. As Henríquez's characters reckon with realizing that they are—and perhaps always will be—the "unknown" Americans, they struggle to accept that the reality of American opportunity is different from the myth of being recognized and embraced—the reality of the American dream is struggle, uncertainty, and unknowability.

Arturo and Alma Rivera come from México in an attempt to heal their brain-injured daughter, Maribel. Rafael and Celia Toro left Panamá with their small children, Enrique and Mayor, to escape the horrors of war. Others in the apartment building departed their home countries in search of fortune and fame. All of Henríquez's characters are chasing something to the United States—and few of them ever really find it. Some are

able to accomplish a version of their dreams and experience, to some degree, the feeling of being seen—once Broadway-bound, the dejected Nelia Zafón opens a small theater of her own in Delaware; Benny Quinto, who dreamed of striking it rich and turned to dealing drugs in order to do so, realized that a life of safety and temperance was more appealing than one of high risks for high rewards. However, huge roadblocks still stand between these characters and the achievement of the dreams they set out to make a reality. Prejudice, discrimination, cultural and linguistic barriers, and the cruel realization that the American dream is a fantasy deepen the feeling of being "unknown," and Henríquez forces her characters to reckon head-on with their disappointment and frustration.

The word "unknown" means a lot of different things within the context of this novel. The characters in it are unknown within the country they have worked so hard to be able to call home—but they are also, in large part, unknown to themselves and to each other. Their futures, too, are unknown, and on top of everything, the longer they stay in America the more unknown they become to the people from their pasts. When the Toros save up for a trip home to Panama, Rafael's friend tells him, over the phone a few days before the journey, that Rafael is no longer Panamanian but is now "gringo royalty." Hurt and furious, Rafael cancels the trip. José Mercado, a Puerto Rican Navy man with the soul of a poet, enlisted in the military as a young man as a proud service member in order to please his father and feel a connection to his country. Pursuing his vision of what it means to be an American, though, has taken a toll on both his physical and emotional well-being, and José now, in his old age, feels more unknown than ever before.

As Henríquez's characters struggle with the disappointment of not being able to be seen or known in America, many of them ultimately embrace the fact that the true nature of the American dream is, in fact, the feeling of being unseen and unknown—and persevering toward success and happiness in spite of that feeling. Each character's eyes are eventually opened to the unattainability of all they dreamed up, but each comes to recognize a new way of dreaming and recognizes that possibility, promise, and longing are what "keep [many of them] going."

LONGING

The hope that "someplace else will be better" and the desire to reach that bettered state of living drives each and every character in *The Book of Unknown Americans*. Though all of the characters take steps to reach a better life, in the end everyone still longs for something more. By finishing her novel on this note, Cristina Henríquez makes the argument that longing is a living, breathing thing—it is never satisfied and it is always growing and changing. Longing, she argues, is what makes the (often grueling) immigrant experience possible, and what keeps the occasionally vicious cycle of desire and longing going. For better or for worse, Arturo Rivera says, longing goads "people to do what they have to in this life."

Alma and Arturo long each day for Maribel's recovery—the hope that they'll be able to help her become herself again is what drives their move to the States. Once settled in Delaware, their longing is met with complication—Maribel cannot go to the special school she was originally supposed to attend, and must start out in the public school system instead. Meanwhile, Arturo's job at a mushroom farm in Pennsylvania is not at all what he thought it would be, and he and Alma, now embroiled in a miserable situation on all sides, experience a longing for home. By moving the Riveras from one situation of desperate longing toward its resolution, and then pulling the rug out from underneath their feet, Henríquez highlights the inability to satisfy longing and the ways in which longing just breeds new longings.

While the Riveras long for a better life for their family, a better education for their daughter, and an end to the pain that has plagued them since Maribel's accident, Maribel's longing is seemingly simple and achievable: she likes a boy who likes her back. Henríquez complicates Maribel's longing, though, by causing it to lead to a chain of unforeseeable events which results in Arturo's death. Thus, Maribel's longing remains unfulfilled—longing, Henríquez argues through this storyline, can never really be satisfied. Approaching the Mayor/Maribel storyline from Mayor's point of view, Henríquez introduces the notion that not only is longing unfulfillable, but it can also be dangerous. Mayor Toro is full of longing—to fit in at school, to crawl out from under his older brother Enrique's shadow, and to woo the odd but beautiful Maribel Rivera. As Mayor's longing for Maribel grows, it eclipses all his other wants and he pursues it to his own detriment. When the first snowfall of the year starts, Mayor drives his father's **car** illegally to Maribel's school and takes her out of class in an attempt to bring her on an adventure to mark her first time ever seeing snow. Mayor's longing to create a perfect day with Maribel has devastating effects when her father, Arturo, is killed while trying to find her. Longing is shown here, in Mayor's story, to be something with potentially dangerous consequences—acting selfishly out of longing can set off a chain of events which has dire results. Maribel and Mayor's longing for one another, despite Mayor's feelings that they are "meant for each other," remains unfulfilled—and creates devastating consequences which themselves just inspire more longing.

The general longing for a better life is what drives many of the stories that make up the tapestry of *The Book of Unknown Americans*. This longing—which Arturo claims is rooted in the "immigrant instinct"—is vague but intense, and it often puts characters in conflict with the reality of their circumstances. Nelia Zafón, who longed to be a famous dancer in her youth, was forced to confront the fact that not only were her dreams

further from her reach than she thought, but that the deck was stacked against her all along due to the racism and tokenism of the entertainment industry. Micho Alvarez longs to use his photography to portray immigrants in a positive light, and to illuminate the poverty and desperation that colors many of their lives, but he is aware that his effort alone will not speed up "progress" for the millions of immigrants in America. Quisqueya Solís longs for true friendship, but she is held back from making any substantial connections with her neighbors due to her desire to keep her troubled past a secret. The longing for something, or someplace, better drives all of the characters in the novel, and each one of them comes to realize, in some way, that the nature of longing is that it is constantly renewed.

As Henríquez's characters attempt to fulfill their hopes and to find all they long for, they are forced to confront the fact that perhaps their dreams will never be realized, and that the end to one kind of longing will only ever herald another kind. Longing can pave the road to joy, or it can open the door for more and more struggle—Henríquez allows longing to offer her characters both happiness and pain, and in doing so demonstrates that though the things we long for can perhaps be attained in some way, the nature of longing itself is that it can never be truly fulfilled.

ISOLATION VS. COMMUNITY

Henriquez's characters are all struggling with loneliness and isolation that are, in many cases, born out of a profound sense of dislodgement and statelessness. The Riveras—the newest arrivals to the bustling apartment complex which houses the "unknown Americans" of Henríquez's novel—are the most affected by this, especially at the beginning of the novel. As the Riveras begin to make sense of their new lives in Delaware, though, they become a part of the community of immigrants and begin to develop camaraderie, confidence, and a feeling of home. Though what they've left behind is never far from the Riveras' minds, the burden of being stateless is lifted slightly by the comforts of community, and while isolation is an integral part of the immigrant experience, Henríquez argues, that isolation is not its defining quality—community is.

Isolation comes in many form in *The Book of Unknown Americans*—emotional isolation, cultural isolation, and physical isolation are all things that the characters must reckon with. While each character who narrates a chapter from their own point of view describes their struggles with all three, the Riveras—specifically Maribel and Alma—best represent the effects of these different kinds of isolation, as they're the central characters and the newest to the United States. Alma Rivera, the novel's protagonist, is isolated in the ways that many of her fellow immigrants are—she is unable to speak English, she longs for home, and she initially lacks the confidence to integrate herself into her community or to seek out company, help, or fun. Alma is isolated further, though, due to her grief and guilt over having been "responsible" for Maribel's accident back in México. Alma chooses to bear this guilt alone, never discussing it with Arturo or with anyone. When she finally confesses her fears to him, Arturo soothes her, absolving her of her quilt and urging her to forgive herself and stop isolating herself. Alma is even further isolated by the knowledge that Garrett Miller has been harassing Maribel—rather than choosing to tell Arturo and worry him, she keeps the knowledge to herself and bears the burden of her anxiety over Maribel's safety alone.

Maribel is the most representative of physical isolation—though she is isolated culturally and emotionally like her parents, her physical limitations and her inability to express herself make her into an even more isolated figure than her parents. Throughout the novel, Maribel struggles against her own mind and body to make her voice heard. Perhaps in order to highlight her unique experience of isolation, Henríquez does not give Maribel a point-of-view chapter of her own—she is the only major character who does not receive a chance to speak.

Henríquez makes clear that isolation is a fundamental part of the immigrant experience, but the novel frames immigrant communities as the saving grace of such isolation. The apartment building where the Riveras make their home at first seems as if it will isolate them even further—their apartment is dingy and small, and they feel farther away from the comforts of home than they thought possible. However, the apartment quickly becomes an emblem of community, since it's a bustling building in which pretty much every tenant comes from somewhere else. The Riveras find comfort, solace, and happiness in their neighbors' homes, lives, and stories. At a local place which offers immigrant services, aptly called the Community House, Alma takes free English lessons and experiences her first feelings of agency and capability in her new home. Finally, after Arturo's death, Celia Toro takes up a collection to raise funds to help Alma transport her husband's body back to México. Nearly everyone in the community pitches in, from the teachers at Maribel's school to the translator from the school district's office. Alma is overwhelmed by the generosity and kindness her community has shown her in her time of need. Though she and Maribel are retreating from their new home and community, their community is still there for them—they are isolated by their pain, to be sure, but they are far from alone even in their darkest moment.

In a narrative committed to demonstrating the pains and difficulties of immigrant life—the poverty, loneliness, isolation, and sense of statelessness or rootlessness that most immigrants must reckon with as they build a new life in a foreign country—it would be easy for Henríquez to make those difficulties the defining characteristic of the immigrant experience. By choosing to tilt her novel toward the light,

though, and demonstrate the ways in which community, joy, solidarity, and perseverance are much more representative not just of the immigrant experience, but also the immigrant spirit, Henríquez makes a bold and beautiful argument for the power of resiliency, determination, and togetherness.

FUTILITY, CHANCE, AND LOSS

Throughout *The Book of Unknown Americans*, Cristina Henríquez continually forces her characters to reckon with losses small and large, and to consider the futility of their actions in trying to prevent, combat, or soothe those losses. The Riveras work hard to obtain visas to come to the States legally, give up everything they know in leaving Mexico, and struggle daily in their new lives in America only to have their dreams crushed, their legal status stripped away, and their patriarch, Arturo, killed in a shooting which could have been prevented entirely. Micho Alvarez, a photographer from México, works tirelessly for immigration legislation reform but knows deep down that the tides may never turn when it comes to American prejudice against immigrants. Mayor Toro woos Maribel Rivera over the course of nearly a year, believing all the while that they are "meant" for one another, until she returns to México and he is left only with the selfish but pained thought that "the only girl who had ever liked [him]" was forever "lost" to him. As the characters within the novel wrestle privately with the futility of their actions, Henríquez actually makes the argument that nothing, really, is ever in vain—though her characters are often overwhelmed by the futility of their lives, most of them come to accept that chance plays an enormous role in disappointment and loss, and that a random accident, firing, or act of violence does not invalidate their hard work or their hope for a better life.

Maribel's accident is the novel's inciting incident, as it leaves her injured and transformed and her parents are devastated and desperate to get their daughter "back." When Alma decides that the right course of action is to bring Maribel to the States for more specialized schooling, Arturo attempts to point out the futility of the move—Maribel's doctors have told them that their daughter may never return to being the impetuous, rebellious spirit she was before the fall—but Alma refuses to hear it, believing that a change in circumstance will bring her daughter back to her. At the end of the novel, after Arturo has died and Alma and Maribel have been forced to return to México due to their lapsed visa status, Alma realizes that while Maribel has made undeniable progress due to her new school and new relationship, Maribel was herself all along—Alma was just so consumed by the futility, banality, and sadness of what she perceived as the "loss" of her daughter to really try to see past Maribel's brain injury. Rather than feeling angry at the arguable futility of this discovery—her family has had to lose so much in order for her to recognize something so small—Alma chooses to embrace the journey she and Maribel have been on, and resolves to stop "moving backward."

Both Rafael Toro and Arturo Rivera face the loss of their jobs over the course of the novel—it is 2008, and the financial crisis is at a fever pitch. Both men are affronted and devastated by their firings, and both consider the futility of their lives and choices when the news of their being let go comes to light. Rafael sees himself as the provider for his family, and becomes enraged any time his wife Celia offers to get a job or to contribute in any other way to their well-being. The futility of such a staunch approach to being the patriarch of his family becomes apparent when Rafael loses his job, and he is forced to realize that the loss would have been less severe if he had relented—his need to be seen as the sole provider was counterproductive all along. Arturo, meanwhile, reckons with the futility of his efforts in a different way when he loses his job—he is let go from the mushroom farm which sponsored his and his family's visas over a minor infraction, but he hears gossip that the farm is firing documented workers in order to hire undocumented workers who can be paid less. Arturo considers the futility of his entire effort to move his family to the States—he worked so hard to do things the "right way" and secure documentation, and now is faced with losing legal status. Both men are forced to confront the futility of planning to avoid loss, and the powerful, disheartening role of chance. While Rafael is ultimately able to find another job, Arturo is not, and he is eventually killed in a devastating, unpredictable encounter. By choosing two opposing outcomes for Rafael and Arturo, Henríquez plays with the ways in which futility can play out across a life. Rafael is delivered, but Arturo is not—however, Arturo's death is not in vain, since—as previously mentioned—it presents an opportunity for his wife and daughter to rediscover one another, and for them to allow his loss to propel them toward richer, more hopeful lives.

Despite the setbacks and disappointments her characters face, Henríquez draws her characters' lives with compassion. She acknowledges the pain of realizing that one's actions have all been (seemingly) for nothing or that the reason for a devastating loss can be traced back to one's own chance choices. However, Henríquez never points fingers or pokes fun at her characters' suffering, and she imbues the narrative with grace and understanding. Feelings of futility can cloud one's judgment or perception, she admits, but she also demonstrates the ways in which futility and loss are inevitable—and that surrendering to the futility of certain actions within or aspects of one's life rather than persevering in spite of it is what renders a life futile.

SYMBOLS

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

THE LADDER

The inciting incident of *The Book of Unknown Americans* is one that occurs "off-screen," so to speak: Maribel Rivera's traumatic fall off of a ladder while visiting her father Arturo at his construction job. The ladder, then, is the physical representation of the moment that everything in the Rivera family changed, and its shaky and dangerous structure symbolizes the perils that accompany change. Maribel, who had once been independent, impetuous, and a bright, shining force within their extended family, loses the ability to emote or express much independent thought after the accident. She is easily confused and frustrated, and Alma and Arturo must care for her more intensely than is needed by most sixteen-year-olds. The fall from the ladder didn't just change Maribel—it changed Alma, too, and it changed the way the Riveras see and relate to one another. Alma and Arturo, who had been so happy in their love for one another, suddenly find it difficult to relate to one another, and are frustrated by the new difficulties they face as parents. These internal changes within their family unit are paralleled by the geographic changes that the fall from the ladder incites—the Riveras' move to America, a journey that is unpredictable and perilous. The move unseats Alma within her own life and suddenly makes her feel lost and vulnerable. It is no wonder, then, that her flashbacks to Maribel's fall from the ladder seem to increase in both frequency and intensity after the Riveras arrive in America, and that her paranoia over having made the wrong choice—having forced her family into another, even more perilous change—grows steadily over the course of the novel's events.

RAFAEL'S CAR

When Celia Toro's sister, who still lives in Panamá, receives a large sum of money in a divorce settlement, she offers to send ten thousand dollars of it to Celia and Rafael. Rafael immediately decides that the money should be used to buy a car and, despite Celia's protests, the family heads to a used car dealership and purchases a Volkswagen Rabbit. The car becomes a symbol of the American dream in all its complexity—much like America, the car promises freedom, mobility, and status, but its ability to provide these things is limited. For example, Rafael is afraid to drive the car as fast and confidently as he wants to because he doesn't want to be pulled over by the police, who "automatically think you've done something wrong if you're black or if you're brown." This shows that simply having a car—like simply being in America—does not guarantee a person status or freedom. Mayor, too, has high hopes for the car, but not only is he an unlicensed driver, he is also forbidden from going into the car at all while grounded. The car's development as a symbol therefore parallels the characters' realizations about the complicated nature of the American dream. When Mayor steals the car in order to take Maribel for a drive in the snow, he regains a measure of agency, and the car once again symbolizes freedom and opportunity. However, when he and Maribel return home and receive news that Arturo has been shot and killed, it's clear that the car was a factor that led to the tragedy. Mayor therefore sees the car as a representation of his guilt over Arturo's death, which he thinks occurred in part because of his own selfish desire to possess the false freedom the car promised.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage Books edition of *The Book of Unknown Americans* published in 2014.

Chapter 1: Alma Quotes

"Back then, all we wanted was the simplest things: to eat good food, to sleep at night, to smile, to laugh, to be well. We felt it was our right, as much as it was anyone's, to have those things. Of course, when I think about it now, I see that I was naive. I was blinded by the swell of hope and the promise of possibility. I assumed that everything that would go wrong in our lives already had.

Related Characters: Alma Rivera (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

The novel begins with a wistful reminiscence. Alma Rivera contemplates a time when simplicity was enough for her and her family, and they did not feel burdened by loss, grief, guilt, or longing. They were confident in the fact that they "deserved" the things they had, and though they hoped for more and were excited by the "promise of possibility," there was no real need to strive for anything else. Alma felt secure in the idea that hard times were over, and that all that lay ahead of her and her family was prosperity and happiness. At the point she is narrating from, she realizes that all of this is naïve—she has learned that longing is not only a part of life, but that it is fueled and deepened in unimaginable ways by loss, grief, and feelings of being unseen and unknown.

Chapter 3: Rafael Toro Quotes

❝ We're Americans now. We're citizens, and if someone asks me where my home is, I say los Estados Unidos. I say it proudly. Of course, we still miss Panamá. Celia is desperate to go back and visit. But I worry what it would be like after all this time. We thought it was unrecognizable when we left, but I have a feeling it would be even more unrecognizable now. Sometimes I think I would rather just remember it in my head, all those streets and places I loved. Because a place can do many things against you, and if it's your home or if it was your home at one time, you still love it. That's how it works.

Related Characters: Rafael "Rafa" Toro (speaker), Celia Toro

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

As Rafael Toro recounts the details of his life and the circumstances that inspired his and his family's move from Panamá to the United States, he reflects on a Panamá torn apart by violent conflict and deep-rooted corruption. At the point he and his family fled the country, it was already "unrecognizable" to him—now, he fears, after having spent fifteen years establishing a life in the United States, that inability to recognize or to reconnect his own homeland will have been compounded many times over. Feeling torn between two lives and two places—bursting with pride at his newfound life in America and the fact that he has earned his citizenship, but still burning with longing for the Panamá of his youth (a Panamá that in reality no longer exists), Rafael concludes that even if home is distant and inaccessible, its value isn't demolished or even diminished. He accepts that his remembrance of Panamá is no longer relevant, but validates his own longing for it by embracing both places as his "home."

Chapter 4: Alma Quotes

❝ I dropped the hot dog into a pot of water. I could hear Arturo behind me, working through his thoughts, trying to box in his frustration. After all these years, I could interpret his various silences. I knew he didn't want to say any more about it. I didn't want him to, either.

Finally, "She's in the bedroom?" he asked.

"She's resting," I said. "The hot dog will be ready soon," I added, as if it were some sort of consolation. But when Arturo didn't say anything, I felt acutely the meagerness of it, the insufficiency. We wanted more. We wanted what we had come here for.

Related Characters: Arturo Rivera, Alma Rivera (speaker), Maribel Rivera

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

As the Riveras begin to settle into their new lives in Newark, Delaware, they begin to realize that the American Dream is not necessarily what they thought it would be. After they struggle to place their daughter in the specialized school they long to send her to, and Arturo attempts to adjust to his grueling job as a physical laborer at a dark and dank indoor mushroom farm, they are forced to reckon with the sad fact that perhaps they will not ever get "what [they] had come here for"—or at least not in the way they thought they would. The idea is isolating, humiliating, and inspires feelings of futility, insufficiency, and even grief in Alma and Arturo alike.

Chapter 7: Alma Quotes

❝ English was such a dense, tight language. So many hard letters, like miniature walls. Not open with vowels the way Spanish was. Our throats open, our mouths open, our hearts open. In English, the sounds were closed. They thudded to the floor. And yet, there was something magnificent about it. There was no usted, no tu. There was only one word—you. It applied to all people. Everyone equal. There were no words that changed from feminine to masculine and back again depending on the speaker. A person was from New York. Not a woman from New York, not a man from New York. Simply a person.

Related Characters: Alma Rivera (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Alma uses the phonetic and linguistic differences between the Spanish and English languages to compare her old life in México with her new life in America. Alma has had a difficult and disappointing time in the United States so far—she has longed every day for her home back in México and has felt that her circumstances in America are "insufficient" compared to the comfort, stability, and ease that was second-nature to her old life. In this way, the "walls" of the English language stand out to her at first glance—or, rather, at first listen. The language is difficult, and life in America is difficult. In Spanish, everything is "open" and even joyful—this is how Alma recalls her life in México. Sad and wistful as she is, she admits that there is "something magnificent" not only about the English language, but also about what its differences from Spanish symbolize. English prizes equality and objectivity, and Alma thrills at the idea that perhaps since English is the predominant language in America, Americans espouse these values, too.

Chapter 8: Mayor Quotes

❝ "It's in you," my dad assured me once. "You were born in Panamá. It's in your bones."

I spent a lot of time trying to find it in me, but usually I couldn't. I felt more American than anything, but even that was up for debate according to the kids at school who'd taunted me over the years. The truth was that I didn't know which I was. I wasn't allowed to claim the thing I felt and I didn't feel the thing I was supposed to claim.

Related Characters: Rafael "Rafa" Toro, Mayor Toro (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

Mayor Toro was just an infant when his family fled the violence in Panamá, and as such he has no memories of his early life there. Some gaps and blanks have been filled in—wistfully and nostalgically—by his parents and his older brother, but Mayor himself has never visited Panamá and feels no real connection to the country. In fact, his identity as a Panamanian makes him the object of taunts and cruelty at school, and, if anything, he wants to distance himself from it. By the same token, those taunts and the othering he faces at the hands of his classmates make him feel unwelcome and out of place in American culture. Mayor is torn between two lives and two worlds—just as the rest of his family is, and just as many of the immigrants who make up Mayor's community are.

Chapter 12: Quisqueya Solís Quotes

❝ I missed my mother, but the truth was that I had missed her even when we were together, so it was nothing new.

Related Characters: Quisqueya Solis (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

As Quisqueya Solis narrates the story of her difficult life, feelings of longing, regret, and isolation emerge through its details. After her mother moved herself and Quisqueya to California to live in the house of an American man she fell in love with and married, Quisqueya was abused and raped by her stepbrother. Quisqueya had always felt distant from her mother, she says in this passage, but that feeling was compounded once she felt alone and isolated in a new country, with no one—not even family—to turn to. Quisqueya's conundrum here—feelings of longing for something that perhaps never existed—is specific to her experience, of course, but it also speaks of the larger unfulfilled and existential longing that all of Henríquez's characters, to some degree, must reckon with over the course of the novel.

❝ My life has been what it has been. It's not a wonderful story, but it's mine.

Related Characters: Quisqueya Solis (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

In a novel populated by brief but touching accounts of immigrant life from a wide variety of perspectives, one thing is constant—each individual takes pride in their story. Quisqueya is the only character to really articulate this

feeling, and she does so in a melancholy but nonetheless headstrong manner. She admits that her life has been full of difficulty, loss, and uncertainty, but nonetheless she feels grateful for what she has and lucky to be able to own, accept, and share her story. It would be easy for Quisqueya to become mired in grief or feelings of futility, but rather she has risen above her circumstances, reclaimed ownership over her own story, and found peace in the fact that no one can take her pride away from her without her consent.

Chapter 13: Alma Quotes

❝ I was a worrier by nature and I couldn't escape the feeling that anything could happen to her at any time. As if because something terrible had happened to her once, there was more of a possibility that something terrible would happen to her again. Or maybe it was merely that I understood how vulnerable she was in a way I hadn't before. I understood how easily and how quickly things could be snatched away.

Related Characters: Alma Rivera (speaker), Maribel Rivera

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

In contrast to her feelings of happiness and security prior to the beginning of the novel, Alma is now in a constant state of worry, discontent, and foreboding. She has looked loss and grief in the face, and the constant threat of having to do so once again now looms over the entirety of her life. This is, in some ways, a marker of wisdom and maturity—Alma's youthful naivete, which she herself admitted to in the novel's first lines, has been eradicated. In other ways, this quote demonstrates Alma's inability to cope with the aftereffects of loss, and the ways in which she has allowed herself to become isolated by her grief, guilt, and longing for the simplicity of her earlier days.

❝ "What if God wants us to be happy? What if there's nothing else around the bend? What if all our unhappiness is in the past and from here on out we get an uncomplicated life? Some people get that, you know. Why shouldn't it be us?"

Related Characters: Arturo Rivera (speaker), Maribel Rivera, Alma Rivera

Related Themes:

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

Just pages after Alma's rumination on the atmosphere of foreboding and fear which has come to shape her life, her husband Arturo offers a different point of view: What if the worst is, in fact, really over? Arturo is all too aware of the insufficiency of their circumstances and the painful adjustment period they have had to go through, and the feelings of futility these things have inspired in his wife. However, he attempts to lift her mood—and his own—by questioning why they no longer feel they "deserve" a simple, joyful life, the way they once did. Arturo's logic is flawed—he is, perhaps, blind to the ways in which longing permeates every person's life, no matter their circumstances—but his sentiment is pure and tinged with the hopeful naivete he and Alma have lost and long to get back somehow.

Chapter 15: Adolfo "Fito" Angelino Quotes

❝ The area is changing. A clash of cultures. I try to make this building like an island for all of us washed-ashore refugees. A safe harbor. I don't let anyone mess with me. If people want to tell me to go home, I just turn to them and smile politely and say, "I'm already there."

Related Characters: Adolfo "Fito" Angelino (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

Fito is the landlord of the Redwood Apartments—the building where the novel is set, and in which all of its characters live—and in this quotation he describes what has driven him to work as a landlord and to maintain a safe, lively community for those who feel as if they have "washed ashore" in America with no "harbor" in sight. Fito is bolstered by his role as someone who helps to build and maintain a community of immigrants, and he uses this confidence and pride in order to handle people who are prejudiced against immigrants and who tell Fito to "go home." Fito *is* home—in a home of his own making, in a home which he has built and cultivated not just for himself but for anyone else like him who wants to take refuge there.

Chapter 17: Mayor Quotes

"Next time, just try to blend in with everyone else and you'll be fine," my mom offered.

"The way of the world," my dad said.

"What?" my mom asked.

"Just trying to blend in. That's the way of the world."

"Well, that's the way of America, at least," my mom said.

Related Characters: Rafael "Rafa" Toro, Celia Toro (speaker), Mayor Toro

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

After Rafael Toro purchases a used Volkswagen Rabbit—his first ever car after a lifetime of dreaming of and "lusting after" expensive foreign cars—he drives his family home from the used-car lot at a snail's pace. When Celia reprimands him and asks why he was driving so slowly, Rafael explains that he didn't want to be pulled over by a cop who was looking to mess with someone "black or brown." Celia retorts that he should just blend in, and Rafael resignedly admits that assimilating is "the way of the world." Celia's assertion that blending in is certainly "the way of America" betrays her—and Rafael's—complicated feelings about life in the States. They are grateful for their lives in America, but are also resentful of the ways in which America prizes assimilation and how a "melting-pot" mentality can actually erode one's connection to their home country or culture.

Chapter 18: Nelia Zafón Quotes

On my walk home sometimes, as I stepped back down into that cellar apartment, my eyes heavy from exhaustion, I would think, Is this what this is? This country? My life? Is this *all*? But even when I thought that, I was always aware of some other part of me saying, there is more. And you will find it.

Related Characters: Nelia Zafón (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Nelia Zafón recalls a time in her life when she was struggling to make it as a dancer in New York and to live out her version of the American dream of being seen, known, and recognized. Frustrated by the racism and tokenism she encountered in the industry, she grew worn down by the daily grind and the physical demands of her life, and began to slip into feelings of depression, exhaustion, and a sense that her entire pursuit of a life in America was futile. Nelia notes, however, that even in these times of doubt and questioning, she clung to hope and optimism—her longing for more saved her.

Chapter 19: Alma Quotes

This wasn't how it was supposed to happen. We had followed the rules. We had said to ourselves, We won't be like those people who pack up and [go] north without waiting for the proper authorization. We were no less desperate them. We understood, just as they did, how badly a person could want a thing—money, or peace of mind, or a better education for their injured daughter, or just a chance at this thing called life. But we would be different. We would do it the right way. So we filled out the papers and waited nearly a year before they let us come. We waited even though it would have been so much easier not to wait. And for what?

Related Characters: Alma Rivera (speaker), Maribel Rivera, Arturo Rivera

Related Themes:

Page Number: 181-82

Explanation and Analysis

Despite their best efforts to do things the "right" way and to safeguard themselves against any calamity, misfortune, or prejudice, the Riveras find themselves destitute and desperate, on the verge of falling out of status and becoming undocumented. Alma's dedication to making sure that she and her family were the "right" kind of immigrants all of a sudden feels deeply futile—a fact that sends her spinning into a spiral of grief. Unable to see the point of having toed the line and stuck to the rules, Alma is plunged into a reckoning with her ideal of the American dream, and of what chasing that dream would ultimately look like for herself and her family. She and Arturo, desperate to hang onto their hard-earned, precious chance at a better life, now realize that they are no "different" than any other immigrant who has come to America—documented or undocumented.

Chapter 24: Micho Alvarez Quotes

❝ We're the unknown Americans, the ones no one even wants to know, because they've been told they're supposed to be scared of us and because maybe if they did take the time to get to know us, they might realize that we're not that bad, maybe even that we're a lot like them. And who would they hate then?

Related Characters: Micho Alvarez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 231

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, photographer and immigration reform activist Micho Alvarez coins the phrase which forms the book's title: "unknown Americans." Micho uses the phrase to denote the fact that while most immigrants long deeply to be Americans, they must resign themselves to the fact that prejudice, stigma, and ignorance will lead to their remaining "unknown"—they will not be able to participate in the American dream of being seen, recognized, and appreciated in the ways they perhaps thought they would. Micho criticizes a system which reviles difference, stigmatizes outsiders, and fears both change and challenge. Micho calls out the ways in which America isolates immigrants in favor of preserving an ideal of what an "American" is—an ideal that in truth never even existed.

Chapter 26: Mayor Quotes

❝ Both of us were trying to make sense of it. And sitting there, I started thinking, Who can say whose fault it is? Who can say who set this whole thing in motion? Maybe it *was* Maribel. Maybe it was me. Maybe if I hadn't left school that day, none of this would have happened. Maybe if our parents hadn't forbidden us from seeing each other, I wouldn't have needed to steal her away. Maybe if my dad had never bought that car, I wouldn't have had a way to get to the beach. Maybe it was my tía Gloria's fault for giving my dad the money [to] buy it. Maybe it was my tío Esteban's fault for being a jerk she would need to divorce to get that money. You could trace it back infinitely. All these different veins, but who knew which one led to the heart? And then again, maybe it had nothing to do with any of us. Maybe it really was completely random, just something that happened.

Related Characters: Mayor Toro (speaker), Maribel Rivera

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 261

Explanation and Analysis

When Maribel asks Mayor if her father Arturo's death is her fault, Mayor initially assures her that she is blameless. However, as he begins to ponder the situation at hand, and look backwards through recent events in search of a cause or a person to blame, Mayor realizes that blame and guilt are deep, intricate concepts—and that it is ultimately futile to try to untangle the web they often weave. Everyone in this particular situation could be to blame, which in fact makes them blameless—there is no one incident, circumstance, or individual who contributed more to Arturo's tragic death than anyone or anything else. In accepting the futility of trying to figure out "which vein [leads] to the heart" of the issue, Mayor pushes away his longing for an answer and takes comfort in the fact that perhaps there isn't one—perhaps everything he and Maribel have been through has been a consequence of chance, and nothing more.

❝ "You could come back one day," I said. "Or I could come there."

"Maybe."

"I could find you."

Maribel shook her head. "Finding is for things that are lost. You don't need to find me, Mayor."

Related Characters: Maribel Rivera, Mayor Toro (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 263

Explanation and Analysis

As Mayor and Maribel prepare to part ways in all likelihood forever, Mayor laments the loss of his first love. Maribel assures him, though, that once she leaves she will not necessarily be "lost" to him—she will always be with him, and he will never need to seek out or "find" the memories, experiences, and lessons they shared. In a novel concerned with what it means to endure a loss—loss of self, loss of agency, loss of homeland, loss of life—Maribel Rivera offers a wise meditation on the idea that loss is perhaps not as permanent as one might think—that loss of something

physical is not necessarily the loss of the thing itself, and that human connection and community can combat loss in powerful, lasting ways.

Chapter 27: Alma Quotes

It was only a word—justice. It was only a concept, and it wasn't enough.

Related Characters: Alma Rivera (speaker), Arturo Rivera

Related Themes:

Page Number: 268

Explanation and Analysis

After Arturo's death, a local police officer who initially, months ago, denied Alma's request for him to look into Garrett Miller, promises her that the law will find "justice" for Arturo. Alma is wearied, grieving, and broken down by how hard her time in America has been—and now, with Arturo's death, the unhappiness she has endured over the course of the last several months makes everything, even Maribel's progress in school and at home, seem futile. Even justice, and the idea that Arturo's death will not have been in vain, seems like a faraway and minimal promise. Alma, Arturo, and Maribel all felt the "insufficiency" of their lives in America—now a new, devastating insufficiency has been piled atop Alma, and it is almost too much for her to bear.

I took most of the garbage bags that I had piled in the hallway out to the alley. Maribel helped me carry the mattress down to the parking lot, where we left it. Somebody else could have all of it if they wanted. I didn't need it anymore.

Related Characters: Alma Rivera (speaker), Arturo Rivera, Maribel Rivera

Related Themes:

Page Number: 276

Explanation and Analysis

When the Riveras first arrived in Delaware, they were shocked to see discarded possessions lining the side of the road, and were even more surprised when their driver told them that everyone in America throws their things away in this manner—even things that still work. The Riveras took a television and mattress in from the street to furnish their new home, and now, as she plans to leave that home, Alma has adopted this wasteful, uniquely American practice—discarding things the no longer needs or wants so that somebody else can use them.

There she was again. The person Arturo and I had been waiting for, the reason for all of this. And as I looked at her I saw that maybe she had been here all along. Not exactly the girl she used to be before the accident, which was the girl I thought I had been searching for, but my Maribel, brave and impetuous and kind. All this time I had been buried too far under my guilt to see her. I had been preoccupied with getting us to the United States because I wanted it to make her whole again. I believed that I had lost my daughter and that if I did the right things and brought us to the right place, I could recover the girl she used to be. What I didn't understand—what I realized now—was that if I stopped moving backwards, trying to recapture the past, there might be a future waiting for us.

Related Characters: Alma Rivera (speaker), Maribel Rivera, Arturo Rivera

Related Themes:

Page Number: 282

Explanation and Analysis

When Maribel, after throwing up on the side of the road as she and Alma make the long journey back towards México, asks Alma if she can cut and dye her hair once they are back home, Alma is struck with a flash of realization: her "brave and impetuous" daughter has been with her the whole time. All of Alma's struggles to bring Maribel to the States, to improve her daughter, and to change her back into who she "was" before the accident were ultimately futile—Maribel never left her. Alma was so isolated in her grief that she was unable to recognize her daughter's presence. After realizing all of this, rather than becoming mired in the idea that their ordeal has all been for nothing, Alma is seized by a new lease on life and a fresh outlook—she wants to move forward now, not backwards, and live in the light of having at last "recovered" Maribel. This quotation ties in with the idea of "unknown" Americans—Maribel has become "unknown" to her mother ever since her accident, and Alma's isolation of Maribel and insistence that Maribel was forever changed only deepened the gulf of unknowability between them. By freeing herself from this way of thinking, Alma has opened up a new path forward—not just for herself, but for Maribel, too.

Chapter 28: Arturo Rivera Quotes

❝ Maybe it's the instinct of every immigrant, born of necessity or longing: Someplace else will be better than here. And this condition: if only I can get to that place.

Related Characters: Arturo Rivera (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 286

Explanation and Analysis

In Arturo's graceful coda—the reflective ending of the novel—he ruminates on the nature of the immigrant spirit and the drives that push immigrants toward "someplace better." He acknowledges the unique combination of longing and necessity which drove him to America, and considers whether "every immigrant" is propelled by the same kind of "instinct." The desire to get to a new place, and to make for oneself a better life, is what Henríquez has revealed to have driven every immigrant whose story has been highlighted throughout the novel. Whether the move to America was for love, money, fame, family, or refuge, every journey is motivated by a desire for more—an endless desire which, once fulfilled, only yields even more longing. While this drive could seem like a vicious cycle of never-ending need, Arturo, in this passage, frames the drive as a blessing, not a curse. The immigrant spirit is portrayed as beautiful, hungry, and full of hope and fire—the perfect note to end on for a novel dedicated to investigating and honoring the immigrant experience.

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: ALMA

Alma Rivera describes a time when all she and her family wanted were "simple" things, and says that in thinking she and her family had a "right" to simplicity, she was "naïve" and "blinded by hope."

Alma is narrating the novel from an unknown point in the future—a point at which her hope and naivete have been shattered.

The Riveras arrive in Newark, Delaware thirty hours after crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. Alma wakes her teenage daughter, Maribel, who has fallen asleep in the pickup truck they've been transported in. Her husband Arturo takes in their new building—it is two stories tall and made of cinder blocks, and the perimeter is ringed by a chain-link fence. Alma is disappointed, having "expected something nicer." Still, she tells herself that she, Maribel, and Arturo are lucky to have a place to live at all.

Alma and Arturo are disappointed by their new home—they had envisioned something better for themselves and their daughter. They long for more, but attempt to soothe their longing by reminding themselves of how much worse things could be.

The Riveras unload their belongings from the pickup, and their driver notices a television on the side of the road. He tells the Riveras to take it if they want it—its previous owner must have discarded it—and they are shocked that "people throw away everything in the United States." The Riveras take a mattress and a kitchen table from the street. Arturo pays their driver—half of all the money they have in the world—and he wishes them luck and drives away.

The discarded furniture by the side of the road tells the Riveras a lot about the strange new country they're in. America is shown as a place seized by an endless cycle of longing, disappointment, and frustration, and their taking of the discarded goods signals the fact that the Riveras will soon find themselves caught up in this cycle, as well.

The inside of the apartment is dingy, ugly, and "reek[ing] of mildew and fish." As Alma and Arturo look around, Maribel stands "expressionless, as usual, clutching her notebook to her chest." Alma wonders what her daughter thinks of their new surroundings, and whether she even understands where they are and what is happening to them. The Riveras, exhausted, lie down all together on their new mattress. Alma cannot fall asleep, as she's full of doubt and anxiety. She tells herself that everything will be all right and eventually drifts off.

Though it's unclear what is wrong with Maribel at this point, it's obvious that she is easily disoriented. Even Alma and Arturo both seem disoriented as they investigate their new home and find that it is dingy, unclean, and very different than the American home they'd envisioned for themselves. Clearly, there's a gap between the American dream as it's represented in other countries and the reality on the ground.

In the morning, the Riveras are hungry for breakfast, but they have no food and no idea where to get any. They leave their apartment and begin walking in the direction of town—the three of them know "minimal" English and struggle to read the signs above the many stores they pass. Eventually they come upon a gas station, and decide to go in. As they approach the market, they see a teenage boy "slouched" against the wall, holding a skateboard. He has a neck tattoo, and he makes Alma nervous.

As the Riveras approach the gas station and Alma spots the teenage skater loitering outside of it, there is a sense of sadness, futility, and even danger. The Riveras have endured a long journey to what they hoped would be a better place—and they are eating gas station meals and fending off perhaps irrational fears of all of their new surroundings.

Inside, the Riveras pick out some food items and laugh amongst themselves about the quality of American jarred salsa. At the register, Arturo does not understand the cashier, and simply hands over a twenty-dollar bill. The cashier continues asking Arturo for something, but neither he nor Alma can understand. Other customers in the store begin to stare. Flustered and frightened, Alma takes Maribel outside. The boy with the skateboard looks Maribel up and down—Alma is "used to people looking" at her daughter, who was considered a great beauty back in their hometown, but Alma is nonetheless unsettled.

As Arturo struggles to communicate with the gas station cashier, Alma becomes overwhelmed and attempts to remove herself from being scrutinized by other customers, only to find that she and her daughter are now being sized up and looked at in an even more invasive way.

Arturo emerges from the gas station with the food, exclaiming that his total had been twenty-two dollars and lamenting the cost of food. The boy with the skateboard continues to stare at the Riveras, and Arturo hurries everyone away toward home.

Arturo senses the distress and isolation that Alma is feeling and he hides his own in order to make sure that she and Maribel can get to a place where they feel safe.

CHAPTER 2: MAYOR

Mayor Toro and his parents watch the Riveras through the front window of their apartment as the Riveras—whom the Toros assume are Mexican due to their shortness—move into the building. Rafael Toro asks his wife Celia if the new family has a lot of things—Celia answers that it doesn't look like it. Rafael is satisfied, proclaiming that perhaps the new family is similar to them.

The Toros hope that the Riveras will be "like" them, in that they will be able to feel seen, known, and build a sense of community with their new neighbors.

The Toros learn from their busybody neighbor, Quisqueya Solís, that the new family's last name is Rivera, and that they are all in the States legally—their visas are sponsored by a nearby mushroom farm. Quisqueya has heard this information from Nelia Zafón, who heard it from Fito, the landlord. Celia says it will be nice to have a new addition to the building, and Quisqueya expresses a hesitation—she begins to say something about "the girl," but hesitates when she realizes Mayor is listening. Instead, she tells the Toros that they'll "see for [themselves] eventually."

This passage establishes the lively network of gossip and sharing that takes place within the community of the apartment building. Quisqueya hints that there is something different or isolating about Maribel, but shies away from revealing too much.

The Toros continue to hear more and more rumors about the Riveras—many of which seem outlandish and untrue. Mayor has started a new school year and he hopes that this will be "the year the other kids stop picking on [him.]" He wears his college-soccer-star older brother Enrique's gym shorts, hoping that "some of Enrique's popularity [will] rub off on [him,]" but he's teased nonetheless.

As the community prepares to welcome a new family, rumors fly about what they are doing in America and what they might be like. Meanwhile, Mayor struggles with feelings of isolation at school, which are compounded by his sense of inferiority to his brother.

Garrett Miller, a bully with a neck tattoo, has made Mayor his "special project." He calls Mayor "Pollo" due to his scrawny legs. Garrett went to juvenile detention the previous year for beating another student bloody, so Mayor does not want to retaliate against Garrett's taunts in any way.

The "sketchy" boy from outside the gas station is revealed to be Mayor's bully, and a general troublemaker in the community. Mayor is prepared to endure Garrett's bullying silently, genuinely afraid of provoking him to violence. Alma's seemingly irrational fears are, unbeknownst to her, completely validated.

The other anxiety Mayor faces with the start of the new school year is soccer. He feels forced into playing the sport by his father, for whom "the logic" is that "soccer [is] for Latinos." Mayor's older brother Enrique was a natural at soccer in high school, and Rafael is disappointed that Mayor has not even come close to matching his brother's skill. Mayor attends practice after school and falls during a drill—a group of nearby girls "erupt in laughter" after his fall.

Mayor wants to make his father proud, but he feels like he is so bad at soccer that there is no chance for his improvement. Rather than working hard and dedicating himself to getting better, Mayor resigns himself to being a failure when it comes to soccer and divorces himself entirely from any kind of motivation to improve at the sport.

CHAPTER 3: RAFAEL TORO

Rafael Toro tells the story of his life Born in 1967 in "a little country by the name of Panamá," Rafael grew up an only child. His father, who had "political ambitions," had a terrible temper, and Rafael developed a temper as well, "even as a young boy." Rafael's father died when he was thirteen years old, and his family's house was sold to the bank. Rafael stopped going to school, started drinking heavily, and floated from place to place.

Rafael Toro's story is the first "point-of-view" chapter that doesn't come from one of the novel's main characters, Alma and Mayor. In giving minor characters a chance to speak up and relay their life stories directly to the audience, Henríquez seeks to complicate her audience's perception of these smaller characters, allowing readers to understand how they have come to be who they are.

After meeting Celia on the beach one day, when they were both eighteen, Rafael's life, he says, was "saved." Rafael got a job at a restaurant and worked hard in order to be able to treat Celia to gifts and nights out. He saved enough money to buy Celia a ring, and the two were married. They had their sons within a couple years of their marriage, in the midst of the U.S. invasion of Panamá—an operation to depose the country's dictator, Manuel Noriega. After the worst of the fighting was over, Rafael and Celia saw nothing but "destruction and more destruction" around them, and they never felt safe in Panamá again. After three years, they left for the United States.

In Rafael's story, he describes his isolated and tumultuous adolescence, his joyful union with the beautiful Celia, and their shared devastation at the destruction of the country they knew and loved. It's notable that the United States caused the instability in Panamá that made the family flee their home. Despite that U.S. involvement made Panamá inhospitable, the family isn't always welcomed in America, which implicates Americans in their inability to belong in either their native country or their adoptive one.

Rafael says that he and his family are Americans now—he is a line cook at a diner and he provides for his family. His children are doing well in school, and their success has made the move "worth it." Both Rafael and Celia miss Panamá, but Rafael feels it would be "even more unrecognizable now" after so many years. Even so, he knows he will never stop loving Panamá.

Rafael's desire to return to Panamá, combined with his fear of finding it unrecognizable after having been isolated from it for so long, speaks to deep feelings of loss, regret, and longing. Knowing all this information about Rafael sets audiences up to understand his character more deeply as the novel unfolds, and to see, perhaps, the deeper motivations behind his words and actions.

CHAPTER 4: ALMA

A few days after the Riveras arrive in Newark, Arturo begins work at a mushroom farm "just over the state line in Pennsylvania." The farm is the only place near to Maribel's new school that would sponsor the Riveras' visas. After Arturo's first day of work, Alma is appalled to find that he stood on his feet for ten hours in a dark warehouse picking mushrooms out of stacked boxes, with no breaks or time for lunch. Alma remembers how in México, Arturo used to come home for lunch each day from his construction job, and she feels full of guilt.

Alma and Arturo must again confront an aspect of their new lives which does not live up to their dreams for how it would be. Alma longs for their old lives—lives in which they enjoyed their work, were treated fairly, and were able to enjoy simple comforts such as a midday lunch together. Alma feels, deep down, that the move to America has been futile and that she and her family have lost a lot, both material and emotional, in a short span of time.

Arturo asks if Alma has heard from Maribel's new school, but she says that they did not call. Alma cooks Arturo a single hot dog, and the "insufficiency" of their new lives hangs over them.

Again, Alma and Arturo feel that their lives in America are isolating, insufficient, and more than a little bit futile.

Five days later, a translator from the school district calls—her name is Phyllis. She informs Alma that Maribel will have to start at a nearby public school before she can be "placed in a school like [The] Evers [School]"—the special school that the Riveras moved to Newark for. The translator tells Alma that getting Maribel set up for Evers will probably take about two months, and Alma knows there is nothing she can do "but say okay and wait again."

Added onto the nasty surprise of Arturo's difficult and degrading job is the fact that Maribel must delay her start at her new, special school. It is revealed that the entire reason for the Riveras' move was to send Maribel to this school. Now, faced with a significant delay, Alma feels herself sink into the futility of the entire situation—the futility of the move, the futility of fighting to get Maribel sent straight to Evers, the futility of having hoped for an easy, joyful start.

Arturo is disappointed by the news, but optimistic. On Maribel's first day of school, Arturo and Alma, "filled with impossible expectation," help Maribel to get ready for school. Maribel is visibly confused, unable to understand why she cannot go to her old school, and seemingly unaware of where she is. Maribel dresses herself, and when she puts her sweater on backwards and Alma tries to fix it, Maribel lashes out. After breakfast, Alma asks Maribel if she is ready, and Maribel responds, "'For what?'" Alma says there is "no rhyme or reason" to Maribel's confusion—"even a year after the accident," Alma still cannot make sense of any pattern to Maribel's behavior. Alma and Arturo take Maribel downstairs to catch her bus, and send her off with both hope and trepidation.

Despite these feelings of futility, Alma and Arturo experience a resurgence of hope on Maribel's first day of school. They try not to let themselves become demoralized by her obvious confusion—it is useless to try to stay ahead of it or to sense when it might rear its head. As they send Maribel off to start her new life, they experience both the naivete of hope and the dark cloud of fear—they long for Maribel to succeed in her new surroundings, but they know that there is nothing more they can do to ensure that this happens. Moving to America has been the ultimate sacrifice, and all they can do now is wait and see if their gamble will pay off.

Arturo leaves for work, and Alma is alone in the apartment for the first time since their arrival in Newark. She watches television and attempts to "replicate the sounds," though she has no idea what anyone is saying. Alma longs to cook something, but has none of the ingredients she needs. She realizes that this is going to be her life—long days alone in the apartment—and she must learn how to spend them.

Alma attempts to figure out how to spend her days. She is both fascinated and saddened by life in America—she wants to know more about her town, about English, and about her future, but she also longs for the comforts of home.

Alma wants to buy more food, but she does not want to return to the gas station. She showers, dresses, and heads outside, and as she steps out onto the walkway, she hears a skateboard in the parking lot below—it is Garrett Miller, the boy with the neck tattoo. Alma is full of fear, but she tells herself to calm down. She waits for Garrett to leave, and after several minutes, he does. Alma wonders why he came to the building—for Maribel or for something else.

Garrett Miller reappears, and Alma is again struck by fear. Garrett has come to represent all that is unknown and dangerous about her new life, and Alma is intensely suspicious of him.

As Alma heads to the staircase, she spots a man who introduces himself as Fito, the landlord. He gives Alma her mailbox key, and she asks about the boy—Fito tells Alma that he is "just a local troublemaker," and that he lives down the road in a neighborhood called Capitol Oaks. He assures Alma that there is "nothing to worry about." He describes the neighborhoods of Newark to Alma, and declares with pride that the Redwood Apartments—his building—is home to Latino immigrants from several countries. He tells Alma that she will "fit right in," and once again reminds her that there is nothing to worry about. It occurs to Alma that perhaps Fito is just afraid to scare the Riveras away and lose out on their rent, but she nonetheless repeats his words back to him—"Nothing to worry about."

Alma likes Fito, but she is afraid to trust him completely. Nonetheless, he offers her comfort and attempts to lighten her heart by describing the bustling community of immigrants that he has made within his building. Alma attempts to make herself believe Fito's words, and to really feel that she is safe and there is nothing at all to be afraid of.

CHAPTER 5: MAYOR

Mayor knows that "sooner or later all the kids who move into our part of town show up at school," and he waits to run into Maribel there. He asks his friend William if William has seen anyone new in his classes, but William says there are too many to keep count—when Mayor presses him, William taunts him for having a crush.

Mayor is curious about Maribel from the start—he has been feeling somewhat bored and out-of-place in his own life, and he longs for something, or someone, new.

Mayor has stopped going to soccer practice after his fall during the drill—he is too embarrassed to continue playing. He hasn't told his parents, though, that he's quit the team. He packs his gym bag conspicuously every morning and tells his parents stories about "practice" every night. Celia longs for a job, but Rafael insists that he is the family's sole provider. The two are so busy fighting that they hardly notice anything is different with Mayor.

Mayor is afraid to tell his parents how he really feels or show them who he really is. The dynamic in Mayor's household is one in which his domineering father has the final say in all things, so it makes sense that Mayor would not want to disappoint or anger Rafael.

One day, Celia and Mayor go to the Dollar Tree, where they run into Maribel and Alma. Mayor is mesmerized by Maribel's beauty. Celia introduces herself and Mayor to Alma and Maribel, and then offers Alma advice on food shopping—there is a Mexican market nearby. The two commiserate over the horrible American impersonations of Latino food, while Mayor attempts to start a conversation with Maribel. She stares at him blankly. When Alma mentions that Maribel will hopefully be attending the Evers School, Mayor is shocked—he and his friends cruelly call it "the Turtle School." Mayor thinks that Maribel is too beautiful to have something wrong with her.

When Mayor finally gets to meet Maribel, he is entranced by her looks but confused as to why she is not able to respond to him or hold a conversation. He is shocked to hear that she is going to be starting at the Evers School, and this somewhat complicates his initial overwhelming attraction to her. However, this realization also complicates his feelings about the Evers School, as he begins to realize his cruelty and prejudice.

Celia tells Alma and Maribel to stop by the Toro apartment any time—she is almost always home, she says spitefully, because "[her] husband likes it that way."

Celia is unhappy with her isolated circumstances and she resents her husband for preferring her to stay at home and out of the way.

CHAPTER 6: BENNY QUINTO

Benny Quinto, an immigrant from Nicaragua, describes his journey to the Redwood Apartments. He has been in America for eight years. In Nicaragua, he was studying and preparing to enter the priesthood and he believed he had been chosen by God. He says that "drugs hadn't come into [his] life then," and that in his conversations with God in more recent years, he has realized that he was never "the one." After a few of Benny's friends left Nicaragua in hopes of making money, Benny followed suit. He stole money from the church in order to pay someone to bring him over the border. Once in Arizona, he lived in a flophouse with twelve other immigrants—the men were not allowed outside until they paid off their debts to the men who'd brought them over. When one of the other men in the house started dealing drugs for the smugglers and earned his debt back in just weeks, Benny again followed the tide and went "out on the streets in Phoenix." After being stabbed by a junkie, Benny decided to get out of Arizona, so he hitched a ride to Baltimore. Unable to handle the even rougher drug scene there, Benny bought a Greyhound ticket to Delaware—a place where he could be at peace.

Benny Quinto's story is the second "point-of-view" chapter and a look at a harsher story of immigration. Benny shamelessly admits that he found his way to America through theft, and primarily came over out of a desire to make money. When he found that the easiest way to do that was to sell drugs, he eagerly became involved in the game. Benny soon realized, though, that his version of the American dream—getting rich off drug money—was more complicated and dangerous than he thought. Benny's brushes with danger are presented casually and nonchalantly, and his decision to get himself out of trouble and start over is framed as an effortless one. Benny has known what the "right" choices were all along, and his decision to move on from danger and isolation and join a safe, peaceful community is, in essence, the one he always longed for.

CHAPTER 7: ALMA

Maribel undergoes a series of evaluations and tests with psychologists and education specialists. Alma is interviewed, too, and is asked about Maribel's developmental history—Alma, frustrated, reminds the experts that Maribel is only the way she is "because of the accident." Eventually, the district agrees that Maribel's traumatic brain injury—albeit mild—is enough to warrant admission to the Evers School. Alma is overjoyed, but after Maribel's first day of school, Maribel is as flat and emotionless as ever. Arturo urges Alma not to grow impatient.

Though Maribel's cognitive impairments are, according to Alma, the results of a devastating accident, she is still scrutinized and subjected to tests. Her condition is frustrating and isolating for herself, for Alma, and for Arturo, but Arturo urges patience, holding out hope that she might eventually improve.

Maribel's school reports do not improve—her teachers describe her as "unresponsive and unengaged." Alma attempts to help Maribel with her homework, which seems to be aimed at getting Maribel to identify feelings and emotions. Maribel struggles, and cannot keep up with the assignment.

Maribel's inability to properly judge the feelings and emotions of others isolates her from her mother.

Alma busies herself during her long days home alone cleaning, watching television, and cooking familiar foods. She calls her parents from her prepaid cell phone, but hearing all their good news from México makes Alma feel sad that "life [is] going on without [her.]"

Alma, still bored and frustrated, longs for home. Speaking to her parents and hearing of that life is "going on" in her home country inspires feelings of futility and frustration.

Alma has received many visits from her new neighbors—Quisqueya Solís brought cookies, and Nelia Zafón and Ynez Mercado also dropped by to welcome Alma and to tell her to call on them if she needed help. Ynez, after learning that Maribel, Arturo, and Alma have all been sleeping on the same mattress, brings over a sleeping bag for Maribel to use.

At the depths of her longing and frustration, Alma is visited by kindly neighbors who seek to make her feel a welcome part of their community.

Alma visits the laundromat and the Mexican grocery store, and sometimes she goes to church to pray. She visits Celia Toro, whom Alma sees as glamorous compared to her friends back in México. Celia gives Alma a list of things she will need for winter, and suggests Alma visit the Community House, a local resource which offers immigrant services. Celia and Alma discuss their reasons for leaving their respective home countries, and marvel together at "what parents will do for their children."

Alma and Celia's friendship offers them both the things they need. Both women are isolated in their own ways, and coming together in friendship allows them to feel less alone, more hopeful, and bound by their shared experiences of having left their home countries for the sake of their children.

Bored of her usual activities, Alma decides to go to Community House one morning. When she arrives, a receptionist asks her if she has come for the English class—though this wasn't the original purpose of her visit, Alma decides to sit in on the class, excited by the idea of being a student again. The teacher, Mrs. Shields, tells the class that she will talk mostly in Spanish during their early sessions, but that as the course goes on and their understanding of English deepens, she will speak in English most of the time. Alma is put off at first by Mrs. Shield's enthusiastic attitude, but she enjoys the class and marvels at the differences between English and Spanish.

As Alma continues to seek a sense of community in her new town, she confronts the differences between her old culture and her new culture as they unfold within the Spanish and English languages. Alma feels warmed by the sense of community she finds in class, and experiences a spark of both joy and hopefulness.

Mrs. Shields passes out Spanish-to-English dictionaries at the end of class, and on the bus home, Alma becomes lost in its pages. She misses her bus stop and begins to panic as she realizes she is in an unfamiliar part of town and has just twenty minutes to get home to meet Maribel's bus as she arrives home from school. Alma gets off the bus at the next stop and stands in the rain waiting and waiting for a bus or a car. She tries calling Maribel's school, but cannot page through her dictionary fast enough to translate what she wants to say, and the school hangs up on her. Eventually, a bus arrives and after verifying that her stop will be on the line, Alma boards it.

Alma, still fascinated by the experience of learning a new language and lost in happy thoughts after having had a positive experience in her new community, suddenly finds herself isolated, afraid, and lost. Disaster is ultimately averted, but her fear of leaving Maribel alone and unattended is revealed in this passage to be a devastatingly intense emotion.

Alma, panicked, arrives back at the Redwood Apartments, searching for Maribel everywhere. She finds her with Mayor Toro, in the hallway outside the Toros' apartment. Mayor assures Alma that everything is okay. Alma is relieved and grateful that Mayor found Maribel because "as boys [go,] Mayor [seems] harmless."

Alma is relieved to discover that no harm has come to Maribel. She sees Mayor as safe and harmless, and admits that she is lucky he was around to take care of Maribel when she could not. Though she doesn't see Mayor as a threat, she seems not to realize his feelings for Maribel.

CHAPTER 8: MAYOR

The Toros and the Riveras grow closer—both families attend the same mass, and Celia often invites the Riveras over to their apartment for lunch afterwards. Celia is a gracious and enthusiastic hostess, but Rafael does not let the Riveras' presence interfere with his usual Sunday routine of watching soccer. Rafael brags to the Riveras about Enrique's success, and even talks up Mayor's (nonexistent) soccer skills. Initially wary of these Sunday afternoons with the Riveras, Mayor tends to hide in his room—Celia coaxes him out, though, and urges him to engage Maribel, since the two of them are about the same age. Mayor is afraid to attempt any real conversation with Maribel.

As the Toros and the Riveras grow closer and find a sense of community in one another's friendship, Mayor struggles with his complicated feelings of attraction towards Maribel. He is shy, and nervous to engage her in conversation, and while their parents' friendships move forward, their own does not.

One afternoon, Garrett taunts Mayor as Mayor walks home from school. Mayor considers that Garrett must be lonely—he doesn't have any friends, his older brother died serving in Iraq, his mother has recently picked up and left town, and his father is rumored to be an alcoholic. Mayor attempts to ignore Garrett and walk away, but soon Maribel's bus pulls up and drops her out front of the Redwood Apartments, where Garrett taunts her for not being able to speak English. He calls Maribel a retard, and then pulls Maribel's sunglasses—which are extra-dark, a remedy against her frequent headaches—down off of her face and throws them to the ground. When Maribel bends over to reach her glasses, Garrett puts his hands on her hips. Mayor calls out to Garrett, telling him to leave Maribel alone. Garrett turns on Mayor, but seemingly gets bored of the interaction before escalating things. He rides off on his skateboard, and calls out to Maribel: "I'm not done with you."

Mayor is used to being teased and picked on by Garrett, but when Garrett teases Maribel, he escalates the situation until it edges on danger. Sensing that Garrett's desire to humiliate Maribel is perhaps sexual in nature, Mayor intervenes despite having sworn at the beginning of the school year that he would not retaliate against Garrett in any way to avoid his own physical endangerment. Garrett threatens Maribel further as he leaves—a bit of foreshadowing that looms over the narrative, but that doesn't seem to affect the disoriented and emotionally isolated Maribel.

Mayor makes sure that Maribel is okay, and then asks her if she's going up to her apartment. Maribel insists on waiting for her mother, who always meets her at the bus. Mayor suggests the two of them wait up on the landing, and Maribel agrees. Maribel pulls out a notebook and begins writing—Mayor tries to talk to her about reading and writing, and they have a pleasant enough conversation despite Maribel's frequent non-sequiturs.

As it becomes evident that Alma has been delayed in coming to collect Maribel, Mayor attempts again to make her feel safe. The two of them finally have a pleasant conversation, and Mayor is happy and surprised to find that he likes Maribel's company.

Soon, Mayor and Maribel hear Alma calling for Maribel. She is flushed and panicked, but Mayor reassures her that everything is okay. Alma quickly takes Maribel up to their apartment, leaving Mayor on his own.

Having seen this event from both Alma and Mayor's point of view, the audience can understand that the emotions and circumstances driving any given encounter are always more complicated than they seem.

Mayor feels that something has changed between him and Maribel—he is protective of her, and now engages in conversations with her on Sundays and attempts to joke with her in order to make her smile. One Sunday, Quisqueya shows up—she is hurt that Celia has not invited her over in a long time, and once she sees that the Riveras are at the apartment, she leaves. After she does the Toros and the Riveras discuss politics—Barack Obama has just been elected president. Rafael Toro is skeptical of what Obama can do for immigrants, but he is hopeful that Obama will fix the economy. Rafael laments that America is "not as safe as it used to be"—when Arturo Rivera seems concerned by this statement, Rafael adds that "compared to where any of us are from, it's safe."

While Mayor and Maribel's friendship begins to blossom, their parents consider all they have suffered in order to bring their children to a "safer" country. The Toros and the Riveras both hope for prosperity, even as the financial crisis looms larger than ever over all their lives. Though "safety" is relative and layered, the Riveras and Toros agree that America is a safer place than any of their home countries.

Mayor was just an infant when the Toros came to America, and though he never really knew Panamá, Rafael constantly assures him that the country is "in [Mayor's] bones." Mayor feels American, though, and he is distressed when his classmates tease him about being Panamanian—he is caught between two worlds.

Mayor is torn between two identities. He feels American, but his classmates at school make him feel ostracized and othered on a daily basis—he does not know where he fits in.

Mayor remembers the day he and his family took their oath of citizenship, "along with a group of other men and women who had made living in the United States a dream."

Mayor considers the idea of American identity even more deeply as he remembers the oath he and his parents—and countless others in pursuit of the American dream—have taken.

The Toros have never been back to Panamá—Rafael is too afraid to ask for vacation time, knowing that as a line cook "he could be replaced in a heartbeat." They almost went back once, for Rafael's high school reunion—the whole family was excited, and Celia bought new clothes for the trip, but after Rafael spoke on the phone to one of his classmates who called him "gringo royalty" and implied that Rafael had forgotten his roots, Rafael became angered and cancelled the trip. The Toros considered one more trip to Panamá, the following year—but two weeks before they were scheduled to depart, the 9/11 attacks took place in New York, and they once again cancelled their trip. That Christmas, Rafael took his family to a frozen beach in Southern Delaware and told Celia—devastated by having twice missed the opportunity to visit her family—that the beach was "[as] close [as she was] going to get" to Panamá. Once at the beach in the freezing cold, Celia admitted that "this country [is] beautiful."

The Toros' complicated longing for home is dissected in these passages, as Mayor—isolated from his family by his American-ness, isolated from his American friends by his Panamanian heritage—reflects upon his parents' intense desire to reconnect with their homeland. Obstacle after obstacle stands in the way of the Toros' return to Panamá—fear, longing, isolation, and feelings of futility are all wrapped up in every attempt the Toros make to visit the country from which they fled. At the height of their collective despair over being caught, just as Mayor is, between two worlds, Rafael brings his family to a beach, the "closest thing" to Panamá they can hope for. Though the gesture seems bleak and futile at first. Celia admits that there is a harsh beauty to America, and to American life.

CHAPTER 9: GUSTAVO MILHOJAS

Gustavo Milhojas was born in Guatemala in 1960—"the year hell came to that country." Raised by a single mother amidst horrific violence perpetrated by the country's military, Gustavo eventually had enough of his dangerous surroundings and decided to move to México, his absent father's homeland. In México, Gustavo found that "Mexicans look down on [Guatemalans,]" and he could not get a job. He met a woman named Isabel, married her, and had two children—he gained a new kind of confidence after his marriage, and the poor treatment he faced in his new country "didn't bother [him] as much." After his wife was diagnosed with breast cancer, she could not obtain adequate medical care and she passed away. After her death, Gustavo moved to the United States in order to make more money to send back to his children, who were preparing to enter college. He works as a janitor at two different movie theaters in Newark, and though the work is difficult, he is grateful to be employed. He hopes that his children will use their educations to "give something back" to the world.

Just like the Toros, Gustavo Milhojas fled war and violence. He faced demoralizing discrimination for years, but found refuge and solace in his wife and family. After his wife's death, having lost his one balm against the abuse and prejudice he faced every day, Gustavo sought something new in America. Though his life remains difficult and lonely, he is grateful for the chance to give his children a better future—and it's notable that he hopes that he can, through his children, better the world, though it has been cruel to him all his life.

CHAPTER 10: ALMA

Alma watches as Arturo struggles with the physical toll his new job is taking on him. She remembers how serious, solemn, but soft Arturo has always been, and notices that since the accident he has grown "darker." When Arturo becomes emotional one day over missing a certain glass bowl that their family had back in México, Alma laments that their whole lives and everything they once knew are "so far away."

Alma and Arturo both struggle—privately as well as together—to reconcile the pain and struggle of their new life with the happiness and comfort of the lives they lived in México.

The Riveras lived comfortably in México, but in the United States, they are nearly destitute and are living paycheck to paycheck. Specialty foods from the Mexican market nearby are unaffordable, and Alma, at the suggestion of a fellow shopper at the Dollar Tree, makes oatmeal for herself, Arturo, and Maribel to have for dinner. Arturo initially is disgusted by the oatmeal and he begins to laugh at the crazy things Americans eat—soon, Maribel is laughing along with him, and Arturo and Alma are overjoyed at Maribel's ability to express herself.

Alma is unable to even provide her family with the food that reminds them of home, and instead the Riveras find themselves eating tasteless oatmeal. The absurdity of the situation, and the fact that no matter what they are all in it together, inspires laughter and mirth in all of them—even Maribel. Her parents are overjoyed to see her be able to emote again, however briefly or randomly, after so long.

Alma has not been sleeping well, since she is dogged by memories of the past and how things used to be before Maribel's accident. Alma recalls the circumstances of the accident: Arturo was leading a construction project and Maribel was desperate to visit the job site with her father. One day, Alma agreed to let Maribel go, as long as she herself could come along and supervise.

In America, Alma is clearly quite protective of Maribel, controlling the people she's around and meeting her at the bus every day. This passage reveals that Alma was protective before the accident, too—she seems to have taken every reasonable precaution to protect her daughter.

At the work site, Alma observed Maribel carefully as she helped out with small tasks. Arturo called down to one of his coworkers from up on the roof to bring a bucket of clay up the ladder to him—Maribel volunteered to do the task, and Alma held a **ladder** steady for her daughter as she climbed to the top. As Maribel made her way back down, a nearby noise startled Alma, causing her to—in her memory—jerk the ladder and cause Maribel's fall. Arturo and Alma rushed Maribel to the hospital, where doctors informed the two of them that in order to reduce the swelling in Maribel's brain, they had to remove a part of her skull. The piece they removed, Alma believes in hindsight, had been "everything" that made Maribel herself. The doctors explain that the accident, not the surgery to save her, changed their daughter, and Alma's guilt multiplied.

As Alma reveals the truth of Maribel's accident in the form of her pained memories, the audience realizes that she bears the guilt of having, through a series of unfortunate events, taken "everything" away from her daughter. Though the accident was clearly due to chance and unpredictable circumstances, the fact of the matter remains that it has forever changed all of the Riveras.

Maribel's doctors in Mexico were optimistic about her recovery, but warned Alma and Arturo that she might never be the same as she had been before. Sending Maribel back to school proved useless—she could no longer keep up in class. Maribel's doctors suggested a specialized school, and recommended a few in México—but advised the Riveras that the best schools were in the United States. After arguing for a little while about whether moving to America would really be the best thing for their daughter, Alma convinced Arturo that an education in the States would be best for Maribel, "and the decision was made."

Alma and Arturo, having acknowledged that, no matter what they did next, their lives would forever be different than before, decided to go all in and take a leap of faith. Their move to America was motivated by both desperation and longing, as well as a dash of recklessness. To stay in one place might have been futile, but to actively pursue an answer and a remedy was at least an action that might move their lives forward.

CHAPTER 11: MAYOR

Mayor and Maribel grow closer, despite Maribel's difficulties with communication. Mayor is patient with her and he helps her to recover her train of thought when she loses it and to remember words when she is uncertain of which to use. Mayor begins to understand how smart Maribel is, and how she is always listening even when she does not appear to be.

Mayor, initially afraid to engage Maribel or to discover that she did not have the ability to communicate, has come to understand how Maribel's brain works—he realizes that though she has an injury which sometimes gives her the appearance of being isolated or unaware, she is bright, thoughtful, and slyly attentive.

Rafael chides Mayor for not being able to "talk to normal girls," but Mayor refuses to "pass up" the chance to grow close to a girl as beautiful as Maribel. Celia defends Mayor, but Rafael still disapproves. This pushes Mayor even closer to Maribel, who feels that he is really "the only one willing to give her a chance."

Once again, Mayor faces his father's harsh judgment. Mayor longs to grow closer to Maribel both out of desire for her and out of a desire to prove his father wrong.

Mayor begins visiting the Riveras' apartment some afternoons after school in order to spend even more time with Maribel. He wishes he could take her out somewhere, but Alma insists the two of them stay in the apartment. One afternoon, Mayor and Maribel discuss the weather—she has never seen snow, and is eagerly anticipating its arrival. As Mayor describes all the different forms snow can take, Maribel hastily writes everything down in her notebook—Mayor asks to take a peek at it, and she allows him to. He sees that she has written several simple directions to herself to help get through her days such as "This is Newark, Delaware," "Delaware is 3,333 kilometers from home," and "The school bus is free. The city bus is not free."

Mayor and Maribel grow closer and closer even within the strict rules of their friendship. Mayor glimpses Maribel's notebook and realizes both how difficult each day must be for her, and how motivated she is to make sense of her present, her past, and her future.

Mayor asks Maribel what happened to her. She tells him that she fell, but she cannot remember the word for what she fell off of—finally, she arrives at the word "**ladder**," and she describes her injuries and her lingering headaches. She tells Mayor that she "lost herself" in between the accident and the hospital, and confides that she likes being around him because he does not constantly ask her how she is feeling.

Maribel expresses the fact that she feels "lost," and shows that she's frustrated with being fussed over and condescended to. Though part of her has been lost, she admits, she is not as helpless as everyone around her seems to think she is.

One evening, Mayor leaves the Riveras' apartment for the night and, when he arrives home, finds that his father is home earlier than expected. Rafael asks Mayor why he isn't in his soccer clothes, and Mayor makes up a flimsy excuse. Rafael seems on the verge of discovering Mayor's secret, but instead he asks Mayor to get him another beer.

Mayor edges closer and closer to disappointing his father. He has abandoned something his father wants for him—soccer stardom—for the pursuit of something his father has vocally disapproved of—a relationship with Maribel.

CHAPTER 12: QUISQUEYA SOLÍS

Quisqueya describes her journey from Venezuela—where she was born and where she lived until she was twelve—to the United States. When her mother fell in love with a man from California, Quisqueya and her mother moved to Long Beach to live in his "glamorous" home. Quisqueya was happy for a while, but soon her new stepbrother began to abuse her. He raped her when she was sixteen, and when she told her mother what had transpired, her mother did not believe her and "warned [her] not to be ungrateful" for the beautiful life they now led. Quisqueya left home and stayed in shelters and with friends. She left California as soon as she graduated from high school and went across the country with a friend who was attending college in New Jersey.

The story of Quisqueya's difficult and even dangerous life highlights the vulnerability and desperation many immigrants face. Quisqueya's mother, desperate both for love and a better life, overlooked and discounted her daughter's vulnerabilities in order to protect her own. Rather than suffer more abuse in order to remain in the lifestyle her mother had chosen for both of them, Quisqueya struck out on her own—in some ways deepening her own vulnerability within a new, strange country, and in other ways refusing to allow herself to be victimized any longer, and reclaiming her strength.

Quisqueya met her husband while she was a waitress at a diner, and had two children with him—boys whom she has raised to be "good and respectful" towards women. Quisqueya and her husband are divorced now, and the monthly alimony she receives keeps her financially secure. She volunteers at the local hospital and remains in Newark because "all [her] friends" are there. Quisqueya says that no one in her life knows what she has been through, and she plans to keep it that way—she does not need "anyone's pity."

Quisqueya's deep internal privacy stands in stark contrast to her flamboyant, busybody exterior—further deepening Henríquez's commitment to drawing her characters authentically in all their layered, complicated shades.

CHAPTER 13: ALMA

It is December, and the days are "long and cold." The Riveras, struggling to adjust to the winter temperatures, run the heat in their apartment all the time—but when they receive a dangerously steep electric bill that they'll never be able to pay, they keep the heat down and instead "huddle by the radiators for warmth."

The bitter cold—and the expense of combating it—is another setback for the Riveras, and a reminder of how futile their pursuit of the American dream sometimes feels.

Trying to focus on the positive, Alma and Arturo rejoice over the fact that Maribel is laughing more often, now, and seems less confused about the day-to-day aspects of her life. Her school reports have improved, as well. Alma continues to worry about Maribel, though. Alma has become much more insecure about her daughter's safety in the wake of the accident.

Despite their struggles, the Riveras find that Maribel is slowly beginning to improve—the reason for their coming to America is beginning to come to fruition, and not all they have done has been in vain.

Alma notices that Maribel has "developed a sort of friendship" with Mayor, but she insists that the two only spend time together at one another's apartments, and only when supervised. One day, cooking while Maribel spends time at Mayor's, Alma loses track of time. When she looks at the clock it is past five, and she knows Maribel should have been home already—she runs out of the apartment and scans the parking lot for a sign of her daughter.

Alma's unfamiliarity with her new home makes her suspicious of everyone, including Mayor who has actually been Maribel's protector. It's clear that Alma feels this way out of love for her daughter, which renders her coldness towards Mayor more understandable.

Alma heads over to the Toros' apartment, but as she reaches the staircase, she hears a boy's laughter. She finds Maribel's sunglasses on the sidewalk and grows uneasy. She turns a corner and sees Maribel pushed up against the wall, her hands over her head—Garrett Miller is holding her wrists in place, and Maribel's shirt is hiked up over her bra. Alma screams, and rushes to place herself between Garrett and Maribel. Garrett squeezes Alma's arm and yells at her in English, while Alma screams at Maribel to return to the apartment. Maribel stays frozen in place. Alma tears herself away from Garrett and drags Maribel back upstairs and inside. Alma is grateful that she got to Maribel in time to stop anything worse from happening.

As Alma's worst fears begin to come true, she contemplates her role in keeping her daughter safe. Alma, despite her best efforts and her sincere care for her daughter's safety, cannot shield Maribel from all of life's pain—to attempt to do so, Alma is learning, is futile. Nevertheless, she feels directly responsible for anything bad that happens to Maribel, and this guilt and unfair responsibility isolates Alma further and further.

That night at dinner, Arturo asks Alma what's wrong—he can sense that something is off. Alma does not answer him—she is not planning on telling him what happened, as she does not want him to know that she has failed Maribel for a second time. She knows that Maribel is okay—she asked her all about the incident once they were safe inside, and Maribel reported that Garett had not touched her, kissed her, or hurt her—at least "this time."

Alma continues to see herself as directly responsible for any pain Maribel faces. She cannot tell Arturo what she has witnessed, as she feels it is her fault, and she does not want to frighten or disappoint her husband, who has worked so hard to ensure that their life in America is possible. Alma is afraid to ruin everything, and she is grateful that at least "this time" nothing more serious has gone wrong.

Arturo urges Alma to snap out of her mood and to "believe [she is] entitled to happiness." Alma sips her tea and thinks about the approaching Christmas holiday. She remembers a Christmas Eve two years previous, when Maribel made buñuelos—fried dough balls—for the entire family all by herself. Alma remembers that as Maribel served her creation at dinner that night, she herself had envisioned Maribel's future—"the family she would have one day and the food she would make for them." In that moment Alma could so clearly picture Maribel's "entire life in front of her, waiting."

As Alma considers the idea that perhaps she and her family will find happiness after all, she reminisces about her hopes and dreams for her daughter—hopes and dreams that once seemed within reach, and which now seem terrifying to continue to long for.

CHAPTER 14: MAYOR

Mayor has not had a run-in with Garrett since he stood up to him in front of Maribel, though he has seen Garrett around school. One day just before Christmas break, though, Garrett approaches Mayor at Mayor's locker to taunt him about Maribel. Mayor tries to exit the situation, but Garrett grabs his arm and asks him increasingly explicit questions about Maribel, revealing that Garrett has been fantasizing about her. Mayor punches Garrett, and the two start fighting. A crowd forms around them until a teacher breaks their fight up and sends them to the principal's office. When the teacher tells both boys that their parents will be called, Garrett sarcastically wishes the teacher luck in getting ahold of his father, who has been missing for three days.

Mayor once again breaks his own promise to himself not to retaliate against Garrett—and, once again, he breaks it for Maribel's sake. As Henríquez drops hints about Garrett's troubled home life, she continues in her commitment to displaying the many layers of her characters' lives—even in the case of her novel's unrelentingly violent and dangerous antagonist.

Mayor overhears his parents discussing the call they received from the school, requesting they come by for a conference—he is in his room, examining his still-bloodied face. His parents go out to the school for an hour and a half, and when they come back, Rafael bursts into Mayor's room, furious, and begins to reprimand him for fighting and for letting his grades slip. Furthermore, Rafael reveals that when he asked Mayor's counselor whether Mayor's grades had suffered because of soccer, the counselor revealed that Mayor has not been on the soccer team for months. Rafael berates Mayor for having made a "fool" of him and tells Mayor that he is "done."

Mayor sought to keep his choice to quit soccer from his father rather than reveal it and disappoint him. However, now Rafael feels he has been made to look stupid and foolish in front of Mayor's teachers, so Mayor's plan has backfired. Though Rafael's anger is excessive and the reader's sympathy is with Mayor, Henríquez's prior revelations about Rafael's upbringing and his angry father makes Rafael's behavior more understandable.

Mayor describes Christmas as "the best and the worst [the Toros have] had in a while." Mayor is heavily grounded—he is not allowed to see Maribel or his friend William, and he receives no allowance. His father has also taken away all of his Christmas presents, and he dangles Mayor's brother Enrique's many gifts right in front of Mayor's nose. On Christmas Eve, the Toros go to retrieve Enrique from the Wilmington train station. Enrique wants to skip church that evening, as he is tired from his trip, but Celia insists that he join them. That night, the Toros ride the bus to church with the Riveras, and Mayor uses the opportunity to make some small-talk with Maribel.

Mayor's sadness over not being able to spend time with Maribel is lessened slightly by the arrival of his older brother—even though Rafael attempts to use Enrique as an emblem of all Mayor's failings.

The next morning, Enrique's "mountain" of presents turns out to be just toiletries. Celia calls her sister back in Panamá, who reveals she has filed for divorce from her husband. Later in the morning, the radiators stop working—soon, the telephone rings, and Alma Rivera reports that her family's radiator has gone out, too. Mayor suggests that they invite the Riveras over—when Celia asks why, as their apartment does not have heat either, Mayor suggests inviting the entire apartment building over as a way to cover for having just wanted Maribel to come by. At noon, Celia begins calling her friends throughout the building and inviting them to come by—everyone's heat is out. Soon there is a party in full swing at the Toro apartment, and even the landlord, Fito, stops by to announce that the energy company is on the way to fix the heat.

Mayor's desire to see Maribel creeps back in, and, in an attempt to cover it up, he inadvertently suggests a full-on block party. Despite the annoyance—and even the danger—of broken heating on Christmas day, Mayor watches as his neighbors all come together to celebrate the holiday and their shared cultures. A moment of profound isolation for everyone in the building—being trapped inside in the cold on Christmas with no heat—is turned into joyful moment of togetherness.

As the party grows more and more boisterous and joyful, and everyone starts dancing, Mayor pulls Maribel away from the action in order to give her a Christmas present—he has saved up his allowance to buy her a red scarf. He tells Maribel that he hasn't been avoiding her, but has been grounded, and then he kisses her. It is his first real kiss. Maribel giggles, and "the moment passe[s]" by. Downstairs, the party rages on.

Mayor displays real tenderness toward Maribel—he has picked out a present for her, and he wants to make sure that she knows he cares about her and has not been staying away from her on purpose. Their kiss moves their relationship to the next level, and represents a moment of togetherness for Mayor despite the isolation he has felt while being grounded.

CHAPTER 15: ADOLFO "FITO" ANGELINO

Fito came to America from Paraguay in 1972 with dreams of being a boxer. He was "skinny but strong," and he gave boxing a try for a while, attempting to follow a famous trainer to Vermont. He could only afford to go as far as Delaware, though, and took a job laying blacktop at the Redwood Apartments. The landlord of the building at the time, a man by the name of Oscar, was planning to return to his home country of Uruguay, and after taking a liking to Fito suggested he take over as building manager. Fito initially refused, telling Oscar that he planned to be a boxer. He challenged Oscar to an arm-wrestling match, making a bet that if he won Oscar would have to pay the rest of Fito's way to Vermont, but that if he lost he would take the building manager job. Fito lost, and so he took over Redwood. Though Fito never expected to end up in Delaware, he has found a thriving Latino community and has come to see it as "home." Fito purchased the building after saving for years, and he tries each day to make it "like an island for washed-ashore refugees."

In Fito's chapter, he describes the ways in which his vision of what the American dream would be like didn't quite work out—but in some ways, he was able to achieve even more than he set out to. Fito came to America with the self-centered dream of achieving fame and fortune as a boxer, but as chance intervened and his circumstances changed, he found himself in charge of a community and discovered that he enjoyed it. He deepened his commitment to creating a thriving, welcoming community of immigrants, and to ensuring that none of his tenants ever feel lost, isolated, or far from home.

CHAPTER 16: ALMA

Alma has not told anyone about the incident with Garrett, but she is hardly able to think of anything else—she is "suffocating under the weight" of the secret. In the first days of the new year, Alma decides to go to the police. She believes that in America, the police are righteous and more reliable than in México.

Alma is isolated in her guilt and shame—she attempts to get herself out from under that isolation, though, by involving the police.

At the station, Alma is introduced to a Spanish-speaking officer and begins to tell him about the situation. The officer ridicules Alma, suggesting that Alma just wants to keep Maribel away from boys she is interested in. Since there is no crime, and since Alma did not witness Garrett lifting Maribel's shirt or otherwise assaulting her, there is nothing the officer can—or will—do. Alma leaves, angry and frustrated.

Alma thought that the police would help her—she believed that in America the police would serve the people more justly and compassionately. However, this aspect of her dream of America is shattered, and she is once again thrust into isolation.

Instead of going home, Alma boards a bus bound for Capitol Oaks. On the ride, she looks up the English words for "leave" and "alone," and practices the phrase as the bus nears Garrett's neighborhood. When the bus drops her off, Alma wanders the neighborhood for upwards of ten minutes and finds not a soul in sight. As she prepares to leave, she finally sees Garrett taking the trash out of his house. Alma realizes that Garrett saw her from inside and came out on purpose to confront her. Garrett approaches Alma, and she says, very quietly, the phrase "Leave alone." Garrett tells her to "Go home," and Alma understands that he means go back to México. Garrett touches a finger to Alma's cheek, turning his hand into the shape of a gun, and then mimes firing it. Alma, frightened, turns and leaves.

Alma's encounter with Garrett is terrifying, to say the least, and seems to foreshadow the threat of even more violence to come. Alma attempted to stand up for herself and her daughter, but now she finds herself more frightened and isolated than ever before. Her attempt to reckon with Garrett—an uncompromisingly mean and angry individual—was ultimately futile and has resulted in Alma only feeling more fearful of what Garrett is capable of doing to her and her family.

That night, after Maribel has gone to bed, Alma and Arturo sit at the kitchen table drinking tea. Alma is aware that she is behaving nervously and that Arturo can tell something is wrong with her. She reminisces about the time before the accident, when she and Arturo were very deeply in love—now, something has "changed" between them. Alma feels "a fire roar up inside [her,]" and longs to stop feeling sad and anxious for a moment. She climbs into Arturo's lap and kisses him, and the two have sex—Alma instantly feels that "all [is] right in the universe."

As Alma contemplates how her relationship with Arturo has changed, and reels from her futile and frightening encounter with Garrett earlier that afternoon, she once again attempts to extricate herself from her isolation by connecting physically with Arturo, whom she loves deeply.

CHAPTER 17: MAYOR

Celia announces to Rafael and Mayor over dinner that her sister has received eighty thousand dollars in her divorce settlement and will be giving "some of it" to the three of them. Rafael scoffs at the news, asking if they'll receive fifty dollars from her—Celia warns him that he will feel bad when she tells him what the actual number is, and then refuses to tell him when he presses her further. As the two begin to argue, Rafael becomes incensed and proclaims that he and he alone will provide for their family. He grabs Celia's wrists, then quickly releases them. The three of them fall silent, and Mayor feels "embarrassed" for his mother.

Rafael's intense need to be seen as the only provider for his family turns, for just a moment, physically violent. He is desperate to maintain control over his situation, and to fulfill the role he has carved out for himself, and to live up to the standards he began to set early on in his relationship with Celia despite the new, unforeseen circumstances of their lives in America. It's telling, too, that Mayor is embarrassed for his mother rather than ashamed of his father's behavior, as though Celia is the one who has erred.

Two days later, Celia reveals that their family will be receiving ten thousand dollars. Rafael counters that their family has probably loaned Celia's sister "almost as much" over the years, but Celia insists that is not so. After allowing the news to settle in for a moment, Rafael announces that he wants to use the money to buy a **car**. Mayor knows that his father "lusted" after cars as a boy and has always dreamed of owning one. Celia protests—she does not even know how to drive, and she points out that their family could "go to Panamá ten times" with the money, but Rafael's mind is made up.

Rafael reacts to the actual amount he and his family will be receiving from Celia's sister with excitement rather than anger once he realizes it will actually make a big difference in their lives. He never acknowledges his prior anger, and instead attempts to take charge of his family once again by deciding firmly how they will spend the money. The decision is a selfish one, as it is Rafael's dream—not his family's—to own a car.

Rafael, Mayor, and Celia go to a nearby used-car lot and pick out a Volkswagen Rabbit. After haggling with the salesman for a bit, they purchase it and drive it off the lot, "two thousand dollars poorer." On the highway on the way home, Rafael drives the **car** painfully slowly, though he does not stall the automatic transmission even once. When Celia asks Rafael why he was driving so dangerously slowly, Rafael counters that cops will pull over black and brown people for even the smallest reason—Rafael was "just trying to blend in," as it is "the way of the world." Celia agrees that blending in is at least "the way of America."

Rafael is excited to have a car, but he seems to feel there is something insufficient about it. When he begins driving, his fears of being singled out by the police are made known to his family, and he and Celia contemplate the need for assimilation in order to make life in America easier—though of course, assimilation (to the extent that it's possible) doesn't make their life much easier.

The mood in the Toro house lifts with the purchase of the car, but Mayor is still grounded and still hasn't seen Maribel since Christmas. He hopes that she doesn't think he is ignoring her—if anything, he thinks, he longs for her more deeply than ever. He feels depressed at home and cannot focus in school. One afternoon, Mayor eavesdrops on a conversation between his mother and Alma—Alma admits that Mayor was "good" for Maribel, and that she is "more like herself" when he is around. Alma asks why Mayor does not come over anymore, and Celia tells Alma that Mayor was grounded, but that nothing serious occurred and that he is a "good boy." Another afternoon, Mayor arrives home to find Quisqueya visiting with his mother—Quisqueya teasingly asks about Mayor's involvement with Maribel. Mayor grows defensive and lashes out at Quisqueya, and Celia sends him to his room.

As Mayor wrestles with feelings of longing, frustration, isolation, and anger, he lashes out. He feels that his entire situation is unfair—he is anxious at the thought of leaving Maribel in the lurch, and he himself harbors a great longing and desire for her which he selfishly wants to fulfill.

Angry that no one around him can understand that he and Maribel are "meant for each other," Mayor goes to visit the Rivera apartment the following day after school. When Alma answers the door and asks Mayor if he is still grounded, he assures her that his punishment has been lifted. Alma lets Mayor in. Maribel is in her bedroom, wearing the red scarf he gave her for Christmas. She asks him about his family's new **car**, and when Mayor tells her it is sitting in the lot, she asks if the car is "lonely" and suggests the two of them "visit it." Mayor notes that Maribel is "way smarter than anyone [gives] her credit for."

Mayor takes matters into his own hands, defying his parents in order to once again be close to Maribel. He takes things a step even further as he goes along with Maribel's suggestion that they visit the "lonely" car, surprised and excited by her sly troublemaking and more than willing to go along with her wishes. Alma's new trust of Mayor indicates that maybe she is getting comfortable in her new surroundings and opening herself up to being vulnerable with others, even if that vulnerability is only through her daughter.

Mayor and Maribel tell Alma that they are going over to hang out at the Toros' apartment. Mayor takes his father's car keys off the windowsill near the front door, and then the two of them head down to the parking lot. They get inside the **car** and Maribel takes stock of the interior. She asks if Mayor knows how to drive—he tells her that he has taken driver's ed, but that he does not have a license yet. Maribel tells Mayor that the car is cool and that he is the only person who "sees" her. Mayor leans over and kisses Maribel. They make out for a while and eventually Mayor, excited and overwhelmed, ejaculates into his pants. Mayor pulls away from Maribel, but when she asks him what is wrong, he assures her that it's "nothing."

Mayor's longing for Maribel is immense and overwhelming, and as they break the rules together Mayor feels closer to Maribel than ever before. This is a complicated scene, as Mayor is violating Alma's already fragile trust by taking Maribel outside of the apartment complex without permission or supervision. However, in another sense, Mayor is giving Maribel the gift of being a normal teenager, and it's clear that Maribel values this enormously.

CHAPTER 18: NELIA ZAFÓN

Nelia Zafón was born and raised in Puerto Rico. In 1964, at the age of seventeen, she told her mother that she wanted to move to New York City to be a Broadway dancer. Despite her mother's objections, Nelia felt she was destined to be "the next Rita Moreno," and she left. After sleeping in Grand Central Terminal for three nights, Nelia met a "chica de compañia"—an escort—named Josie, who offered her a place to stay. Josie was living in Queens, in the apartment of one of her friends who was off in the Vietnam war. Nelia moved in rent-free. After a time, word arrived that Josie's friend has died, and the girls stayed in the apartment.

Nelia's story is, like Fito's, the story of how the desire for the fame and fortune promised by the American dream inspired her to seek out a new life, even if her dreams were improbable.

Nelia worked in a restaurant and put all her money toward dance classes. She went to every audition she could—at one for *Man of La Mancha*, she asked a casting director if it was okay for her to audition for a Spanish role even though she was Puertorriquena—he asked her what the difference was. Nelia tried for years and years to land a role, but was unable to. She left the apartment in Queens and found a place of her own. She continued going on auditions, but laments the fact that "Americans can only handle one person from anywhere," and "the world already had its Rita Moreno."

Despite working tremendously hard, Nelia's dreams of being a famous dancer like her idol, Rita Moreno, were squashed when she realized that racism was rampant in America. Nelia was never seen as an individual, and her culture was never understood or appreciated. More than that, she realized that because there already was a Rita Moreno, there was no room for her—America didn't want a plurality of Latina voices, they only needed one token.

After finding out that taxes for new businesses were low in Delaware, Nelia saved money and moved out to Wilmington. There, she started a theater company of her own—a theater she still runs in the present. She delights in giving roles to young actors, and though she never became a "big star," she still feels proud when she visits home in Puerto Rico. She is dating a younger man—a gringo attorney—and at fifty-three years old she is still excited by the "possibility" that her life holds.

The devastating realization that her dream would not come true might have sent her spiraling into feelings of anger, regret, and futility, but instead it pushed her to carve out a new, uncharted space for herself. In opening her little theater in Delaware, Nelia has found a new dream for herself—and, like Fito's, her new dream revolves around the creation of a community and a safe space for people like her. Nelia remains an optimist, having discovered that though the American dream is not what she thought it was, there is, after all, a place for her.

CHAPTER 19: ALMA

Toward the end of January, Arturo loses his job. He comes home one afternoon while Maribel and Alma are working on Maribel's homework and gets straight into the shower. Alma follows him into the bathroom, and he tells her that he has been fired for a minor infraction that occurred months ago—when he changed his shift and stayed home on the morning of Maribel's first day at school. Alma insists it must be a mistake, but Arturo claims that the farm only sponsored their family's visas due to government pressure to hire workers with papers. Arturo thinks that they are letting go documented workers and preparing to hire undocumented workers in their place in order to save money. Maribel and Arturo both lament having done things the "right way" and having worked so very hard for nothing. Arturo tells Alma that he has thirty days to find a job.

Alma and Arturo become overwhelmed by the futility of their having done things the "right way." They worked so hard to be "good" immigrants, and to make sure that they were on the right side of the law. Now, after Arturo has been fired and the mushroom farm's corruption has been revealed, they experience anger and sadness over yet another way in which the American dream has failed them.

Arturo begins going out during the days, looking for work. He is laughed out of "store after store"—the economy is in shambles, and no one is hiring. Arturo and Alma use money from their savings in order to pay the rent and they try to ask Fito for a break, but he cannot give them one. The Riveras subsist on rice and beans and oatmeal until they are sick of the same meals over and over again. The atmosphere in the apartment is dismal as the Riveras cope with true poverty. Alma stops going to classes at the Community Center, in part because she wants to be home during the days in case Arturo comes home for lunch. Celia Toro begins teaching Alma basic English, and Alma passes on what she learns to Arturo in hopes that it will raise his chances with potential employers.

As the Riveras reach the depths of their misery, they realize even more deeply and fully how the American dream has failed to materialize for them despite their best efforts. They remain hopeful, but chance and circumstances beyond their control continue to bring hardship and pain into their lives.

Despite all their hardship, Alma feels that she and Arturo are closer than they have been since Maribel's accident. For their nineteenth wedding anniversary, on February 19th, Alma and Arturo decide to go out for "drinks"—but since "even sodas [are] beyond [their] means," they settle for having waters at a local pizza place, where Arturo has put in a job application and wants to show his face in case someone wants to offer him a job—there is only a week left before their visas lapse.

Even at the height of their difficulties, the Riveras are bound by the love they all share. They celebrate in a small but meaningful way, attempting to stave off the looming threat of their visas' expiration and the extreme depths of their poverty.

At the restaurant, Arturo, Alma, and Maribel order ice waters and watch the American families all around them. Arturo toasts his and Alma's marriage and attempts to tell several jokes—finally, Alma tells one that sends all three of them, even Maribel, into hysterics.

As Maribel continues to improve, she becomes more and more like her old self and is able to participate and share in her parents' moments of happiness.

A week passes, and Arturo is still without a job. He is afraid that if anyone finds out their family has fallen out of status, Maribel will have to leave her school. Alma assures him that their family is "not like the rest of them," meaning undocumented immigrants. Arturo, sad and resigned, tells her that "[they] are now."

The Riveras lapse out of status, cementing the futility of their efforts to prevent their family from becoming like other immigrants from México who enter the States undocumented.

At the end of February there is an ice storm—Celia calls to suggest that the Riveras join the Toros for some ice skating at a local frozen marsh over the weekend. On Sunday, as the two families prepare for the drive over to the marsh, Quisqueya asks what they are doing—Celia, wanting to avoid her, doesn't invite her along. At the marsh, Mayor helps Maribel skate on the soles of her shoes. There is a large crowd at the marsh, and Alma briefly thinks she sees Garrett—in the confusion, she loses sight of Maribel and becomes distressed. Arturo notices, and again asks Alma what is going on and what she's keeping from him. Alma considers telling him everything, but ultimately decides not to. She notes, in hindsight, that the split second in which she made her decision "changed [her family's] fate."

Quisqueya's feelings of rejection continue to mount, while Celia replaces her friendship with Alma's. The families continue to spend time together, and Mayor and Maribel make the most of it. Alma's fears continue to haunt her, and her paranoia seems to be at a fever pitch—perhaps worsened by her fear of having fallen out of status, and the fact that she and her family are in dire circumstances even without the threat of Garrett looming over them. Alma refuses her husband's attempts to pull her from her isolation, and her actions, she says, will impact her family in ways she could not have predicted.

A week later, Alma and Arturo borrow the Toros' radio and are enjoying listening to old music when there is a knock at the door—it is Quisqueya. Alma offers her water and sends Maribel to her room—when she and Arturo sit down with Quisqueya, Quisqueya says that she "hates to say anything," but she must tell them that a few weeks ago she saw Maribel and Mayor canoodling in the Toros' **car**—not only that, but when Mayor stepped out of the car, his pants were wet. Arturo tells Quisqueya she is lying, but she insists it is the truth and warns them that they "can't be too careful" with boys Mayor's age.

Quisqueya, envious of Alma and Celia's relationship, uses what she has seen in order to drive a wedge between their two families. She also seems to insinuate that boys Mayor's age are predatory (like Garrett), even if they seem sweet. In this way, Quisqueya preys on Alma's fears for Maribel's safety.

CHAPTER 20: MAYOR

Late in February, Rafael comes home from work one evening visibly angry. Mayor steers clear of his parents until dinner. At the table, his parents fight viciously back and forth over whether Mayor has the right to "know" something—eventually, Rafael leaves the table, and Celia tells Mayor that Rafael has lost his job.

The financial crisis has at last impacted the Toros as well—Rafael has lost his job, and with it his ability to call himself his family's sole provider.

Mayor feels sorry for his father, who has worked at the diner six days a week for fifteen years. Rafael searches for jobs everywhere, but, like Arturo, he cannot find anything. Celia and Rafael fight more and more, and Mayor is helpless to mediate their arguments.

Mayor, despite his differences with Rafael, feels genuine compassion for his father and senses the crushing futility of having worked so hard for so many years only to have everything fall apart.

Mayor and his friend William have been on the outs lately, but one day, at school, the two of them make up. William asks Mayor if he wants to go to a movie—Mayor is still grounded, but he decides that if he snuck out for Maribel, he can sneak out for William, too. That afternoon, when Mayor arrives home from the movies, his mother tells him that she has received a call from Alma Rivera. Mayor asks what about, but Celia insists on waiting until Rafael gets home. When Rafael walks in the door, Celia sends Mayor to his room. "After an eternity," Celia and Rafael knock on Mayor's door—when he lets them in, it is clear that Celia has been crying and Rafael has "a dark look in his eyes." Rafael confronts him about having been in the **car** with Maribel, and Mayor admits to stealing the keys off the windowsill in order to get in. Rafael asks if Mayor kissed Maribel—Mayor attempts to dodge the question, but eventually concedes that he did and that it "wasn't a big deal." Rafael tells Mayor that he is not allowed to see Maribel anymore—the Riveras want him to stay away.

Mayor and Maribel's sly disobedience finally catches up with them, and each is forbidden from seeing the other. Mayor, who was already in trouble with his parents, has betrayed their trust even further, whereas Maribel, whose parents give her little or no agency at all, has awakened her parents' fears of more harm befalling her. Mayor remains adamant that his relationship with Maribel is not a "big deal," failing to realize how the fact that he is obsessed with a girl with a brain injury might look to others.

Mayor protests, angry that his father has never liked Maribel and upset that no one ever asks Maribel what it is that she herself wants. Mayor feels the situation spinning out of control, "like a rope slipping through [his] hands."

Mayor attempts to force Rafael to see his point of view, but it is all in vain, and he is aware that he has lost control over his circumstances.

CHAPTER 21: JOSÉ MERCADO

José and his wife Ynez were both born in Puerto Rico in the 1950s. He joined the navy shortly after they were married and travelled all over—he was injured in Bosnia, but he came home, and says that arriving home safely is "all any soldier cares about." Though José prefers the artistic and high-minded "things in life," pressure from his father, who "believed a man should work hard with his hands," led José to enlist. His father was overjoyed when he became a Navy man, but Ynez was upset. The two of them had no children, and Ynez was always alone during José's deployments. He began sending her letters when he was away, and the letters "saved" both of them and their marriage. A great lover of poetry, José can no longer see very well to read, and he now listens to books on CD or allows Ynez to read poetry to him. He quotes an American poet who writes about the beauty and horror of life, ultimately concluding that "'life blows you apart in her arms.'"

José's story is the story of the American dream falling apart in a different way. After serving in the military in order to impress his macho father, José suffered pain and injuries both emotional and physical. His sensitive soul was unprepared for the toll that the Navy would take on him, and he now, in his old age, finds refuge in poetry which speaks to his struggle, and which acknowledges the difficulty, futility, and unpredictability of life.

CHAPTER 22: ALMA

Alma and Arturo tell Maribel that she cannot see Mayor anymore, and in the days afterward, she becomes "moody and sullen." Alma remembers a time in Mexico, before the accident, when Maribel painted her fingernails black in a small act of rebellion. All of Maribel's "small insurrections" were done "playfully [and] good-naturedly," and Alma and Arturo always reassured Maribel that they would love her no matter what. Now, Alma worries that by banning her from seeing Mayor, and squashing the only "small insurrection" she has attempted since the accident, they are "undermin[ing] all of her progress."

Alma both misses the rebellious spirit her daughter once had, and attempts to prevent Maribel from regaining that agency and point of view. Alma is aware, though, of the potential consequences of forbidding her daughter to pursue something she has chosen for herself, and denying her the "small insurrections" which make up a life and a personality.

In the middle of the night, unable to sleep, Alma asks Arturo if they did the right thing, and Arturo implies that if Maribel did not have a brain injury, she would be allowed to see Mayor. Alma accuses Arturo of thinking of Maribel as his "brain-damaged daughter" rather than just his daughter. Arturo reminds Alma that even Maribel's doctors said she would never be the same person she was before the accident. He implores Alma to understand that they will not "get her [back.]" Alma attempts to accept the truth of what Arturo has said.

Alma herself struggles with the perception of Maribel as "brain-damaged," and she considers whether she and Arturo are still making the best choices for their daughter. A year after her accident, with all the progress she has made, Maribel is beginning to show signs of being who she once was—but Arturo insists that no matter what they do or do not let Maribel do, she will never be the same, and Alma resignedly relents.

CHAPTER 23: MAYOR

It is March, and Rafael has secured a job as a newspaper carrier. Tensions in the Toro house have eased, and Rafael ends Mayor's grounding. It almost doesn't matter to Mayor, though, as he is still not allowed to see Maribel.

Mayor's whole life has been thrown into disarray by his inability see Maribel—nothing can cheer him up, even as his home life seems to be improving.

One Friday afternoon, Mayor is sitting in class when he notices that it is snowing outside—though it is late in the season, it is the first snow all winter. Mayor excuses himself from class, claiming that he has to go to the bathroom. He goes to find his friend William in study hall and asks William to drive him home. When they get to the Redwood Apartments, Mayor confesses that he is not going to spend the afternoon with William, but instead he is going to steal his father's **car**. Mayor goes inside and takes the keys, and then William accompanies him to an empty lot and teaches him how to drive automatic. William intuits that whatever Mayor is up to, it is about Maribel.

Mayor remembers his conversation with Maribel about snow, and about how interested she was in it. Miserable over the fact that he cannot spend the first snow she has ever seen with her, Mayor decides to take matters into his own hands, once again betraying his father's trust and using the car as a means of asserting his independence and his maturity.

Mayor drives his father's **car** out to the Evers School and gets there at around two in the afternoon. The snow is falling even harder. There are no security guards outside the school, and Mayor creeps around the building from window to window looking for Maribel. After a while, he finds her and motions for her to come outside. He points to the sky, indicating the snow, and watches as Maribel secures a hall pass from her teacher and leaves the classroom.

Mayor and Maribel both have a desire to be together—though Mayor is the instigator of this rendezvous, Maribel willingly leaves class in order to be with him.

Mayor meets her at the front of the school, and, though Maribel does not have her coat or her sunglasses, she agrees to go with Mayor to a "cool" place he wants to take her. They drive for a while in silence, and then Maribel tells Mayor that he is "the only one who thinks [she] can do anything." They drive for an hour and a half—Mayor's cell phone rings, but he turns it off instead of answering it. He does not want anything to stop him from seeing Maribel—they "deserve to be together," he thinks.

Maribel tells Mayor, in her own way, that she has missed him by admitting that he is the only one who believes in her and the only one who takes her seriously. Mayor relishes the time that they are spending together and shuts off his phone in an attempt to isolate them both from the outside world, which has proven that it wants to keep them apart.

At nearly five in the evening, Maribel and Mayor arrive at their destination—it is the beach that Rafael once took the Toros to. Maribel thinks the beach is beautiful and thanks Mayor for bringing her. They kiss, and Mayor knows that Maribel wants to be there "as much as [he does.]" The two huddle together inside Mayor's coat and eventually fall down in the sand laughing—Mayor wishes that their afternoon could last forever.

Mayor and Maribel share a sweet moment of connection on the beach—their longing is intense and mutual, and they both wish that the time they are sharing could last, though they know it cannot and that there will be consequences for both of them for pursuing one another.

CHAPTER 24: MICHO ALVAREZ

Micho Alvarez, an immigrant from México, resents the racist attitudes toward Mexicans that he has encountered in the United States. He is tired of having racial slurs hurled in his direction and tired of the media claiming that all Mexicans are "gangbangers [and] drug dealers [who] want to destroy America." Micho longs to be given the benefit of the doubt and to be accepted as a citizen—which he is. He calls immigrants "the unknown Americans, the ones no one even wants to know," and feels that Americans born in America are afraid to get to know immigrants and have no one left to hate. Micho says that people are crossing the border in such high numbers out of desperation, but also to try to "do something good in this country." Micho himself works as a photographer for a group in Wilimington, Delaware which advocates for legislation reform for immigrants. He documents the suffering of his fellow immigrants. He sometimes feels that no progress is being made, but knows he must keep "fight[ing] for what [he] believe[s] in."

Micho's story represents a more intense disappointment with the American dream. Whereas characters like Benny, Nelia, and Gustavo suffered (and sometimes continue to suffer) disappointments but were ultimately able to carve out a space for themselves, Micho feels angry about the state of American attitudes toward immigrants, and angrier still at the apparent futility in trying to turn those attitudes around. Micho devotes himself to what he believes in, but still fears that because of the underlying fear and hatred Americans have towards immigrants, his actions will be in vain.

CHAPTER 25: ALMA

It is Friday, and Alma is waiting at the front window of the apartment for Maribel to get home from school. It is snowing outside, and there is no sign of Maribel—Alma gets nervous, and she puts on her coat and boots and walks outside. She heads to the Toros' apartment—Celia is surprised to see her, as the two have not talked since Maribel and Mayor have stopped seeing one another. Alma tells Celia that Maribel's bus didn't come twenty minutes ago when it was supposed to—Celia assures Alma that Maribel is not in the apartment and that though Mayor is not home either, he is not with Maribel—"he knows the rule," and he is at a movie with his friend William.

Alma wanted Maribel to stop seeing Mayor as an attempt to safeguard her from being coerced or taken advantage of. After fearing that Garrett would harm Maribel so intensely, it makes sense that Alma would want to keep Maribel away from any boy at all. However, in attempting to prevent her daughter from making "small insurrections," Alma has driven Maribel to act out even more—something she wasn't even sure her daughter was capable of in the wake of her accident. Meanwhile, Celia remains faith in Mayor's allegiance to the "rules," despite the fact that he has spent the entire school year breaking rule after rule.

Alma becomes afraid that Garrett has somehow taken Maribel, and she makes "an anguished sound." Celia implores her to calm down and offers to make some coffee while the two of them wait for Maribel to get home. Celia calls Mayor, but his phone is off, and she again assumes that he is in a movie.

Celia and Alma are isolated from their children, and all they can do is wait and hope for each of their safe returns.

Alma calls Arturo and tells him that he needs to come home from job-hunting—Maribel has not come home from school. Arturo asks if Alma has called the school, and she is "embarrassed" that she hasn't. As soon as she and Arturo hangs up, she contacts Evers, but there is no answer. Arturo arrives home and Alma confesses that she has been hiding something from him—she tells him all about Garrett. Arturo is hurt that Alma lied to him, but Alma insists she was just trying not to add to his worry—more than that, she wanted to "make it up to him" for being the one responsible for Maribel's fall off the **ladder**. Arturo assures her that he does not blame her for what happened and that neither of them could have known that Maribel would fall. Arturo begs Alma to forgive herself and assures her that they will find Maribel.

As Alma and Arturo attempt to track down Maribel, the truth of the last several months comes out. Alma reveals the situation that has been unfolding with Garrett Miller and confesses that she kept everything from Arturo because of her crushing guilt over not being able to keep Maribel safe—either from the accident or from Garrett. In isolating herself and attempting to head off any harm or pain, Arturo points out, Alma has deepened the gravity of the situation. He implores her to overcome her guilt before it sinks her—and her family—any deeper into more pain or trouble.

Arturo calls the police, who say that the school has already notified them that Maribel is missing and that a patrol car has been sent out to look for her. The police officer reassures Alma and Arturo that "kids [Maribel's] age" are always in trouble, and that she will probably come home on her own soon. Arturo puts on his cowboy hat and readies himself to leave—Alma asks him where he is going, and Arturo tells her he is going to track down Garrett Miller. He tells Alma to stay put in case Maribel comes home and he promises her that he will be back soon.

As Arturo and Alma become increasingly desperate to find their daughter—who they are still unable to see as exhibiting normal behavior for "kids her age"—Arturo takes matters into his own hands. He puts on his cowboy hat as if readying himself for battle, but assures Alma that no harm will come to any of them.

CHAPTER 26: MAYOR

By the time Mayor and Maribel get back in the **car** and start heading for home, it is already getting dark. The snow is falling even harder, and the car is skidding on the road before they even get out to the highway. Mayor pulls off the road onto the shoulder to wait. Mayor realizes that Maribel has fallen asleep, and he too rests his head and drifts off. When he wakes up, the snow has stopped and he has no idea what time it is. He starts the car, and the dashboard reveals that it is past one in the morning. Mayor begins to put the car in gear, but out of nowhere, Maribel starts to tell him about Garrett and the time he pushed her up against the wall of the apartment building. Mayor silently holds her hand.

Mayor and Maribel have become so caught up in creating an isolated space for themselves that they ignore the weather and don't realize, when they pull over for safety and fall asleep, how much time is passing. The world is still going on around them, even if they don't want it to. Maribel's confession to Mayor indicates her lingering fear—perhaps her fear of returning home, and perhaps a sense of foreboding over what is waiting for them when they return.

When Mayor and Maribel reach home, Rafael Toro is standing outside in the parking lot smoking a cigarette. Rafael opens the driver's-side door and tells Mayor to get out of the car—Maribel is asleep in the passenger seat. Rafael tells Mayor to get in the back and the three of them begin to drive away. There are no other cars on the road, and Rafael is driving very fast. Within ten minutes, they all arrive at the local hospital, and Rafael instructs Mayor to wake Maribel up—they are all going inside. Mayor wonders if his father is taking them to see car accident victims, as a kind of warning—he has no idea what is going on. The three of them walk into the hospital, where Celia is sitting in the waiting room. Mayor realizes that whatever is going on, it is not good. Celia reports that there is no good news yet, except for Mayor and Maribel's return.

Mayor is completely disoriented upon returning home—he expects that his father is about to conduct some elaborate punishment in order to highlight his and Maribel's insolence and stupidity. As it becomes clear that there is something far more serious going on, both Maribel and Mayor experience an even deeper disorientation, which they have, in a way, brought on themselves by choosing to isolate themselves from their families and their home with no consideration as to what their actions might lead to.

Maribel asks Mayor what is going on, and she seems to be growing agitated. Celia tells her that Arturo is in surgery, and that Alma is waiting elsewhere in the hospital. Celia tells Mayor that they called him "a hundred times." When Mayor asks what happened to Arturo, Celia tells him that they don't know, but there is nothing they can do but wait.

Something bad has happened to Arturo, but there is no information available as to his status and there is nothing that anyone can do but wait to find out. The futility and immobility of the situation grates on the Toros, and on Maribel.

Maribel waits with the Toros for hours until a nurse takes her away to the surgical waiting area to be with her mother. Mayor, Rafael, and Celia stay put. Eventually, a doctor comes out to tell them that Arturo is in recovery but is still unconscious. The Toros head home, and Mayor worries that whatever has happened is somehow his fault. He cannot get any rest and he finally begs his mother to tell him what has happened. Celia reveals that Arturo was shot when he went out to try to find Maribel. Celia runs to the bathroom to throw up and Mayor is stunned into silence.

As information begins to come to light and Maribel is taken to be with her family, the Toros decide that there is nothing more they can do. As the waiting becomes more excruciating, Mayor begins to wonder if he is somehow responsible—though there is still no answer as to the exact chain of events, the revelation that Arturo has been shot frightens and shocks Mayor.

Quisqueya and Nelia drop by, as do Micho, José, and Benny. Everyone pieces together what they have heard and eventually the story comes out. When Arturo went to Capitol Oaks to find Garrett, there was a confrontation and a man fired at him with a shotgun. Mayor cannot stop imagining the scene in greater and greater detail, and the images in his mind grow more and more horrific. Mayor thinks that Garrett's dad must have been the man with the gun, and he imagines that Arturo was shot based on his race.

Mayor's imagination runs away with him as he continues to wonder whether his actions have led to Arturo's injury. Mayor recognizes that in entangling himself with the Millers, Arturo become involved in real danger and Mayor knows that the hostile attitude of white Americans toward Latino immigrants is something that can easily lead to unwarranted violence.

Celia cooks for the Riveras, Rafael drinks and smokes, and Mayor goes up to the Riveras' apartment, where a mountain of flowers waits at their doorstep. He begins kicking them to pieces. Rafael comes out and asks Mayor what he is doing and when Mayor cannot answer, Rafael assures him that Arturo is going to be fine.

Mayor continues to wrestle with his grief and self-loathing as he and his family wait together for any news of Arturo's status.

That night, though, the Toros receive a phone call—Arturo has died. The Toros are overwhelmed with grief. Rafael goes to the hospital to retrieve Alma and Maribel and brings them back to their apartment—Celia asks why he wouldn't have brought them back to the Toros' rather than having them stay alone, and Rafael answers that "they have each other." When Celia counters that that "isn't good enough," Rafael agrees, but says that there is nothing to be done.

The devastating news of Arturo's death shakes the Toro family. Rafael thinks that Alma and Maribel should be alone, despite the insufficiency of the comfort they can provide one another—nothing will never be enough to soothe the loss, he argues, and it is futile to attempt to ignore that fact or make it better.

The next morning, Celia and Mayor go to visit Alma and Maribel. Mayor sits with Maribel in her bedroom while their mothers converse, cry, and even laugh in the next room. Maribel asks Mayor if he thinks what happened to Arturo was her fault, since their family only left Mexico for her well-being. Mayor reassures Maribel that it isn't, but then he begins wondering whose fault it is and he marvels at how the series of events which led up to Arturo's death can be "trace[d] back infinitely." Finally, Mayor wonders if Arturo's death was "completely random—just something that happened."

Maribel, too, is wrestling with blaming herself for Arturo's death. Mayor attempts to comfort her, but ultimately arrives at the conclusion that fault and guilt can be traced back infinitely and assigned to anyone, everyone, and no one all at once. Mayor considers the role of chance in everything that has happened and wonders if there is a design to all things, or if this line of thought is futile, too.

The last time Mayor ever sees Maribel is one week later—Maribel is sitting on the curb outside of the Redwood Apartments next to a discarded mattress. She tells Mayor that Alma is inside sleeping on the floor—she does not want to sleep on the mattress anymore—and that they are leaving to return to Mexico the following day. Maribel gives Mayor her notebook, which is full of the lists she kept for herself. Mayor tells Maribel that she could come back, or that he could come to México to find her. Maribel tells him that "finding is for things that are lost." Mayor thinks how unfair it is that "the only girl who [had] ever liked [him]" is leaving, but recognizes that there are "way worse things in the world."

Maribel, having once told Mayor that she felt she had lost a part of herself, now asserts that she is not lost. Perhaps she has found herself in her grief, or perhaps she has been there all along, and is just now realizing this about herself. Mayor reacts to the news of her and Alma's departure selfishly, but with the knowledge that he is being selfish. He continues to long for Maribel, even as her departure is imminent.

The next morning, Alma and Maribel are gone and Mayor pictures what they might have looked like as they left for their journey. Mayor believes he will hold a "place" for Maribel—and that she will hold one for him—inside his heart.

Mayor and Maribel experienced longing, isolation, and loss together, and Mayor knows that he has been forever changed by the impact that Maribel has had on his life. He believes he has had a similar impact on hers and continues to hold a candle for her even after she has left.

CHAPTER 27: ALMA

After Arturo's death, Alma says, she "detached from [her]self." She remembers the pain of the moment she learned of Arturo's death and how difficult it was to tell Maribel that her father had died. There were no words "in Spanish [or] in English" to "match the depths" of her sorrow.

Alma finds that language is insufficient in its ability to hold her and her daughter's grief—there is nothing that could have prepared them for the anguish they now feel.

Alma, unable to sleep on the mattress she and Arturo had shared, sleeps on the floor. The night of Arturo's death, Alma sits awake for hours, remembering the events of the day. The same officer who had told Alma that there was nothing he could do about Garrett Miller had come to the apartment right after Arturo left to look for Maribel, and when Alma suggested to him that Maribel's disappearance might have had something to do with Garrett, the officer went over to Capitol Oaks—they arrived after Arturo had already been shot and took Garrett's father into custody for having shot him. At the hospital, the officer assured Alma that Mr. Miller would be "locked up for a long time" and apologized to her for not having listened the first time.

Alma considers the too-little too-late nature of justice in America, and the fact that when she first asked for help, no one believed her. Her grief turns to anger when she considers all of this, and the futility of the justice system in attempting to assure her that her husband's killer will be held accountable for his act of unspeakable violence.

Alma thinks that if she could, she would kill Garrett and his father herself. As the sun rises, Alma looks back toward the mattress, hoping that Arturo will be sleeping there.

Alma feels both rage and denial tugging at her as she descends into grief and mourning.

Alma does not blame Mayor Toro for what happened, but Celia comes by every day—sometimes twice a day—with food, clothes, and prayer notes from church. A woman from the hospital calls to ask Alma what she wants to do with Arturo's body—though Alma wants Arturo buried in Mexico so that she can "honor him" and keep him near her, it will cost five thousand dollars to transport his body. Alma tells Celia that she and Maribel must return to Mexico—they have fallen out of status and the police now know. No matter what, Alma and Maribel will have to go back eventually.

As Alma must deal with the practical fallout of her husband's death, she is almost numb to the blows that continue to come her way. The high cost of transporting Arturo's body means he will have to be buried alone, in Delaware, and that she and Mirabel will not be able to stay in the place they have sacrificed so much to reach.

Many other tenants of the apartment building stop by to offer their condolences and small gifts—Gustavo Milhojas brings flowers, and Micho Alvarez brings a picture of Arturo that he took at the impromptu Christmas party at the Toros'. Even those who don't bring anything tangible, like the Mercados, offer heartfelt remembrances of Arturo.

As the community comes together to remember Arturo and comfort Alma, she is able to take solace in the impact her husband had on their friends' lives.

Alma speaks with Phyllis, the translator from the school district, and informs her that Maribel will not be continuing at Evers. Phyllis assures Alma that Maribel did well and that she is "a different girl than when [she] arrived." Alma tells Phyllis that she, too, is different now.

This conversation with Phyllis, coupled with her neighbors' heartfelt remembrances of Arturo, help to convince Alma that their journey to Delaware was not in vain.

Alma and Maribel pass the time receiving guests, watching television, and packing for their journey home. Alma keeps all of Arturo's belongings and feels as if, throughout the days, he is still "everywhere." Forced to bury Arturo in Delaware, Alma readies herself for the funeral—she is angry, and as she packs the kitchen, she smashes plates on the floor to relieve her grief.

Alma continues to work through her grief, attempting to hold onto what little pieces of Arturo she can as she prepares to effectively abandon his body in a foreign country, against her wishes.

Celia comes over the next morning to deliver an envelope—inside are "hundred[s]" of bills, and Celia explains that the community took up a collection—everyone from the building, along with people from Maribel's school, the mushroom farm, the Mexican grocery, the hospital, and the church pitched in to raise over five thousand dollars and help Alma get Arturo's body home. Celia tells Alma that everyone loved Arturo. Alma, overwhelmed, breaks down in tears.

Alma is overcome by the kindness and generosity her community has shown her in taking up a collection to help Alma, Maribel, and even, in death, Arturo get home to México. This demonstrates clearly that the isolation Alma once felt in America has given way to a community that supports her. It's sad that it's only upon leaving America that Alma realizes how large and loving her community is.

Two days later, Alma and Maribel leave in a black pickup truck. Rafael has found someone to take them across the border and has, Alma assumes, paid their fee. Alma and Maribel's belongings are stuffed in trash bags in the bed of the truck, and their driver does not speak to them—Alma is "grateful for his indifference." As they drive through the country, Alma wonders if things would be different if she had told Arturo about Garrett earlier. She remembers one of the last things he ever said to her: "Forgive yourself." She wonders if she can.

The Toros demonstrate even greater generosity by arranging for Alma and Maribel's journey home. As they begin heading back to México, Alma, just like Mayor, attempts to trace the threads of blame backwards, but eventually sees both the futility of doing so, and the fact that attempting to compound her guilt goes directly against her husband's final wishes for her.

Six hours or so into the trip, Maribel complains of a stomachache. The driver pulls over, and Maribel gets out of the car and throws up. Alma holds Maribel's hair, and when Maribel is done, she proclaims that she wants to cut it once they are home and dye it purple. Alma recognizes "her" Maribel in that moment and realizes that "maybe she had been here all along." Alma laments having been "buried [so] far under [her] guilt" that she was unable to see the truth. Together, Alma and Maribel look forward to returning home as they get back in the car and resume their journey.

Alma's realization that Maribel was never lost renews her hope, helps her to unbury herself from beneath her grief and guilt, and emboldens her to complete the journey home with the resolution of always moving forward and never again wasting time looking back in anger or in self-loathing.

The next morning, Alma looks out at the countryside and remembers something Arturo said to her on their way up to Delaware so many months ago: "Every place is beautiful if you give it a chance." As she contemplates the journey that remains ahead of them, Alma asks Maribel how she is feeling—Maribel tells Alma that she is "fine," and Alma is relieved. This is what she has "been waiting to hear the whole time."

Alma is able to find a measure of peace as she considers her husband's optimistic, resilient, and giving spirit. She feels that, despite all the loss she and Maribel have suffered, that they will be able to repair things going forward. Alma is finally able to accept that perhaps things will turn out "fine," and that she is deserving of happiness, just as Arturo wanted so badly for her to believe she was.

CHAPTER 28: ARTURO RIVERA

Arturo lived all his live in Pátzcuaro, México—unlike other people who left town in search of "a better life," he and his family always had "a beautiful life"—they came to America for their daughter. Arturo wonders whether God watches his people and whether things happen for a greater reason, but he concludes that he does not have the answers. Arturo is grateful for what he and his family have found in America—though they have not been in the States long, they have found friends that feel like family and have watched their daughter improve. Arturo wonders about the nature of longing and whether "the instinct of every immigrant [says] someplace will be better than here." Arturo concedes that though the move to America has been difficult, he would do it all again, and he proudly proclaims that one day, when he and his family return to México, he will tell people there "all the ways [he] loved this country."

In the novel's final chapter, Arturo delivers a brief but inspiring message of hope, joy, and grace. Arturo exalts the immigrant instinct and the immigrant spirit, finding honor and nobility in the desire to find something or someplace better. Arturo himself is full of the longing that makes up so much of the immigrant spirit, and though he has encountered many hardships, he is full of gratitude and love for all that America has given him and his family.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Tanner, Alexandra. "*The Book of Unknown Americans.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 25 Jan 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Tanner, Alexandra. "*The Book of Unknown Americans.*" LitCharts LLC, January 25, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-book-of-unknown-americans.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Book of Unknown Americans* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Henríquez, Cristina. The Book of Unknown Americans. Vintage Books. 2014.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Henríquez, Cristina. The Book of Unknown Americans. New York: Vintage Books. 2014.