Dreaming in Cuban

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CRISTINA GARCÍA

Cristina García was born to a Guatemalan father and a Cuban mother. In 1961, when García was two and a half, her family was among the earliest wave of people to flee to the United States after Fidel Castro's Cuban Revolution. García grew up in several New York City boroughs, including Queens, Brooklyn, and Manhattan. She studied political science at Barnard College and later earned a master's degree in international relations from Johns Hopkins. After spending time in Italy and Germany, García worked as a journalist in Miami. In 1984, after revisiting Cuba for the first time since childhood, García felt torn between Cuba and Miami's Cuban exile community, prompting the questions of identity which later gave shape to *Dreaming in Cuban*. The novel was nominated for a National Book Award. Six months after its publication, García gave birth to her daughter, Pilar. Her later novels—including *King of Cuba*, *Monkey Hunting*, and *Here in Berlin*—explore questions of immigration and identity more broadly.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The events of the novel revolve around the Cuban Revolution, which was carried out by Fidel Castro and his followers against President Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship. The Revolution took place over the course of the 1950s, beginning in 1953 with an attack on a military barracks led by Fidel Castro (the 26th of July Movement) and concluding on January 1, 1959. However, the Revolution's work didn't truly end in 1959—the following years radically transformed Cuban society to accord with communist beliefs and practices. While greater equality was sought and improvements were made in areas like education and healthcare, the Revolution also included executions of political criminals without due process and forced suppression of dissent. The Revolution resulted in a freeze in U.S.-Cuban diplomatic relations, which has thawed slightly since 2015. About 500,000 Cubans left Cuba for the United States in the 20 years following the Revolution.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Besides poetry, García has said that while working on *Dreaming in Cuban*, she was inspired by the stories of Anton Chekhov and the magical realist fiction of Franz Kafka (especially *The Metamorphosis*), Jorge Luis Borges (*Ficciones*), and Gabriel García Márquez (*One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Love in the Time of Cholera*). As a novel that focuses on the 1950s Cuban Revolution and its after-effects, *Dreaming in Cuban* is also similar to books like Christina Diaz Gonzales's *The Red Umbrella* and Enrique Flores-Galbis's *90 Miles to Havana*. Additionally, *Dreaming in Cuban* is a story that focuses on different generations of a single family, namely Celia (the del Pino matriarch) and her daughters and granddaughter. In this way, the novel is aligned with other contemporary books with intergenerational narratives, including Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko*, and Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Dreaming in Cuban
- **When Written:** 1990
- **Where Written:** Hawaii
- **When Published:** 1992
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Historical Fiction; Magical Realism
- **Setting:** Santa Teresa del Mar, Cuba; Havana, Cuba; New York City
- **Climax:** Pilar visits Celia in Cuba.
- **Antagonist:** The antagonist varies depending upon different characters' points of view. Lourdes Puente, Celia del Pino, the United States and capitalism, and El Líder (Fidel Castro) and communism are all antagonists to various characters in the book.
- **Point of View:** Third Person; First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

From Poem to Novel. *Dreaming in Cuban* actually began as a poem. After the poem reached 100 pages, García was surprised to discover that she was actually writing a novel, which she'd never set out to do.

Biographical Basis. García, having grown up in New York City with a stronger New Yorker identity than a Cuban one, identifies most strongly with the character of Pilar. In writing about Pilar's reunion with Celia, García hoped to capture the sense of loss she personally experienced after decades of separation from her own grandmother, whom she finally met in Cuba in 1984.

PLOT SUMMARY

In 1972, Celia del Pino is guarding the northern coast of Cuba in her best housedress and pearl earrings. Her husband, Jorge, who has been getting medical treatment in New York, appears

walking on the water. From this, Celia discerns that Jorge has died. She wades in the **ocean** and thinks about her marriage, which was marked by Jorge's frequent absence—he worked as a traveling salesman. Celia's middle daughter, Felicia, is distraught over her father's death. Felicia's best friend, Herminia Delgado, encourages her to participate in a cleansing Santería ritual in order to make peace with her father's spirit. Even though Felicia hates the blood of animal sacrifice, she agrees.

Meanwhile, Celia's eldest daughter, Lourdes, lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she runs a successful bakery. In the midst of her grief over Jorge's death (the two of them were especially close), Lourdes discovers that her 13-year-old daughter, Pilar, has run away. It turns out that Pilar witnessed her father, Rufino, having an affair and decided to return to Cuba, where she was born. Pilar has always identified strongly with her grandmother Celia and fights with Lourdes. Sometimes Celia even communicates with Pilar by speaking to her at night from hundreds of miles away. Pilar makes it to Miami, Florida by bus and reaches a cousin's house, but before she can figure out how to catch a boat to Cuba, one of her aunts contacts Lourdes, and Pilar is sent back to New York.

Back in Cuba, Celia thinks about her affair with a married Spanish lawyer, Gustavo Sierra de Armas, before she married Jorge. After Gustavo returned to Spain, Celia fell into a debilitating depression. While she was housebound, Jorge visited her and told her to write to Gustavo. If Gustavo doesn't write back, Jorge reasoned, Celia should marry Jorge instead. Celia does write to Gustavo, on the 11th day of each month, for 25 years. However, she keeps the letters in a box under her bed and never sends them.

When Celia visits Felicia's house, which once belonged to Jorge's mother, Berta, she remembers how her mother-in-law hated and tormented her when she and Jorge were newlyweds. The experience broke Celia mentally, and she rejected her newborn daughter, Lourdes. After that, Jorge placed Celia in an asylum for a while. After she got out, they lived in a house by the beach, which the doctor hoped would provide a healing atmosphere for Celia. There, she gave birth to Felicia and, years later, a son named Javier. All this time, Celia longed for Gustavo, and Jorge knew that Celia didn't love him passionately. Returning to the present, Celia decides that with Jorge now dead, she will devote her life to the service of El Líder (Fidel Castro) and the Cuban Revolution.

Forty days after Jorge's death, he starts visiting Lourdes. She can't see him, but she hears his voice and smells his trademark cigar. Lourdes is unsettled by this, and she thinks back to her departure from Cuba: after Castro's takeover, Lourdes had been pregnant with her second child. Some Revolutionary soldiers came to Rufino's family estate, claiming that it now belonged to the government. After Lourdes threatened the soldiers, she suffered a miscarriage. Some time after, while Rufino was away, the soldiers returned, and one of them raped Lourdes. Nowadays, Lourdes feels grateful for her new life and self-reinvention in the United States. She passionately hates all things related to Castro and the Revolution, and she pours herself into her business. Her biggest regret these days is that Pilar hates her.

Back in Cuba, Felicia sometimes has delusions. The summer following her father's death, the delusions are especially overpowering. She shuts herself indoors, plays records, and dances with her five-year-old son, Ivanito. Ivanito's father, Hugo Villaverde, was a merchant marine who could be violently abusive and who often cheated on Felicia. He even gave Felicia syphilis, which nearly killed Ivanito when Felicia gave birth to him. One day, Felicia kicked him out of the house by dropping a flaming rag onto his face, maiming him for life. Ivanito doesn't remember his father, and unlike his older sisters, twins Luz and Milagro, he is loyal to his mother and thinks her behavior is normal. But by the end of the summer, Felicia attempts to kill herself and Ivanito. After that, Ivanito is sent to boarding school, and Felicia is sent to serve in a guerilla brigade in the mountains. Celia hopes that Felicia will find a new sense of purpose in the Revolution, but Felicia is indifferent to politics.

A few years later, in 1975, Lourdes has become an auxiliary policewoman in Brooklyn, eager to carry out her ideas about law and order. Pilar has gotten into the punk music scene and become an avid abstract painter. To Pilar's amazement, Lourdes commissions her to paint a patriotic mural for the grand opening of her second bakery. Pilar can't help portraying a "punk" Liberty, complete with a safety pin through her nose, though she feels uneasy about it. At the unveiling, when a disgruntled customer intends to destroy the offensive painting, Lourdes knocks him flat with her handbag, and Pilar feels a surge of love for her mother.

In 1978, Felicia consults a santero because she's longing for a husband. The *santero* forecasts misfortune in Felicia's life and gives her a healing spell to perform, but before she can do this, Felicia falls in love with an awkward restaurant inspector named Ernesto. After four days of bliss, Ernesto is killed in a grease fire. Felicia becomes convinced that El Líder is behind it. After that, Felicia disappears for a while. In July, she finds herself married to a carnival worker named Otto, unable to remember how she got there. One night, Otto dies when he falls off the roller coaster that he and Felicia are riding, and Felicia claims that she intentionally pushed him. After this, Felicia makes her way home and embraces the practice of *Santería*, with her friend Herminia's help. She undergoes the initiation to become a *santera*, seeming at first to find peace; however, she gradually sickens, aging before her time. At the very end of Felicia's life, Celia orders Felicia's so-called "witch doctor" friends out of the house, stomps on the divination **shells** they'd been using, and holds Felicia until she dies.

In 1979, Jorge stops communicating with Lourdes and

disappears, but not before admitting to her that during the first year of their marriage, he sent Celia to live with his cruel mother in hopes of breaking Celia's spirit—he was jealous of her love for Gustavo. Jorge assures Lourdes that Celia really did love her.

In 1980, Pilar, who's always been irreligious but lately feels uninspired, wanders into a botánica in New York. The shop owner gives Pilar a spell to perform, promising her that after nine days of sacred baths, she'll know her next steps in life. Before Pilar can do this, she's sexually assaulted in a park. After the assault, she notices that she can read disconnected bits of people's thoughts and even see glimpses of the future. She performs the ritual and learns that she and Lourdes must go to Cuba. They do go end up going to Cuba, where Lourdes is pained by the decay visible everywhere and disgusted by her mother's continued devotion to El Líder. She revisits the old Puente estate, where her rape occurred, and she wonders if she will ever see justice. She tries to convince her nephew Ivanito, now 13 and gifted at languages, to defect to the United States.

By contrast, Pilar is enchanted by Cuba and relishes spending time with her Abuela Celia at last. She paints Celia's portrait and listens to stories about her life. Celia gives Pilar the collection of letters that she wrote Gustavo. Pilar also visits Herminia, learns about her aunt Felicia's life, and discovers that she, too, is destined to become a *Santería* initiate. One day, Pilar asks Celia if she'd be allowed to paint anything she wants in Cuba. Celia says she can, as long as she doesn't attack the Revolution—Cuba can't yet afford the luxury of dissent. Pilar begins to realize that as much as she loves Cuba, she truly belongs in New York.

Early one morning, Lourdes drives Ivanito to the Peruvian embassy, where a crowd of defectors has gathered. She urges him to get out of Cuba and tells him that she'll sponsor him for American citizenship. When Celia discovers they have gone, Pilar drives to Havana in pursuit and finds Ivanito among the crowd, but she lets him go and lies to Celia that she couldn't find him.

Some time after this, Celia, alone again, takes a swim deep into the ocean. She sinks beneath the surface, taking off the pearl earrings Gustavo once gave her. It's not clear that she ever surfaces.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Celia del Pino – Celia del Pino is the protagonist and matriarch of the del Pino family. She's Jorge's widow; Lourdes, Felicia, and Javier's mother; and Pilar, Luz, Milagro, and Ivanito's grandmother. Celia is a passionate woman: she cares about the plight of the less fortunate, loves poetry, and is sincerely committed to communism and the ideals of the Cuban Revolution. She was born into an impoverished family in rural Cuba before being sent to Havana as a little girl after her parents' divorce. Celia lived with her great-aunt Alicia, who taught her piano-playing, Cuban culture, and progressive ideas. As a young woman, Celia fell in love with a married Spanish lawyer named Gustavo Sierra del Armas. The two began a short-lived but passionate affair which shaped the rest of Celia's life. After Gustavo left her one morning to return to Spain, Celia succumbed to a months-long depression. Jorge del Pino persuaded Celia to marry him, though for years Celia continues writing weekly letters to Gustavo which she never sends. After spending the first year of her marriage living with her cruel mother in law, Berta Arango del Pino, Celia becomes mentally ill and rejects her newborn daughter, Lourdes, resulting in lifelong strain between the two. She and Jorge also have a strained marriage because Jorge is bitter over Celia's lingering feelings for Gustavo. As an old woman, after Jorge passes away, Celia is estranged from Lourdes and frets over her other daughter, Felicia's, mental health. She feels most understood by and affectionate toward her son, Javier, who secretly shared in Celia's enthusiasm for the Cuban Revolution. Celia gradually heals from her grief over Gustavo after spending years living by the **ocean** and, later in life, becoming involved in civilian efforts for the Revolution. To a degree, El Líder (Fidel Castro) displaces what affection Celia has for Jorge. Celia has a special connection with her granddaughter Pilar, who lives in New York City and who Celia believes will remember and carry on all that she cannot. However, when Pilar and Lourdes visit, Celia and Pilar find that their connection doesn't give them the clarity and sense of purpose they both hoped it would. The story ends ambiguously with Celia alone, isolated from her family once more, wading into the sea.

Jorge del Pino – Jorge is Celia's late husband and the father of Lourdes, Felicia, and Javier. Jorge is 14 years Celia's senior; he began courting Celia while she was housebound, heartbroken over her lover, Gustavo. He told Celia that if Gustavo didn't write back to her from Spain, then Celia should marry Jorge instead. Jorge is a faithful husband and dearly loves Celia, but he does have a jealous and vindictive streak—for example, he leaves Celia with his mother-in-law while he works as a traveling salesman during the first year of their marriage, knowing full well that Berta will break Celia's spirit. However, he accepts that Celia will never love him as she does Gustavo. Jorge has a close bond with Lourdes, their oldest daughter, whom Celia rejects from birth. Jorge spends most of his weeks traveling, a dedicated employee of an American company, to avoid seeing Celia's sadness—and later, Celia's devotion to the Cuban Revolution, which Jorge opposes. Jorge always wears an impeccable suit and Panama hat and smokes cigars. In later life, Jorge develops stomach cancer and receives medical treatment in New York City. After his death, he visits Celia as a ghost and

spends years visiting Lourdes. Jorge encourages Lourdes in her entrepreneurship and anti-communism. During his life, Jorge was never as close to Felicia—whose first husband, Hugo, he hated and attacked with a chair—or Javier, whom he relentlessly criticized. Ultimately, Jorge's family (other than Lourdes) is haunted rather than comforted by his memory and inexplicable ghostly presence.

Lourdes del Pino Puente – Lourdes is the eldest of Jorge and Celia's children. She's Felicia and Javier's sister, Rufino's wife, and Pilar's mother. When Lourdes was born, Celia was so depressed over Gustavo, her former lover, that she refused to bond with her daughter, claiming she would never remember Lourdes's name. However, Lourdes has a close bond with Jorge, and she grows up as the most conventional, devout, and well-behaved of the del Pino children. She marries Rufino Puente and has one daughter, Pilar. While she's pregnant with her second child, Lourdes suffers a miscarriage and is dispossessed of her land and raped by Revolutionary soldiers soon after. Lourdes makes a new life in New York City, opening successful bakeries, becoming an auxiliary policewoman, and engaging in anti-Castro politics with other Cuban exiles. She continues talking with the ghost of her father, Jorge, after his death, having been especially close to him in life. Lourdes sometimes eats and diets obsessively to cope with her grief. As a Catholic, she hounds her daughter, Pilar, relentlessly for her rebellion and unconventionality. Yet deep down, she truly loves Pilar, even supporting Pilar's provocative artwork when others threaten to destroy it. Though Lourdes is almost a caricature of conservative anti-communist beliefs, she is also deeply reflective about her grief, fiercely loyal, and capable of deep love. However, she never fully reconciles with her mother or with the trauma she associates with Cuba.

Felicia del Pino – Felicia is the middle child of Celia and Jorge; she's Lourdes and Javier's sister and Luz, Milagro, and Ivanito's mother. She is named after Felicia Gutierrez, a friend of Celia's in the mental health asylum. Like her namesake, Felicia is stricken with misfortune and mental illness throughout her life. Felicia lives a haphazard and unpredictable life governed only by her poetic imagination and sexual desires. Felicia suffers from delusions, especially after marrying her abusive husband, Hugo Villaverde. She sometimes locks her children, twins Luz and Milagro and son Ivanito, in the house for weeks at a time, obsessively making coconut ice cream and teaching Ivanito to dance. When the children were small, Felicia attacked Hugo with a flaming rag, maiming him for life. Years later, after the housebound and delusional "summer of coconuts," she attempts suicide before being rescued by Celia. After this incident, she spends time training with a guerilla brigade with the goal of making her a useful member of society. However, despite Celia's urgings, Felicia never cares about politics. Felicia is drawn to aspects of Santería, the religion of her best friend Herminia, throughout her life. Following the deaths of her second husband Ernesto and third husband Otto (which are highly suspicious and unclear as to Felicia's involvement), Felicia gives herself to the practice of *Santería* completely. After her initiation, she finally seems to find a measure of peace and stability in her life. However, feeling unloved by her family, she declines, eventually dying in Celia's arms.

Pilar Puente – Pilar is Lourdes's and Rufino's daughter and Celia's granddaughter. She and Celia have a lifelong special bond despite their distance (Pilar lives in New York City with her parents while Celia remains in Cuba), whereas things between Pilar and Lourdes are always antagonistic. Pilar shows hints of special spiritual powers all her life, making her nanny's hair fall out as a baby and remembering everything that has ever happened to her, even in infancy. Pilar always has a strong rebellious streak, even running away to Miami at 13 with the hope of reaching Cuba. She takes up abstract painting because it doesn't require any translation; later, she gets into the punk music scene and teaches herself to play bass. Pilar is cynical and defiant, instinctively siding against her mother's passionate anti-communist views and sometimes deliberately antagonizing Lourdes with pro-communist writings and provocative artwork. However, even though Pilar doesn't understand how they could be mother and daughter, Pilar loves Lourdes deep down and admires her mother's stubborn loyalties. Pilar attends art school and studies anthropology at Barnard College, but she finds herself uninspired as a young adult and becomes curious about Santería, despite being only nominally religious up to that point. After a ritual reveals that Pilar should go to Cuba, she hopes that reuniting with her grandmother Celia will help her finally make sense of her life. Although Pilar finds Cuba magical, she ultimately realizes that she can't be happy there because her artistic self-expression would be stifled. Pilar realizes that she is truly a New Yorker, but parts of Cuba—like Celia's stories and Pilar's newfound devotion to *Santería*—will always remain with her.

El Líder / Fidel Castro – El Líder is Fidel Castro, the communist revolutionary politician who came to power in Cuba in 1959, serving as its prime minister and president over many years. He is never called by name in the novel, but his presence looms large in the book. Celia is passionately devoted to him and his cause, even covering her bedside photo of Jorge with a photo of Castro, while Lourdes despises and conspires against him. He appears a couple of times in the book, making speeches but never interacting with main characters (though Lourdes gets the chance to shout, "Murderer!" at him in person when she visits Cuba).

Ivanito Villaverde – Ivanito is Felicia's and Hugo's youngest child and Luz and Milagro's brother. He is gifted at dancing and languages. He spends his early childhood mostly locked in Felicia's house; his mother is obsessed with him and even tries to kill herself and him rather than allow Celia to take him away. After this, Ivanito is sent to boarding school to help him

integrate with other children. Ivanito is a naïve, melancholy kid who longs to someday become a translator for world leaders. At the end of the book, Lourdes and Pilar help him escape Cuba as a refugee.

Gustavo Sierra de Armas – Gustavo is Celia's first lover. He was a married Spanish lawyer who purchased a Kodak camera at the department store counter where Celia worked. Gustavo is the only one of Celia's lovers who took her completely seriously, respecting her mind and opinions. As a result, Celia never gets over him after he leaves her one morning to return to Spain. Celia writes Gustavo monthly letters, which she never sends; she dreams of someday reuniting with Gustavo, but she never does. However, Celia wears the pearl earrings he gave her for the rest of her life.

Javier del Pino – Javier is the youngest of Celia and Jorge's children; he's Lourdes and Felicia's brother and Irinita's father. Unlike his sisters, Javier doesn't figure prominently in the novel. He is a scientifically gifted young boy who is frequently criticized by Jorge. He secretly sympathizes with Celia's communist politics and ultimately goes to Czechoslovakia, where he becomes a professor of biochemistry, marries, and has a daughter, Irinita. After his wife leaves him, he returns to Cuba, heartsick and cancer-ridden. He later disappears from Celia's house and presumably dies.

Herminia Delgado – Herminia is Felicia's best friend. They met on the beach as little girls, when Herminia explains that in Santería, **shells** can predict the future. She and Felicia are fiercely loyal to one another throughout their lives. Herminia's father, Salvador, is a highly regarded santero, or *Santería* priest, though he and his family are sometimes mocked and feared for their beliefs, including by Celia at times.

Hugo Villaverde – Hugo is Felicia's first husband and Luz, Milagro, and Ivanito's father. He is abusive and infects Felicia with syphilis after having lots of affairs during his travels as a merchant marine. Felicia eventually gets back at Hugo by setting him on fire, leaving him maimed and unable to work. Hugo attempts to rekindle a bond with Luz and Milagro, who are loyal to him, and with Ivanito, but they stop visiting him after they see him with a prostitute.

Rufino Puente – Rufino is Lourdes's husband and Pilar's father. His wealthy family owned a massive estate in Cuba before being dispossessed by Castro's government. Rufino has a special bond with Pilar and supports her art, but unlike Lourdes, he is never happy in America. He spends most of his time tinkering with technology in his workshop and at one point has an affair, prompting Pilar to run away.

Luz Villaverde – Luz is one of Felicia's and Hugo's daughters; she's Milagro's twin and Ivanito's older sister. Luz and Milagro are more loyal to their father than to the del Pinos and do not feature prominently in the story. The twins tend to speak in symbols that only the two of them understand.

Milagro Villaverde – Milagro is one of Felicia's and Hugo's daughters; she's Luz's twin and Ivanito's older sister. Milagro and Luz are more loyal to their father than to the del Pinos and do not feature prominently in the story. They tend to speak in symbols that only the two of them understand. Milagro is a little more sentimental than her sister.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Ernesto Brito – Ernesto is Felicia's unlucky second husband. He is a pale, nondescript, scrupulously honest restaurant inspector. Four days after they meet, Ernesto dies in a hotel fire.

Berta Arango del Pino – Berta is Jorge's mother. Celia lives with her during her first year of marriage to Jorge. Berta hates and torments Celia, calling her a whore and breaking her spirit. This treatment triggers a mental illness for Celia that culminates in a stint at an asylum.

Ofelia del Pino – Ofelia is Jorge's unmarried sister who suffers from tuberculosis. Celia lives with her and Berta del Pino during her first year of marriage.

Blanquito – Blanquito is the American cousin with whom Pilar seeks refuge after running away to Miami.

Dom Guillermo Puente – Dom Guillermo is Rufino's father who is wealthy from Cuba's casino business. He and his wife, Zaida, are exiled to America after the Cuban Revolution.

Doña Zaida Puente – Dona Zaida is Rufino's mother. She and her husband, Guillermo, are exiled to America after the Cuban Revolution. She despises Lourdes.

Great-Aunt Alicia – Alicia is the great-aunt with whom Celia lived in Havana as a girl following her parents' divorce. Alicia's love, music, and progressive values have a lifelong influence on Celia.

Felicia Gutiérrez – Felicia is a young woman Celia meets in the asylum. Felicia is said to have burned her husband to death. Celia later names her own daughter Felicia after her friend.

Maribel Navarro – Maribel works in Lourdes's bakery at one point before she's summarily fired for pocketing change. A few years later, Maribel's teenage son—whom Lourdes busts on her auxiliary policewoman beat—commits suicide by jumping into the river.

Xiomara Rojas – Xiomara Rojas is the lieutenant of Felicia's training brigade in the Sierra Maestra.

Ester Ugarte – Ester is the wife of the postmaster in Santa Teresa del Mar. She accuses Loli Regalado of seducing her husband, Rogelio.

Loli Regalado – Loli is a woman in Santa Teresa del Mar whom Ester Ugarte accuses of seducing her husband, Rogelio. Rogelio ultimately confesses to seducing Loli.

Rogelio Ugarte – Rogelio is the postmaster of Santa Teresa del

Mar, husband of Ester. He eventually confesses to seducing Loli Regalado and is sentenced to a year's volunteer service.

Irinita – Irinita is Javier's daughter in Czechoslovakia.

Max – Max is Pilar's musician boyfriend in 1976. Max's real name is Octavio Schneider, and they start dating after Max (who is half Mexican) speaks Spanish to Pilar at a club. He encourages Pilar to become a bass player someday.

Sergey Mikoyan – Mr. Mikoyan is Ivanito's Russian teacher at boarding school. He is especially fond of Ivanito and ultimately flees the school after he's accused of "indiscretions" with underage students.

Otto Cruz – Otto is Felicia's third husband. He found her wandering around the carnival where he worked and married her the next day. Otto ends up falling off a roller coaster. Felicia later claims, in a trance, that she pushed him.

Salvador Delgado – Salvador is Herminia's father, a Santería priest. He was sometimes derided by the community as a "witch doctor."

Rubén – Rubén is a Peruvian boyfriend of Pilar's at Barnard College. He cheats on her with a Dutch exchange student.

La Madrina – La Madrina is a Santería practitioner connected with Herminia and Felicia.

Minnie French – Minnie is Pilar's troubled 17-year-old seatmate on the bus ride from New York to Miami. Minnie is traveling to Florida seeking an abortion.

Sister Federica A sister at the Sisters of Charity Hospital. She takes care of Jorge, including shaving him twice a day, after Lourdes empties her savings to pay for that sort of personal care. Jorge appears to Sister Federica after he dies, making her believe that he is a saint.

TERMS

Santería – *Santería* is an Afro American religion that originated in Cuba. It incorporates elements of the West African Yoruba religion as well as Roman Catholicism. Followers believe in one God who created the universe as well as seven *Orishas*, or lesser goddesses, who guide humanity. *Santería* is heavily ceremonial and focuses on the supernatural. Practitioners commonly create shrines, perform divination, and make offerings or animal sacrifices. In *Dreaming in Cuban*, **Felicia**, **Herminia**, **Pilar**, and **Celia** (to an extent) all believe in *Santería*.

Santero/Santera – A *santero* or *santera* is a priest or priestess, respectively, of the Santería religion.

Botánica – A botánica is a store that sells Santería supplies such as medicinal herbs, religious statues, and ceremonial objects.

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.

PASSION, ROMANCE, AND MARRIAGE

In *Dreaming in Cuban*, Cristina García's magical realist novel about three generations of the del Pino family, the heat of passion and the stability of marriage are often in conflict. The romance that dominates the novel is that of matriarch Celia for Gustavo, the lover who abandoned her following a passionate, youthful affair, sending Celia into a profound depression. Celia's ongoing love for Gustavo overshadows her marriage to a good man, Jorge, even though her life with Jorge is real and her relationship with Gustavo is not. By framing the novel around Celia's stubborn love for the absent Gustavo, García argues that passion, because of its tendency to fizzle out, obscures and even damages the more ordinary happiness that can be found within lifelong marriage.

Though Celia pines for Gustavo, her complicated feelings toward him suggest that romantic passion waxes and wanes. Celia's love for Gustavo is the driving passion of her life: "For twenty-five years, Celia wrote her Spanish lover a letter on the eleventh day of each month, then stored it in a satin-covered chest beneath her bed. Celia has removed her drop pearl earrings only nine times, to clean them. No one ever remembers her without them." Writing to Gustavo is an ingrained ritual, and the earrings which Gustavo gave Celia are her trademark, even long after her marriage to Jorge. Yet she never actually mails the letters to Gustavo—suggesting that even though she loves him in a way she doesn't love Jorge, Celia views Gustavo as a theoretical lover, a safely abstract figure in whom she can confide her deepest feelings. Eventually, Celia acknowledges to herself that even her passion for Gustavo isn't what it once was, writing, "I still love you, Gustavo, but it's a habitual love, a wound in the knee that predicts rain. Memory is a skilled seducer. I write to you because I must. I don't even know if you're alive and whom you love now." In other words, Gustavo is a deeply entrenched memory and a cherished habit for Celia, but Celia acknowledges that her feelings for him are illusory on a certain level, a "seduction" of memory that doesn't correspond to reality. She doesn't know the real him at all, nor does she maintain a genuine relationship with him. Meanwhile, this has lasting consequences for her actual marriage.

Celia and Jorge's marital struggles further show that passion, if clung onto long after it has spent itself, is not harmless—it can

damage potentially healthy relationships. When Jorge is injured in a car crash, Celia realizes that she does have feelings for him, writing to Gustavo: "Jorge is a good man, Gustavo. It surprised me how my heart jumped when I heard he'd been hurt. I cried when I saw him bandaged in white [...] His eyes apologized for having disturbed me. Can you imagine? I discovered I loved him at that moment. Not a passion like ours, Gustavo, but love just the same. I think he understands this and is at peace." Celia, in other words, realizes that there are different intensities of love, and she concludes that these can exist simultaneously. However, she draws the wrong conclusion about Jorge's feelings. Pilar, granddaughter of Jorge and Celia, recalls that, while her grandfather lived in New York City and her grandmother in Cuba, "[My grandfather] used to write her letters every day, when he still had the strength, long letters in an old-fashioned script with flourishes and curlicues. [...] They were romantic letters, too. [...] He called Abuela Celia his 'dove in the desert.' [...] Abuela Celia writes back to him every once in a while, but her letters are full of facts, about this meeting or that, nothing more. They make my grandfather sad." In other words, it's transparently obvious, even to Pilar, that her grandmother doesn't share her grandfather's romantic feelings. Yet even Celia's coldness doesn't stop Jorge from expressing his love for her on a daily basis, suggesting that a happy marriage could have been possible. Near the end of the book, Jorge's ghost visits his eldest daughter, Lourdes, and confesses to her that he's responsible for Celia's unhappiness during their marriage and the suffering this subsequently caused the family: "After we were married, I left her with my mother and my sister. I knew what it would do to her. A part of me wanted to punish her. For the Spaniard. I tried to kill her, Lourdes. I wanted to kill her. I left on a long trip after you were born. I wanted to break her, may God forgive me. When I returned, it was done." Despite Celia's assumptions, in other words, Jorge has never been oblivious to the truth about Celia's feelings for Gustavo, and that's why he abandoned her to mistreatment at the hands of his jealous mother and sister. Celia's and Jorge's relationship, haunted by the lingering ghost of Gustavo, became a spiral of mutual harm and regret.

None of the major characters' marriages are happy ones. Lourdes uses her husband for sex, objectifying him until her passion is briefly satisfied, but she doesn't respect him as a man; more dramatically, Felicia serially marries men who ignite her passion, but she ends up maiming or killing them all. There isn't an ideal marriage in the book—rather, there's only the ghost of healthy marriages that might have been.

INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICT

When Lourdes, eldest daughter of protagonist and del Pino family matriarch Celia, announces that she and her daughter Pilar are leaving the country, the resulting scene displays the larger family conflict on a smaller scale: "I was sitting in my grandmother's lap," Pilar recalls, "playing with her drop pearl earrings, when my mother told her we were leaving the country. Abuela Celia called her a traitor to the revolution. Mom tried to pull me away but I clung to Abuela and screamed at the top of my lungs. [...] That was the last time I saw her." Celia conceives of Lourdes's decision to flee as a betrayal of Celia's communist beliefs and therefore a betrayal of Celia herself. Pilar, only a child, feels caught in the middle between her mother and grandmother. By portraying the clash of three generations as they deal with the fallout from the 1950s Cuban Revolution, García suggests that when family relationships are viewed through the lens of politics, unfettered relationships between parents and children become impossible.

Celia sees her daughters' struggles and successes as tracing back to their acceptance or rejection of her as their mother and as a reflection of their loyalty to the Revolution, or the lack thereof. Celia diagnoses the problems of Felicia, her middle daughter who suffers from mental illness, as essentially political, and she therefore prescribes a political solution: "Everyone tells Felicia that she must find meaning in her life outside of her son, that she should give the revolution another try, become a New Socialist Woman. After all, as her mother points out, the only thing Felicia ever did for the revolution was pull a few dandelions during the weed-eradication campaign in 1962, and then only reluctantly. Her lack of commitment is a source of great rancor between them." Felicia's reluctance to get on board with the revolution, in other words, is an affront to Celia, and something to which Felicia's lifelong problems can be conveniently attributed. Celia's relationship with Lourdes, living in exile in the United States, is even worse. "Her daughters cannot understand her commitment to El Líder. Lourdes sends her snapshots of pastries from her bakery in Brooklyn. Each glistening eclair is a grenade aimed at Celia's political beliefs, each strawberry shortcake proof—in butter, cream, and eggs—of Lourdes's success in America, and a reminder of the ongoing shortages in Cuba." The conflict between mother and daughter comes down to the mundane products of Lourdes's new life abroad—instead of seeing the pastries as proof of her daughter's success in which Celia can take pride, Celia sees them as proof that her daughter has betrayed Cuba, and her.

In post-Revolutionary Cuba, estranged from actual relationships with her children, Celia spends her spare time mediating community disputes as a civilian judge. For her, these disputes come to represent something about her own family and about human nature in general: "The auditorium vibrates with discord. Every combination of argument is going full tilt. Husbands against wives. Married women against the single and divorced. [The trial is] an excuse for everyone to unleash frustrations at family members, neighbors, the system, their lives. Old wounds are reopened, new ones inflicted. [...] It

seems to her that so much of Cuba's success will depend on what doesn't exist, or exists only rarely. A spirit of generosity. Commitments without strings. Are these so against human nature?" Celia sees the domestic turmoil in the court as a reflection of Cuba's struggles more broadly, reinforcing the political view of family life that she takes throughout the novel.

Though conflict is no less pronounced in subsequent generations, mother-daughter relationships—especially that of Lourdes and Pilar—thrive better when they are untangled from politics. Despite the fact that conservative, anti-Castro Lourdes and her daughter Pilar are political opposites and are locked in constant discord, they transcend politics more notably than any other characters. When Pilar's painting of a "punk" Statue of Liberty causes an uproar at Lourdes's bakery grand opening, Lourdes jumps to her daughter's defense: "A lumpish man charges Liberty with a pocketknife […] Before anyone can react, Mom swings her new handbag and clubs the guy cold inches from the painting. Then, as if in slow motion, she tumbles forward, a thrashing avalanche of patriotism and motherhood, crushing three spectators and a table of apple tartlets. And I, I love my mother very much at that moment." Lourdes dislikes Pilar's provocative painting as much as anyone present, but her love of her daughter overrides that hostility. Later, it's evident that she lets the painting remain in her bakery. Lourdes, in other words, is fundamentally more loyal to her child than to her pro-America, anti-communist politics. García thus suggests that it's possible to maintain staunch political beliefs without letting them damage relationships—and that perhaps Lourdes, observing her mother's limitations in this regard, will break the pattern with her own daughter.

Celia views her granddaughter Pilar as bringing the family full circle. "Women who outlive their daughters are orphans, Abuela tells me. Only their granddaughters can save them, guard their knowledge like the first fire." Celia sees Pilar as her rescuer, the repository of her wisdom. However, at the end of the novel, Pilar discovers that as much as she loves her grandmother and wonders how her life might have been different in Cuba, she can't thrive there and can't be the savior her grandmother seeks. Pilar's experience suggests that every generation has to create their own "fire," not simply guard that of its predecessors.

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

Cuba's cultural diversity has resulted in a range of religious expression and identification over the course of the island's history. Though colonized primarily by adherents of Roman Catholicism, which has a strong legacy in Cuba, there is also a strong tradition of Santería, which is a religion incorporating elements of Yoruban religion (brought by West African slaves) and Roman Catholicism. Sometimes these traditions mix—one might, for example, be a devoutly practicing Catholic while also observing elements of *Santería* as one chooses. Among her characters, García presents some devout Catholicism, but she focuses more on *Santería*, a mixture of beliefs, or general religious skepticism. In this way, she suggests not only that the Cuban attitude toward religious practice is uniquely tolerant, but that people's openness to and understanding of religion will shift throughout their lives, depending on their personal circumstances.

Felicia, middle daughter of the del Pino family, exemplifies a blend of Catholicism and *Santería*. For Felicia, Catholic faith is largely a matter of externalities, which transfer easily into the realm of *Santería*: "Felicia remembers how when she was in grammar school the paraphernalia of faith had proved more intriguing than its overwrought lessons. After mass, long after the priest's words stopped echoing against the cement walls, she remained in church, inspecting the pews for forgotten veils or rosary beads. She collected prayer cards and missals engraved with gold initials and filled glass jars with holy water, which she later used to baptize Ilda Limón's chickens." For Felicia, in other words, the abstract teachings of religious faith are relatively uninteresting, whereas its external rituals feel instinctively meaningful to her. Later in life, Felicia finds a spiritual home in the *Santería* practiced by her best friend Herminia's family: "Felicia returned to our religion with great eagerness after her disappearance in 1978," Herminia explains. "Felicia's mother discouraged her devotion to the gods. Celia had only vague notions about spiritual possession and animal sacrifice […] Celia revered El Líder and wanted Felicia to give herself entirely to the revolution, believing that this alone would save her daughter. But Felicia would not be dissuaded from the [gods]. She had a true vocation to the supernatural." Herminia's account suggests that Celia's lifelong obsession with worldly, political matters makes *Santería* incomprehensible to her, and that it's incompatible with Felicia's "supernatural" bent, which finally finds its full expression in *Santería*.

Celia, matriarch of the del Pino family, is religiously ambivalent: she rejects Catholicism and tolerating aspects of traditional superstition, yet she's distasteful of an enthusiastic embrace of *Santería*. For her, professed atheism and observance of cultural superstitions aren't mutually exclusive. "Felicia knew that her mother […] had an instinctive distrust of the ecclesiastical. […] Although Celia was not a believer, she was wary of powers she didn't understand. She locked her children in the house on December 4, the feast day of Changó, god of fire and lightning, and warned them that they'd be kidnapped and sacrificed to the black people's god if they wandered the streets alone." Celia doesn't trust conventional and hierarchical religion, but the beliefs she's imbibed from her culturally diverse surroundings—like certain gods of *Santería*—still make a strong enough impression on her that she directs her actions accordingly, especially when she fears forces, like lightning, that she can't control. Even superstition, though, is different from

devoted adherence. When Felicia turns to *Santería* for healing, "Celia is uneasy about all these potions and spells. […] Celia fears that both good and evil may be borne in the same seed. Although Celia dabbles in *Santería*'s harmless superstitions, she cannot bring herself to trust the clandestine rites of the African magic." In other words, *Santería* might not be inherently evil, as more staunchly Catholic Cubans might claim, yet that doesn't mean its secretive otherness doesn't feel threatening to Celia.

Celia's granddaughter Pilar blends religious views in yet another way: she grows up away from Cuba's pluralistic context and considers herself to be an atheist, yet she feels herself pulled back toward traditional Cuban religion. Removed from her mother, Lourdes's, and her grandmother Celia's Cuban context, Pilar becomes irreligious, though not by a conscious decision. "My mother told me that Abuela Celia was an atheist before I even understood what the word meant. I liked the […] derision with which my mother pronounced it, and knew immediately it was what I wanted to become. I don't know exactly when I stopped believing in God. It wasn't as deliberate as deciding at age six to become an atheist, but more like an imperceptible sloughing of layers. One day I noticed there was no more skin to absently peel, just air where there'd been artifice." Pilar, in other words, is drawn to atheism primarily because it lets her side with her grandmother against her mother, not because of a principled rejection of religion. Yet even Pilar isn't impervious to the tug of religion. When she wanders into a botánica (a religious supply shop for *Santería* practitioners) in New York City, Pilar reflects, "I'm not religious but I get the feeling that it's the simplest rituals, the ones that are integrated with the earth and its seasons, that are the most profound. It makes more sense to me than the more abstract forms of worship." The proprietor perceives that Pilar is "a daughter of Changó" and gives her a ritual to perform to determine her next steps in life. Pilar does so, and immediately afterward, she knows she must visit Cuba. This scene suggests that even when separated from her family's homeland, Pilar has a mysterious pull toward religious traditions of the island, one that her insulated life in America has given her no opportunity to follow.

Ultimately, the novel's blend of religious pluralism, magical realism (as in Celia's husband, Jorge's, haunting of the devoutly Catholic Lourdes), and even evidence of mental illness (Felicia, Celia, and even Pilar show hints of illness which seems to dispose them toward the supernatural all the more) flow together throughout the novel. García does not draw a strong distinction between them. In this way, she suggests that people find the spiritual meanings that make sense to them depending on the unique circumstances of their lives.

HISTORY AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

The question of personal identity is a constant problem in the novel. Given the political upheaval in Cuba over the course of the 20th century and the Cuban diaspora that resulted, individual characters struggle to figure out where they belong. García's characters take various stances relative to the history unfolding around them. Some, like Celia, commit themselves to Cuba no matter what; others, like Lourdes, separate themselves from their Cuban past. But García pays particular attention to young Pilar's experience of living in exile, feeling neither quite Cuban nor fully American. By focusing on Pilar's struggle for identity, García argues that, given arbitrary, ever-shifting political forces, each person must carve out a sense of identity for oneself without looking exclusively to history or even family to guide them.

In the novel, the arbitrary nature of history is taken for granted. Pilar observes that the way history is written is largely subjective: "If it were up to me, I'd record other things. Like the time there was a freak hailstorm in the Congo and the women took it as a sign that they should rule. Or the life stories of prostitutes in Bombay. Why don't I know anything about them? Who chooses what we should know or what's important? I know I have to decide these things for myself. Most of what I've learned that's important I've learned on my own, or from my grandmother." In other words, it's up to individuals to learn what's meaningful and how different stories and events are significant to their own lives—people shouldn't trust the accounts of others just because they claim to be authoritative.

Because the Cuban Revolution has forced Pilar's family to move to the United States, Pilar feels arbitrarily cut off from an important part of who she is. "I resent the hell out of the politicians and the generals who force events on us that structure our lives, that dictate the memories we'll have when we're old. Every day Cuba fades a little more inside me, my grandmother fades a little more inside me. And there's only my imagination where our history should be." Because of the actions of politicians and the military, Pilar can't access the Cuban part of her history and must create it for herself—a reflection of the distance between those with the power to move history and those who must live with the consequences.

Pilar, pulled between the United States and Cuba, struggles for a stable identity. Pilar always feels uncertain about where her home is: "Even though I've been living in Brooklyn all my life, it doesn't feel like home to me. I'm not sure Cuba is, but I want to find out. If I could only see Abuela Celia again, I'd know where I belonged." Ironically, though, Pilar invests authority in her grandmother to help her determine where she belongs. Pilar looks for other pursuits, like painting, to help her figure out who she is, even when others find her efforts alarming, as when her mother sends her to a psychologist because of her disturbing art: "[W]hat could I say? That my mother is driving me crazy? That I miss my grandmother and wish I'd never left Cuba? That I

want to be a famous artist someday? That a paintbrush is better than a gun so why doesn't everybody just leave me alone? Painting is its own language, I wanted to tell him. Translations just confuse it, dilute it, like words going from Spanish to English." In other words, painting, unlike human language, doesn't require translation, meaning that it helps Pilar express herself in a way that doesn't risk the distortions of being converted from one language to another.

When Pilar finally gets to visit Celia in Cuba, she reflects on the life she might have had: "I wonder how different my life would have been if I'd stayed with my grandmother. I think about how I'm probably the only ex-punk on the island, how no one else has their ears pierced in three places. […] I ask Abuela if I can paint whatever I want in Cuba and she says yes, as long as I don't attack the state. Cuba is still developing, she tells me, and can't afford the luxury of dissent. […] I wonder what El Líder would think of my paintings. Art, I'd tell him, is the ultimate revolution." Celia's answer, in other words, disillusions Pilar somewhat. She realizes that if she had grown up in Cuba instead of America, she probably would not have become exactly the person she is today, because she would not have enjoyed the same degree of freedom of expression. While Celia takes this fact for granted as an aspect of the revolutionary Cuba she loves, Pilar sees it as a potential dilution of her identity. Ultimately, then, Pilar realizes that she cannot stay in Cuba. "I'm afraid to lose all this, to lose Abuela Celia again. But sooner or later I'd have to return to New York. I know now it's where I belong—not *instead* of here, but *more* than here. How can I tell my grandmother this?" Pilar recognizes that the environment in which she's grown up has had an indispensable shaping influence on who she has become, and she can't leave it behind without risking her self-identity.

In a letter to Gustavo around the time of the Cuban Revolution, Celia writes, "If I was born to live on an island, then I'm grateful for one thing: that the tides rearrange the borders. At least I have the illusion of change, of possibility. To be locked within boundaries plotted by priests and politicians would be the only thing more intolerable. Don't you see how they're carving up the world, Gustavo? How they're stealing our geography? Our fates? The arbitrary is no longer in our hands. To survive is an act of hope." Ironically, a younger Celia shared Pilar's instinct, expressed much later, that the fate of one's country—a major aspect of one's personal identity—remains stubbornly out of one's own control, and it's up to the individual to cultivate hope as best one can.

OBSESSION AND DEVOTION

In *Dreaming in Cuban*, many characters are driven by their devotion to specific desires, dreams, or causes. One of the best examples is the opposite ideologies of Celia and her daughter, Lourdes. Celia truly believes in the Cuban Revolution and works for its advancement; Lourdes vehemently denounces it, having fled to the United States in search of greater personal freedoms. By portraying Celia's and Lourdes's divergent political devotion against the backdrop of personal desire and trauma, García suggests that such devotion, while ideologically rooted, is often as much prompted by personal sufferings as by beliefs.

Celia's communist commitments, particularly her devotion to Fidel Castro, are an expression of her personal loss and unfulfilled desire. Feeling uprooted in her life, a newly widowed Celia finds refuge in political action. "Celia hitchhikes to the Plaza de la Revolución, where El Líder, wearing his customary fatigues, is making a speech. […] Celia makes a decision. Ten years or twenty, whatever she has left, she will devote to El Líder, give herself to his revolution. Now that Jorge is dead, she will volunteer for every project—vaccination campaigns, tutoring, the microbrigades." Now that Celia doesn't have anyone else to live for, in other words, the affections and energies she once poured into her family will now go into Castro and his revolution. This devotion to Castro is further illustrated in the way Celia carries out her revolutionary duties: "Three nights per month, too, Celia continues to protect her stretch of shore from foreign invaders. She still dresses up for these all-night vigils, putting on red lipstick and darkening the mole on her cheek, and imagines that El Líder is watching her, whispering in her ear with his warm cigar breath. She would gladly do anything he asked." Celia's idealism, even romanticism, about Castro shapes the way Celia approaches her duties, as politics becoming blended with personal desire.

The nature of this devotion isn't lost on other family members. Lourdes's daughter Pilar relates, "My mother says that Abuela Celia's had plenty of chances to leave Cuba but that she's stubborn and got her head turned around by El Líder. Mom says 'Communist' the way some people says 'cancer,' low and fierce. She reads the newspaper page by page for leftist conspiracies […] Mom's views are strictly black-and-white. It's how she survives." Interestingly, though, this black-and-white outlook is something Lourdes has in common with her mother, though it's very differently expressed. Lourdes's outlook is not only opposite to her mother's politically, but darker in its origin. This is gradually revealed over the course of the novel. After Lourdes flees Cuba for the United States, she becomes ever more obsessed with her belief in the evils of communism. "Above all, Lourdes and her father continue to denounce the Communist threat to America. Every day they grow more convinced that the dearth of bad news about Cuba is a conspiracy by the leftist media to keep international support for El Líder strong. Why can't the Americans see the Communists in their own backyards, in their universities, bending the malleable minds of the young! The Democrats are to blame[.]" Lourdes does what she can to resist communism from abroad, even if it's largely paranoid and ineffectual, not based in an imminent threat.

Though Lourdes is undoubtedly an obsessive character, sometimes comically so, García does not portray her as a caricature. She provides crucial background into the impetus for Lourdes's hatred of the revolutionary government: " [Her husband] Rufino was in Havana ordering a cow-milking machine when the soldiers returned. They handed Lourdes an official sheet of paper declaring the Puentes' estate the property of the revolutionary government. She tore the deed in half and angrily dismissed the soldiers, but one of them grabbed her by the arm. [...] The other soldier held Lourdes down as his partner took a knife from his holster. Carefully, he sliced Lourdes's riding pants off to her knees and tied them over her mouth. [...] Then he placed the knife flat across her belly and raped her." This traumatic event can't be disconnected from Lourdes's feelings about the Revolutionary government. Though Lourdes's anti-communist political ideology is genuine, it's unavoidably connected to the violation she experienced at the hands of revolutionary soldiers, who acted as if she could be seized, used, and tossed aside as unfeelingly as her land. Ultimately, Lourdes admits this even to herself: "What she fears most is this: that her rape, her baby's death were absorbed quietly by the earth, that they are ultimately no more meaningful than falling leaves on an autumn day. She hungers for a violence of nature, terrible and permanent, to record the evil. Nothing less would satisfy her." In other words, Lourdes longs for resolution surrounding her miscarriage and for justice for the rape. Though she fears that these things are unattainable, she grasps for whatever measures—even obsessive resistance of communism—that can serve as a stand-in.

In a letter to Gustavo, Celia writes, "I asked myself once, 'What is the nature of obsession?' But I no longer question it. I accept it the way I accept my husband and my daughters and my life on the wicker swing, my life of ordinary seductions." Celia means that she no longer asks questions about her obsessions in life; they have become absorbed into her daily existence and her understanding of who she is. Perhaps, García suggests, this is the case with most people's obsessions—they are "ordinary seductions," or things that gradually become inseparable from one's sense of self.

SYMBOLS

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

THE OCEAN

The ocean symbolizes both healing and tragedy in the novel. After Celia's love affair with Gustavo ends, casting her into depression, a Santería practitioner tells her that she envisions "a wet landscape" in Celia's palm, signaling that Celia will survive her grief and go on to live a life by the sea. Indeed, spending years studying the ocean from her porch swing helps heal Celia, as she finds peace in its various blues and a suggestion of freedom in its shifting tides, even as the political landscape around her grows more chaotic. At the same time, it's the ocean that separates Celia from her husband, Jorge, her daughter Lourdes, and her granddaughter Pilar, who are exiles in the United States because of political changes outside of anyone's control. In this way, the ocean functions both as a hopeful symbol of change and a symbol of tragic and immovable fate. At the end of the novel, it functions ambiguously, as Celia wades into the ocean, letting go of her love for Gustavo that has tortured her for so long—but also possibly ending her life. Ultimately, then, the ocean represents the enduring and overpowering nature of tragedy, as even something as beautiful and therapeutic as sea is also a source of pain and an outlet self-destruction for Celia.

SHELLS

Seashells symbolize the unavoidability of fate. Early on in Felicia's life, she's obsessed with collecting seashells. Then, during her childhood, a tidal wave nearly destroys the del Pino home—and after the wave dissipates, the house is full of shells. After this, Celia dreams of a little girl (presumably Felicia) filling her pockets with shells, heedless of the tidal wave that's about to hit. This leads Celia to believe that shells are bad luck, establishing Felicia's natural association with misfortune from an early age. Indeed, Felicia goes on to suffer from mental illness, domestic abuse, and general bad luck in spite of her mother's warnings.

As an adult, a santero (high priest of Santería) uses seashells in a divination ceremony and predicts unavoidable misfortune for Felicia: "water cannot be carried in a basket," he tells her. The use of shells represents the idea that bad luck is following Felicia despite her better efforts, and the *santero*'s reading suggests that Felicia won't be able to hold onto anyone she loves—they will fall away like water in a woven basket. Again, despite this warning, Felicia goes on to suffer more loss and fall deeper into her illness, reaffirming the idea that people's fate is determined early on (as symbolized by Felicia's childhood affinity for seashells) and is unavoidable and unchangeable. Later, when Felicia is dying, Celia stomps on the divination shells that Felicia's friends have brought, as if blaming them for her daughter's ill fortune. The recurrence of shells throughout Felicia's life suggests that she was destined to suffer misfortune and to die before her mother, no matter what she knew ahead of time or what anyone else did to protect her.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the

Ballantine edition of *Dreaming in Cuban* published in 1993.

Going South Quotes

That's it. My mind's made up. I'm going back to Cuba. I'm fed up with everything around here. I take all my money out of the bank, $120, money I earned slaving away at my mother's bakery, and buy a one-way bus ticket to Miami. I figure if I can just get there, I'll be able to make my way to Cuba, maybe rent a boat or get a fisherman to take me. I imagine Abuela Celia's surprise as I sneak up behind her. She'll be sitting in her wicker swing overlooking the sea and she'll smell of salt and violet water. There'll be gulls and crabs along the shore. She'll stroke my cheek with her cool hands, sing quietly in my ear.

Related Characters: Pilar Puente (speaker), Celia del Pino, Lourdes del Pino Puente

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is part of García's introduction of Pilar Puente, granddaughter of matriarch Celia and daughter of Celia's foil, Lourdes. The quote shows how Pilar feels herself to be pulled between her grandmother, who's loyal to the Cuban Revolution, and her mother, who staunchly opposes it—and who also quashes any display of individuality or rebellion on Pilar's part. As a result, when Pilar is 13, she decides to run away to Cuba, imagining that reuniting with her grandmother and restarting her life there will fix everything that's wrong with her life in New York City.

This quote also shows Pilar's childish perspective—of course, getting to Cuba won't be as simple as catching a boat, and rejoining Celia won't instantly resolve Pilar's sense of having a split cultural identity. But the quote effectively shows how Pilar's feeling of exile looms over her life and complicates her sense of self—a problem that will stay with her into adulthood. When Pilar visits Cuba as an adult, there's a callback to this passage when Pilar, sensing that she must return to New York after all, notices that her grandmother does not smell of violet water the way she remembered.

My mother says that Abuela Celia's had plenty of chances to leave Cuba but that she's stubborn and got her head turned around by El Líder. Mom says "Communist" the way some people say "cancer," low and fierce. She reads the newspapers page by page for leftist conspiracies, jams her finger against imagined evidence and says, "See. What did I tell you?" Last year when El Líder jailed a famous Cuban poet, she sneered at "those leftist intellectual hypocrites" for trying to free him. "They created those prisons, so now they should rot in them!" she shouted, not making much sense at all. "They're dangerous subversives, red to the bone!" Mom's views are strictly black-and-white. It's how she survives.

Related Characters: Lourdes del Pino Puente, Pilar Puente (speaker), Rufino Puente, El Líder / Fidel Castro, Celia del Pino

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

This quote shows a number of dynamics operating within and among the women of the del Pino family. For example, this passage is narrated by Pilar, who sees her mother's anti-communist obsession through a sheltered lens. Because she's grown up outside of Cuba, Pilar hasn't experienced any material suffering as a result of the Cuban Revolution, unlike her father Rufino's family, whose lands were seized. Moreover, she doesn't know that her mother Lourdes was sexually assaulted by Revolutionary soldiers—a fact that adds fuel to Lourdes's rage. Not knowing any of this firsthand, Pilar just interprets her mother's political views as being naïve and superficial. A further irony is that, though Pilar dismissively categorizes her mother's views as "black-and-white," her grandmother Celia's pro-Revolutionary views are not much different; she, too, sees the Revolution as bad and any resistance to the Revolution as simply betrayal. The quote as a whole, then, suggests that people's obsessions are often more deeply rooted than they seem to outsiders, and that only individuals themselves can account for what roots and sustains those obsessions.

He used to write her letters every day, when he still had the strength, long letters in an old-fashioned script with flourishes and curlicues. You wouldn't expect him to have such fine handwriting. They were romantic letters, too. He read one out loud to me. He called Abuela Celia his "dove in the desert." Now he can't write to her much. And he's too proud to ask any of us to do it for him. Abuela Celia writes back to him every once in a while, but her letters are full of facts, about this meeting or thar, nothing more. They make my grandfather sad.

Related Characters: Pilar Puente (speaker), Gustavo Sierra de Armas, Jorge del Pino, Celia del Pino

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

In the late 1960s, Jorge del Pino, Pilar's grandfather, moves to New York City to seek treatment for stomach cancer. During the waning days of his illness, he takes to sending his wife, Celia, romantic letters, to which she responds with cold detachment. The letter exchange, in short, illustrates the dynamic of Jorge and Celia's marriage. Before marrying Jorge, Celia fell in love with a married Spanish lawyer named Gustavo and nearly pined to death after he left Cuba. Even after marrying Jorge, Celia continues to write letters to Gustavo but not to send them, rather like keeping a secret diary in which her true passion can be safely recorded. She assures herself that Jorge is at peace with Celia's lack of passion for him, but his deathbed letters suggest otherwise. Their incompatible feelings exemplify García's argument that an abstract passion—like Celia's feelings for the absent Jorge—can wither a tangible relationship over time. This can irreparably harm a marriage like the del Pinos', which might have been a happy one if Celia had been able to give her heart to it.

The House on Palmas Street Quotes

Celia hitchhikes to the Plaza de la Revolución, where El Líder, wearing his customary fatigues, is making a speech. Workers pack the square, cheering his words that echo and collide in midair. Celia makes a decision. Ten years or twenty, whatever she has left, she will devote to El Líder, give herself to his revolution. Now that Jorge is dead, she will volunteer for every project—vaccination campaigns, tutoring, the microbrigades.

Related Characters: Gustavo Sierra de Armas, El Líder / Fidel Castro, Jorge del Pino, Celia del Pino

Related Themes:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

After her husband Jorge dies, Celia finds herself at loose ends, struggling to face her grief head-on or to find an outlet for her romantic passion. Already a committed communist, Celia takes comfort in renewing her loyalty to Fidel Castro, or El Líder, by taking part in various civilian-run community initiatives. For Celia, even though her political convictions are genuine, the Revolution is also a convenient outlet for a lifetime of misdirected passion. Laboring for the Revolution helps her express her suppressed affections for her old lover, Gustavo, and distract herself from her grief over her estranged family members (several of whom are indifferent or hostile to the Revolution). She even has romantic thoughts about Castro and the pleasure of gaining his approval through her efforts on the Revolution's behalf. This quote gives a vivid illustration of one woman's enthusiastic efforts on behalf of the communist Revolution, while also suggesting that the motivations underlying such efforts were often complex, tied up with generational perspectives and personal entanglements.

Celia's Letters: 1935–1940 Quotes

Jorge is a good man, Gustavo. It surprised me how my heart jumped when I heard he'd been hurt. I cried when I saw him bandaged in white, his arms taut in midair like a sea gull. His eyes apologized for having disturbed me. Can you imagine? I discovered I loved him at that moment. Not a passion like ours, Gustavo, but love just the same. I think he understands this and is at peace.

Related Characters: Celia del Pino (speaker), Gustavo Sierra de Armas, Jorge del Pino

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

For 25 years, Celia writes letters that she never sends to her former lover, Gustavo, who disappeared after one of their meetings, presumably returning to his home and marriage in Spain. This quote is an excerpt from one of the earlier batches of letters. It shows how much Gustavo continues to loom over Celia's life and even her marriage to Jorge. It isn't until Jorge suffers a car accident that Celia realizes that she does, in fact, love him. Her surprise at this

suggests that the feeling has lain dormant for a long time, and that if Celia had not been so preoccupied with her feelings for Gustavo, she and Jorge might have enjoyed a happier marriage. This supports García's argument that the indulgence of romantic passion has a selfish aspect, in that it tends to disrupt or obscure the long-term happiness that's possible within a stable marriage. The quote also shows that, from early on in their marriage, Celia tended to misread Jorge. She thinks that Jorge accepts her halfhearted love for him, but later events in the novel suggest that Jorge's feelings are more complicated than that, with deeper pain lurking beneath the surface.

A Grove of Lemons Quotes

But what could I say? That my mother is driving me crazy? That I miss my grandmother and wish I'd never left Cuba? That I want to be a famous artist someday? That a paintbrush is better than a gun so why doesn't everybody just leave me alone? Painting is its own language, I wanted to tell him. Translations just confuse it, dilute it, like words going from Spanish to English. I envy my mother her Spanish curses sometimes. They make my English collapse in a heap.

Related Characters: Pilar Puente (speaker), Celia del Pino, Lourdes del Pino Puente

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is spoken by Pilar Puente, whose chapters are narrated in the first person, unlike those told from the perspective of older generations which are generally narrated in the third person. García employs this technique as if to more deeply explore the complex identity questions faced by young characters like Pilar, who grew up in American exile following the Cuban Revolution. In particular, this quote shows Pilar's struggle to articulate her identity through art. Her mother, Lourdes, is disturbed by the abstract subject matter of Pilar's paintings to the point that she sent Pilar to a psychiatrist. But Pilar doesn't say what she's really thinking to this psychiatrist—that painting is a way of cutting through her complex identity questions and finding a way to express herself. Unlike her mother, Pilar doesn't have fluency in two languages, but she does have painting, which doesn't require translation, and in fact would be watered down by translation. This quote also shows Pilar's persistent, naïve belief that if she could rejoin her grandmother Celia in Cuba, her identity questions would neatly resolve themselves.

Lourdes considers herself lucky. Immigration has redefined her, and she is grateful. Unlike her husband, she welcomes her adopted language, its possibilities for reinvention. Lourdes relishes winter most of all—the cold scraping sounds on sidewalks and windshields, the ritual of scarves and gloves, hats and zip-in coat linings. Its layers protect her. She wants no part of Cuba, no part of its wretched carnival floats creaking with lies, no part of Cuba at all, which Lourdes claims never possessed her.

Related Characters: Rufino Puente, Lourdes del Pino Puente

Related Themes:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Lourdes, the eldest del Pino daughter, reflects on her feelings about being a Cuban immigrant in the United States. She relishes the opportunity for reinvention that moving to the United States has given her, and she especially appreciates the unfamiliar season of winter, which had no parallel in her tropical homeland. Winter's "layers" symbolically protect Lourdes against the types of violations she experienced while living in Cuba—being raped by Revolutionary soldiers and also having her in-laws' lands wrested away. Because Cuba is associated so strongly in Lourdes's mind with the assault she suffered, as well as her husband, Rufino's, family's dispossession from their land, she decides that Cuba itself never truly possessed her. Indeed, it didn't possess her any more than the revolutionary soldiers truly possessed her body, or than the government had any right to the Puente estate. This quote gives insight into the complex role of personal history in shaping one's present identity and the hidden depths that often underlie obsessions, like Lourdes's hatred of Cuba.

The Fire Between Them Quotes

Celia is uneasy about all these potions and spells. Herminia is the daughter of a *santería* priest, and Celia fears that both good and evil may be borne in the same seed. Although Celia dabbles in *santería*'s harmless superstitions, she cannot bring herself to trust the clandestine rites of the African magic.

Related Characters: Herminia Delgado, Felicia del Pino, Celia del Pino

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

Santería is a popular religion in Cuba which combines elements of West African (Yoruban) religion and the island's more dominant Roman Catholicism. The tradition involves elements like consulting with priests to determine one's destiny, devotion to *Orishas* (supernatural figures sometimes combining elements of Yoruban gods and Catholic saints), and animal sacrifice. Celia's daughter, Felicia, practices elements of *Santería*, despite having been raised Catholic; she is influenced by her best friend, Herminia, who was raised in *Santería*. Although some blending of religious traditions is not uncommon in Cuba, and although Celia herself distrusts hierarchical religions like Catholicism, that doesn't mean that Celia feels comfortable with what she sees as "clandestine [...] African magic." Celia doesn't mind participating in so-called "harmless superstitions" like leaving offerings of coins or fruit before making a wish to a sacred tree, but to her, the more complex, mysterious rites of *Santería* are a step too far. Felicia's shifting beliefs and Celia's complicated attitudes about religious traditions exemplify Garcia's point that people's religious allegiances can shift or change shape depending upon the variable circumstances of their lives.

Celia's Letters: 1942–1949 Quotes

I still love you, Gustavo, but it's a habitual love, a wound in the knee that predicts rain. Memory is a skilled seducer. I write to you because I must. I don't even know if you're alive and whom you love now.

I asked myself once, "What is the nature of obsession?" But I no longer question it. I accept it the way I accept my husband and my daughters and my life on the wicker swing, my life of ordinary seductions.

Related Characters: Celia del Pino (speaker), Jorge del Pino, Gustavo Sierra de Armas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from a letter Celia wrote to Gustavo in the decade following their affair. She has continued her monthly correspondence to her ex-lover all this time—though she doesn't actually send the letters, instead concealing them in a box as a hidden diary. By this time, Celia admits, her love for Gustavo is less passionately ardent than it used to be—it's become more like a bodily instinct, something that's always present, even if not always sharply felt. She continues writing to Gustavo out of habit, even though he's become a much more abstract figure whose life Celia actually knows nothing about. This reinforces García's argument that passion usually wanes in a person's life and might even have less staying power than a steady, affectionate marriage. But Celia doesn't explore the "nature of obsession" very deeply, she just accepts it as an aspect of her life alongside its "ordinary seductions." The phrase is ambiguous, but Celia implies that the mainstays of her ordinary life—like Jorge, her daughters, and the wicker swing—are "seductions" that, rather like the "skilled seducer" memory, blur and blunt the sharpness of her youthful obsessions like Gustavo.

If I was born to live on an island, then I'm grateful for one thing: that the tides rearrange the borders. At least I have the illusion of change, of possibility. To be locked within boundaries plotted by priests and politicians would be the only thing more intolerable.

Don't you see how they're carving up the world, Gustavo? How they're stealing our geography? Our fates? The arbitrary is no longer in our hands. To survive is an act of hope.

Related Characters: Celia del Pino (speaker), Gustavo Sierra de Armas

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from another of Celia's letters to Gustavo, written soon after World War II and years of political upheaval in both Cuba and Spain. Celia reflects on the impact of shifting politics on ordinary human lives. Celia spends much of her time studying the ocean while sitting on her porch swing. She remarks to Gustavo that watching the tides lets her believe that she has greater control over her life than she really does. Without that hope, even if it's

illusory, Celia feels that her life is outside of her control, subject to the whims of distant figures with political power. In a somewhat ironic way, Celia's comments unknowingly anticipate the obsessions that will govern her later life—especially her eventual devotion to a political figure, Fidel Castro, after he comes to power in the following decade—as well as the divisive impact of Castro's revolution on Celia's own family. Celia's comments also anticipate similar words spoken by her granddaughter, Pilar, decades later and separated by sharp political boundaries. Already, Celia understands that the only way to cope with such arbitrary divisions is simply to survive.

The Meaning of Shells Quotes

❝ Felicia learned her florid language on those nights. She would borrow freely from the poems she'd heard, stringing words together like laundry on a line, connecting ideas and descriptions she couldn't have planned. The words sounded precisely right when she said them, though often people told her she didn't make any sense at all. Felicia misses those peaceful nights with her mother […] Now they fight constantly, especially about El Líder. How her mother worships him! She keeps a framed photograph of him by her bed where her husband's picture used to be. But to Felicia, El Líder is just a common tyrant. No better, no worse than any other in the world.

Related Characters: El Líder / Fidel Castro, Celia del Pino, Felicia del Pino

Related Themes:

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

Once, Felicia and her mother, Celia, enjoyed a closer relationship. However, time, illness, and outside events have changed that. In this quote, Felicia recalls the nights she spent as a child, sitting beside Celia on her porch swing and listening to her mother recite her favorite poetry. Today, the words of those poems fill Felicia's troubled mind; as she descends deeper into mental illness, she speaks bits of poetry in ways that instinctively make sense to her yet sound incoherent to everyone else. The poetic language, taken from its original context of bonding between Felicia and her mother, now becomes a barrier between her and other people. Another barrier between Felicia and her mother is Celia's allegiance to Fidel Castro. Ironically, Celia cultivated this devotion, in part, because of her estrangement from most of her family members, even replacing her dead husband's photo with Castro's. Celia's obsession with Castro, more public in nature, clashes with Felicia's private obsession—her "florid language"—and the mother and daughter are driven further apart.

❝ Celia del Pino settles on a folding chair behind a card table facing the audience. It is her third year as a civilian judge. Celia is pleased. What she decides makes a difference in others' lives, and she feels part of a great historical unfolding. What would have been expected of her twenty years ago? To sway endlessly on her wicker swing, old before her time? To baby-sit her grandchildren and wait for death? She remembers the gloomy letters she used to write to Gustavo before the revolution, and thinks of how different the letters would be if she were writing today. Since her husband's death, Celia has devoted herself completely to the revolution.

Related Characters: Jorge del Pino, Gustavo Sierra de Armas, Celia del Pino

Related Themes:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

Since Jorge's death, Celia has found renewed passion and purpose in serving Fidel Castro's Revolution. One of her jobs is to judge cases—often domestic disputes—brought before her in the community court. She takes pride in this work, and for her, it's like participating in the Revolution's sweeping social experiment ("a great historical unfolding") on a smaller scale. It's also a big change from when Celia was young, recovering from the emotional collapse she suffered after her lover Gustavo's departure. For years, as a young wife and mother, Celia's life consisted of sitting on the porch swing, disengaged from her family and from the wider world. Now, Celia finds an outlet for her abilities. Ironically, that outlet includes settling other people's family conflicts—something she hasn't been able to achieve in her own family. By tending to other people's marital difficulties, it's as if Celia can make up for her own failure to achieve a happy marriage, or as if acting in a political context (serving the Revolution) is more comfortable for her than a merely domestic one.

Her daughters cannot understand her commitment to El Líder. Lourdes sends her snapshots of pastries from her bakery in Brooklyn. Each [...] strawberry shortcake [is] proof—in butter, cream, and eggs—of Lourdes's success in America, and a reminder of the ongoing shortages in Cuba. [...]

If only Felicia could take an interest in the revolution, Celia believes, it would give her a higher purpose, a chance to participate in something larger than herself. After all, aren't they part of the greatest social experiment in modern history? But her daughter can only wallow in her own discomforts.

Related Characters: Felicia del Pino, Lourdes del Pino Puente, El Líder / Fidel Castro, Celia del Pino

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes how Celia's passion for the Cuban revolution has become a source of conflict between her and her daughters. Between Celia and Lourdes, it's a matter of opposing ideologies. Lourdes has built a successful pastry business in the United States, based on the very capitalism Celia adamantly rejects. Thus, it's easy to believe that the photos Lourdes sends home are meant to be taunting—they show, in the form of "butter, cream, and eggs," how much better things are in America and how Lourdes has begun to build her own wealth. Celia, meanwhile, believes that Cuba's shortages are a necessary step while wealth is being redistributed in the communist nation, but that doesn't mean that Lourdes's plenty wouldn't feel like an affront to her.

Between Celia and Felicia, on the other hand, it's a matter of Felicia's sheer indifference to politics, which Celia interprets as stubbornness. Celia believes that Felicia could find meaning and purpose in her life by channeling her energies toward serving Castro, like Celia does, but instead she remains caught up in her private dramas. Because politics is central to Celia's identity, she looks at her daughters' lives through a political lens, which ends up reducing her ability to relate to them simply as a loving mother.

Enough Attitude Quotes

Last Christmas, Pilar gave her a book of essays on Cuba called *A Revolutionary Society*. The cover showed cheerful, clean-cut children gathered in front of a portrait of Che Guevara. Lourdes was incensed.

"Will you read it?" Pilar asked her.

"I don't have to read it to know what's in it! Lies, poisonous Communist lies!" Che Guevara's face had set a violence quivering within her like a loose wire.

"Suit yourself," Pilar shot back.

Related Characters: Lourdes del Pino Puente, Pilar Puente (speaker), Celia del Pino

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes conflict between Lourdes and Pilar over the subject of Cuban communism. This quote is subtly humorous because it echoes the way that Lourdes provokes her own mother, Celia, by sending home pictures of her very *un*-communist bakery—in this way, the intergenerational conflict continues its cycle. At the same time, however, the quote shows the lack of communication between mother and daughter. Pilar doesn't know, for instance, about the sexual assault committed against her mother by revolutionary soldiers shortly before the family fled Cuba. It's easy to suppose here that the picture of Che Guevara, the Marxist guerilla who participated in the Revolution under Castro's command, might have trigged upsetting memories for Lourdes of being attacked by soldiers. To Pilar, though, Lourdes's incensed reaction is just more evidence of her mother's irrational, black-and-white worldview.

It's important to note, too, that Pilar has no firsthand knowledge of either struggling or thriving under Cuba's communist regime, having been only two years old when her family fled to the United States. So while she sees herself as siding with her pro-communist grandmother against her mother, she is basing her views on other people's experiences and interpretations, not on a personal understanding of Cuban society. That is, her viewpoint isn't inherently more rational than her mother's—it's arguably even less so.

Most days Cuba is kind of dead to me. But every once in a while a wave of longing will hit me and it's all I can do not to hijack a plane to Havana or something. I resent the hell out of the politicians and the generals who force events on us that structure our lives, that dictate the memories we'll have when we're old. Every day Cuba fades a little more inside me, my grandmother fades a little more inside me. And there's only my imagination where our history should be.

Related Characters: Pilar Puente (speaker), Gustavo Sierra de Armas, Celia del Pino

Related Themes:

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

As a young adult, Pilar rarely feels the childhood longing for Cuba that compelled her to run away to Miami at age 13. She blames this on the political and military leaders who create the conditions that govern the lives of those who lack power. She sees the events of the Cuban Revolution and her family's subsequent exile as events that were imposed by external forces, events in which people like Pilar and her grandmother Celia have no say. Because of the geographic and political distance, Pilar is disconnected from her Cuban roots and from her once-vivid bond with her grandmother. Therefore, her relationship with her grandmother consists mostly of imagination, not of genuine, tangible history. Pilar's thoughts echo Celia's remarks to Gustavo as a young woman before the Revolution, commenting that their fates lay in the hands of those with the power to draw borders. Now, even though they live on opposite sides of the divide, both women's experiences illustrate how personal identity is often bound up with external historical forces that are outside their control.

A lumpish man charges Liberty with a pocketknife, repeating his words like a war cry. Before anyone can react, Mom swings her new handbag and clubs the guy cold inches from the painting. Then, as if in slow motion, she tumbles forward, a thrashing avalanche of patriotism and motherhood, crushing three spectators and a table of apple tartlets.

And I, I love my mother very much at that moment.

Related Characters: Pilar Puente (speaker), Lourdes del Pino Puente

Related Themes:

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

For the grand opening of Lourdes's second bakery, Lourdes commissions Pilar to paint a Statue of Liberty mural. Pilar feels unable to portray her subject "straight" and instead renders a "punk" version of Lady Liberty, complete with a safety pin through her nose and the words "I'm a mess" added below. It's intentionally provocative, sure to antagonize her patriotic mother. Yet Lourdes's reaction is different from what might be expected. When a customer charges the painting yelling that it's garbage, Lourdes defends the painting, and her daughter, without a second thought, knocking him flat.

The portrayal of Lourdes as "a thrashing avalanche of patriotism and motherhood" is one of the most humorous scenes in the novel, but it also gives Lourdes's character the opportunity to be something more than a caricature. Up to this point, readers would have expected the outspokenly pro-American Lourdes to greet the painting's unveiling with outrage, but instead, her first instinct is to protect her daughter. This shows that Lourdes is actually *less* tribal in her political views than her own mother is—and Pilar's loving response, in keeping with Jorge's prediction about the two of them, suggests that there's hope for their combative mother-daughter relationship.

Baskets of Water Quotes

Could her son, Celia wonders, have inherited her habit of ruinous passion? Or is passion indiscriminate, incubating haphazardly like a cancer?

Celia hopes that the sea, with its sustaining rhythms and breezes from distant lands, will ease her son's heart as it once did hers. Late at night, she rocks on her wicker swing as Javier sleeps, and wonders why it is so difficult to be happy.

Of her three children, Celia sympathizes most with her son.

Related Characters: Javier del Pino, Celia del Pino

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes the return of Celia's youngest child, her son Javier, from Czechoslovakia. He is in bad shape:

abandoned by his wife and daughter, stricken with cancer, and alcohol-dependent. Celia must care for him as if he is a little boy again. Overall, Javier plays a very small role in the novel because of García's desire to emphasize the experiences of women. It's interesting, then, that Javier's sudden and brief reappearance prompts such reflections for Celia. Though Celia claims to identify with Javier the most out of all her children, each of her children could be described as suffering from "ruinous passion" in some way—Felicia perhaps most of all. Ultimately, this points to the fact that Celia never really defines what passion means to her. From Javier's experience and her own, passion appears to be a ruinous longing for something that saps one's ability to love what's right in front of them, diminishing one's capacity to find lasting happiness.

❝ Simón Córdoba, a boy of fifteen, has written a number of short stories considered to be antirevolutionary. His characters escape from Cuba on rafts of sticks and tires, refuse to harvest grapefruit, dream of singing in a rock and roll band in California. […]

Celia suggests to the boy that he put down his pen for six months and work as an apprentice with the Escambray Theater, which educates peasants in the countryside. "I don't want to discourage your creativity, Simón," Celia tells the boy gently. "I just want to reorient it toward the revolution." After all, she thinks, artists have a vital role to play, no? Perhaps later, when the system has matured, more liberal policies may be permitted.

Related Characters: Celia del Pino (speaker), Javier del Pino

Related Themes:

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

While caring for Javier, Celia has to give up her job as a civilian judge. Her final case, however, exemplifies her motivations as a volunteer for the Cuban Revolution. The young defendant, Simón, writes about fleeing Cuba, resisting Revolutionary activities, and embracing an American lifestyle—all things Celia stands against. The gentleness of her response underscores her sincerity about the communist cause—she tries to redirect the young boy's talents toward the revolution, encouraging the less educated to get on board with its policies. Celia figures that once the Revolution has made more progress, there might be room for dissenters like Simón, but right now, Cuba can't afford to give such self-expression free reign. This anticipates the response Celia will later give to her artist granddaughter, Pilar. For Pilar, this attitude equates to squashing dissent (and ultimately helps her decide that she can't stay in Cuba). But for Celia, it's simply the natural outworking of the Revolution, something that serves the good of Cuba's citizens by allowing the Revolution to progress unimpeded.

A Matrix Light Quotes

❝ My mother told me that Abuela Celia was an atheist before I even understood what the word meant. I liked the sound of it, the derision with which my mother pronounced it, and knew immediately it was what I wanted to become. I don't know exactly when I stopped believing in God. It wasn't as deliberate as deciding at age six to become an atheist, but more like an imperceptible sloughing of layers. One day I noticed there was no more skin to absently peel, just air where there'd been artifice.

Related Characters: Pilar Puente (speaker), Lourdes del Pino Puente, Celia del Pino

Related Themes:

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes Pilar's attitudes about religion. Pilar was raised nominally Catholic, but she never has much faith in the religion that's passed down to her, even as a small child. When she hears her mother, Lourdes, describe Pilar's grandmother Celia as an atheist, Pilar decides she wants to be associated with that, even though she doesn't know what it means—more because she wants to associate with her grandmother than because she truly doesn't believe in God. Once she makes that decision, she gradually finds that any pretense of formal religious commitment fades away.

Significantly, though, Pilar's atheism becomes a precursor to renewed religious faith and how this compares to Celia's very different experience. Despite not growing up around traditional Cuban practices, Pilar sometimes dreams about practicing *Santería*, and she later wanders into a religious shop (*botánica*) and feels naturally drawn to what she finds there; later, she learns her destiny to become an initiate. Celia, by contrast, dabbles in superficial customs of *Santería*, like leaving offerings to a special tree and making a wish, but she harbors mistrust and distaste for the religion itself, regarding its rites as mysterious, African, and not to be trusted—perhaps even evil. In this way, Pilar's perceived

allegiance with her grandmother is actually the basis for yet another generational conflict. Ultimately, Pilar must discover her own version of spirituality rather than trying to align herself with anyone else's beliefs.

God's Will Quotes

❝ At night, Felicia attended our ceremonies. She didn't miss a single one. For her, they were a kind of poetry that connected her to larger worlds, worlds alive and infinite. […]

Felicia's mother discouraged her devotion to the gods. Celia had only vague notions about spiritual possession and animal sacrifice, and suspected that our rites had caused her daughter's mysterious disappearance. Celia revered El Líder and wanted Felicia to give herself entirely to the revolution, believing that this alone would save her daughter. But Felicia would not be dissuaded from the *orishas*. She had a true vocation to the supernatural.

Related Characters: Herminia Delgado (speaker), El Líder / Fidel Castro, Celia del Pino, Felicia del Pino

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

After Felicia loses two husbands in quick succession and disappears for a while, she throws herself into *Santería* wholeheartedly, after reluctantly dabbling in her best friend's religion when she was younger. Recalling Felicia's childhood love of her mother's poetry, it's striking that Felicia's renewed religious devotion is something she classifies as "poetry"—it's as if Santeria helps her make sense of the world in a way that more mundane systems of meaning (like her mother's beloved politics) cannot. Celia, for her part, seems to have an innate prejudice against *Santería*. According to Herminia, Celia doesn't really understand the religion's deeper teachings and scapegoats it for Felicia's disappearance and the subsequent decline in her health. Herminia thinks this is because Celia doesn't have much inclination toward the supernatural to begin with. For Celia, Castro and his Revolution are all the religion she needs; Felicia, by contrast, needs contact with the gods.

❝ Celia overturned the tureen with the sacred stones and crushed Felicia's seashells under the heels of her leather pumps. Suddenly, she removed her shoes and began stamping on the shells in her bare feet, slowly at first, then faster and faster in a mad flamenco, her arms thrown up in the air.

Then just as suddenly she stopped. She made no sound as she wept, as she bent to kiss Felicia's eyes, her forehead, her swollen, hairless skull. Celia lay with her torn, bleeding feet beside her daughter and held her, rocking and rocking her in the blue gypsy dusk until she died.

Related Characters: Herminia Delgado (speaker), Celia del Pino, Felicia del Pino

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

After the deaths of her second and third husbands and then taking up the practice of *Santería* in earnest, Felicia undergoes an unexplained decline. Many of her fellow initiates cast spells, prescribe healing potions, and try to save Felicia, but to no avail. At the very end of Felicia's life, Celia shows up at her house and kicks out Felicia's friends in a fury, even smashing the shells that had been used in divination spells. Celia had always had an instinctive mistrust of shells and the "bad luck" they brought, not even letting Felicia bring them into the house. Now, her cathartic destruction of the shells is like a symbolic destruction of *Santería*, too, and the harmful influence Celia believes it's had on her daughter's life. It's also as if Celia wants to share something of her daughter's pain, able to do nothing else but bleed and weep alongside her as Felicia's lifetime of poor fortune finally runs its course.

Daughters of Changó Quotes

❝ After we were married, I left her with my mother and my sister. I knew what it would do to her. A part of me wanted to punish her. For the Spaniard. I tried to kill her, Lourdes. I wanted to kill her. I left on a long trip after you were born. I wanted to break her, may God forgive me. When I returned, it was done. She held you out to me by one leg and told me she would not remember your name.

Related Characters: Jorge del Pino (speaker), Gustavo Sierra de Armas, Celia del Pino, Lourdes del Pino Puente

Related Themes:

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

For years, Jorge's ghost speaks to Lourdes in private, encouraging her in her business, in her anti-communist activism, and in her family life. He senses that he's soon fading into oblivion, however, and before that happens, he wants to clear up some matters of family history with Lourdes. Jorge explains that after he and Celia got married, he was angry with her for still loving Gustavo, with whom she'd had an affair before their engagement. So he decided to try to break her spirit by leaving her with his vindictive mother and sister, who resented her presence in the family and would do everything in their power to degrade Celia. He explains all this by way of assuring Lourdes that, despite her words to the contrary, Celia really did love Lourdes. If it hadn't been for Jorge's desire to punish Celia, then perhaps her bond with her daughter would not have been so tragically disrupted. While Jorge's role is almost an afterthought—Garcia focuses much more on the relationships among the del Pino women—it shows that Jorge's pain was much deeper than Celia gave it credit for, a fact to which she seemed fairly oblivious.

❝ I envy this woman's passion, her determination to get what she knows is hers. I felt that way once, when I ran away to Miami. But I never made it to Cuba to see Abuela Celia. After that, I felt like my destiny was not my own, that men who had nothing to do with me had the power to rupture my dreams, to separate me from my grandmother.

Related Characters: Pilar Puente (speaker), Celia del Pino

Related Themes:

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

As a young woman, Pilar has been feeling passionless and at loose ends. Art school and various relationships have not worked out for her. Even though Pilar has never felt much of a pull toward religion, one day she wanders into a *botánica*, a *Santería* shop, and watches a young woman there purchase supplies for a love potion. Pilar admires the fact that the stranger knows exactly what she wants—she hasn't felt that way since her thwarted attempt to travel to Cuba as a kid. Visiting the shop turns out to be a turning point for Pilar because the shop owner sends her home with ingredients for a sacred bath, after which she will know what her next steps in life should be. After years of feeling she's at the mercy of external forces, Pilar takes steps to reclaim what she feels is her destiny. It's also a turning point toward becoming an initiate in *Santería*, which, for Pilar, is another way of claiming her own path.

Six Days in April Quotes

❝ I wonder how different my life would have been if I'd stayed with my grandmother. I think about how I'm probably the only ex-punk on the island, how no one else has their ears pierced in three places. [...] I ask Abuela if I can paint whatever I want in Cuba and she says yes, as long as I don't attack the state. Cuba is still developing, she tells me, and can't afford the luxury of dissent. Then she quotes me something El Líder said in the early years, before they started arresting poets. "Within the revolution, everything; against the revolution, nothing." I wonder what El Líder would think of my paintings. Art, I'd tell him, is the ultimate revolution.

Related Characters: Pilar Puente (speaker), El Líder / Fidel Castro, Celia del Pino

Related Themes:

Page Number: 235

Explanation and Analysis

This quote represents another turning point for Pilar, as she realizes that she could not have become the same person she is now if she'd grown up in Cuba, and she probably cannot thrive there now. The biggest reason is that, according to Celia, anti-Revolutionary art is not permissible (in fact, Celia herself has sentenced young artists to perform pro-Revolutionary services, as she does with a teenaged writer earlier in the book). Celia accepts this as a matter of course—the Revolution is, as Castro put it, an effort that encompasses all of life, and until it makes a certain amount of progress, there isn't room for anything which dissents from it. In Pilar's view, however, artistic expression is one of the most major parts of who she is, meaning that she couldn't exist in Cuba in the same way as she does in the United States. Pilar has always dreamed of finding her place in the world when she visited her grandmother. This turns out to be true; it just turns out that her home—New York, not Cuba—is different from what she thought.

> I've started dreaming in Spanish, which has never happened before. I wake up feeling different, like something inside me is changing, something chemical and irreversible. There's a magic here working its way through my veins. […] I'm afraid to lose all this, to lose Abuela Celia again. But sooner or later I'd have to return to New York. I know now it's where I belong—not *instead* of here, but *more* than here. How can I tell my grandmother this?

Related Characters: Pilar Puente (speaker), Celia del Pino

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 236

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the book, Pilar has always imagined that if she could just get to her grandmother Celia in Cuba, her path in life, her identity, and her home would all become clear to her. When she finally makes it to Cuba, she does find what she's been seeking, but it's less clear-cut than she had always imagined. In Cuba, she finds aspects of her identity that were unknown to her in the United States—something "chemical and irreversible," a sort of "magic." Yet, even though something very real and unchangeable is happening to Pilar in Cuba, making her realize how Cuban she really is, it's not enough to hold her there—she is primarily a New Yorker after all. Yet Pilar brings out the complication inherent to personal identity when she explains that she doesn't set the two places in opposition to one another; identity isn't a zero-sum concept. Rather, her identity is multilayered, with each part becoming enriched by rather than diminished by the others.

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.

OCEAN BLUE

It's 1972, and Celia del Pino is guarding Cuba's northern coast. She does so while wearing her best housedress and pearl earrings, sitting on her wicker porch swing. She scans the sky and **ocean** with binoculars. Celia was voted by her neighborhood committee to serve as the lookout for her town of Santa Teresa del Mar, a big honor.

The image of Celia serving as a lookout for her town while dressed up in her best outfit is peculiar, as it's not yet clear who she is or why she was chosen for this role. Her willingness to do so at the very least suggests that Celia's devotion to Cuba is deeply important to her.

Celia listens to a radio broadcast which replays an encouraging message from El Líder, praising the people for defending Cuba against aggressors 11 years ago. She then touches up her red lipstick and darkens the mole on her cheek using an eyebrow pencil. Her sleepy-eyed grandson, Ivanito, appears in the doorway, and Celia tucks him back into bed. After she resumes her post and looks through her binoculars once more, she sees a radiant light in the distance.

Fidel Castro—referred to throughout as El Líder, *or "the leader"—appears as the first man in Celia's life in the novel, which sets Castro up as figure who's perhaps even more significant to Celia than any husband or family she may have. The reference to 11 years ago is to the Bay of Pigs, a failed 1961 attempt by Cuban exiles (backed by the United States) to invade Cuba and thwart Castro's revolution. The fact that Celia still takes encouragement from this decade-old message from Castro—even touching up her make up in response-- suggests that her devotion to him borders on obsession, and that her own identity is tied to Cuba's past.*

Out of this light emerges Celia's husband, Jorge. He is taller than the palm trees and walking on the water, wearing a white suit and Panama hat. He smiles at Celia, and his eyes emit blue beams that illuminate the beach. He moves his mouth as if speaking, but Celia can't tell what he's saying—she can only feel the warm wind of his breath. Then, Jorge disappears. Celia paces the beach, calling, "Jorge, I couldn't hear you."

Jorge's bizarre appearance as a kind of supernatural being is the first element of magical realism in the novel. Celia appears to take his unexplained, larger-than-life appearance for granted, not something to be disbelieved. It's unclear what his ghostly presence signifies at this point, but Celia's inability to hear him speak perhaps suggests a kind of symbolic disconnect in communication between the couple.

A letter had arrived from Jorge that morning. Celia reads it again, surprised by the passion of the words. The handwriting is ornately old-fashioned. She thinks that when Jorge wrote the letter, he must have known he was going to die. She remembers when he was wheeled onto an airplane to New York years ago, ranting about Cuba. Celia grieves "not for his death [...] but for his mixed-up allegiances."

Celia's surprise at Jorge's passion suggests that there have been difficulties in their marriage. Now, Jorge's ghostly appearance confirms to Celia that her husband has died, and it's his "mixed-up allegiances," presumably his anti-Cuban stance, that grieve her the most.

Before the revolution, Jorge worked as an electric broom and portable fan salesman for an American company; he traveled five weeks out of six. He wanted to be a "model Cuban," wearing his suit even on the hottest days of the year. Celia isn't sure whether separation or death is worse. She's used to separation, but not to its permanence.

Celia and Jorge have endured the strain of separation in their marriage before, but Jorge's stints away from home were never permanent. The fact that Celia isn't sure whether separation or death is worse implies that Jorge's absence impacted her greatly while he was alive, to the point that his death might even be preferable to her. On another note, Jorge's desire to be a "model Cuban" during his life suggests that he wasn't always "mixed-up" in his allegiances—he was seemingly devoted to Cuba prior to the revolution.

Celia marvels that if El Líder had signed with a Major League baseball team, as nearly happened, then her life might have been completely different. But because El Líder returned to Cuba and started a revolution instead, Celia and her husband will be buried in separate countries, and their offspring are "nomads."

Fidel Castro's pitching prowess is largely myth—Castro was never scouted by Major League Baseball—but it's a piece of propaganda which Celia devoutly believes. In her mind, Castro's turn to politics instead of baseball changed her life by transforming her political identity and driving her and her family apart due to divergent alliances.

Celia sometimes receives letters from her granddaughter, Pilar, written in awkward Spanish. She knows Pilar is an abstract painter and that she hides a diary in her coat lining. Celia approves of the secret diary. She sometimes speaks to Pilar in the night, and she does so now.

Celia and Pilar have a special bond across generations—and apparently across vast distance. Celia's ability to speak to her granddaughter across the distance is another bit of magical realism that's never fully explained but left for the reader to wonder about.

Presently, Celia wades into the **ocean**. She remembers something a santera told her 40 years ago: "there's a wet landscape in your palm." This turned out to be true. Celia has lived by the ocean for so long that she knows all its shades of blue.

A santera *is an initiate of* Santería, *an Afro-Cuban religion which plays a prominent role in the novel. Celia isn't a practitioner, but she dabbles in aspects of the religion throughout her life. It seems that the* santera*'s accurate prediction—that her life would revolve around an ocean landscape—contributed to Celia's respect for* Santería.

Celia and Jorge moved into the house by the sea in 1937. Jorge bought her an upright piano and stocked it with sheet music—everything but Debussy, whose "restless" style the doctors warn him against. But Celia just hides her Debussy music and plays it nonstop while Jorge is traveling. Celia recalls that music now as she floats in the **ocean**. It reminds her of meeting with her Spanish lover, before Jorge.

In the novel, characters often shift across timelines without warning as they reflect on events from their pasts. Here, it's hinted that Celia suffered psychological difficulties when she was younger, and that these were in some way connected with her old lover. Given the implied conflict that she and Jorge had during their marriage, it's also possible that Celia's feelings for this Spanish lover exacerbated their marital problems when Jorge was alive.

Weighted down in the water, Celia considers just dropping below the surface, but instead she swims back to shore. She pulls Jorge's letter out of her pocket to dry, and she waits for morning.

In light of Jorge's death, Celia seems to momentarily consider whether her life is still worth living. She apparently decides that it is, though she still grieves his loss.

Felicia del Pino. Early the next morning, Felicia pulls up to Celia's house in her 1952 De Soto, honking the horn. Screaming for her mother, she flings herself awkwardly out of the car and onto the porch. Celia is rocking on the swing. "I know already," she tells Felicia, who weeps on her mother's lap. Celia explains that Jorge said goodbye to her last night. Felicia is upset that she and her children didn't get a goodbye, too.

Felicia's frantic arrival sets the tone for her unpredictable character, which contrasts with her mother's calmer exterior. She seems to take the possibility of ghostly visits for granted, not to assume that her mother referred to a literal visit, which suggests that Felicia, too, is open to the supernatural. However, her distress suggests that she thinks Jorge cared more about her mother than about her.

Celia changes the subject, asking about Felicia's sister's message. Felicia says that, according to Lourdes, the nuns claimed that Jorge ascended to heaven "on tongues of fire." As Felicia hugs her son, Ivanito, she finally notices that Celia is damp and covered with seaweed. With annoyance, Celia explains that she went for a swim with her clothes on. She instructs Felicia to send a telegram to Felicia's brother, Javier, who lives in Prague with a Czech wife and baby daughter. Celia hasn't heard from him since the Soviets stormed Prague four years ago.

Felicia heard about Jorge's death from her sister, Lourdes, who seems to have been in closer contact with Jorge than the rest of the family. The presence of the nuns at Jorge's death, and their view of his apparent holiness, indicates that the family has diverse religious views—so far, both Roman Catholic and Santería. *Meanwhile, the other sibling in the family, Javier, lives on yet another continent. A picture emerges of a far-flung family that's been dealing with estrangement for some time.*


Felicia gets into her car. The steam rising off the roof of her green car reminds her of the tidal wave in 1944, when Felicia was six. Felicia had picked up a beautiful **shell** on the beach, but Celia, hastily packing their valuables in a suitcase, scolded her for bringing bad luck into the house. Seventy homes were washed away by the tidal wave, though the del Pinos' brick and cement house was merely flooded. When the family returned, the house was filled with shells.

Throughout the story, shells are associated with Felicia's poor fortunes, though Felicia herself is somewhat obsessed with them. In the form of a childhood memory, the symbolism of shells comes into her mind as she absorbs the news of her father's death, suggesting that Jorge's death will be a turning point toward misfortune in her adult life, much like the tidal wave was an ominous turning point in her childhood.

Felicia's daydream is interrupted when her best friend, Herminia Delgado, knocks on her car window. Felicia tells Herminia about her father's death and his ghost's appearance. Herminia points out that Jorge's spirit might be floating around, and she suggests that Felicia consult with La Madrina. Felicia is reluctant because she doesn't like the blood, but Herminia warns her that if she doesn't cleanse her soul, she'll be tormented for life. Felicia agrees, as long as there are no goats involved.

It's not yet clear who La Madrina is or exactly what a consultation with her would entail, but it obviously involves more complex and bloody rituals than the simple palm reading that Celia underwent in her youth. Although Felicia is squeamish about some of these practices, she believes in their healing potential—and she believes they're able to bring about some unnamed but necessary healing between her and her father.


That night, Felicia drives to a remote, run-down house. Herminia scolds her for being late and possibly making the gods angry. Inside the house, La Madrina, dressed in a white turban and layered skirts, welcomes them into a room filled with candles and incense. Shrines of various gods crowd the room. The god Elleguá inhabits eggs with cowrie-**shell** faces. Four "mulatta" women are praying before the shrines, and a Yoruban man stands quietly. La Madrina explains that this man has traveled many hours to help Felicia and her father find peace.

Elleguá is a deity of Santería *who presides over its rituals. He is also said to be the owner of roads and pathways, suggesting that rituals like this one help determine a person's next steps in life. The rituals, combining elements of West African and Roman Catholic practice, are elaborate and involve vivid sensory elements.*

Felicia is distressed when the man, a santero, announces that Elleguá desires a goat. Herminia tells her she has no choice if she wants the job done right. When the goat is brought in, Felicia has to spit coconut in the animal's face and kiss and fondle it while the women sing. The *santero* quickly butchers the goat, letting its blood flow onto Elleguá's eggs, then adds salt and honey to the offering. Overcome by the smells and the atmosphere, Felicia faints.

Just as she'd feared, Felicia finds the animal sacrifice overwhelming. Though she's more open to the practices of Santeria *than Celia is, Felicia isn't yet completely comfortable with what it demands of its practitioners. Right now, it's unclear what effect, if any, the ritual has on Felicia's healing or her relationship with her father.*

GOING SOUTH

Lourdes wakes up at four a.m. beside her exhausted husband, Rufino. She puts on her large white uniform and rubber-soled shoes. She likes the feeling of authority her uniform gives her, and she thinks that her lazy eye, which slightly skews her vision, enables her to see what others don't.

The shift from Felicia's dramatic Santería *ceremony to the much more ordinary routines of her older sister, Lourdes, is striking, suggesting that Lourdes lives a more mundane, less passionate life than her sister. But Lourdes, too, has her own unique way of viewing the world, though it's not yet clear from what perspective she sees it.*

Lourdes leaves a note demanding her daughter's help at the bakery after school, and then she walks to the bakery in Brooklyn's early morning dark. She loves the order and the calming aromas of her bakery, which she purchased five years ago, deciding that working with bread would not be a sorrowful task.

Lourdes has unnamed sorrows in her past which have followed her from Cuba to the United States, though it's not yet clear what brought her to the U.S. or how her past experiences have shaped her career choices.


Lourdes unpacks and organizes the day's cakes and pastries, reserving some sticky buns for herself. As she's brewing coffee, Sister Federica from the hospital calls. Sister Federica tells Lourdes that "Your father is a saint." She describes finding Jorge fully dressed, his head and hands aglow. He had thanked Sister Federica for her kindness, put on his hat, and passed through the window without saying where he was going.

Jorge's appearance to the nurse when he died, like his appearance to Celia in Cuba, is a recurrent magical realist element in the story. It also has Catholic overtones, as the nurse sees his unusual death as evidence of his sainthood. The fact that Lourdes is in contact with Sister Federica suggests that Lourdes (and likely Jorge) are Catholic, in contrast with Felicia's Santería *beliefs.*

After this call, Lourdes spends a flustered, distracted morning trying to deal with customers. When she gets a reprieve, she sits down with her sticky buns and thinks about how much her appetite for both sweets and sex had increased after Jorge's arrival in New York. Lourdes had been a skinny child, but in the last few years, she has gained over 100 pounds. She rigged up a bell in her husband's workshop so that she could demand sex from him at any time, even though it wore him out. She is "reaching through Rufino for something he could not give her," but she doesn't know what it is.

Whereas Felicia has been dealing with her past by turning to the supernatural, Lourdes deals with hers by very earthly means, like food and sex—and she's aware, on some level, that she's not succeeding in healing her wounds through these outlets—instead, she's reaching through her husband, Rufino, for an unidentified "something" she knows he can't give her.

After Lourdes closes her shop, she goes to the Sisters of Charity hospital to see Jorge's body. She remembers her father's impeccable hygiene and his misery in the hospital, until Lourdes emptied her savings so that he could be privately attended by the doting Sister Federica, who carefully shaved Jorge twice a day. She figures he would have been happy about dying clean-shaven.

Lourdes was clearly devoted to her father, to the point that she was willing to sacrifice her savings to cater to his obsession with staying clean-shaven.

Lourdes's daughter Pilar doesn't come home that night. Lourdes bakes and eats sticky buns while calling the police and hospitals. She yells at Rufino and envisions horrible fates for Pilar. Finally, she covers herself with Pilar's turpentine-scented painting overalls and lies on her daughter's bed.

The fact that Pilar doesn't come home implies that there's conflict between her and Lourdes. However, Lourdes clearly loves Pilar and even identifies herself with her daughter on some level, as she drapes Pilar's clothing over herself to comfort her when her daughter disappears.

Pilar was born 11 days after El Líder's triumphal arrival in Havana. None of her nursemaids lasted very long, all claiming that Pilar was bewitched. At dawn, Lourdes walks across the Brooklyn Bridge, headed south. She thinks about the sad family memories associated with Cuba. In 1936, Celia was in an asylum. Lourdes had ridden all over the island, accompanying Jorge in his big, black car.

Pilar's life is closely connected to the triumph of El Líder (Fidel Castro) and the trajectory of his revolution; she grows up under the shadow of Cuban culture and spirituality. Unnamed hints of that spirituality seem to cling to her, startling superstitious nannies. Lourdes's life also seems to be marked by associations with Cuba, most of them sorrowful—ones she would sooner forget.

Pilar Puente. Thirteen-year-old Pilar is trying on garters and bras in a department store when she overhears her father, Rufino's, voice. She looks out and sees him laughing with a large blond woman. Pilar follows them down the street and, when she sees the two kissing, makes up her mind that she's going back to Cuba. She withdraws her savings from the bank and buys a one-way bus ticket to Miami. Pilar figures that if she can get that far, she'll catch a boat to Cuba.

Things clearly aren't going well in Lourdes's and Rufino's marriage. Seeing this, Pilar—whose after-school wanderings suggest that she's headstrong and independent—makes the decision to flee to Cuba to get away from the family conflict. Though she's precocious, her naïve plan to simply catch a boat is a reminder of her childish inexperience.

Pilar remembers everything that's happened to her since she was a baby. She remembers sitting in her Abuela Celia's lap when Lourdes announced that they were leaving Cuba. Celia called Lourdes a traitor to the revolution, while Pilar clung to Celia and screamed. Jorge intervened, telling Celia to let go of Pilar. That was the last time Pilar saw her grandmother.

Pilar has a unique ability to remember everything about her life, though she doesn't have an adult ability to interpret it. Even as a baby, she had an instinctive bond with her grandmother Celia instead of with her mother, Lourdes (a bond that Celia and Lourdes don't share, either). Celia seemingly views Lourdes's decision to leave in political terms first and foremost, a reflection of how she'll view her daughters through the lens of her own obsessions throughout their lives.

Lourdes has always said that Celia could leave Cuba if she wanted, but that she's too obsessed with El Líder. Lourdes hates communism and sees leftist conspiracies everywhere she looks. Pilar thinks that Lourdes survives by viewing the world in black and white. Pilar knows that Lourdes reads her diary—that's how Lourdes found out that Pilar was masturbating in the tub. For that, she beat Pilar and forced her to start working in the bakery.

In contrast to Celia, Lourdes hates the revolution and what it stands for—a mirror image of her mother's obsession. Pilar thinks this is just a reflection of her mother's black-and-white worldview. Indeed, without much background about Lourdes at this point in the story, Lourdes's interactions with the world (including her daughter) make her seem like a bit of a caricature.

On the bus ride, Pilar sits next to a woman from Richmond named Minnie French. Pilar tells Minnie about her memories of riding horses on Rufino's huge ranch in Cuba. She remembers her father telling her stories about Cuba's early history. It makes her wonder why history books only record stories of men who fought. Who decides what's worth knowing? Pilar decides she needs to figure that out for herself.

From a young age, Pilar questions the way others interpret the world around her and doesn't passively submit to the interpretations of her elders. She feels the need to make sense of history, and its implications for her life, on her own instead of having it dictated to her by authority figures.

Pilar has learned a lot of important things from her grandmother Celia. Sometimes, Pilar hears Celia speaking to her before she falls asleep at night, telling stories of her life. She also encourages Pilar in her art. Lourdes, however, thinks Pilar's abstract art is morbid and forbids her from attending a prestigious art school—but Rufino persuades her to change her mind. He also builds Pilar a painting studio in the back of the big warehouse in which they live.

Pilar and Celia communicate in an unspecified way in their minds, another magical realist element of the book that is never fully explained but that underscores the strong intergenerational bond between them. Lourdes, on the other hand, disapproves of Pilar's preferred mode of self-expression.

Minnie French, who's 17, explains to Pilar that she's traveling to Florida to get an abortion. Pilar holds Minnie's hand until Minnie falls asleep. She can't stop picturing Rufino with his blond lover. Pilar knows her parents aren't getting along, partly because her dad doesn't like the way Lourdes runs her business. Lourdes tends to hire down-and-out immigrants for cheap wages, then fire them for alleged stealing.

Though young, Pilar is sensitive to the struggles of others and aware of the dynamics that create conflict between people. She sympathizes with Minnie's plight and identifies the points of contention in her parents' marriage.

Pilar saw her grandfather Jorge when he came to New York for stomach cancer treatments. He slept in Pilar's bed, and she slept in a cot beside him. Sometimes he'd fight a "good-for-nothing Spaniard" in his dreams. Jorge complimented Pilar that she reminded him of Celia. For a while, he wrote Celia romantic letters every day. When Celia wrote back, her letters only contained facts about her daily life.

Jorge apparently had stronger feelings about Celia and her former lover than Celia might have guessed, as his disparagement of the "Spaniard" suggests. Celia's mundane letters don't match Jorge's passionate ones, hinting at the ongoing disparity in their feelings.

Minnie gets off the bus at Jacksonville; no one meets her there. Pilar falls asleep after that, dreaming of people surrounding her on a beach, praying. In the dream, she's wearing a white dress and turban and sitting on a throne. The people march toward the **ocean**, carrying Pilar's throne. Pilar doesn't understand their language, but she isn't afraid. She can see Celia's face.

Like other female characters' dreams in the story, Pilar's dream hints at a destiny—in her case, a specifically spiritual one—that will only make sense to her many years later, involving her religion and her relationship to Cuba. Even though the dream doesn't make sense to her now, its association with her beloved grandmother, Celia, causes her to trust it.

THE HOUSE ON PALMAS STREET

On a rainy day, Celia picks up her twin granddaughters, Luz and Milagro, from a field trip to the Isle of Pines. She feels as if she's always been waiting for someone—it started in 1934, before she married Jorge. She was called Celia Almeida back then. She worked in a prestigious Havana department store called El Encanto, selling American cameras. One day, Gustavo Sierra de Armas, a married lawyer from Spain, wanted to buy a Kodak. After that, he kept returning to Celia's counter, bringing her gifts such as drop pearl earrings.

The story shifts from the present back to Celia's earlier history, as she recalls her relationship with her first lover, Gustavo. The fact that Celia still feels like she's waiting for someone so many years later suggests that she'd had a lifelong obsession with Gustavo which likely impacted her marriage to Jorge.

After Gustavo returned to Spain, Celia was heartbroken. She bought potions at the botánicas and then took to her bed for eight months, weakening and appearing to shrink. Neighbors brought advice and food. Finally, her great-aunt Alicia brought in a santera, who saw the "wet landscape" in Celia's palm and promised that Celia would survive.

Celia's obsession with Gustavo is so strong that his departure completely devastates her. Celia employs elements of Santería *to help her survive her heartbreak, culminating in the palm-reading which connects her survival to the strength she'll draw from a life lived by the ocean.*

While Celia was housebound, Jorge del Pino, 14 years older than Celia, began courting her. He'd known Celia since she was a child. He told Celia that she must "write to that fool," and that if Gustavo didn't respond, then Celia must marry him instead. So Celia did. In fact, for the next 25 years, she wrote a letter to Gustavo on the 11th day of every month, then stored the letters in a chest beneath her bed. She never took the drop pearl earrings off.

Celia's hidden letters to Gustavo suggest that she already knows their love affair isn't meant to survive over the long term. Yet the fact that she writes the letters at all (and continues to wear the earrings he gave her) suggests that she can't let go of the obsession either. Jorge's insistence that she "write to that fool"—a gesture he hoped would put an end to the affair—only intensified it.

Celia and her twin granddaughters, Luz and Milagro, hitch a ride to the house on Palmas Street. When they get there, Felicia waves at them frantically from an upstairs window. She's wearing a nightgown and has just made coconut ice cream, a ritual ever since her husband left in 1966. Felicia tends to have delusions after heavy rains, and they always follow a similar pattern.

Felicia is afflicted with mental illness throughout the book, which seems to be connected to trauma she's experienced in her former marriage, although the nature of that trauma isn't yet revealed. Her illness manifests in certain obsessions that are inexplicable (for now), like making and eating coconut ice cream.

That night, Celia lies awake in Felicia's house. The house used to belong to Celia's mother-in-law, Berta Arango del Pino, and it's full of unhappy memories. When Celia returned from her honeymoon with Jorge, Berta called Celia a harlot, and things never improved. While Jorge traveled, Berta and her daughter, Ofelia, excluded Celia from meals, giving her poor scraps instead. When Celia tried making them a delicious stew, Berta flung the pot into the yard. When Celia found out she was pregnant, Ofelia started taking Celia's clothes and shoes.

The house on Palmas Street has an unhappy history, as Celia, already fragile from heartbreak, was basically driven insane there as a newlywed. Her mother-in-law and sister-in-law, who resent her presence in the family for unclear reasons, do everything they can to make Celia feel dehumanized and unwanted.

Celia hoped for a baby boy, so he could make his own way in the world. She would then leave Jorge and sail to Spain to reunite with Gustavo. But if she had a girl, she'd stay and teach her daughter survival. When their daughter was born, Jorge named her Lourdes. Celia handed Lourdes to Jorge by one leg, saying, "I will not remember her name."

Perhaps thinking of her own heartbreaking passion for Gustavo, Celia believes that girls face an inherently more difficult path in the world. She thinks that she must be there to teach a daughter how to survive in a way that a son wouldn't need. With a son, Celia would feel free to leave in pursuit of her own obsessions. However, when Lourdes is born, Celia is seemingly driven to a breaking point by her in-laws—she appears to reject her daughter, which will likely have lifelong consequences for their relationship.

Presently, after a sleepless night in Felicia's house, Celia goes to a ceiba tree nearby. Offerings, like fruit and coins, surround its trunk. Celia's great-aunt Alicia once told her that the ceiba is a maternal saint. Celia circles the tree, making a wish for her daughter.

The ceiba tree, with massive roots, is native to the tropical Caribbean and West Africa. Celia participates in a cultural superstition with roots in Santería, *believing that a prayer before the sacred tree will have special benefits for Felicia.*

Celia decides to hitchhike to the Plaza de la Revolución to hear El Líder make a speech. She thinks that now that Jorge is dead, she'll devote her remaining years to El Líder and his Revolution. She signs up for a brigade that's cutting sugarcane and spends two weeks in the fields. She imagines Cuba growing prosperous because of the sugar—a prosperity that she and the other workers can share.

Throughout the book, Fidel Castro is referred to as El Líder. Celia is already devoted to Castro and the cause of the Cuban Revolution. Throwing herself into its activities, even identifying herself with it fully, helps her channel her grief following her husband's death. Perhaps actively working for the Revolution helps Celia feel justified in the political divide that damaged her marriage.

Celia has a recurring dream of a young girl filling her pockets with **shells**. The girl ignores warnings that a tidal wave is coming. When the wave comes, she floats underwater with hummingbirds, pheasants, and cows; a mango tree bears fruit and dies.

For Celia, shells are a symbol of bad luck. The girl in the dream is apparently Felicia, heedless of warnings before the tidal wave that nearly destroyed the family's home. It suggests a poor fortune for Felicia, implying that she only pays attention to her own obsessions and will therefore be overwhelmed by bad luck, no matter how others try to help her.

When Celia returns to Felicia's house, she finds her daughter in worse shape. She untangles and washes Felicia's filthy hair, but Felicia refuses to change out of her nightgown. She's afraid of letting any light into the house. Luz and Milagro say they've had nothing but ice cream for days, and that their mother spends her days dancing with Ivanito. Celia takes the girls back to Santa Teresa del Mar with her, but Ivanito refuses to leave his mother.

Felicia has descended further into illness. She is closely bonded with her son Ivanito, yet she's failed to bond with the girls, seemingly repeating the same pattern of Celia's rejection of Lourdes.

Celia wonders what the twins are thinking. Their father, Hugo Villaverde, has returned a few times with gifts, once hitting Felicia, another time giving her syphilis. Yet the girls refuse to give up their father's surname. As they take the bus out of Havana, Celia wonders why she can't mourn for Jorge—something comes between her and her sorrow.

The past looms large over the girls' lives and over Celia; in their different ways, none of them can fully let go of it. For Celia, it has to do with her passion, both for her ex-lover and for the Revolution. For the twins, it has to do with Hugo's abuse of Felicia, though the specifics their parents' relationship aren't yet clear.

CELIA'S LETTERS: 1935–1940

In March, 1935, Celia writes to Gustavo that she's about to marry Jorge del Pino, a good man who loves her and who tells her to forget Gustavo. She tells Gustavo that she feels like a prisoner in Cuba. A month later, on her honeymoon, she writes that Jorge's kindnesses to her make her cry. The following January, she is pregnant.

Celia's unsent letters to Gustavo intersperse the narrative, giving insight into the family's past. The newlywed Celia knew that Jorge loved her, yet she couldn't let go of her feelings for Gustavo, setting an obsessive pattern that will last throughout her marriage.

In August 1936, Celia writes to Gustavo that she hopes to die and that Jorge, away on business, is afraid to come home. If she gives birth to a boy, she plans to sail to Spain and reunite with Gustavo.

Celia tells Gustavo of her hopes to abandon her life with Jorge and resume her affair with him. Yet keeping in mind that Celia never sends these letters, it's not clear how serious she is about her plan.

The following month, Celia writes that her baby, a girl, reads Celia's thoughts. In December, she writes an incoherent letter from the asylum where Jorge has sent her, speaking of "Malaria [that] feeds the hungry clocks." The next month, February 1937, she writes of Jorge's visits and a new friend, Felicia Gutiérrez, who burned her husband to death and with whom Celia is plotting an escape. But the next month, she reports that Felicia has been killed, burned to death in her bed. Celia is going home tomorrow.

Celia descends further into illness, her torment in her mother-in-law's home compounds her already heartbroken state. Much of the content of her letters, like malaria feeding "the hungry clocks," has no evident meaning and just shows how incoherent she's become. Celia later gives her daughter the name of her friend Felicia in the asylum, suggesting that the fate of this unfortunate Felicia hangs over her daughter's life in the future.

The next letter is dated November, 1938. Celia has a new baby girl, whom she's named Felicia. Celia promises that this time, she'll be a good mother. Lourdes is now two and a half and asks Jorge whenever he calls, "When are you coming home, Papi?" Lourdes always wears her party dress to await his arrival.

The long gaps in letters go unexplained—it's not clear whether letters for the intervening months are lost, or whether Celia simply didn't write. Celia's remark about being a good mother "this time" suggests that she feels she's already failed with Lourdes. In fact, Lourdes's strong bond with Jorge is already evident, even as a toddler longing for his homecoming.

In 1940, Celia writes that Jorge was in a terrible car crash: his arms, right leg, and several ribs are broken. She tells Gustavo that she was surprised how much Jorge's accident hurt her. Seeing him in the hospital, she realized that she loves him, even though it isn't a passion like the one she shares with Gustavo. She thinks Jorge knows and understands this.

Jorge's car crash forces Celia to reevaluate her feelings for him. Though she rightly concludes that a genuine love exists between them, she wrongly assumes that Jorge has reconciled himself to Celia's obsession with Gustavo and is content with second place in her heart.


A GROVE OF LEMONS

Pilar Puente. When Pilar arrives in Miami, she can't believe the intense heat. She knows she can't call Rufino's parents because Abuela Zaida hates Lourdes and would send Pilar home, complaining that her mother can't control her. She figures her cousin Blanquito will hide her and help her figure out how to catch a boat to Cuba. He lives in a house in Coral Gables where the entire Puente family tends to gather on weekends. On her way, Pilar stops in a church for a break from the heat. Here, she remembers getting kicked out of Catholic school and sent to a psychiatrist. The doctor asked Pilar questions about her art: why does she draw images of human mutilation? Pilar didn't know what to say, except that her mother is driving her crazy, that she misses Cuba, and that at least painting doesn't require translation.

The point of view shifts to teenage Pilar's misguided attempt to flee to Cuba. Each generation is locked in conflict with the rest—Pilar with her parents' generation, and her grandparents' generation with their own children. Pilar feels like a misfit in her family and tries to make sense of her confusion over her identity through her art, because unlike human language, it doesn't require translation and therefore doesn't risk potential distortion. This points to Pilar's struggle to navigate the split between the American and Cuban branches of her family and to figure out her own identity.

Pilar walks to Blanquito's house and hears her Abuela Zaida, whom Lourdes claims had all her sons out of wedlock before moving to Cuba from Costa Rica, arguing with her daughter-in-law. In another room, several of Pilar's uncles are arguing over the news headlines about Angela Davis's trial. Beside the pool, she finds a napping Abuelo Guillermo, who made a fortune in the casino business. Eventually, a downpour begins, and Pilar starts to feel discouraged.

At this time, Angela Davis (a communist activist and academic) was on trial for murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy after firearms registered to her were used in an attempt to take over a California courtroom. She was acquitted of these charges in 1972. The prominence of Davis's case show that issues related to a larger debate over communism persist in the wider world beyond Pilar's divided family.


Lying on a lounge chair, Pilar thinks of her mother and reflects that if it weren't for late-night talks with Abuela Celia, she'd be more afraid of Lourdes. Celia has explained to Pilar that her mother is sad and frustrated about things she can't change. Pilar knows that back in Cuba, her mother was treated with respect, whereas in the U.S., neighborhood kids and merchants just think she's loud and complaining. Pilar falls asleep on the lounge chair, and early the next morning, she's awakened by one of her aunts.

Thanks to the special connection that Pilar has with her grandmother Celia, she perceives that Lourdes, too, is struggling with identity in her own way. Others don't know how to interpret Lourdes's personality, and it seems that she, too, is running away from things in her past—though neither Celia nor Pilar understands exactly what. Presumably, the aunt who wakes up Pilar will contact Lourdes and send Pilar back to New York.

Lourdes Puente. Forty days after Jorge del Pino's burial, he reappears. Lourdes can't see him, but she hears his voice. He thanks Lourdes for the nice burial—she even made sure Jorge had his Panama hat and cigars. Lourdes asks if her father will return. He says that he will, from time to time, and that Lourdes should look for him at twilight.

Jorge's appearance to Celia clearly wasn't his last. He continues to show up in Lourdes's life, though for what duration and for what purpose is unclear. Jorge seems to believe that there is lingering family business that he must deal with.

When Lourdes gets home, she feels like she's losing her mind. She fears she's "exhausted reality," and she hates ambiguity. Lourdes summons Rufino to comfort her; she associates him with the material world and figures he'll keep her grounded. She tells Rufino about hearing Jorge's voice and smelling his cigar. Rufino tells Lourdes she's tired, and he massages her feet.

Unlike her mother and sister, Lourdes isn't naturally inclined to things like poetry, magic, and ambiguity—she prefers "reality," which she associates with concrete things like food and sex. Because of this, her encounter with her father's invisible, unexplained presence unsettles her, whereas Celia and Felicia took the idea of Jorge's ghost in stride.

The next day, Lourdes throws herself into her work. She has a new trainee, Maribel Navarro, whom she coaches throughout the day to show greater initiative. Just when she's feeling pleased with the results, she notices Maribel sneaking 50 cents into her pocket, and she fires Maribel on the spot. Lourdes's restored self-confidence feels shattered. She walks home thinking of her father, especially the baseball games they used to attend together in Cuba. In New York, they shared a Mets obsession and celebrated in the hospital after the team won the World Series.

Lourdes mercilessly fires a promising employee for stealing an insignificant amount from her, showing her obsession with running her business in an exacting manner—anything less feels like a detraction from what she has worked hard to establish. In fact, her success is so much a part of her identity that such misbehavior feels like a personal attack.

When Lourdes and Rufino left Cuba, they didn't know how long it would last. Lourdes was supposed to meet Rufino and his family in Miami. It was all so sudden that she packed riding crops, her wedding veil, a painting, and birdseed in her confusion. In the airport, toddler Pilar ran away and was brought back to them by a pilot. Lourdes hated living with Rufino's family—she wanted to settle someplace cold. So they drove farther and farther north, until they reached New York.

Present business difficulties prompt Lourdes to reflect on her past. She had to flee Cuba in a hurry, indiscriminately packing pointless items, which suggests that she was emotional and perhaps regretful about leaving Cuba despite her present disdain for the country. Upon arriving in the United States, Lourdes seemingly wanted to put as much distance between herself and her country of birth as possible.

Two months before that, Lourdes had been pregnant with her second child. Out in the fields with her horse, she'd been thrown from the saddle. She stumbled back to the family's dairy farm, borrowed a horse, and galloped desperately home to the villa. There, she found two soldiers pointing rifles at Rufino. She jumped in front of her husband and yelled ferociously at the men until they fled. Soon after, Lourdes miscarried.

Back in Cuba, Lourdes experienced trauma—her miscarriage is closely connected in her mind with the experience of being harassed by the Revolutionary soldiers. This finally gives insight into Lourdes's hatred of the Revolution and all it represents. It also shows that Lourdes bravely defends her loved ones when they're under threat, a characteristic that will be evident throughout her life.

Some time later, Rufino was in Havana on business when the soldiers returned. They gave Lourdes a deed declaring that the Puentes' family estate now belonged to the revolutionary government. She ripped it up and yelled again, but this time, the taller soldier grabbed her arm. Despite her rage and attempt to run away, the two men soon had her pinned down. One of them cut off her pants, tied them over her mouth, and raped her at knifepoint. Afterward, he scratched illegible marks onto her belly with the knife.

Lourdes's history in Cuba grows darker still, as she reflects on the details of how the Revolutionary soldiers raped her. In Lourdes's memory, the Revolutionary government cruelly wrests away from her anything to which it claims entitlement. It becomes clearer why she feels such wrath toward Cuba and its government and has worked so hard to dissociate herself from it by starting a new life and identity in the United States.

A few days after the incident with Maribel, Lourdes looks at the various businesses in her bakery's neighborhood. She buys some sticky dates from an Arab store and thinks about all the immigration, all the violence in other places, that has caused various nations to converge here. For her own part, Lourdes feels lucky. She feels that moving to the United States has given her the chance to redefine herself. She loves winter and its protective layers most of all. She no longer desires returning to Cuba.

Moving to the United States gives Lourdes the chance to cleanly separate herself from her traumatic past—or so she thinks. Everything is different here, from the government system to the climate, allowing Lourdes to make a fresh start for herself.

As Lourdes approaches home, she smells Jorge's cigar again. He asks Lourdes if she's forgotten him. Lourdes admits that she thought she'd imagined him the first time because she misses him. She thinks back to a few weeks ago, flying to Miami to fetch her runaway daughter. The smell of the **ocean** reminded Lourdes of Celia. She can still remember her mother saying, "I will not remember her name." Now, she cries and tells Jorge that she doesn't know what to do—Pilar hates her. Jorge says this isn't true: Pilar just hasn't learned how to love her yet.

Challenging Lourdes's belief that she can separate herself completely from her past, Jorge continues to haunt Lourdes. Lourdes feels pain regarding her relationship with her daughter, and despite the tension between them, Lourdes doesn't want the rejection she experienced from her mother to be repeated in Pilar's life. Jorge predicts that there's still hope for their relationship.

THE FIRE BETWEEN THEM

Felicia doesn't know why she has delusions. She just starts hearing small sounds, like a beetle on the porch or a tree down the block, very vividly. She hears them all at once. Playing Beny Moré records is the only thing that helps. Colors become overpowering too, seeming to rise above their objects, like greens that "flee the trees and assault her." Felicia decides this is the sun's fault, so she stays inside and shuts the blinds tight.

The story shifts from Lourdes's conversation with her father's ghost to Felicia's delusions, suggesting that maybe there's not a firm distinction between these kinds of experiences. The source of Felicia's struggles isn't as clear as those of Lourdes or Celia, and her view of reality is much more tenuous. Somehow, everything in Felicia's surroundings—even down to the colors on the trees—seems to be attacking her, indicating that the world as a whole feels like an unsafe place for her. This seemingly causes her to turn to obsessions, like favorite music, as a feeble defense against it.

At such times, Felicia's thoughts overwhelm her, too—thoughts from the past, future, and even other people's minds, in fragments that seem strangely connected. Her mind jumps from one to another.

Felicia's disconnected mental world echoes her mother's experience of mental breakdown, though Felicia's is more persistent. Later, Pilar will experience a variation on the same pattern, suggesting that although it's never spoken aloud, mental illness is passed down through their family.

Felicia remembers that when she was in elementary school, she found the external aspects of Catholicism more interesting than its teachings. After mass, she would search the church for rosaries or prayer cards, and she would gather holy water with which to baptize a neighbor's chickens. Her father and sister Lourdes participated enthusiastically in mass, while Celia, who distrusted churches, stayed home.

Felicia has always had a spiritual inclination, more so than Celia. Unlike Jorge and Lourdes, Felicia's spirituality has always tended in an unorthodox direction, more focused on tangible, earthly things than on religious teachings, which she finds too abstract to relate to.

Celia didn't identify herself with a religion, but she was still nervous about mysterious powers. She locked the children in the house on the feast day of Changó. She wouldn't let Felicia visit her best friend, Herminia, whose father was rumored to be a witch doctor.

Even though Celia shuns organized religion, she still observes certain cultural expressions of it, like belief in Changó, a powerful Yoruban god of fire and lightning who is revered in Santería. *Even though Celia mistrusts formal religious practice, in other words, she still acknowledges the presence of powers outside her control.*

That summer, the "summer of coconuts," Felicia keeps hearing Saint Sebastian inside her head, sometimes in rhyme, sometimes in a jumble, disrupting her thoughts. Saint Sebastian says that Felicia used to love him, but now she just disappoints him. Felicia had become obsessed with Sebastian when she was a girl, feeling sympathy for his gruesome execution by Roman soldiers. But the nuns wouldn't let Felicia pick "Sebastian" as her confirmation name. For that reason, Felicia refused to get confirmed. Jorge later blamed Felicia's sorrows on this.

Sebastian was a third-century Christian martyr who, according to tradition, was tortured and ultimately killed under the Emperor Diocletian. Felicia always felt a strong affinity for him, though she was denied the chance to associate herself with him more formally—another example of how she doesn't fit into a mainstream religious identity. In fact, as her obsession with coconuts shows, she doesn't fit easily into mainstream society more generally.

Thoughts of Jorge unsettle Felicia, so she plays Beny Moré records and teaches five-year-old Ivanito all the dances she knows. When they dance, things make sense. When they stop, she thinks about her husband, Hugo, a merchant marine. She served him in the restaurant where she worked. When he placed his hand on her wrist, she immediately left her apron and walked out of the restaurant with him. They ended up at the Hotel Inglaterra and had sex repeatedly. But the next morning, he left.

Felicia has a complicated history with men, lacking the bond that Lourdes shared with Jorge and later searching for happiness with men who mistreat her or don't stick around. Her little boy, Ivanito, is the only one she can rely on. But given the dysfunction in Felicia's past, it's not clear that her relationship with Ivanito is healthy, either—perhaps she is perpetuating dysfunctional patterns by becoming too obsessed with and dependent upon her relationship to him.

When Hugo returned, Felicia was seven months pregnant. They got married during the week of the Cuban Missile Crisis; Jorge refused to attend. After that, Hugo and Felicia moved into the house on Palmas Street where Jorge's mother, Berta Arango del Pino, and his sister Ofelia (long dead from tuberculosis) once lived. When Felicia offers to have sex, Hugo nearly chokes her, and he promises to kill her if she comes near him again. The next day, he goes back to sea. Luz and Milagro were born on Christmas Eve.

Felicia's happiness with Hugo is short-lived, as he proves to be abusive and never appears to have wanted to be married to her to begin with. The Cuban Missile Crisis occurred in October, 1962, when the United States discovered Soviet missiles in Cuba; tense negotiations finally led to the weapons being dismantled instead of to nuclear war. Felicia's explosive marriage parallels the tension of the political moment, another example of how characters' personal histories and identities are bound up with what's happening in society more broadly.

By the end of the summer, Felicia is in worse shape—it feels like someone has drawn a curtain over her brain. She remembers deciding to murder her husband in the summer of 1966. She was pregnant with Ivanito and suffering from the syphilis Hugo gave her. One afternoon, while frying plantains, Felicia experiences a sudden clarity. She lights an oil-soaked rag on fire and stands over Hugo until he wakes up from his nap, then says, "You will never return here," and drops the rag onto his face. To this day, she laughs when she remembers his screams.

It's not clear if Felicia's mental illness began before Hugo came into her life, or if it's a symptom of the syphilis he gave her. Either way, it has tragic consequences for Hugo and appears to be the start of a downward spiral in Felicia's life, as after she burns him she retreats more and more from reality and into the world of her private obsessions.

Ivanito Villaverde. Every day, Ivanito and Felicia dance to a song called "Rebel Heart." Felicia wears a flannel nightgown and an embroidered Chinese tunic that had been a gift from Hugo. Ivanito doesn't remember his father, and he isn't sure if it's true that Hugo still loves him, as his sisters claim. Felicia tells Ivanito that when he was born, he almost died from the venereal disease his father gave him.

For the first time, the perspective switches from the women of the del Pino family to that of a male child. Ivanito's point of view gives an innocent onlooker's perspective on Felicia's descent into illness. Ivanito's world revolves around his mother and her interpretations of the world; he hasn't had the opportunity to know anything else, as his identity has been shaped by the illness and abuse Felicia has suffered over the years.

Felicia uses the last of her food coupons to buy a bin of coconuts. Felicia is still wearing her tunic and slippers. As she and Ivanito walk through the neighborhood, looking for more coconuts, they "speak in green," talking about everything that makes them feel "green." They do the same with other colors. At home, Felicia breaks open the coconuts, and Ivanito helps her make ice cream. Felicia believes that the coconuts will purify them.

Ivanito is drawn into his mother's delusions, innocently seeing the world through her eyes. Felicia's inability to dress and behave in a socially acceptable way—such as her obsession with coconuts and her disconnection from normal, everyday topics of conversation—seems normal to Ivanito.

When Luz and Milagro return home from their camping trip, they look upset. They tell Ivanito that they've seen Mamá this way before, but when he says, "What way?" they don't reply. When Abuela Celia leaves, Felicia locks them in the house. The girls tell Ivanito about Felicia's attack on Hugo, warning him that he might end up crazy like Felicia. Hugo isn't sure why, but he feels like his sisters are united against him and his mother.

Luz and Milagro, being older, understand the nature of their mother's illness better than Ivanito does and also remember Felicia's attack on their father. They perceive that Felicia's delusions are shaping Ivanito's view of the world, perhaps passing down a legacy of mental illness that will harm him in the long run. To Ivanito, Felicia just seems normal.

At the end of the summer, Celia comes and packs up Ivanito's things. After she leaves, Felicia cleans the house and cooks an elaborate dinner. Ivanito helps her pick gardenias for her bath. After Felicia bathes and gets dressed up, she also bathes Ivanito and dresses him in his nicest clothes. They enjoy a sumptuous dinner, and Felicia tells him that he must imagine "winter and its white extinguishings." At last, Felicia crushes pink tablets onto their ice cream, saying it will help them sleep. Then, they go to bed.

Felicia's delusions culminate in her attempting suicide and intending to take Ivanito along with her. It's later revealed that Felicia's quote about winter is a fragment from one of Celia's favorite poems, suggesting that half-remembered things from childhood have a way of strangely recurring, and that the mother-daughter bond sometimes takes shape in inexplicable ways.

Celia del Pino. Celia worries that despite his young age, Ivanito looks like his father, and she wonders what goes through Felicia's head while she's locked up with him. Celia hasn't seen Hugo since Felicia was pregnant. Once, Hugo insisted on entering the del Pinos' house even though Jorge had threatened to kill him. When Jorge came in that day, he wordlessly broke a dining-room chair over Hugo's back. In response, Hugo punched him in the mouth. Jorge warned Felicia never to come back if she left with Hugo, but she did anyway.

Celia senses that there's something unhealthy about Felicia's relationship with her son and that it's a continuation of the dysfunctional patterns between Felicia and Hugo. The tension in Felicia's relationship with her father traces back to his hatred of Hugo and his insistence that she choose sides. Together, these dynamics suggest that intergenerational wounds are difficult to heal and that they have a continual ripple effect.

Celia keeps visiting Felicia's house, bringing food and trying to keep her and Ivanito clean. On her way home, she often stops by the ceiba tree in the nearby plaza, leaving an offering of coins and fruit and praying for Felicia. Occasionally she sees Herminia Delgado passing by carrying healing spices for Felicia. Herminia's association with Santería unnerves Celia.

Celia does what she can to help Felicia, even participating in cultural superstitions—yet a more elaborate religious intervention, like Herminia's, seems a step too far. In Celia's mind, there's a distinction between so-called harmless superstitions, which give human efforts a boost, and wholesale religious practices, which demand surrender to the supernatural.

The day when Felicia attempts suicide is similar to the rest. Celia hitchhikes to Felicia's house with food for Ivanito. She assures Felicia that her job at the beauty shop is still there for her. Then she threatens to take Ivanito. Felicia promises that she'll take Ivanito to the beach the next day. Celia takes heart from this.

Felicia's suicide attempt stems from Celia's threat to take Ivanito away from her. Celia is too quickly assured that Felicia is responsive to reason, underestimating how much Ivanito has become an obsession for Felicia .

Outside, Celia passes a couple of her half-brothers in Old Havana but has nothing to say to them. On the bus ride home, she recalls being a baby with many siblings. Celia's father had had two families, with nine children each. The two families lived down the street from each other and attended the same church but never acknowledged each other. After her parents divorced, Celia was sent to live with her Great-Aunt Alicia in Havana. On the train ride there, Celia forgot about her mother.

Celia has a complicated family history too, shaped by infidelity and hypocrisy. Perhaps this background helps explain why Celia never follows through on reuniting with Gustavo and only pretends to write to him—she knows that a mere obsession is harmful enough without being acted upon. Perhaps Celia's lack of a relationship with her parents also shapes her struggles to relate to her own children.

When Celia reached Havana, she soon fell in love with it and with Alicia. Great-Aunt Alicia educated Celia about the capital's culture and introduced her to the ancient ceiba tree. Alicia also mocked churchgoers, and she took Celia to see American movies; they named their pet canaries after American movie stars.

Great-Aunt Alicia was a complete change from Celia's rural, provincial upbringing, and her influence has shaped Celia's view of culture, religion, and the world in general. Whereas Lourdes is devoutly Catholic, Alicia's influence apparently made Celia cynical of religion. Further, the fact that Celia was once a fan of American movies suggests that she was not always so vehemently pro-Cuba—it seems this devotion to her country emerged in adulthood.

That night, Celia sleeps restlessly, and when she wakes up, she sends the Luz and Milagro to Herminia's house to get her to drive them to Felicia's house immediately. She repeats "*Mi hija*," over and over again, as if this could save her daughter.

Despite the conflict between them, Celia has a deep connection to Felicia that allows her to sense when Felicia is in danger and ultimately to save her life, suggesting that their bond transcends illness and conflict.

CELIA'S LETTERS: 1942–1949

In December, 1942, in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War and the establishment of dictatorships in both Spain and Cuba, Celia writes to Gustavo that she still loves him, but that it's become "a habitual love." She doesn't know if he is still alive. She unquestioningly accepts her obsession with him as a fact of life.

Celia has continued writing to Gustavo for several years now. She acknowledges to herself that, on some level, her obsession with him is not rational—it's just become a fixed aspect of her identity that can't be explained. Passion, then, can't be reduced to rational categories, even as it causes conflict in daily life.

In 1944, Celia mentions the tidal wave that hit Cuba and destroyed many people's homes. She worries that her piano is irreparable and hopes she'll be able to play Debussy on it again. In 1945, she expresses gratitude for having been born on an island—at least the changing tides give her an illusion of possibility. With arbitrary forces carving up the world, just surviving is a hopeful act.

Celia feels that her life is at the mercy of political forces making decisions at a level far removed from daily existence. The ocean's changes at least let her believe that there's hope for her life to change, too.

In 1946, Celia writes that her son Javier has been born. She's named him after her father, whose appearance she only remembers from her Tía Alicia's face. Her father was murdered when Celia was 13, by men whose wives her father had slept with. Celia remembers nothing of her mother, except for her hard eyes and the sight of her back as she walked away from Celia on the train.

Celia grasps for some link to her own past, even though her parents don't seem like people much worth remembering. In politically volatile times, it seems that even an unsavory past gives a basis for a more hopeful future—or perhaps just the illusion of hope.

Later that year, Celia writes that Jorge is afraid of her smile, so she looks in the mirror and tries on other smiles, which reminds her of going to the movies with her girlfriends as a young woman. After the movies, she would see women standing in food lines and feel ashamed of herself. She tells Gustavo that after he left, she stayed in bed for months, reliving their time together as if it were a movie. Though Jorge saved her from that, she doesn't understand for what purpose.

Celia is still not happy, even though she has an outwardly stable life, and Jorge perceives her unhappiness. Celia is sensitive to the sufferings of people less fortunate than herself, a sensitivity to which Gustavo seems a more sympathetic audience than Jorge. In light of this, Celia questions whether being saved from heartbreak was really worth it. But given Celia's less than reliable grasp of Jorge's thoughts and feelings, it's worth questioning whether her perception is accurate.

In 1949, Celia writes Gustavo that she has been reading Molière's plays and "wondering what separates suffering from imagination."

Celia tries to escape her current circumstances, even through imagination. Her comment that she's trying to determine "what separates suffering from imagination" suggests that she's trying to understand whether her heartache over Gustavo has any enduring reality, or if her devotion to him has been a meaningless fiction.

THE MEANING OF SHELLS

1974. One October afternoon in 1974, Felicia is marching through the Sierra Maestra, but she can't remember why. She's wearing a helmet and cheap Russian boots and carrying a rifle. Lieutenant Xiomara Rojas yells at Felicia and the group of women to keep moving. Felicia is miserable.

The Sierra Maestra is a mountain range located in southeastern Cuba. Felicia's life has obviously taken a sharp turn from her self-imprisonment in the house with Ivanito, but cut off from the obsessions that have defined her life, it's not clear how she got here.

The women in Felicia's brigade are mostly middle-aged—"a unit of malcontents" and "social misfits" whom it's Lieutenant Rojas's job to transform into revolutionaries. Felicia is there because she almost killed herself and Ivanito, though she doesn't remember this. She has been deemed an "unfit mother," and everyone convinced her to send Ivanito to boarding school to help him "integrate" with boys his own age.

How Felicia gets here is never shown—but presumably, Celia rescued her and Ivanito before the murder-suicide attempt could be carried out. Now, Felicia is considered a "malcontent," a "social misfit," and an "unfit mother" who's being rehabilitated into a so-called fit member of society by the standards of revolutionary Cuba. As such, Felicia is separated from what has given her life meaning up to now—especially her son, who's also being forced to "integrate" and conform to the standards of others.

With Ivanito gone, everyone encourages Felicia to find new meaning in her life—to become "a New Socialist Woman." Celia points out that Felicia has never done much for the Revolution, which is a major point of contention between the two of them. But Felicia scorns revolutionary slogans and only wishes that her son was there.

Celia believes that political involvement can fill the gap in Felicia's life that motherhood leaves behind, which affirms that this how Celia personally copes with estrangement and loss as well. Celia assumes this method will work equally well for her daughter, showing that it plays an all-consuming role in her own life.

Felicia tends her nails and rubs lotion on her hands while the others in the troop talk. A woman named Silvia complains that her daughter betrayed her as an "antisocial" for insisting that the family say grace at the dinner table. Another reports that a man was sent to the marble quarries for having long hair and listening to American music. Felicia never talks to the rest of the group.

Most of the people in Felicia's brigade are there because of perceived offenses against the state, even ones that seem very trivial. The Cuban government, then, is meant to be a totalizing influence in people's lives, satisfying all their needs. While Celia accepts this role, Felicia resists it.

Felicia likes volunteering for night duty. It reminds her of some of Herminia's gods, to whom the slaves used to pray. She also remembers the nights when she would sit with Celia on her wicker swing until dawn. Celia would recite poetry, which Felicia heard as a kind of prayer, and from which Felicia "learned her florid language." Felicia often quotes from those poems now, and it always sounds right to her, but others don't understand.

Felicia does remember a treasured bond with Celia, and the influence of Celia's poetry persists in her life, even though it's in a fragmentary form of "florid language" that doesn't seem meaningful to anyone else. This demonstrates that the mother-daughter bond endures despite adversity and conflict.

Nowadays, Felicia and her mother just fight over El Líder. Felicia worries that Celia's attraction to El Líder is partly sexual, as for many Cuban women. Felicia doesn't trust El Líder's cold bitterness, sensing that though he's seduced many women, his only true passion is for the Revolution. But she can't resist fantasizing about him too.

Felicia correctly perceives that Castro displaces other passions in many women's lives, and she suspects that devotion to Castro is ultimately unrequited and therefore meaningless. Despite her insight into the nature of obsession, though, she's susceptible to it herself.

1975. It's December in Santa Teresa del Mar, and the whole town has squeezed into the local movie theater to watch Celia preside over a dispute between Ester Ugarte (the postmaster's wife) and Loli Regalado, whom Ester has accused of seducing her husband. Celia has served as a civilian judge on the People's Court for three years and is proud of what she's made of her life since Jorge's death, serving the Revolution. She is happy to do anything El Líder asks. In her judgments, Celia likes to focus on reform, especially "converting […] young delinquents into productive revolutionaries."

Since Jorge's death, Celia has found other ways of filling her life by devoting herself to the Revolution. One of the ways she does this is by adjudicating disputes for local families, something she truly believes helps support Castro and his cause. Not only that, she's in a position to help transform "young delinquents" into "productive revolutionaries"—in other words, into committed communists like herself. It's self-evident to Celia that Castro is a worthy object of devotion in everyone's life, showing how ardently she believes in the cause.

Earlier this year, the Family Code was passed, and that means people have been increasingly bringing domestic troubles to the courts—things like husbands neglecting housework or spouses having affairs. In this particular case, Loli claims that Rogelio Ugarte pushed himself onto her. Ester claims that Loli was wearing a provocative dress at the time. Celia bangs her gavel to stop the squabbling that erupts between the two women and the divided audience. She knows it's true that Rogelio is a cheater. Finally, she sends somebody to find Rogelio so the dispute can be settled more directly.

The Family Code, the section of Cuban law which is designed to cover issues related to marriage, divorce, and children, went into effect in March of 1975. The law code is supposed to be understandable by everyone and applied in part by civilian courts like this one. Celia uses her personal knowledge of her community to judge this dispute. Doing so gives her a sense of power and purpose she's often lacked in her own life.

During this interim, the theater is filled with argument, as Loli and Ester's dispute gives everyone else an excuse to reopen old wounds. The discord feels symbolic of Cuba's failures. Celia wonders why generosity and commitment are so rare. When Rogelio is brought in, he confesses to trying to seduce Loli. Ester flies into a rage and attacks her husband. When Celia regains control, she sentences Rogelio to a year's volunteer work in the short-staffed local nursery. As everyone cheerfully files out of the theater, Celia feels discouraged that everyone treats the court like a soap opera.

The court case is both a stand-in for deeper community-wide wounds and a source of entertainment, facts Celia finds depressing. Celia handles the case deftly, yet it also seems that her role as judge allows her to handle domestic issues that she couldn't manage so well in her own family life. It's also apparent that human nature ultimately can't be controlled by law codes, especially where romantic passion is concerned.

That night, Celia wonders how she can serve her neighbors as a judge yet be useless to her middle-aged children. Her daughters don't understand Celia's love for El Líder. Celia feels offended by the photos Lourdes sends of her successful bakery in New York. Meanwhile, Felicia doesn't care about the revolution, preferring the luxury (the "waste," in Celia's mind) of unplanned time.

Celia perceives that her efforts as a judge are an attempt to compensate for her failures with her own children. She can't identify with the passions of either of her daughters, and she takes their attitudes about politics personally, since she identifies herself so closely with her service to the Revolution.

Celia looks at a picture of her son, Javier. As a teenager, Javier had shared Celia's enthusiasm for the Revolution, but they'd had to keep it quiet at home because Jorge was staunchly against it. In 1966, Javier left for Czechoslovakia, later becoming a biochemistry professor at Prague. He had a little girl, Irinita, to whom he spoke Spanish so that she could someday talk with Celia.

Javier is the only one of Celia's children who identifies with her politics, and he isn't really in Celia's life anymore. She feels cut off from her children because the causes that are most meaningful to her—that help determine her identity—don't occupy the same role in their lives.

Though Celia keeps herself busy, she has to admit that she is lonely—she doesn't have anyone to share happiness with. She misses talking to Pilar in the middle of the night; their connection somehow got lost, and a new one hasn't begun.

Celia is in an intermediate stage in her life. She doesn't have a basis for relating to any of her children, or even to the granddaughter with whom she once connected so naturally. This suggests that no object of devotion, no matter how sincerely held, can substitute for genuine, intimate human connection.

Luz Villaverde (1976). Luz remembers how handsome Hugo used to be. She blames Mamá for destroying him. For nine years after the fire incident, the girls didn't see their father, but they always imagined he'd come back and rescue them from their mother. They think Felicia offers only pretty, meaningless words. They even start calling her "not-Mamá," even though this upsets Ivanito.

Felicia's daughters play a limited role in the story—their characters function mainly to provide another perspective on Felicia and Hugo's marriage, which they see very differently from Ivanito. Their mother's mental illness has had a devastating effect on them, making their father seem the better parent by comparison. The difference in perspective is stark: to Ivanito, Felicia is the whole world, but to the twins, she's not even worthy of the name "Mamá."

Whenever Milagro, who's more sentimental, feels sorry for Mamá, Luz reminds her of their ninth birthday party. Their whole class came. When Luz broke open her piñata, she discovered that it was filled not with candy, but with raw eggs. Mamá had just laughed as the sticky children ran shrieking to their parents.

Felicia's failures as a mother are not funny or harmless in the girls' memories—they're examples of their family's abnormality. Incidents like the egg-filled piñata likely cause Luz and Milagro to be ostracized from their peers, further perpetuating their emotional withdrawal from their mother.

That summer, the girls got their first postcard from Hugo, whom the girls call Papi. He told them he was living in a hotel on the wharf and wanted to see them. While Felicia went to a voodoo meeting, the twins took a taxi to the decaying hotel. When Milagro knocked on the door, Hugo, with his mutilated face and scarred hands, answered and embraced them. They began visiting him more often. He lived on a meager disability pension but somehow afforded gifts for them. In time, the girls grew less afraid of his face and found in his eyes a more meaningful language than their mother had to offer.

The girls disparage their mother's religion as "voodoo," seeing it not as a meaningful religion but as yet another obsession that takes her away from them. Though their father abandoned them and is able to offer them very little in any way, he still seems like a better parent than their emotionally absent mother—an indictment of Felicia's failures. The sight of Hugo's mutilated face and hands is a stark reminder of the price of Felicia's illness—it not only damages her, but those around her.

One day, Hugo asks to see Ivanito. Luz and Milagro feel jealous, but they decide that their brother should see what Felicia did to his father. There's a hurricane warning that day, and if it weren't for the sudden rain, they might have turned around. But instead, they enter the slightly open door and find their father having sex with a prostitute.

The children's reunion with their father is doomed to failure, as they stumble upon him in a humiliating situation and never visit him again. This incident makes it so that the twins and Ivanito don't have a parent with whom they can feel reliably safe and loved.

After this incident, the three children return to boarding school. Luz and Milagro are happy there, but Ivanito cries a lot. He feels guilty about visiting Hugo and fears that Felicia will find out, even though the siblings pricked their fingers and swore they'd never talk about it. Luz thinks that Ivanito doesn't yet realize that Felicia doesn't really care about any of them.

The twins' situation with their parents seems to have made them self-sufficient beyond their years. Ivanito, by contrast, seems to have been emotionally stunted by it, struggling to find a sense of identity apart from his mother.

ENOUGH ATTITUDE

1975. Lourdes walks her five-block beat in Brooklyn. She's become the first auxiliary policewoman in her precinct, and it makes her feel powerful. Pilar thinks her mother is prejudiced in her attitudes about crime, but Lourdes thinks her daughter only has abstract ideas about equality and doesn't know anything about real life—like the faces, mainly black and brown ones, she sees at the precinct.

Lourdes is actually a lot like her mother Celia—except that while Celia is a volunteer helping implement a socialist revolution, Lourdes volunteers to patrol American neighborhoods to maintain her ideas about law and order (ideas apparently infused with racism).

Lourdes has rarely had to use her nightstick. Once, she had to break up a fight that included the Navarro boy, the son of the woman who'd worked in her bakery for one afternoon. Now, that kid sells pot. Lourdes knows that if her son were alive—he'd be the Navarro kid's age now—he wouldn't have been a delinquent. She knows he would have been a loyal son and a companion to her, the way Pilar is to Rufino.

Lourdes sees her dead son in every young man and idealizes what he and their relationship would have been like if she hadn't miscarried. She feels a lack in her relationship with her only child and envies what Pilar and Rufino have—she never enjoyed such a bond with her own mother and has no outlet for one now.

Rufino never adjusted to life in the United States—he wanted to be back on the farm. So Lourdes got a job, even though many Cuban women of her age and class would consider such work beneath them. In Florida, the other Puente women keep living their privileged, soap opera-watching lifestyles even amid their less affluent circumstances. But Lourdes began working on the ranch as soon as she got married, taking over the bookkeeping, redecorating the mansion, and building an aviary. This infuriated Doña Zaida, who promptly undid all of Lourdes's efforts. The two women never spoke again.

Lourdes is an enterprising woman who takes initiative to realize her ideas—an attitude that isn't always appreciated by others of her social standing. This attitude also looks different in Cuba than it does in the United States. In Cuba, Lourdes seemed to have more avenues open to her, while in the U.S., she's portrayed as almost a caricature of her younger self, obsessed with what she's lost.

Lourdes and Rufino barely speak anymore, and her husband is no longer familiar to her. Lourdes sometimes hears about his projects, tinkering with engines or daydreaming about artificial intelligence, from Pilar. She feels she can only be herself with Jorge. It was his idea for her to join the auxiliary police, so she can be ready to fight the Communists someday. Pilar just mocks her mother, which makes Lourdes furious—she's trying to set an example for her daughter.

Lourdes fails to connect meaningfully with either her husband or her daughter. Her connection with her father's spirit makes up what is lacking in those relationships. Jorge affirms Lourdes in her aspirations and ideals as no one else in her life does.

Last Christmas, Pilar gave Lourdes a book of essays about Cuba called *A Revolutionary Society*. Its front cover is a picture of happy-looking children in front of Che Guevara's portrait. Lourdes tells Pilar that she doesn't have to read this book in order to know it's filled with communist lies. Lourdes puts the book in a tub filled with hot water and then places the ruined volume on a platter with a note: "Why don't you move to Russia if you think it's so great!" She leaves this on Pilar's bed. The next day, *A Revolutionary Society* is hanging from the clothesline to dry.

While this scene of mother-daughter conflict is humorous, there's also more to it than that. Pilar doesn't know about Lourdes's past sufferings in Cuba, which is what fuel Lourdes's passionate hatred of communism and Cuba now. She mistakenly reduces Lourdes's views to politics alone. For Lourdes, it's deeply personal, which helps explain her over-the-top response.

As Lourdes continues on her beat, she sees a figure running toward the river, jumping over the fence. She yells, "Stop!" and chases the figure "as if chasing a part of herself." She can't remember what codes to shout into her walkie-talkie. She jumps into the cold river. She makes it, but the Navarro boy doesn't.

To Lourdes, though it isn't rational, the Navarro boy's suicide feels like losing her own son again. She can't even protect the young man on her beat from harming himself, just as she was helpless to prevent her miscarriage.

Pilar (1976). Pilar is at a Lou Reed concert in the Village with her boyfriend, Max, a musician whose real name is Octavio Schneider. They started dating after Max, whose mother is Mexican, saw Pilar in a club and casually started speaking Spanish to her. Lourdes hates Max's beads and long hair and immediately rejects him, but Rufino is friendly to him. Pilar likes going to Lou Reed concerts because Lou has so many personalities, and Pilar feels like "a new me sprouts and dies every day."

Pilar is a New Yorker and is immersed in the punk scene there, yet she's often reminded of her Cuban roots at unexpected moments, suggesting that she can't sidestep the complexity of her identity. She identifies with people who, like her, have a complicated sense of identity, as her own sense of self feels as if it's constantly evolving, unable to be contained by a label.

Pilar loves punk music because it gets in people's faces, an attitude she tries to convey in her painting. She likes to confront people and has no problem showing she doesn't like someone—she thinks that this is the only she has in common with Lourdes.

Though Pilar's identity feels complicated, Pilar is confident in what she likes and doesn't shrink from telling anyone exactly what she thinks. This defining trait seems to come straight from Lourdes, suggesting that Lourdes has had a bigger influence on Pilar than Pilar admits.

Lourdes recently bought a second bakery and is going crazy with patriotic themes, given the upcoming bicentennial. Pilar thinks her mother joined the auxiliary police "out of some misplaced sense of civic duty." She also knows that Lourdes talks with Abuelo Jorge.

Though Pilar doesn't talk with Celia anymore, mysterious spiritual communications with absent loved ones is something else Pilar and Lourdes have in common. Yet Pilar and Lourdes don't communicate openly with each other about what drives their respective actions. Pilar attributes Lourdes's police work to "misplaced [...] civic duty," not suspecting that Lourdes has personal, trauma-related reasons for desiring control and caring about law enforcement.

Pilar doesn't think about Cuba so much lately, but sometimes she longs to go there. She resents the military and political leaders who have so much sway over other people's lives. Because of that, both Cuba and Celia fade inside Pilar, and she can only imagine what they're like. Lourdes won't talk to Pilar about Celia, and Rufino can't tell Pilar much about her.

Pilar is effectively cut off from her Cuban roots, because of both familial and political roadblocks. Her sense of Cuban identity lies dormant, existing mainly within her imagination.

Lourdes commissions Pilar to paint a pro-American mural for her Yankee Doodle Bakery grand opening. Pilar, baffled at first, finally agrees—but on the condition that Lourdes can't see the painting before it's unveiled.

Lourdes couldn't have asked something more difficult of her cynical daughter, yet her request seems to be a genuine attempt at finding a connection and showing respect for Pilar's interests and talents.

That night Pilar gets started on her painting. She starts painting Lady Liberty, adding background markings that look like barbed wire, putting a safety pin through Liberty's nose, and captioning the image with the "punk rallying cry, I'M A MESS." Pilar booby-traps her studio in case Lourdes spies on her work, but Lourdes never does. Lourdes has even taken out a full-page ad in the paper about the grand opening and art unveiling. Worrying about her mother's reaction to the painting, Pilar can't sleep before the grand opening.

Pilar, immovably true to her convictions (much like her mother), can't make the straightforwardly patriotic painting Lourdes wants to see—she has to be true to her own punk ideals and identity as an artist. Still, she feels conflicted about hurting Lourdes, showing that she really does care about her mother, too.

At the grand opening, the new bakery is full of patriotic decorations, a Dixieland band, and free desserts. Lourdes brags to customers about her daughter, the artist, causing Pilar to sweat. At noon, Lourdes climbs on a stepladder and pulls the sheet off the painting. As the crowd takes in the sight of "punk" Liberty, people start buzzing disapprovingly. When a man moves toward the painting with a pocketknife, yelling "Gaaahbage!" in a Brooklyn accent, Lourdes suddenly swings her purse at the man and knocks him flat. Then, she tumbles off the stepladder onto both spectators and apple tartlets. Pilar is filled with love for her mother.

Lourdes shows that although she's devoted to her convictions, she's loyal to her daughter above all else. Surprisingly, she's more capable than her own mother of transcending political beliefs in her relationship with her daughter. This suggests that Lourdes's estrangement from her own mother has yielded not just pain, but an understanding of what true loyalty should look like. And Jorge's prediction comes true—Pilar does learn how to love her mother, given the right opportunity.

BASKETS OF WATER

Ivanito. Ivanito started teaching himself English out of his Abuelo Jorge's old textbooks. At school, students are only allowed to study English with special permission; most study Russian. Ivanito's Russian instructor, Sergey Mikoyan, tells him that he has a gift for languages. Mr. Mikoyan is especially fond of Ivanito. After class, he tells Ivanito stories about Russia and quotes Tolstoy. Ivanito longs to live in a world that, like Russia, preserves its history.

At boarding school, Ivanito is finally able to start exploring his own identity apart from his mother. Much as Felicia has an interest in language—albeit poetic or imaginary ones—Ivanito shows a gift for language, too. Given his sheltered upbringing, he longs to explore unknown, faraway things.

One day, after class, Mr. Mikoyan stands close to Ivanito and says that he's going back to Russia. He warns Ivanito that he might hear "vile" rumors. When Ivanito turns to look at his teacher, Mr. Mikoyan suddenly embraces Ivanito fiercely and strokes his hair, repeating his name. Ivanito runs. Much later, he hears cruel jokes about Mr. Mikoyan's "indiscretions." They start teasing Ivanito, too. Ivanito doesn't understand and doesn't want to.

The "vile" rumors about Mr. Mikoyan's "indiscretions" imply that he's been having inappropriate relationships with his students—as such, his fondness for Ivanito likely had sinister motives. Ivanito keeps finding himself being taken advantage of by the adults in his life he's supposed to be able to trust, but he's still naive enough that he doesn't fully understand their exploitative intentions. He is effectively alone in the world, estranged from his mother, his sisters, or any truly sympathetic adult.

1978. This year's Santería forecast is mixed. On one hand, the dead are benevolent toward the living; on the other hand, the living must strive hard to get what they want. Felicia knows exactly what she wants: another husband. Early in the year, she visits a santero who's known for his divination skill. Though the *santero* casts the **shells** repeatedly, he gets repeated predictions of misfortune. He tells Felicia that "water cannot be carried in a basket."

Santería *includes a form of divination which uses pieces of coconut or cowrie shells.In this case, the shells' message that "water cannot be carried in a basket" is a prediction that even if Felicia gets what she desires, she won't be able to keep it, much like liquid can't be contained in a woven basket.*

The santero gives Felicia a simple spell to perform in order to cleanse herself of evil. Felicia intends to follow his advice, but instead, on her way home, she falls in love with Ernesto Brito. He pedals past her on a bicycle, then falls to the ground on a sharp turn. Felicia helps him up and comforts him, then pulls him into her car. Four days later, Ernesto, who's a restaurant inspector, dies in a grease fire in a hotel.

Felicia's tendency toward misfortune manifests itself again—even her good intentions are thwarted by her sexual passion, and her love is thwarted by sudden tragedy. It's unclear whether Ernesto's death is an accident or if Felicia was somehow responsible, just as she was responsible for burning Hugo. Regardless, the santero*'s prediction has come true: Felicia gets what she wants, but either fate or her own actions prevent her from holding onto it.*

At Ernesto's small funeral, Felicia is hysterical. She knew almost nothing about Ernesto—she was his first lover, and they'd spent three days sleeping together, insatiably. Felicia finds out that she and Ernesto had been born on the same day and year, just minutes apart. Felicia writes to El Líder, demanding an investigation into Ernesto's death. He doesn't respond, so Felicia becomes convinced that El Líder must have specifically plotted Ernesto's death.

Felicia, repeatedly thwarted in her attempts to hold onto love, seems to be descending more and more into hysteria and paranoia. She and Ernesto seem to have been fated for one another in some sense, yet they're denied all but the most fleeting, superficial happiness. It's little wonder that she forms a desperate conspiracy theory.

Felicia even becomes convinced that one of her beauty shop customers, Graciela, is a government spy who must have been complicit in Ernesto's murder. She coaxes Graciela into coming to the shop for a special hair treatment, then mixes lye into a paste which she rubs into the woman's scalp, burning her. After that, Felicia doesn't remember anything for a long time.

Felicia's paranoid delusions lead her to a violent act again, this time against an apparently innocent woman. Felicia is losing touch with reality.

Felicia regains awareness in an unfamiliar room. She hears carnival noises outside. Felicia dresses in a dirty set of men's work clothes she finds in a closet, eats some food she finds in the oddly familiar kitchen, then ventures outside. A passerby tells her it's July 26, 1978. As she walks around the carnival, men in similar work clothes call her name and blow kisses. A bearlike, barrel-chested man calls Felicia over and fondles her. He tells her he's talked to a friend about catching a boat to Key West; then, he wants to settle in Minnesota with Felicia and open an ice rink. But all Felicia cares about is getting her clothes back.

Unnervingly, the next thing Felicia knows, she's in an unfamiliar place—she doesn't know how she got there, among people who apparently know and love her. Her delusions, once limited to particular seasons and circumstances, now threaten to consume her entire life.

Felicia spends the next week trying to piece her memories back together—she can't remember anyone except Ivanito. For his part, Otto Cruz adores Felicia. He'd discovered her wandering around the spare-parts warehouse the previous winter and married her the next day. He finds her "crazy and beautiful and mysterious" and does whatever she wants. One night, she leads Otto to the carnival's roller coaster. They end up having sex during the ride, and when the car pauses on a hill, Otto somehow falls from the car and is killed.

Felicia's romantic relationships become ever more bizarre—and shorter. In this case, it's again unclear if Felicia purposely caused Otto's death or if his fall was truly an accident. Meanwhile, the carnival atmosphere reflects the chaotic strangeness of Felicia's interior world.

The day after Felicia's incident with Graciela, Celia's son Javier comes home from Czechoslovakia, terribly sick. He sleeps for three weeks, occasionally telling her bits of his story while in delirium. Celia learns that Javier's wife ran away with another professor and that their daughter went with them. Celia spoon-feeds her son and reads him poetry, wondering if Javier "inherited her habit of ruinous passion." Of all her children, she sympathizes with him the most.

Celia seems to find Javier the easiest to relate to because of their shared devotion to communism and to their lovers. And, like Celia, Javier ends up abandoned by someone who loves him. It's questionable, though, whether Javier is the only one who's inherited Celia's "ruinous passion"—each of her offspring could lay claim to this in a different way. Yet Celia has a blind spot where her daughters are concerned—perhaps seeing her weaknesses replayed in their lives is too painful.

After two months, Javier gets out of bed, but he spends wads of American cash on black-market rum, his condition worsening. Celia cuts back on her work, even resigning from the People's Court. Her last case is sentencing a 15-year-old boy, found guilty of writing antirevolutionary stories, to work as a theater apprentice, educating peasants in the countryside. She hopes the theater work will channel the boy's talents toward the revolution instead of away from it.

Celia's judgment of the 15-year-old boy sums up her attitude about the Revolution: she's a true believer in its goodness and the necessity of quashing dissent, even if she does so mildly.

Celia now spends her time tending to Javier as if he's a little boy. She doesn't even think about Felicia, who's gone missing, or her faraway grandchildren. She decides to track down the santera from east Havana who'd helped her as a young woman. The *santera*, now elderly, remembers Celia and kindly accompanies her home. She prays a series of Catholic prayers under the tree in Celia's front yard, and then her eyes roll back in her head; she abruptly crumples to the ground and disappears, smoking. Celia doesn't know what to do, so she just folds up the *santera*'s shawl and goes inside. She finds that Javier has gone. She also finds a lump in her chest and, within a week, her left breast is removed.

The disappearing santera *is another magical realist element in the book. Her sudden vanishing suggests that Celia was grasping for a kind of healing that may have worked when she was young and naïve, but which she is never going to find again. Javier, too, disappears abruptly from Celia's life and never appears in the story again. This suggests that even the child with whom Celia most identifies cannot stay comfortably within her protection.*

CELIA'S LETTERS: 1950–1955

In 1950, Celia writes to Gustavo that her mother-in-law, Berta Arango del Pino, while on her deathbed, threw a decanter at Celia after claiming she wanted to make peace. She screamed at Celia for stealing her husband and then fell dead, shaking up Jorge terribly.

Celia's mother-in-law never stops perceiving Celia as a threat to her relationship with her son, even while senile and dying. In this way, harmful obsessions are ubiquitous throughout the story, playing out in multiple branches of the family at the same time.

In 1951, Celia writes of Jorge's harshness toward Javier. He makes Javier study accounting from the time he is five years old, and he constantly scolds and corrects the boy. Jorge was traumatized by his car accident and fears his family will be left destitute in the future. Celia urges Gustavo to kiss his sons, if he has them.

Jorge's harshness toward his son stems from his fears about his own fragility, as well as his sexist assumption that his wife and daughters cannot fend for themselves without him.

In 1952, Celia writes that "that bastard Batista" stole Cuba and that it must be the Americans' fault. She doesn't want Javier learning about manhood from such men. She has started campaigning for the Orthodox Party. Salvador, the father of Felicia's friend Herminia, says that Batista is under the god Changó's protection and his destiny is set, but he will eventually leave Cuba. This gives Celia hope.

Fulgencio Batista was the dictator of Cuba, with U.S. backing, before Castro came to power in 1959. The Orthodox Party was a left-wing populist party which opposed political corruption. Celia's turn to politics seems to be motivated partly by what she sees as Jorge's failure to be a good father to Javier; she searches for an alternative in political figures and eventually finds what she seeks in Castro. Celia also continues to find strength in Santería *when it suits her.*

In 1953, Celia protests in front of the palace in Havana. She admires the young leader of the rebels; he reminds her of a young, idealistic Gustavo. Jorge, however, is upset when he learns about Celia's protesting. Celia is hurt by Jorge's and Lourdes's bond and believes that Lourdes is punishing her for the early years of neglect.

Celia's interest in politics takes shape at a time when she feels lonely in her marriage and helpless to secure deeper bonds with her daughters. In politics, she finds an identity apart from her family and an outlet for her passion. Castro reminds Celia of Gustavo, who believed in Celia's potential to be more than a lover, wife, or mother.

In 1954, Celia worries about Felicia. Felicia has left high school at 15 and is searching for a job in Havana. Celia knows there's only one job a girl like Felicia could get, one that has destroyed many young Cuban girls. She laments that this has happened to their country. Later that year, Javier wins a national science prize for children; Celia is proud when she's told that Javier is a genius, though she doesn't understand what exactly he does. Meanwhile, Felicia gets a job selling stationery, but Celia senses it won't last.

The possible trajectories for girls and boys in pre-Revolutionary Cuba are, according to Celia, markedly different. A boy as young as Javier has hope for a bright, respectable career, but a girl like Felicia has limited options, some of which—like prostitution—are ruinous.

A MATRIX LIGHT

1977. A month ago, Lourdes stopped eating—she's lost 34 pounds. During a long morning walk, Lourdes thinks about Pilar, away at art school in Rhode Island. Lourdes is sickened by the kinds of men—hippies—with whom Pilar associates. She doesn't understand how Pilar turned out as a bad seed, rejecting rules and religion just like Celia does. Lourdes stops in a diner and uses the pay phone to dial up Pilar and call her a whore for sleeping around.

Lourdes appears to be coping with deep emotional wounds by either eating excessively or not eating at all. Her eating habits are connected in some way with her fears for Pilar and her own sense of failure as a mother. Despite past hopeful gestures, she still struggles to express love to Pilar, because she sees in Pilar the things she most dislikes about her own mother.

Though Lourdes didn't plan to stop eating—she's simply repulsed by the smell and sight of food nowadays, and she longs for emptiness. Eventually, she loses 82 pounds after switching to a liquid protein diet and obsessively riding her exercise bike. Jorge still visits Lourdes at twilight and worries about her condition, but Lourdes won't admit that anything's wrong.

Lourdes longs to be rid of something, though it isn't clear exactly what that is. She continues to find solace in talks with her father's ghost, though she can't be completely honest even with him, showing how deep her wounds run.

With Jorge's encouragement, Pilar begins to imagine a nationwide chain of Yankee Doodle bakeries. She and Jorge also chat about the ongoing communist threat and the leftist media conspiracy in support of El Líder. They blame the Democrats for allowing communist influence in the U.S.; it's time for another Joe McCarthy, they think.

In other ways, Pilar hasn't changed at all. Her ambitions continue to rise, and she still sees communist threats everywhere she looks. Joe McCarthy was a 1940s-50s senator whose allegations of communist infiltration in the American government are widely looked upon as having been obsessive and generally misplaced. To Pilar, though, they seem just about right.

Lourdes disapproves of Pilar's painting, but when journalists question her about it, she becomes even more determined to keep it on display—she won't let anyone tell her what to do on her own property. In fact, if it weren't for the safety pin in Liberty's nose and the bugs in the background, it would be a nice painting. Lourdes doesn't understand why Pilar always goes too far—did she inherit that from Celia?

Lourdes continues to show her overarching loyalty to her daughter in her willingness to keep the offending painting in her bakery. She also shows an amusing lack of self-awareness in thinking that Celia is the family's only example of "going too far"—to the reader, it's likely obvious that Lourdes has this in common with Celia, too.

By Thanksgiving Day, Lourdes has lost 118 pounds, meeting her goal. Today, she'll eat for the first time in months. She's even bought a size-six Chanel suit for the occasion. Lourdes beams when Pilar comes home and sees her physical transformation. When Pilar picks a fight about Cuba at the dinner table, Lourdes resists the urge to reply. Instead, she starts eating turkey and yams feverishly.

Pilar's approval seems to be at least part of Lourdes's motivation for losing weight—she's desperate to be acceptable in her daughter's eyes in some way. Rather than taking Pilar's political bait, she also displaces her stress about family conflict onto eating.

The next day, Lourdes is back to eating sticky buns. On a family outing to the Frick Museum, she eats hot dogs, shish kebabs, and pretzels as if she's afraid of starving. At the museum, she sits beside a reflecting pool and feels an inner wound reopening. She remembers learning that she'd miscarried and that she would be unable to have any more children.

Lourdes's old wounds regarding her miscarriage, kept private for so many years, are clearly also at the root of her disordered eating. She's stuck in a cycle of repressing and ignoring her grief, which also makes it difficult to truly connect with those in her life.

Pilar (1978). Pilar grew up hearing that Abuela Celia was an atheist, and she liked the sound of that. Pilar herself stopped believing in God imperceptibly, without quite realizing it.

At first, Pilar identifies herself with atheism because she wants to associate with her grandmother. Her religious principles, or lack thereof, lagged behind.

Pilar looks at lots of old photographs of Celia, which Lourdes keeps hidden. In the pictures, Celia looks like she could be either happy or sad. Pilar has a trick to help her determine someone's public face from their private one: if they're left-handed, like Celia, the right side of her face reveals her true feelings. In each photograph, Pilar covers the left side of Celia's face and sees the truth every time.

Pictures are all Pilar has of her grandmother, and even these can't tell Pilar everything she wants to know. Later, Pilar's own artwork will reveal her interpretation of her grandmother's true self.

Pilar feels much more connected to Celia than to Lourdes, even though they haven't seen each other for 17 years and no longer communicate at night. From afar, Celia has given Pilar self-confidence and the ability to trust in her own perceptions. Pilar finds this difficult around Lourdes, who Pilar thinks rewrites history to suit her own purposes. For example, Pilar remembers the incident in the Miami airport when she was a toddler differently—it was Lourdes who ran away from *her* that day.

Pilar instinctively trusts her grandmother and feels affirmed by her, whereas she finds something dishonest about her mother's view of the world, even if it's not intentional on Lourdes's part. In reality, Pilar lacks context to fully understand her mother's perspective.

Lourdes's Yankee Doodle bakeries have become meeting places for "shady Cuban extremists" to discuss anti-Castro politics. They even celebrate the murder of a Miami journalist who supported the reestablishment of diplomatic ties with Cuba. Pilar can't understand how her mother could be Celia's daughter, or how *she* could be Lourdes's daughter—she thinks something got mixed up among the three of them.

Compared to both her mother and her grandmother, what Pilar lacks is firsthand context for the political situation in Cuba. Her understanding is filtered through her own, almost exclusively American upbringing.

Even after studying abroad in Italy, Pilar feels she doesn't know enough about the world to communicate anything meaningful about it, and she senses she's still waiting for her life to begin. Right now, she's dating a guy named Rubén, from Peru; he, too, is from a politically divided family. They met at Barnard, to which Pilar transferred after Italy. As Pilar thinks about Rubén in the library, she decides to surprise him in his room. But when she gets there, she finds him having sex with a Dutch exchange student.

Pilar perceives that her view of the world is constrained by her limited life experience, and she longs for more. Currently, most of the drama in her life derives from a series of short-lived romances. Unlike her mother and grandmother, she's experienced shifting political fortunes only secondhand.

An hour later, sitting in a coffee shop, Pilar reads the classified ads and sees one for someone selling an acoustic bass. She remembers her old boyfriend, Max, telling her she'd make a good bass player. She buys the bass and lugs it all the way home. Immediately, she puts on a Velvet Underground album and starts playing along, even though she doesn't know what she's doing, and she finally feels her life begin.

Pilar finally feels her horizons expand when she steps out of her usual life to try something completely different—breaking the pattern of searching for meaning in dead-end relationships—and a new obsession is born. She finds a new outlet, much as her grandmother did in politics and her mother in entrepreneurship and policing.

GOD'S WILL

Herminia Delgado (1980). Herminia and Felicia met when they were six years old. Felicia was collecting **shells** on the beach. Herminia told Felicia that shells could be used to predict the future. Felicia asked Herminia, "Will you save me?" Herminia said, "Sure."

Herminia and Felicia seem to be fated for friendship through Felicia's attraction to shells, which figure prominently in Santería. *Even as a young child, Felicia seems to sense that she'll need "saving" one day.*

Herminia's father was a *babalawo*, or high priest of Santería. People in Santa Teresa del Mar told lies about him and made fun of Herminia, but Felicia defended her. Felicia also came to Herminia's house even though her parents didn't let her. Watching Salvador use a coconut in divination, Felicia's fascination with coconuts began.

Felicia is fiercely loyal, no matter what the outside world or her own family think about her actions. Based on her loyal to Herminia, she also feels drawn to Santería *long before she actively takes interest in practicing it herself.*

Felicia was a loyal friend, staying with Herminia after her oldest son died. She was stubborn, but she used her imagination to cope with grief, which Herminia admired. She's also the only person Herminia knows who doesn't seem at all racist. Herminia knows that black Cubans' history is only a footnote in history books, so she doesn't trust what she reads, only what she sees and knows with her heart.

Herminia is the only minority character who speaks prominently in the story. Besides offering that perspective—one, she points out, that seldom receives official attention—she also provides insight into Felicia's life that her own family cannot.

After she disappeared in 1978, Felicia returned to Santería eagerly. Herminia took her to La Madrina, and Felicia entered a trance. During the trance, Felicia talked about her third marriage, claiming that she'd pushed Otto off a roller coaster and watched him die. Felicia started working hard at the beauty parlor during the day and attended every *Santería* ceremony at night, finally seeming to find fulfillment. Celia doesn't approve, but Herminia thinks that Celia is too political to understand the supernatural.

After her failed marriages, Felicia seems keen for a fresh start. After dabbling at the edges of Santería *for most of her life, she finally devotes herself to it, and the fragmented pieces of her life seem to be coming together. Because Celia has never fully trusted* Santería, *she finds this development suspect.*

Felicia undergoes special initiations. The ultimate one is called the *asiento* and is very secretive. Felicia is possessed by a god and tastes the blood of goats and other animals. When Herminia sees her afterward, Felicia appears to be at peace. However, when Felicia goes home, none of her family is there to greet her. Herminia tells her that the family is frightened, but Felicia argues that this is completely different from the "summer of coconuts"; she has clarity now. Felicia is sad, but she thanks Herminia for saving her.

Felicia finally finds what she's long been seeking in the practice of Santería. *However, she discovers there's still something missing: her family's love and approval, without which she cannot be completely happy. Her family appears to chalk up Felicia's religious conversion to further mental instability.*

Most newly initiated santeras look radiant, but Felicia grows ill and old before her time. Her hair loses color, she goes blind, and her head swells. Everyone from Herminia's *casa de santo* tries remedies and offers sacrifices, but nothing helps. Divination reveals only death. One day, as the *babalawos* are about to leave Felicia's house, Celia shows up and orders the "witch doctors" out, stomping on the divination **shells** in her bare feet. Then she held Felicia and wept over her until she died.

The lack of family connection sickens Felicia—even her spiritual connection isn't enough to compensate for that lack. Celia, who has always mistrusted Santería *and seen shells as bad luck, destroys the shells as if doing so can somehow eradicate the misfortunes from her daughter's life—as well as the ways in which she's failed her daughter.*

Ivanito. After Felicia's funeral, Ivanito received a radio in the mail. He thinks it might be from his father. Whenever he can, Ivanito walks along the beach, trying to pick up radio stations in Key West so he can learn English better. Sometimes he wants to be a radio personality so he can talk to a million people at once.

With his mother dead, Ivanito is now free to find his own voice and his own way in the world. His efforts with his radio suggest that his future won't be limited to Cuba. He has too many stories to tell.

DAUGHTERS OF CHANGÓ

1979. These days, Jorge speaks with Lourdes less and less, and she can't hear him as clearly. She grieves her father's death more deeply than before. Lourdes asks Jorge why he really left Cuba. He says it's because he couldn't bear to watch Celia falling in love with the Revolution. He really loved Celia, and he believes she loved him too, in her own way.

Jorge's conversation with Lourdes reveals that he always knew Celia didn't love him the way he wanted her to, and that after Gustavo faded in Celia's life, Castro and the Revolution took his place. Unable to come to terms with this during his life, he seems to be accepting it after death.

A month later, in winter, Lourdes and Jorge walk together on the Brooklyn Bridge. Jorge says that he can't return after this, so he needs to tell her a few things. After a long silence, he tells Lourdes that Celia really loved her. He confesses that when he left Celia with his mother and sister, early in their marriage, he knew how much it would damage her. Part of him wanted to punish Celia for loving Gustavo. When he returned from his travels, he saw that he had succeeded.

Jorge admits that Celia's mental collapse, and the resultant neglect of her children, is really his fault because of his inability to accept Celia's feelings for Gustavo and himself for what they were. This suggests that the family's troubles had their root not so much in Celia's obsession as in Jorge's jealousy and vindictiveness.

After Celia spent time in the asylum, they moved to the beach to help her continue to heal. But Jorge kept traveling because he couldn't bear Celia's indifference to him. He wanted to take Lourdes all for himself, but Celia loved her. Jorge also tells Lourdes about Felicia's death. Lourdes must go back to Cuba, he says. When Lourdes says he doesn't understand, Jorge replies that he knows about the rape. He tells Lourdes that he loves her, and then he's gone.

Jorge tries to assure Lourdes of what she's never really believed: that her mother truly did love her. However, this is only one reason that Lourdes must return to Cuba—she must also try to find closure regarding the assault, which she's never told anyone about. Jorge fades, apparently having told Lourdes everything she needed to hear from him. With her father finally gone, it's now Lourdes's turn to try to come to terms with her life.

Pilar (1980). Pilar chats with Franco, a Spanish-speaking cashier in a record shop, and feels nostalgic for her younger days, even though she's only 21. Pilar feels uninspired these days. She wanders into a botánica on Park Avenue that she's never been to before. She looks at the snakeskins, wooden saints, incense, potions, and spices. She watches the elderly proprietor prescribing a love spell to a young woman, and Pilar envies the young woman's clarity about what she wants. Pilar hasn't felt that way since she ran away to Miami as a kid. Since then, her destiny has never quite felt like hers.

Pilar still feels that she's at loose ends. She feels instinctively drawn to the botánica, *where* Santería *religious items are sold, even though she's never practiced the religion herself. Like Lourdes and Celia, it seems that Pilar is looking for something, though she doesn't know what. Her discomfort with her identity seems to stem partly from the inaccessibility of Cuba—something that's out of her control.*

As Pilar examines the shop's wares, the proprietor comes over and calls her "a daughter of Changó." He tells Pilar that she must finish what she began. He gathers herbs, a votive candle, and holy water, and he gives her instructions to bathe for nine nights. After that, the proprietor says, Pilar will know what she should do. He won't let her pay, saying these things are a gift from the god.

The proprietor senses a special destiny for Pilar. This is a turning point for Pilar, as she finally has the tools to determine what to make of her life, rather than being constrained by politics or family strife.

Excited, Pilar takes a shortcut through Morningside Park. She remembers one of her childhood nannies telling her about Changó, the temperamental god of fire and lightning. Suddenly, however, three boys surround Pilar, the tallest wielding a knife. They force her under a tree and take turns suckling her breasts, and then they steal some of her magical herbs to smoke. Pilar contains her fear, waits until they're gone, and runs home.

Pilar's quest for self-discovery is disrupted by violence. This incident suggests that even self-confident women like Pilar live in a world that does not respect who they are and will try to degrade their confidence at every opportunity. It seems that America is no different than Cuba in this regard.

When Pilar reaches the university, nothing makes sense to her. She thinks she hears conversations from passing cars in the fluorescent lights. Back in her room, she finally starts her bath. Each night, after her bath with the sacred herbs, she paints. On the ninth night, she calls Lourdes to tell her they're going to Cuba.

Pilar's traumatic experience in the park seems to trigger symptoms of mental illness, like what happened to Celia and Felicia at different points in their lives. Yet somehow, Pilar takes these in stride more than either her grandmother or her aunt Felicia ever did. She proceeds with the ritual and learns what she should do.

CELIA'S LETTERS: 1956–1958

In 1956, Celia writes to Gustavo, speaking approvingly of Lourdes's new boyfriend, Rufino, a wealthy young man who isn't afraid to get his hands dirty on the ranch. Jorge is jealous. Later that year, Celia ponders what happened to her and Gustavo. She remembers the last time she saw him—waking up to see him rushing across a plaza filled with protestors. She has often wondered whether sudden disappearance was better than growing old together and becoming indifferent. Celia dated other men, but they expected much less of her. None of them expected her to have opinions about the world.

Watching her daughter date seems to give Celia a fresh perspective on her love for Gustavo. She realizes that what she loved most about him was his respect for her. She also recognizes that their passion for each other would have probably died out sooner or later, which indicates that Celia's perspective on passion has matured and become more realistic over time.

Later that year, after Lourdes is engaged to marry Rufino, Celia complains to Gustavo about Don Guillermo's pro-American views. She says it's an open secret that Don Guillermo's casinos are mixed up with the Mafia, and that Don Guillermo has lunch with Batista every week. She doesn't like Doña Zaida, either. Doña Zaida keeps her mother, an Indian from Costa Rica, locked in a room upstairs. She wonders how Rufino survived such parents.

To Celia, Rufino's parents represent a wealthy, collaborating class that betrays the Cuban people in order to uphold its own interests. For the staunchly pro-Revolution Celia, this is completely unacceptable.

Celia tells Gustavo that she and Jorge made love for the first time in ages. When she initiated this, Jorge began to cry. Meanwhile, Zaida is ruining all of Celia's plans for Lourdes's wedding. Rumors abound regarding rebels looking to oust Batista, especially their leader, who has a bearlike beard and always wears an olive cap. Jorge fears a rebel victory because it might threaten his job. Celia tells him that there will soon be *more* jobs for all. As Celia predicts, Lourdes's wedding turns out to be a "circus," and she predicts that Zaida will be "among the first to hang" in the revolution. The following summer, Celia tells Gustavo that she's going to be a grandmother.

Celia's more mature reflections on her passion for the absent Gustavo seem to prompt a renewed appreciation for what she does have with Jorge. As Lourdes's wedding unfolds, revolutionary tensions are building up (and with them, political tensions between Celia and Jorge). Lourdes becomes pregnant on the cusp of Castro's revolution, hinting that a new stage is about to begin for the family.

SIX DAYS IN APRIL

It's 1980, and Celia is going through Felicia's old belongings. She recalls Felicia as a little girl, collecting **shells** on the beach before the tidal wave. Her daughter had been buried as a santera, a last request which Celia couldn't refuse. Now Celia goes for an **ocean** swim wearing Felicia's old, sheer bathing suit.

The fact that Celia was willing to respect Felicia's wishes of being buried as a santera *proves that she truly loved and respected her daughter despite Celia's skepticism of* Santería. *Now, Celia is clearly looking for ways to remember and identify with Felicia following her daughter's death. Shells are an ongoing symbol of the unavoidability of fate, so the fact that Celia thinks about Felicia collecting shells implies that Celia recognizes, on some level, that her daughter was fated to have a tragic life. Meanwhile, the ocean's dual symbolism of hope and tragedy implies that Celia is struggling to find optimism in the wake of Felica's death.*

Pilar and Lourdes arrive in Havana. Their taxi driver tells them that a busload of asylum-seekers have crashed the gates of the Peruvian embassy, making trouble for El Líder. Lourdes is barely listening, taking in the decay of the city. But Pilar admires the brightly colored houses and ornate balconies. Ever since the incident in Morningside Park, Pilar can hear bits of people's thoughts and catch glimpses of the future. It's unpredictable, and the perceptions are never given in context.

While returning to Cuba confirms Lourdes's worst suspicions about it, Pilar discovers a new world, even as she continues to adjust to new mental symptoms—perceptions that, in contrast to her grandmother and aunt, she seems to regard as a special power rather than a sign of illness.

As they travel the coastal highway toward Celia's house, Pilar looks at the **ocean** and gets glimpses of shipwrecks and drownings. When they reach Abuela Celia's house, Pilar notices how neglected it looks. They go inside, and Lourdes recoils from Celia's bedside photo of El Líder. Pilar finds her grandmother sitting on her porch swing, still in the worn bathing suit. They embrace.

Pilar's long-awaited reunion with her grandmother is different than she's long imagined—Celia is much older and weaker than Pilar thought she'd be. Lourdes, meanwhile, is repulsed by Celia's unabashed devotion to Castro, once again demonstrating how differing political allegiances can cause conflict among loved ones.

Lourdes and Pilar bathe Celia and wash her hair. Celia says nothing as Lourdes scolds her that she could've died of pneumonia. Pilar notices Celia's drop pearl earrings and remembers playing with them as a baby. They put Celia to bed, and Pilar catches glimpses of her sorrowful dreams.

Lourdes and Pilar care for Celia, a role reversal that the long passage of years has brought about. Though Celia rejected Lourdes as a young child, it seems Lourdes is unable to treat her mother with the same cruelty.

Lourdes huffs about the photo of El Líder placed over Jorge's photo and flings the picture into the **ocean**. Pilar just watches the ocean, thinking that Cuba is best approached by sea. Though it can be reached by a 30-minute flight from Miami, one might never reach it at all. Lourdes and Pilar walk to town and sample sugarcane from a street vendor. Lourdes keeps complaining loudly about things, indignant that the people have been "brainwashed" by communism and don't know what they're missing, but Pilar is entranced by the colors, the old-fashioned cars, and the bustle.

Lourdes and Pilar continue to find Cuba more or less what they'd each expected based on their respective outlooks: Lourdes finds a place that foolishly worships Castro and rejects capitalism, while Pilar finds a complex, mysterious place filled with novel delights.

That night, Pilar can't sleep; she settles into the wicker swing beside Celia. Celia begins telling her stories of her childhood, of traveling to Havana for the first time, and of falling in love with Gustavo much later. She says that she knew all about Pilar before she was born, but Jorge said one couldn't remember the future. Celia tells Pilar that women who outlive their daughters are orphans and must rely on their granddaughters to save them.

Celia confides in Pilar, seeing in her the fulfillment of her hopes for the family and a fresh start after her failures to connect with her children's generation. In their own ways, both Celia and Pilar hope that the other will answer all their respective questions about their places in the world.

Lourdes. Lourdes sees destruction and decay everywhere she looks, and it pains her. Last night, her nephew Ivanito ate six plates full of food at the tourist hotel—the best food is reserved for the tourists or for export to Russia, and Ivanito never sees such fare at his boarding school. Lourdes disdains the "armchair socialists" who vacation in Cuba.

Lourdes continues to find Cuba to be the nightmare she'd expected, a place that oppresses its own citizens and that outsiders foolishly idealize. She's cynical toward the "armchair socialists" that make up Cuba's tourism, as she sees them as perpetuating harmful Revolutionary sentiments without suffering the effects in their daily lives.

After dinner, Pilar had danced sloppily with Ivanito. The boy was a wonderful dancer, and Lourdes couldn't resist taking a turn, instinctively remembering the moves. A crowd gathered to watch, and they applauded. The next day, Lourdes drives along the coast, remembering her childhood journeys with Jorge and her honeymoon at the Hotel Internacional. She is depressed by the decay of the towns and wishes she could explain it all to Ivanito, who has no future here.

Lourdes's return to Cuba awakens her own passions, like her latent dancing talent. But mostly, she sees Cuba's failures and lack of a future. She feels drawn to her young nephew, as if he's the son she never had, and she longs for better opportunities for the boy.

Lourdes drives to the old Puente ranch, which now appears to be a home for the elderly. This estate is where Lourdes lost her second child. Her biggest fear is that her baby's death, and her rape, are meaningless and forgotten.

Lourdes revisits the place where her biggest heartbreaks occurred, but it's unclear if she finds what she seeks there. She longs for some kind of resolution and fears it's impossible.

Ivanito. Ivanito feels confused and overwhelmed these days, dreaming of escaping somewhere unknown on a horse. He and Pilar talk a lot. He confides everything about his childhood: his mother, Mr. Mikoyan, seeing his father for the first and only time, his dream of being on the radio. He never knew he had so many things to say.

For the first time in Ivanito's life, he has an audience in his cousin Pilar. She's willing to hear everything he has to say and is ready to accept him on his own terms—treatment he's never received from the other adults in his life.

Pilar has brought a copy of the *I Ching* and invites everybody in the family to ask it a question. Lourdes asks, "Will I see justice done?" She sounds angry, but she looks at Ivanito with kindness—she's taken a liking to him. Lourdes buys him gifts and hugs him a lot, calling him her sweet boy. She tells him about all the things he could achieve in America. Ivanito tells Lourdes that he wants to be a translator for world leaders, but she doesn't listen.

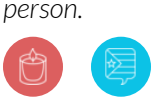
The I Ching, *an ancient Chinese classic, is a divination text, so it's significant that Pilar takes the role of telling others' futures—even though she's doing it for fun, it hints at a growing awareness of her spiritual identity. Meanwhile, Pilar views Ivanito as the son she lost and longs to make a better life for him, no matter what he wants.*

Ivanito hasn't seen Abuela Celia so happy in a long time. She and Pilar spend hours together, and Pilar is painting her portrait. Pilar seems to have brought Celia back to life, and Celia keeps saying that everything will be better now. When it's Celia's turn to question the *I Ching*, she asks, "Should I give myself to passion?" The *I Ching* gives an ambiguous answer, but Celia doesn't seem to mind.

Pilar's presence rejuvenates Celia, reassuring her that everything is taking a turn for the better. Celia's question is ambiguous, but in her happiness, she seems to have come full circle in her life and seeks a new outlet for passion, which has failed her in the past.

Later Pilar asks Ivanito to take her to Herminia's house. She needs to learn the truth about herself, she explains. Herminia seems to have been expecting them. She tells them everything about Felicia's life and then welcomes Pilar into the candle- and incense-filled room, calling her "daughter."

It seems that Pilar may take Felicia's place in the family's connection to Santería. *This seems to have been fated for her all along, despite her distance from Cuba and her long indifference to religion. This suggests that spirituality is an irrepressible aspect of a person.*



Pilar. Pilar asks Celia how she wants to be remembered. Celia jokes that Pilar should paint her like a flamenco dancer, in a flared red dress. But then she grows sad and asks Pilar if she's going to stay this time. Pilar paints a whole series of watercolor sketches of her grandmother, mostly in blue. Pilar never realized how many blues there were. Celia likes the portraits, but she wonders if she truly looks so unhappy in real life.

Pilar paints Celia as if Celia has absorbed the many blues of the ocean she's studied so avidly throughout her life. Given that the ocean symbolizes both hope and tragedy, it seems that Pilar perceives Celia's inner life as one defined by both heartbreak and resilience. But Pilar also paints the sadness she perceives in Celia, revealing her interpretation of the old photographs of Celia earlier in the story—sorrow, she thinks, has outweighed joy in her grandmother's life.

Celia talks to Pilar as Pilar paints, telling her about Cuba—that is used to be "a parody of a country," without enough work for everyone and sugar as its only product. Her great-aunt Alicia, she explains, gave her progressive ideas and helped Celia understand that "freedom [...] is nothing more than the right to a decent life." Lourdes interjects with complaints about political prisoners, land theft, and persecution of Catholics, but Celia never replies.

Celia sees freedom very differently than Lourdes and Pilar do. Whereas Celia believes that freedom ends at the ability to live "a decent life," Lourdes has seen some of the ugly sides of the revolutionary government. Further, Pilar has grown up with more advantages and much greater freedom than she could have found in Cuba. The generations seem to be unable of finding common ground on this issue.

Lourdes has been making such a nuisance of herself in front of the neighbors that the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution starts complaining to Celia, but Celia assures them that Lourdes will be gone soon. Pilar wishes she could stay longer, though she admits that conditions in Cuba are tougher than she had expected. She wonders how life might have been different if she had grown up here. She asks Celia if she can paint whatever she wants in Cuba. Celia explains that Pilar can't paint anything attacking the state, because dissent is a luxury that Cuba can't yet afford.

Pilar's conception of Cuba continues to shift as she considers that she can't be the kind of painter she wants to be here, and that she's already become in the United States. In Cuba, a painting like the punk Lady Liberty would get her in much more trouble than just ticking off her mother's customers. Celia accepts such dissent as simply a matter of life under the Revolution, which she believes is improving conditions for everyone overall—and it's therefore worth enduring certain repressions.

Celia gives Pilar the box of letters she wrote to Gustavo but never sent. She also shows Pilar Gustavo's photo. Pilar has begun dreaming in Spanish, and she feels like she's changing, a certain magic working through her. She feels instinctively drawn to Cuba's vegetation and architecture and the **ocean**. She doesn't want to lose it or her grandmother. But now, she knows that she belongs much more to New York than to Cuba. How can she tell Celia this?

Even as Pilar feels more drawn to Cuba and realizes how Cuban she really is, she also realizes that she'll never truly belong here. She had always believed that Celia would give her answers about herself, and in her own way, Celia believed the same of Pilar. But neither generation can give the other what it ultimately seeks, which suggests that each individual's sense of identity and purpose is something they must find within themselves.

Lourdes. When Lourdes hears about the refugees at the Peruvian embassy, she drives to Havana. A Jeep pulls up in front of the embassy, and El Líder steps out. Lourdes had always expected to curse at him in a moment like this, but now that it's here, her mouth feels dry. She wishes she could put a gun to his head and make him feel afraid. She finally takes a deep breath and yells, "Murderer!" Some soldiers move toward Lourdes, but El Líder stops them. He tells the assembled defectors that he won't hold them in Cuba against their will. Then he gets back in his Jeep and drives away.

Lourdes finally gets a chance to vent her rage at Castro. To her, he represents everything she suffered in Cuba: the loss of her baby, her land, and her own innocence and dignity. But it's not clear that this climactic moment offers Lourdes the catharsis she seeks.

Celia walks along the beach with Lourdes, Pilar, and Ivanito. Lourdes goes back inside the house and smokes a cigar, thinking that she can't keep her promise to Jorge, to tell Celia that he's sorry for sending her away. Lourdes just keeps thinking of her mother's words to her in infancy—"I will not remember her name." That night, Lourdes dreams of defectors.

Lourdes doubts she can fully forgive her mother. They are just too different, and the chasm between them, which began in Lourdes's childhood, is too deep.

Very early the next morning, Lourdes wakes Ivanito. She's laid out clothes for him and packed him a bag. They speed to Havana. At the Peruvian embassy, people clutch boxes and suitcases and push at the gates. She gives Ivanito $200 and a message written in English, identifying himself as a Cuban refugee and naming Lourdes as his sponsor. She promises that she'll come and fetch Ivanito from Peru or wherever he is sent, and she'll bring him back to Brooklyn. When Ivanito asks about his Abuela, Lourdes doesn't answer—she just urges him to go.

Instead of finding closure with Celia or with Cuba at large, Lourdes attempts to help Ivanito, who has become a surrogate son, escape to a better life. It's not clear whether this is what Ivanito really wants, or if it's just Lourdes's projection. She may be hoping that Ivanito will escape Cuba in a way that she, hampered by grief, has never fully been able to do.

Pilar. When Celia discovers that Ivanito and Lourdes are gone, Pilar borrows Herminia's car, and they rush to Havana. Celia tells Pilar that families are no longer loyal to their roots. The **ocean** has always been a comfort to her, but now it just separates her from her children.

For Celia, the ocean has always symbolized peace, but its healing presence also has a more sinister aspect as a literal and symbolic divide from her loved ones. She senses that her family is disintegrating around her as yet another grandchild is carried beyond her reach.

In Havana, they walk to the cordoned-off Peruvian embassy and search for Ivanito. People start fighting, a policeman smashes someone's head, and rocks start flying. Pilar gets hit by a rock and forced within the gates by the restless crowd. She hears that this morning's arrivals have already been put on a plane to Lima, and another one will leave soon. Finally, she spots Ivanito and embraces him.

Pilar ostensibly tries to rescue Ivanito for her grandmother's sake, but it's not clear that's actually what she wants to do for him. Her experience in Cuba has shown her that maybe there really isn't much opportunity here for a promising young person.

When Pilar rejoins Celia, she lies, claiming she couldn't find Ivanito and that he must have already left on a plane. She hugs her grandmother and no longer smells her comforting scent of violet water.

In the end, Pilar cannot bring herself to stop Ivanito from fleeing Cuba and betraying her grandmother. Her grandmother, in turn, no longer seems like the same woman for whom Pilar has longed over the years. This suggests that neither a place nor a relationship can ultimately give someone meaning—it's something each person can only determine for themselves.

Celia. Celia walks out of her house toward the beckoning blue of the **ocean**. She takes off her shoes and stands in the cool sand, feeling planted there like a palm. She realizes she's never been more than 100 yards off Cuba's coast and remembers her old dream of sailing to Spain. She steps into the ocean and pretends she's a soldier on a mission, letting herself be submerged, "[breathing] through her wounds." She takes off her pearl earrings and releases them into the water.

It's not clear how much later this passage occurs in the story, but since Celia is alone, it would seem to take place after Lourdes, Pilar, and Ivanito have all left Cuba. It's also left ambiguous whether she intends to end her life in the ocean. She does let go of the passion that has defined her life—symbolized by the pearl earrings—and is now untethered from the ties, both good and bad, that have constrained her all her life. She is absorbed into the ocean, the force that has been the backdrop of her whole life.

CELIA'S LETTERS: 1959

On January 11, 1959, Celia writes to Gustavo that 11 days after the revolution, her granddaughter, Pilar, is born. It's also Celia's 50th birthday. She will no longer write to Gustavo, because Pilar will remember everything.

This final letter suggests that despite Pilar's betrayal of Celia by letting Ivanito go and leaving Cuba, the bond between them will always remain intact. Pilar will, in some way, carry Celia's legacy, and Cuba, with her in her own life.

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