

My Beloved World



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SONIA SOTOMAYOR

Born in 1954, Sotomayor was her parents' first child. As she explains in her memoir, both of her parents immigrated to New York City from Puerto Rico within a week of each other during World War II; her mother worked as a nurse in the local hospital while her father worked in manufacturing. At seven years old, Sotomayor was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes, a diagnosis that shook her family. Two years later, her father died. Sotomayor attended Princeton, where she graduated summa cum laude. The summer after graduation, she married her high school sweetheart, Kevin Noonan. The two were married for seven years, during which time Sotomayor received her JD from Yale Law and took a job at the New York City DA's office. Following this, Sotomayor was hired by Pavia & Harcourt, a commercial litigation practice group. While there, she worked heavily with the designer brand Fendi and became a partner in 1988. Throughout her time as a lawyer, she worked in several public service roles, such as on the board of the State of New York Mortgage Agency, the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund, and the New York City Campaign Finance Board. She became a judge in 1992 for the New York district court system, making her the youngest judge in the district and the first Puerto Rican woman to serve as a federal judge. President Bill Clinton nominated her to a seat on the Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit in 1997 and in 2009, President Barack Obama nominated her to the United States Supreme Court. As a judge, many found her to be a political centrist; as a Supreme Court Justice, she often rules with the Court's liberal bloc. She has received a number of honorary law degrees and in 2010, the Bronxdale Houses development—the development where she grew up—was renamed after her.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Sotomayor's memoir touches on a variety of happenings in her parents' lifetimes and in her own. Most important to her parents' experience was Puerto Rican involvement in World War II. Many Puerto Ricans signed up to serve after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, and Sotomayor's mother served in a division of the Women's Army Corps (WAC) in New York City. The armed forces were segregated at the time, and while Puerto Rican soldiers from the mainland US who were fluent in English sometimes served with white units, most Puerto Rican soldiers served in entirely Puerto Rican or black units. In Sotomayor's lifetime, some of the most important things she encounters are affirmative action policies, especially those governing college admissions.

Walter J. Leonard, an administrator at Harvard, was the main architect of what's known as the Harvard Plan, which was one of the first and most successful affirmative action policies in the early 1970s. Yale was also an early advocate for affirmative action. Louis Pollack, the dean of Yale Law School until 1970, advocated for admitting more black students, citing the fact that many black Yale alums became very accomplished professionals soon after graduating—and he articulated the idea that Yale had a responsibility to educate more black lawyers. Sotomayor spends much of her time in college and law school working with student groups to expand the scope of affirmative action policies to include Hispanics and other minority groups as well.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

As Sotomayor notes in the preface to her memoir, it's unusual for Supreme Court Justices to be as open as she is about their private lives, especially in published works. The most similar works by a Supreme Court Justice are Sandra Day O'Connor's *Lazy B*, in which she details her formative years growing up on a ranch in the Southwest, and Justice Clarence Thomas's *My Grandfather's Son*. It's far more common for individuals in other branches of government to write memoirs like Sotomayor's. These include former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's *No Higher Honor* and *Forgetting to Be Afraid* by Wendy Davis. Sotomayor compares her memoir specifically to President Barack Obama's 1995 memoir, *Dreams from My Father*, in that they both look to their childhoods to explain how and why they ultimately come to think the way they do. Sotomayor's memoir also bears resemblance to [Becoming](#), Michelle Obama's memoir. She, like Sotomayor, details the struggles of fitting in as a minority student and what it's like to navigate the legal field.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** My Beloved World
- **When Written:** 2010-2012
- **Where Written:** Washington, D.C.
- **When Published:** 2013
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** The Bronx, Princeton, Yale, Manhattan
- **Climax:** Sotomayor becomes a judge.
- **Antagonist:** Racism, Poverty
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Books Come First. Sotomayor was the justice who swore Vice President Biden into office for his second term—but rather than swear him in just before noon, as the Constitution dictates, Sotomayor performed the swearing-in early in the morning so she could attend a midday promotional event for this book.

Perry Mason. Sotomayor writes that she was inspired to become a lawyer or a judge while watching the CBS show *Perry Mason*. The character first appeared in a series of 1930s novels—which, in addition to being one of the best selling book series in the world, are currently published by the American Bar Association’s (the governing body for law professionals) publishing imprint.



PLOT SUMMARY

Sonia Sotomayor is seven years old. After experiencing a string of fainting spells, she’s diagnosed with diabetes and spends a week in the hospital for monitoring. Rather than listen to Mami and Papi argue about who’s going to give her the insulin shot, Sonia learns how to do it herself. Mami and Papi fight all the time, especially after the birth of Sonia’s brother, Junior, and the move to the projects away from the rest of the extended family. This is because Papi drinks, only emerging from his room to go to work and cook dinner. Mami copes by working the late shift at the local hospital. Sonia resents Mami for abandoning her, but she finds refuge at Abuelita’s house. Abuelita and Sonia share a special connection, so Abuelita coaches Sonia on how to select chickens for her regular Saturday night parties. At the parties, Sonia plays with her cousins, especially Nelson. After a poetry recitation, the adults herd the children to bed so that Abuelita and her husband, Gallego, can hold a séance. Papi seldom comes to the parties but when he does, it’s a disaster.

Sonia regularly visits Puerto Rico. There, she loves helping out in Tío Mayo’s *panaderia*. During one visit when Sonia is little, she, Mami, Titi Aurora, and Tío Mayo visit Mami’s father in the hospital. Mami has never met her father before, and Sonia can see the anger between them. Later in her life, she thinks of this memory and vows to not replicate it in her relationship with Mami.

In April when Sonia is nine, Papi dies. Sonia thinks things will be easier now. Mami lives with Abuelita until they move apartments. Sonia is relieved that the fighting is over, but Mami’s behavior perplexes her. Mami stays in her bedroom, grieving, which makes no sense to Sonia, since she never saw her parents happy together. Sonia also doesn’t understand why Abuelita stops throwing parties when Papi never attended. To cope, Sonia immerses herself in books. Finally, Sonia screams at Mami to stop hiding. Many years later, Mami shares her life story. Mami’s mother was unwell, so her older siblings raised her. Mami sewed handkerchiefs for Titi Aurora and when she

was 17, Titi Aurora and Tío Mayo helped her join the Women’s Army Corps. Mami served in New York City, where she met Papi at a party. Then, Papi was happy, romantic, and artistic, and Mami fell in love with his family. They married after the war. Things didn’t begin to go downhill until they moved to the projects. When Papi dies, Mami mourns the end of her marriage and is terrified.

Following Sonia’s pep talk, Mami perks up. When Sonia starts fifth grade in the fall, school is easy—after reading all summer and with Mami’s recent shift to speaking English at home, Sonia better understands what’s going on in the classroom. Mami insists on sending her children to Catholic school and purchases *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and Sonia learns from a classmate how to study. During one of Sonia’s visits to the diabetes clinic, she receives a pamphlet of professions for diabetics. She’s aghast that she can’t be a police officer; this means she can’t be a detective like Nancy Drew. However, through watching *Perry Mason*, Sonia decides she’d like to be a lawyer or a judge.

As Sonia moves through middle and high school, her apartment becomes the hangout spot. She learns that teachers aren’t the enemy and is entranced by [Lord of the Flies](#). Midway through her freshman year, Mami moves the family to Co-Op City, and Titi Aurora moves in with them. Sonia’s junior year history teacher, Miss Katz, shocks Sonia when she insists that students should learn to synthesize information rather than just regurgitate facts. Later that year, Sonia meets Kevin Noonan. Everyone knows they’ll get married someday.

Sonia embarks on a mission to improve her public speaking, first by reading the Bible in church and then by joining Forensics Team, a debate club headed by Kenny Moy. A few years later, Ken points Sonia toward the Ivy League schools. When she’s accepted to Princeton, several school officials are rankled that she got in when other top students at school didn’t. Sonia interviews at Harvard’s sister school, Radcliffe; Yale; and Princeton. Radcliffe is a disaster and Yale feels too radical, but Sonia feels at home at Princeton. She receives a full scholarship. Around this time, Mami takes Sonia to buy a raincoat, and Sonia falls in love with a snowy white [raincoat](#) in a fancy shop. The saleswoman is rude to Mami until she learns that Sonia is going to Princeton.

Sonia makes friends at Princeton, but she’s acutely aware that she doesn’t come from money. She dedicates herself to learning to make arguments in her papers and improve her writing skills. Abuelita dies over Christmas during Sonia’s freshman year, which is devastating, but Sonia is able to talk Mami through completing her certification to become an RN. In her second year, Sonia becomes involved in minority student groups like Acción Puertorriqueña. She later advocates for a course on Puerto Rican history, which she finds eye opening—especially when she takes a trip to the island during an election year and sees the politics she read about being argued in real life. Sonia

is also able to see her own family reflected in her readings, as when she reads about women sewing handkerchiefs and thinks of Titi Aurora. As a senior, Sonia is accepted into Phi Beta Kappa, wins the Pyne Prize, and graduates summa cum laude—all things she didn't know about until helpful friends explain the significance to her. That summer, Sonia and Kevin marry so he can follow her to New Haven, where she'll attend Yale Law School.

Sonia's classmates are intimidatingly brilliant. During her first year, she meets her first mentor, the lawyer José Cabranes. He shows Sonia how to be a successful, community-focused lawyer and be proud of being Puerto Rican. As she works with José, Sonia writes a note for *The Yale Law Journal* on Puerto Rico's seabed rights. Over her second summer, Sonia works at a top Manhattan law firm. It's a disaster; she doesn't get a job offer at the end and feels like a failure. The money, though, is good enough that she and Kevin are able to take a honeymoon. They road trip across the U.S., and as they drive, Sonia thinks about what she wants to do. She scorns José's suggestion that she clerk, as she'd rather work in public service. In the fall, during a recruiting dinner with the firm Shaw, Pittman, Potts & Trowbridge, the partner is extremely rude and racist. Sonia's friends encourage her to report the incident. The student-faculty tribunal rules in Sonia's favor, and the firm issues an apology.

One evening, Sonia passes a presentation and stops in for the free food and wine. She hears Robert M. Morgenthau, the New York district attorney, speak about jobs at the DA's Office. She interviews the next day and accepts a job. She commutes two hours per day to the Manhattan office and distinguishes herself within weeks, only to fail miserably the first time she prosecutes a case in front of a judge. Her second case is also a mess, but Sonia becomes good friends with the defense attorney, Dawn Cardi. Sonia forms a good relationship with Judge Rothwax, who is known as the Prince of Darkness, and soon moves on to prosecuting felonies. The new bureau chief, Warren Murray, encourages Sonia to appeal to juries' emotions and moral convictions. Sonia also begins to see that being Puerto Rican is an asset: she can connect with juries better than her more affluent peers can. During her time at the DA's Office, Bob Morgenthau encourages Sonia to give back by joining several community service organizations.

In 1981, Sonia and Kevin divorce. Sonia moves back in with Mami and leans heavily on her friends, who encourage her to buy a share in a group summerhouse and to move out of Mami's apartment. Living in the same building as Dawn is wonderful, and Sonia's old friend Marguerite teaches Sonia to manage money. Sonia loves children and adopts her friends' kids as godkids, but Junior's daughter Kiley holds a special place in her heart. However, Sonia decides not to have kids. Though this isn't because she chooses work instead, she doesn't think she could do her job the same way with a child to

care for. Ultimately, she knows that people can create families in many different ways.

Following her divorce, Sonia begins to doubt the value of her job. She realizes she's becoming cynical, so she privately sets her sights on becoming a judge. Bob Morgenthau, however, gives Sonia several high profile cases to try to retain her. She successfully prosecutes the Tarzan Murderer and a series of horrifying child pornography cases. When she finishes the last case, she quits. At this time, Nelson is diagnosed with HIV. His death at age 29 haunts Sonia—he was always smarter, but he said before he died that he didn't have the drive that Sonia does.

Sonia accepts a job at Pavia & Harcourt, a tiny but surprisingly progressive law firm. She discovers mentors in Dave Botwinik, who's extremely fair, and Fran Bernstein, who writes extremely well and is immersed in the emerging field of intellectual property. She asks Sonia to help her represent Fendi. Sonia soon becomes good friends with the Fendis. She also begins to work on her image—people are often afraid of her brisk nature when they first meet her. During Sonia's fourth year at the firm, she makes partner. However, George Pavia and Dave make it clear that they know Sonia is going to be a judge and simply ask that she stay with Pavia & Harcourt until this happens. Fran dies of breast cancer in the spring, and Sonia is forced to confront her own mortality. Though diabetes has seemed like a nonissue for much of her life, Sonia has several frightening sugar lows that might have killed her had friends not come to her rescue. She vows to be more open about her diabetes and her life in general with her friends. She also vows to work on her relationship with Mami. Mami points out that she didn't grow up observing kindness and empathy, but by being honest with each other, their relationship improves and grows closer.

In 1990, Sonia returns from a Christmas vacation to find an application to be a judge on her desk; New York Senator Moynihan wants to nominate her. She interviews a few weeks later and insists that while she's only 36, she's spent her life learning to do hard things, and this will be no different. It takes a year and a half, but the Senate confirms her in 1992. Mami and her boyfriend, Omar, move to Florida after Sonia's confirmation, and Sonia also learns that Titi Aurora died. Six years later, Sonia is nominated to the Second Circuit Court of Appeals and marries Mami and Omar as her first act in that capacity. She hopes she'll continue to evolve as a judge, and she feels grateful for the friends and family who helped her ultimately get to the Supreme Court. She feels blessed.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Sonia Sotomayor – Sonia Sotomayor is the author and protagonist of the memoir. Sonia is raised speaking Spanish in a

tight-knit Puerto Rican community in the Bronx. At seven years old, she's diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. This diagnosis, coupled with her parents' constant fighting, forces her to be self-sufficient and independent. It's not until Papi dies when she's nine that things begin to get easier for Sonia, as after this, Mami begins speaking English at home, consequently giving Sonia a better grasp on the language and her schooling. Sonia is a dedicated student and throughout high school, college at Princeton, and law school at Yale, she makes a point to apply herself to her studies. She insists that her success is a result of her optimism and the people who helped her, but that she also couldn't have done it without the drive to apply herself to her studies. Though Sonia marries after she graduates from Princeton, she and Kevin only stay married for a few years. However, Sonia makes a point to cultivate the kinds of deep friendships that turn into chosen family. She never has children of her own, but she adores the children of her friends and family. As she did throughout her education, Sonia seeks to constantly get better and work harder in her professional life. Her first job at the New York City DA's Office introduces her to the intricacies of criminal justice, though it ultimately makes her feel as though she's becoming cynical. In her job with the firm Pavia & Harcourt, she dives into the world of intellectual property, becomes a partner in four years, and represents the Fendi brand. All of this prepares her to ultimately become a judge at the end of the memoir. Following her time at the DA's Office, Sonia embarks on a self-improvement journey, becoming more open about her diabetes and working hard to improve her relationship with Mami. Throughout her educational and professional life, she works with various public service organizations and connect with mentors who show her what it means to be proudly Puerto Rican and serve one's community.

Mami / Celina Sotomayor – Celina Sotomayor is Sonia's mother. Throughout Sonia's youth and young adulthood, she and Mami have a tense and cold relationship. Sonia learns much later in life that this is because Mami had no model of what a loving parenting relationship was like: her father left around the time Mami was born and Mami's mother was unwell, so Sonia's siblings raised her. Though she insists that her siblings did their best—and fortunately, sent her to school—Mami's brother, Mayo, was physically abusive. Mami only began to find herself and feel like part of a family after joining the Women's Army Corps and serving in New York, where she met Papi. Now a nurse, Mami works the late shift at the local hospital so she can escape the house and her husband. When she is home, she and Papi fight constantly, and she's not a warm presence to her children either. She's devastated when Papi dies, but his death brings a number of positive changes to the family. A firm believer in education, Mami sends Sonia and Junior to Catholic school for their entire school careers, but after Papi's death she also begins speaking English at home, which consequently helps her children succeed in school. Her willingness to

absorb all sorts of people into her inner circle means that Sonia's apartment becomes the meeting place for all her school friends, and Mami relishes the opportunity to keep an eye on the teens. Throughout her life, she remains close to her oldest sister, Titi Aurora. Titi Aurora comes to live with Mami when they move to Co-op City and though they argue, Sonia recognizes that something binds the women together. Even though Mami doesn't entirely understand what Sonia is getting herself into as she attends Princeton and Yale, Mami supports Sonia every step of the way. They live together briefly as adults during Sonia and Kevin's divorce, and after, as Sonia works to better her relationships, she and Mami finally begin to open up to each other. Mami ultimately becomes a far more loving and demonstrative person by the time Sonia becomes a judge.

Titi Aurora – Titi Aurora is Mami's eldest sister; she's about 13 or 14 years older. Titi Aurora marries an older man at age 16 to escape their mother's household and their mother's failing health. However, Titi Aurora doesn't abandon her family—she returns every few weeks to collect piecework from women who sew handkerchiefs, and she asks Mami to hem two-dozen handkerchiefs every week as her contribution to the family. With the proceeds, Titi Aurora provides Mami with shoes and clothing. When Mami's mother finally dies, Mami goes to live with Titi Aurora in the city. To support her younger sister, Titi Aurora helps procure Mami a false birth certificate so Mami can join the Women's Army Corps. Titi Aurora is a regular presence in Sonia's life in the Bronx. Sonia attends church with Titi Aurora when she becomes disillusioned with the priest at Blessed Sacrament following Papi's death, and when Mami moves the family to Co-op City, Titi Aurora comes to live with them. During this time, Sonia resents Titi Aurora's presence, as Titi Aurora is frugal to a fault and takes issue with the fact that Mami buys things that she considers luxuries—and on top of that, Sonia believes that Titi Aurora is around to help keep an eye on any teenage rebellion or rule-breaking. Regardless, Sonia recognizes that Titi Aurora and Mami are connected to each other in a deep way that she'll never fully understand. As Sonia grows up, she begins to place Titi Aurora's life in the wider context of the Puerto Rican immigrant experience. Titi Aurora works illegally in the garment industry in New York, but she also values honesty, rules, and hard work. The one thing she loves and that allows her to loosen up is pro wrestling, which she watches with Kenny Moy on TV. Titi Aurora dies right after Sonia becomes a judge and Mami moves to Florida with Omar.

Abuelita – Abuelita is Sonia's paternal grandmother. Abuelita is the life of every party and the center of her large Puerto Rican family's universe in the Bronx. She's extremely devoted to blood family, but in-laws and friends don't receive the same unconditional love and support. Thus, while Sonia and Nelson are the favorite grandchildren and enjoy her unwavering love and support, Abuelita blames Mami, her daughter-in-law, for Papi's alcoholism and eventual death. A firm believer in

traditional Puerto Rican herbal remedies, she concocts a remedy that she believes will cure Sonia's diabetes and is shaken when it doesn't work. Before Papi's death, Abuelita throws weekly parties on Saturdays for the family. She's an excellent cook and also has the gift of being able to commune with the spirits. She and her husband, Gallego, hold séances with the spirits at the end of every party, after they're sure that any children still there are asleep. When Mami moves her family out of the tenements where Abuelita lives and into the projects, Abuelita is angry and incredulous—despite the fact that within a few years, she and the rest of the family follow. She's shattered when Papi dies; his death heralds the end of her parties and Sonia perceives that it dampens Abuelita's spirit permanently. Following Gallego's death several years later, Abuelita immediately moves to a senior home, unwilling to go on alone without him. Throughout Sonia's first semester at Princeton, Abuelita sends her a dollar every week. The envelopes stop when Abuelita is diagnosed with advanced ovarian cancer. She dies while Sonia is home for Christmas after demanding a final cigarette on her deathbed. Even after Abuelita's death, Sonia feels as though Abuelita is still protecting her. Abuelita also provided a model of how to live one's life in service to others.

Nelson – Nelson is Sonia's same-age cousin and Tío Benny's son. As kids, Nelson and Sonia are extremely close. Nelson is up for anything that Sonia comes up with, and they often get into trouble for their shenanigans. Nelson is a brilliant student, and Sonia believes that there's no way that Nelson could *not* become a doctor, as Tío Benny wants him to. Sonia and Nelson's relationship begins to fall apart as they enter high school. Nelson's real love is music, a passion his father doesn't support. He begins to pull away from Sonia, focuses on music, and ultimately becomes addicted to heroin in high school. Sonia loses contact with him for years at a time because of her disappointment in him, but they reconnect when they're in their late 20s. After joining the military, mostly cleaning up, marrying, and having a daughter, Nelson is diagnosed with one of the first cases of HIV contracted through sharing needles. As his illness worsens, he and Sonia talk often and Nelson begs for forgiveness. When Sonia expresses confusion and sadness that Nelson didn't manage to succeed despite his supportive family and intelligence, Nelson insists that he couldn't succeed on brains alone. He lacks Sonia's tenacity and discipline; he's never able to apply himself like she does. Not long after the birth of his second child, right before he'd turn 30, Nelson dies.

Junior – Junior is Sonia's little brother who is three years younger than her. When they're kids, Sonia finds Junior extremely obnoxious, though adults like him. Where Sonia is belligerent and difficult, Junior is easygoing and accepting of anything. He and Sonia fight viciously and physically at home, though Sonia protects him fiercely when bullies pick on him at school. This ends when Sonia is in middle school, as she

recognizes Junior is getting big enough that she won't be able to keep winning for long. After this, they turn to tattling on each other. Junior is a quiet kid who feels overshadowed by Sonia, though the two eventually become very close. He's extremely intelligent and hardworking, but he only begins to distinguish himself academically after Sonia graduates from high school. He benefits from an affirmative action program that puts minority students through med school for free, and like Sonia, he gets through it by applying himself and working hard. He marries a Polish woman named Tracey and they have a daughter named Kiley, in addition to adopting a set of twins. Junior has no memories of Papi, since Junior was only six when Papi dies, and Sonia believes that Junior is able to successfully figure out what it means to be a man and a father all on his own.

Papi / Juli Sotomayor – Juli Sotomayor is Sonia's father. During Sonia's lifetime, Papi struggles with alcoholism and alcoholic neuropathy. He and Mami fight constantly, which makes Sonia anxious and watchful from a young age. She understands that Papi's alcoholism is out of his control, so though she's sad for him, she doesn't resent him. This is partially due to the fact that Papi is still a dedicated parent; he takes on the work of shopping for and feeding the family, and he and Sonia often run errands together. He dies when Sonia is nine due to complications from alcoholism. It's not until years later that Sonia learns about how bright, romantic, and full of life Papi was as a young man. She discovers that he was extremely talented at math, but his mother, Abuelita, wouldn't allow him to leave to attend college on a scholarship—he was the firstborn and shared a special bond with his mother. He was an artist and a dancer, and he taught Mami how to love and be happy in a way that was entirely new to her. Though Sonia is sad to lose her father, she also recognizes that life will be easier without him.

Kevin Noonan – Kevin is Sonia's husband for seven years. They meet in high school and Kevin's compliments, unlike most of the others she receives, seem genuine and make her feel seen. From the moment that Sonia introduces Kevin to Abuelita, everyone knows that they'll marry. Sonia insists that though her relationship with Kevin is comfortable and companionable, they never really think critically about what their relationship means or what marriage might mean for them. Following their graduations from Princeton and SUNY at Stony Brook, they marry so that Kevin can accompany Sonia to law school at Yale. During this time, Kevin gets accepted to a graduate program at Princeton that he loves. Several years into Sonia's job at the DA's office, however, their marriage begins to fall apart. Kevin admits that he'd like to be needed in their relationship—though he doesn't resent Sonia for her independence, he needs something different. They divorce amicably, though the split is difficult for their shared friends.

Judge Rothwax – Judge Rothwax is a New York City judge with a reputation for being difficult, cantankerous, and exacting.

Sonia wins him over by promising to be ready for trial on a short timeline, so she doesn't suffer as other lawyers do—he once puts a defense lawyer in jail for preventing a trial from starting. He's known by various epithets that suggest he's evil, but he's wildly intelligent and has an excellent memory. Part of his reputation comes from a controversial book he wrote in which he proposed abolishing rules that he thinks hinder prosecutors and police. He came to these views after he became disillusioned in his earlier career as a civil rights advocate. Though Sonia disagrees with some of his views and dislikes what she refers to as his “Prince of Darkness persona,” he mentors her and shows her what it's like to be a judge.

Kenny Moy – Kenny Moy is the student coach for the girls' team of the Forensics Club at Sonia's high school. He's extremely intelligent and is one of only a handful of Chinese students at the school. He and Sonia become friends quickly; he often watches pro wrestling and engages in bilingual conversations with Titi Aurora that baffle Sonia. Ken is skilled at teaching Sonia and the other girls on the team to analyze chains of logic so they can more effectively take down their opponents, and he encourages Sonia to be less emotional in her debates. He's the first student from Cardinal Spellman High School to be accepted into an Ivy League school, and he encourages young Sonia to also pursue an Ivy League education. Ken settles in California, and he and Sonia remain friends long after they both graduate from Princeton.

José Cabranes – José Cabranes is Sonia's first mentor. They meet at Yale, thanks to an introduction from one of Sonia's younger friends. José is an expert on Puerto Rico and issues of citizenship, served as special counsel to the government of Puerto Rico, and founded the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. Sonia finds him brilliant and engaging, and he asks her to work for him over the summer during their first meeting. She assists with research on his book on the legislative history of US citizenship for Puerto Ricans, and he models what it means to be a “citizen-lawyer.” He's generous with time, knowledge, and influence. Most importantly, he shows Sonia that it's possible to be both a successful lawyer and academic and Puerto Rican.

Dawn Cardi – Dawn Cardi is a public defender at the New York City DA's office. She's a natural defense attorney, as she distrusts authority and wants to stick up for the underdog whenever possible. Though the stereotype that prosecutors and defenders can't be friends persists, Dawn and Sonia nevertheless form a strong friendship during their time working together—and sometimes against—each other. Their regular conversations help Sonia remember the power of mercy, compassion, and fairness, and they occasionally work together to lessen sentences when they both know a harsh sentence would ruin a defendant's life. Following her divorce, Sonia moves into the same apartment building in Brooklyn where Dawn lives, and Dawn is distraught when Sonia insists

on moving out when she becomes a judge (judges must live in their district, but judges often break this rule).

Fran Bernstein – Fran Bernstein is a lawyer at Pavia & Harcourt; she soon becomes Sonia's friend and mentor. She distinguished herself in law school at Columbia and only works part-time when Sonia knows her. Unlike Sonia and other women, Fran is willing to type openly in the office—and she's an excellent writer. A Republican because she believes it's important to align oneself with power, she attempts to convince Sonia to register with the party, but is unsuccessful in this regard. Fran is a pioneer in intellectual property law and brings Sonia along with her. She asks Sonia to take Fendi's lawsuit against a retail chain to court, as she's impressed with Sonia's ability to prep witnesses. She dies of breast cancer right after Sonia becomes a partner at the firm.

Robert “Bob” Morgenthau – Robert Morgenthau is a New York district attorney when Sonia starts at the DA's office. He's not much of a talker, but he's very good at his job and takes an interest in Sonia. Despite the fact that he has almost no budget to work with, he runs an efficient operation and implements policies that help his employees, such as allowing one employee to follow a case from beginning to end (rather than passing cases up to more senior employees after newer employees perform the difficult work). He becomes Sonia's patron as she begins her journey to be a judge.

Dr. Fisher – Dr. Fisher is the beloved local doctor in the Bronx. He manages to form close connections with all of his patients and treats most of Sonia's family. He's the one who diagnoses Sonia's diabetes, and he takes special care of her family. She suspects that he knows Papi won't live long due to his alcoholism and alcoholic neuropathy, so he forces Papi to take out a life insurance policy that eventually pays for Papi's burial. He also leaves Mami \$5000 in his will, which enables Mami to move Sonia and Junior to Co-op City.

Marguerite Gudewicz – Marguerite Gudewicz is Sonia's best friend in high school. Marguerite is Jewish; her father is German and her mother is Polish, so although Marguerite's father is still prejudiced against Puerto Ricans, he still understands the value of standing up for others. As adults, Marguerite is Sonia's maid of honor in her wedding and years later, she and her husband, Tom, help Sonia move out of her shared apartment with Kevin. Marguerite also teaches Sonia basic life skills and in particular, how to save money and responsibly take on and pay back debt.

Richard Maddicko / The Tarzan Murderer – Maddicko becomes known as the Tarzan Murderer due to his practice of acrobatically swinging into upper-story apartments through windows, stealing whatever he can (usually, not much; his targets tend to be low-income individuals and families) and killing anyone in the apartment, whether or not they resist or fight back. Sonia finds him especially disturbing because he exhibits no hint of remorse during the trial. His is one of the

final high-profile cases that Sonia prosecutes in her final months at the New York DA's office.

Mami's Father – Mami's father is a cold man whom Mami and Sonia meet once at the same time, when he's ill in the hospital as an elderly man. He left Mami's mother when Mami was born, so Mami never knew him when she was a child. The resentment and anger that Sonia sees Mami hold for her father eventually impresses upon Sonia that she doesn't want that kind of relationship with Mami, which spurs her to work on their relationship.

Miss Katz – Miss Katz is Sonia's history teacher for her junior year of high school. She's the first to ask Sonia to synthesize information into compelling arguments rather than just regurgitate facts, and Sonia remembers her later in college when professors ask her to do the same. During high school, however, Miss Katz is the only teacher to ask this of her students. For this—and possibly because she's politically active and progressive—she only teaches at Cardinal Spellman for one year.

Miriam – Miriam is Sonia's cousin and Nelson's younger sister. Miriam is timid, shy, and disinterested in stepping even a toe out of line as a child, which makes Nelson Sonia's partner in crime. Miriam also manages to always keep her dresses neat and her curls in ribbons, which Sonia cannot do. As they get older, though, Miriam and Sonia grow closer and even sign up to be maritime cadets together—though mostly so they can keep an eye on Nelson. Miriam earns a degree in bilingual education.

The Partner – The partner is a man at Shaw, Pittman, Potts & Trowbridge, a firm that recruits at Yale. During a recruitment dinner with Sonia, the partner makes the racist insinuation that Sonia and other students admitted thanks to affirmative action policies aren't as smart as their white counterparts. He refuses to back down later, when Sonia calls him out on his racism. A tribunal at Yale Law eventually gets the firm to apologize to Sonia, and the incident garners national attention.

Scott Rafferty – Scott Rafferty is Sonia's friend at Princeton who, after a summer job as an associate at Shaw, Pittman, Potts & Trowbridge, encourages Sonia to attend a recruiting dinner with one of the firm's partners. Even though he had a great time working there, he's on Sonia's side when the partner is awful and racist to her. He gives up the guarantee of a post-law school job with the firm in order to support her.

Tío Mayo – Tío Mayo is one of Mami's older brothers who was put in charge of caring for his much younger sister after Titi Aurora married. He was a violent and exacting caregiver and often beat Mami, which Mami resents him for. He saw Mami as trouble. However, as an adult, Mami sees that he was just doing his best in a difficult situation, and fortunately, he did send Mami to school.

John Fried – John Fried is the bureau chief at the New York

DA's office and Sonia's mentor. She goes to him when she doesn't feel she can, in good conscience, prosecute a case, as he's committed to fairness. He gives Sonia the freedom to exercise her judgment and gain confidence, even when he doesn't always agree with what she chooses.

Warren Murray – Warren Murray is the bureau chief after John Fried. Sonia initially worries about working under him, as he has a reputation for being soft-spoken but tough. Sonia's first experience with him is on a case in which the accused is clearly innocent. Rather than just agree with Sonia, Murray plays devil's advocate and makes Sonia indignantly refuse to prosecute the case. Though she doesn't appreciate his flair for the dramatic, she does appreciate his support.

Tío Benny – Tío Benny is one of Sonia's paternal uncles and Nelson, Miriam, and Eddie's father. He cares often for Sonia and Junior, especially while Papi is still alive, and he's one of the uncles who comments on how much of a mess Mami and Papi's apartment is. Sonia envies her cousins because of how involved and loving Tío Benny is, especially compared to Papi. His dream is for Nelson to become a doctor.

Alessandro – Alessandro is a young Italian lawyer and an in-law of the Fendi family. He acts as the interpreter when Fendi works with Pavia & Harcourt. Sonia and Alessandro—along with his wife, Fe—become close friends. Alessandro is one of the few people who knows about Sonia's diabetes, and he saves her life during a wedding in Italy that all three attend.

Dolores Chavez – Dolores Chavez is Sonia's freshman year roommate at Princeton. Dolores is Hispanic and from New Mexico, and Sonia initially sees her as an innocent, shy country girl. However, as the girls get to know each other, they become good friends. Dolores often plays her guitar and sings, and one of Sonia's fondest memories is of listening to Dolores and her father play a duet while Sonia and Kevin are visiting.

Dave Botwinik – Dave Botwinik is a senior partner whom Sonia turns to for advice and mentorship. He's honorable and professional, and Sonia admires him. He also teaches her about grain markets and asks her to help in grain arbitrations. Dave is one of Sonia's loudest cheerleaders as she begins the application and vetting process to become a judge.

Theresa Bartenope – Theresa Bartenope is a secretary at Pavia & Harcourt whom Sonia convinces to work for her as a paralegal. Though Theresa is initially terrified of Sonia, the two eventually become close friends. Sonia says that Theresa still works for her, and she's the one to remind Sonia to be kind or less intimidating.

Nancy Gray – Nancy Gray is Sonia's friend from the DA's Office. She's instrumental in helping Sonia after her divorce, offering her a place to sleep, a listening ear, and shopping trips. She also encourages Sonia to purchase a share in a group house on Fire Island, though Sonia ends up going with a different house than the one Nancy is in.

Alfred Titi Aurora's son and Sonia's cousin, though since he's 16 years her senior, he's more of an uncle figure to her. He's one of the few family members who visits the house when Sonia is little due to Papi's alcoholism. Alfred often drives Papi places and runs errands for the family.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Gallego – Gallego is Abuelita's husband, but not the father of her children; they married in Puerto Rico when Papi was a young teenager. He's a musical man and runs the record player at Abuelita's Saturday night parties. He dies of Parkinson's disease several years after Papi's death, which devastates Abuelita.

Mami's Mother – Mami's mother was unwell, though it's unclear what affliction plagued her. By the time Mami, her last child, was born, she was mentally unwell in addition to physically unwell. Mami's father also leaves her around this time. She dies when Mami is still very young.

Father Gigante – Father Gigante is the priest at St. Athanasius, where Sonia attends church with Titi Aurora as a young person. Sonia discovers in high school that Father Gigante is more than just a priest; he's an activist for tenants' rights, and Miss Katz describes him as a freedom fighter.

Carmelo – Carmelo is a cute boy at Sonia's middle school. He befriends Sonia and keeps other kids from bullying her. She helps him with his schoolwork, though she never lets him cheat off of her.

Titi Carmen – Titi Carmen is Sonia's aunt, Tío Benny's wife and Nelson's mother. She gets Sonia a job at a women's clothing store when Sonia is in high school, around the time that she and Tío Benny divorce.

Professor Weiss – Professor Weiss is a professor of history at Princeton and the first female head of the department. She continues Miss Katz's project of asking Sonia to *analyze* history, not just regurgitate facts, and she calls out Sonia's poor English grammar.

Felix Lopez – Felix Lopez is one of Sonia's closest friends at Yale. He's Puerto Rican and from East Harlem. Sonia describes him as having a big heart and as a person committed to helping others.

Rudy Aragon – Rudy Aragon is one of Sonia's closest friends at Yale. He and Sonia co-chair the minority student group YALA, and his goal after law school is to become a high profile and high-earning lawyer.

Drew Ryce – Drew Ryce is one of Sonia's closest friends at Yale. He runs the bar for grad students and grudgingly promotes Sonia from bouncer to bartender to avoid arguing with her about sex discrimination.

Margarita Rosa – Margarita Rosa is Sonia's friend at Princeton. She's also Puerto Rican and grew up in the Bronx, which is in

part why she and Sonia get along immediately. She encourages Sonia to join Acción Puertorriqueña.

Clemente D'Alessio and Scott Hyman – Clemente D'Alessio and Scott Hyman are the defendants in the series of child pornography cases that Sonia prosecutes in her final months at the New York City DA's office. Despite the heinousness of their crimes, they only go to prison for a few years each.

Titi Maria – Titi Maria is Mayo's first wife. She helped to raise Mami, so after she and Mayo split up, Mami maintains her relationship with Titi Maria. Mami, Sonia, and Junior often stay with her when they visit Puerto Rico.

Bisabuelita Ciriata – Bisabuelita Ciriata is Sonia's paternal great-grandmother, whom she meets in Puerto Rico on one of her summer trips to the island. Bisabuelita had 10 children, including Abuelita.

Senator Moynihan – Senator Moynihan is the New York Democratic senator who appoints Sonia to the Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit.

Kiley – Kiley is Junior and Tracey's oldest daughter, and Sonia's first niece. Born prematurely at less than two pounds, her birth is a stressful time for the entire family.

Omar – Omar is Mami's second husband. As her first act as a judge of the Court of Appeals, Sonia marries Mami and Omar. The couple then promptly moves to Florida.

Gilmar – Gilmar is Sonia's best friend in elementary school. He and his family move to California.

Donna Renella – Donna Renella is one of the smartest girls in Sonia's fifth grade class; Sonia asks her how to study.

Professor Winn – Professor Winn is the professor at Princeton who facilitates the course on Puerto Rican history.

Ana – Ana is Mami's best friend and Moncho's wife. She often cares for Sonia and Junior after school.

Moncho – Moncho is the husband of Mami's best friend, Ana. Junior idolizes him when he's a child.

Monsignor Hart – Monsignor Hart is the head of Blessed Sacrament.

Carmin – Carmin is Mami's first friend in the Women's Army Corps.

George Pavia – George Pavia is the managing partner at Pavia & Harcourt.

Tracey – Tracey is Junior's wife and Kiley's mother. She's Polish.



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.



OPTIMISM, DETERMINATION, AND ADVERSITY

My Beloved World follows the life of Associate Justice of the Supreme Court Sonia Sotomayor from her impoverished childhood in housing projects in the Bronx; through college at Princeton and law school at Yale; and ultimately, to her appointment to a federal judgeship at 38 years old. Throughout her memoir, Sotomayor attributes her remarkable achievements to her enduring sense of optimism and her unwavering willingness to work hard in the face of adversity. While she acknowledges that there are lots of reasons why a person might not be able to achieve the kind of success she's enjoyed, she nevertheless makes the case that to achieve one's dreams, one must approach life with a combination of optimism and determination.

Sotomayor is upfront about the fact that she believes her own optimistic nature is both an innate personality trait and a reaction to adverse circumstances as a child. To illustrate this, Sotomayor opens her memoir with the story of being diagnosed with type 1 diabetes at age seven. At the time of her diagnosis in 1962, diabetes was essentially a death sentence, so it only intensified Sotomayor's already fraught home life. But rather than helplessly listen to her parents fight about who was going to give her the insulin shot, the young Sotomayor took matters into her own hands and learned how to administer the shot herself. Sotomayor then explains how her parents' constant fighting, fueled by her Papi's alcoholism, made her constantly vigilant and instilled in her a sense of independence and self-preservation. From an early age, she learned to treat everything—from a scary health diagnosis, to difficulties at school or fighting parents—as a problem to solve. This framing is something she holds onto throughout her life, as it's one that enables her to frame adversity in a way that feels more manageable and approachable.

However, Sotomayor also points out that her success cannot be attributed simply to her optimism and her proclivity for problem solving; rather, there's also an element of luck—and it's necessary to accept help from others. When Papi dies two years after Sotomayor's diagnosis, her home life changes dramatically and becomes infinitely more supportive and less stressful. After a stern talking-to from Sotomayor, Mami throws herself into her work and taking care of her children, which allows Sotomayor to focus on doing well in school. This, Sotomayor acknowledges, was a major stroke of luck—one that not all children experience especially after the death of a parent. Sotomayor has been so successful thanks to these strokes of luck and the fact that Mami has consistently supported her daughter.

Additionally, Sotomayor recognizes the value of intentionally

putting herself in difficult situations so she can practice and improve, something she does most notably when she takes her first post-law school job at the New York City DA's office. There, everything is difficult—the nature and sheer volume of the work means that new hires must figure out how to navigate via a combination of trial and error (when they're on their own in front of a judge) and by asking for help from more experienced individuals in the office whenever they can. During this time, however, Sotomayor discovers that part of retaining one's optimistic outlook means being able to look at one's life and identify areas that are hindering that outlook—which in this case, happens to be the job itself. As a prosecutor, Sotomayor has to approach every case she takes as though every defendant is guilty. And though they often are, she ultimately realizes that this outlook makes her cynical and cold to the people around her. Thus, Sotomayor concludes that sheer determination isn't always enough—one must balance their determination by organizing their life, to the greatest extent possible, in such a way as to preserve their mental health and sense of optimism.

As Sotomayor dives into the various qualities and circumstances that helped propel her to success, she also considers why some people in her position struggle—and for the most part, she suggests that tenacity and the willingness to work tirelessly is the one thing that sets her apart from others. Her most frequent comparison is to her same-age cousin, Nelson, who she describes as the smarter and luckier one when they were children; Sotomayor envied his involved father and his healthier family situation, and Abuelita loved both her and Nelson more than her other grandchildren. However, this didn't stop Nelson from getting involved with drugs in high school, dropping out of every college program he tried, and ultimately dying from one of the first identified cases of HIV contracted through sharing needles. How, Sotomayor asks, could someone as poised for success as Nelson succumb to such an avoidable fate? Though Sotomayor acknowledges that there are a variety of reasons or circumstances beyond an individual's control that make success less likely, Nelson suggests plainly that his intelligence wasn't enough to guarantee success when he didn't have the desire to sit down and apply himself to his studies or a job. With this, Sotomayor makes it clear that being successful in life and being able to tackle adversity isn't as simple as just being optimistic or just having supportive family to offer encouragement. Rather, people have a greater chance of success when they have the drive to apply themselves to whatever task is in front of them.



FAMILY AND FRIENDSHIP

Growing up, Sotomayor's family situation was difficult and anxiety inducing, but she nevertheless goes to great lengths in her memoir to acknowledge all the ways in which her family supported her

along her journey. As she gets older, marries, and ultimately divorces, Sotomayor extends this idea of a loving, supportive family to the friends she meets in college, law school, and in her jobs that follow. Alongside her optimism and tenacity, Sotomayor positions the supportive family and friends who become chosen family as essential elements of her success. However, Sotomayor doesn't simply stop at giving credit to the people who have supported her throughout her life. Rather, she makes the case that if one wants to cultivate a rich, supportive network of friends and family, it's important to be a good friend and family member in return, even when this takes work.

Sotomayor's early experiences with her family form her baseline for what familial relationships should look like; namely, she learns that they should be supportive, loyal, and extensive. Though she acknowledges that her family isn't perfect—Papi is an alcoholic, Mami seems cold and unfeeling at times, and Abuelita unfairly blames Mami for things that aren't her fault—the vast network of aunts and uncles that care for Sotomayor, her little brother, Junior, and their numerous cousins are nevertheless strong and loyal. They come together to support Mami and her children after Papi dies when Sotomayor is nine, and even as Mami moves her children from housing project to housing project, the rest of the extended family eventually follows. No matter where Sotomayor goes, she's surrounded by a loving, caring community that will always go above and beyond for those they call family.

As Sotomayor gets older and especially after Papi's death, Sotomayor begins to rely more on Mami and her friends from school. Importantly, Mami is thrilled that during high school, their apartment is where Sotomayor and her friends congregate to hang out, plan their runs for student government, and sneak beer—and Mami believes that providing this close, supportive environment is what keeps Sotomayor and her friends from getting into trouble, as so many in their drug-riddled neighborhood do. Thus, by the time that Sotomayor leaves the Bronx for Princeton, she understands the importance of finding a community of friends and family for herself, no matter where she is. This is why, when Sotomayor introduces each new phase of her life, she begins by describing the friends she made during the coming episode. Even more important to her than what she did are the friends she made—many of whom, at some point or another, are invited to Mami's apartment in the Bronx for Thanksgiving, an invitation that drives home their closeness and importance in Sotomayor's life.

As Sotomayor's marriage with her high school sweetheart, Kevin, dissolves and as she learns more about Mami's early life, she begins to see even more clearly that it's absolutely essential to have family, friends, or both to draw on in difficult times—it's impossible to go through any major upheaval alone. Mami's early life was difficult and lonely; Mami's mother was mentally unwell, her father was absent, and her older siblings

cared for her. Marrying Papi meant marrying into a huge and complex group of new friends and family members (though Sotomayor makes it clear that Abuelita, Papi's mother, always saw in-laws more as friends than as family members). For the first time, Mami was able to enjoy the company and the safety of being around people who, for the most part, supported her, admired her, and helped her raise her children. While Mami finds this community as she enters a marriage, Sotomayor cultivates it as she exits hers; she leans heavily on her friends, both old and new, as she moves out of her apartment she shared with Kevin and back in with Mami. Particularly after her marriage ends, Sotomayor comes to understand more clearly than ever that one doesn't need to embark on the process of creating their own family through marriage and having children. Though part of her choice to not have children is due to the risks posed by her diabetes, Sotomayor nevertheless remains firm that even in her role as a beloved biological or chosen aunt, she can still make a positive impression in the lives of her friends' and family members' children.

After her divorce, Sotomayor deepens her understanding of what she suggests is the most important element of a relationship with a friend or family member: the necessity of being open and trusting. She and Kevin divorce after Sotomayor has spent several years working at the DA's office, where her work makes it easy to treat everyone with suspicion and cynicism. Thus, Sotomayor vows both to leave the job and to work on her own attitude as to not alienate her friends and family. Most importantly, Sotomayor vows to work on her relationship with Mami. Though Mami has consistently been supportive, she and Sotomayor have never been particularly close. However, as Sotomayor practices being more open and honest with Mami, Mami does the same in return. Sotomayor comes to realize that if she's open and trusting with her friends and family, they'll treat her with the same openness and trust—and that this is important for more reasons than just the relationships themselves. Sotomayor ultimately realizes that throughout her life, she's kept her diabetes diagnosis quiet from most of her friends and coworkers. Though this comes from an understandable place, given her family's poor reaction when she was diagnosed as a child, several dangerous low blood sugar episodes that she survives only because of luck or because someone who knew about her diabetes was able to advocate for her make it clear just how important it is to be open with one's friends. By becoming more open about her diabetes and her medical needs, Sotomayor shows that friendships and familial relationships must be rooted in openness and trust—otherwise, it's impossible for those relationships to be truly supportive.



EDUCATION AND LEARNING

Focusing more than half of its length on Sotomayor's younger, formative years, much of the

memoir is naturally taken up with Sotomayor's educational pursuits. However, Sotomayor makes it very clear that her life as a student doesn't end when she receives her JD degree from Yale Law—a degree doesn't automatically make her a lawyer, and what she learns in the classroom only makes up a fraction of what she considers her education. Through this, Sotomayor suggests that learning and education aren't confined to a classroom. Rather, learning must be a lifelong process if one wants to continue to better themselves and achieve their goals.

Before the age of nine, Sotomayor is a mediocre student. However, she soon learns that this is only because she doesn't have the right tools—namely, fluency in English—to help her succeed. Following Papi's death in the spring when Sotomayor is nine, Sotomayor spends the entire of the summer reading. Mami also begins to speak English at home, and when Sotomayor starts school in the fall, she finally feels able to strive for success. This becomes one of Sotomayor's most important lessons of the memoir: if children don't have what they need to succeed, especially in cases where there's a language barrier at play, they can never truly be successful. This, of course, isn't to say that everything suddenly becomes easy for young Sotomayor. Rather, she comes up with ways to make her learning more productive, such as by breaking up overwhelming tasks or ideas into smaller, more manageable chunks. She also learns how to ask for help; it's a transformative moment when she asks one girl in her high school exactly how to study for a test. With this, Sotomayor stresses that a person's aptitude or intelligence is only a small part of what makes them a successful student. Instead, academics hinges on having the right tools; knowing whom, how, and when to ask for help; and being willing to persevere when things get difficult.

However, as Sotomayor begins college and moves on to law school, she discovers that her past education was lacking in one important way: while her high school teachers asked her to regurgitate facts and figures, her college and law professors want to see her synthesize information and come up with arguments. Learning how to do this, she suggests, is what education should really be about. This shift in thinking is also what she insists is the first step to learning how to think like a lawyer—something that takes her years to feel comfortable and competent doing. And this shift, importantly, takes place mostly during Sotomayor's first post-law school job at the New York City District Attorney's office, not while she's still in school. There, by combining her knowledge of how to study with a work environment where she has to constantly form arguments as a prosecutor, she's finally able to make the shift. Though it can push a person in the direction of learning to think critically, school is no substitute for on-the-job practice.

Throughout the memoir, Sotomayor repeatedly makes the that it's one study skills (that is, *how* to go about learning something new) and one's willingness to learn anything at any time that makes a person a good student of life and, in her case, a good

lawyer. She notes that over the course of her career, she becomes an expert in such things as Fendi designer goods, as she represents Fendi in intellectual property suits; the American grain trade, since she assists a partner in reading over trade agreements to provide legal advice; and Puerto Rican maritime law, on which she writes a note for *The Yale Law Journal* that catapults her to sudden fame. These are all things she might not have chosen to learn about of her own volition, but things she needed to know about in order to do her job well. And in some cases, especially while at the DA's office, she must call on her ability to break things down and learn quickly in order to prepare for a case in mere hours or, in a best-case scenario, overnight. The additional bonus, she insists, is that having to learn about all these things makes her life far more interesting—and while she may need to have this expertise because she's a lawyer and a judge, these are nevertheless skills that will make anyone's life richer.

Sotomayor also suggests that the main reason why students who are otherwise much like her—that is, minority students who speak a language other than English at home—fail to do well in school is because of the language barrier and the systematic way that minority students have diminished access to education (especially during the time that Sotomayor was in school in the 1970s). Sotomayor insists that Mami's switch to English at home was a blessing that impressed upon her that she wasn't an unintelligent kid—she simply didn't understand what was going on in the classroom, something she believes is the case for many kids who speak English only at school. Once she understood what was going on, she was able to excel. She also mentions affirmative action policies, which had only been in place a few years when she began college (no students admitted via affirmative action had yet graduated when she started). By drawing out the obstacles that keep minority children in particular from succeeding and laying out the remedies, Sotomayor offers hope that children and adults following in her footsteps won't have to struggle as much or rely on unlikely changes at home to enjoy the same successes that she did. And furthermore, by making her support for these policy changes clear, Sotomayor insists that it's not only possible, but necessary to make education more accessible to everyone. Not everyone dreams of being a lawyer or a judge, but everyone, Sotomayor insists, should have access to an education that prepares them to be a lifelong student of any interest or profession.



PUERTO RICAN IDENTITY AND CULTURE

Sotomayor's Puerto Rican upbringing is a huge part of her identity, both in her personal life and in her work as a lawyer and, eventually, a judge. Both her parents and parts of their respective families immigrated to New York City (separately, but within weeks of each other) during World War II, and Sotomayor is thus raised in a tight-

knit Puerto Rican extended family. Especially as Sotomayor recounts her childhood experiences, she remains acutely aware of how she and her family members embodied what it meant to be Puerto Rican—but also how they frequently flouted tradition as they made their lives in the city. As she gets older and especially as she gets involved with minority student groups at Princeton and Yale Law, Sotomayor begins to fit her Puerto Rican identity into a much larger framework of Puerto Rican history, the immigrant experience, and the issues Puerto Rico still faces about its own identity. Sotomayor allows that while being Puerto Rican may have provided unique hurdles along her journey, she insists that learning to think about her identity in a variety of different ways while also finding ways to take pride in who she is have been major contributors to her success.

In the first part of her memoir, when Sotomayor focuses on her childhood and particularly on life before Papi dies when she's nine years old, Sotomayor describes her family's Puerto Rican culture as tight-knit, fun-loving, and focused on food and quality time spent together. She describes in detail her Abuelita's Saturday night parties—the delicious Puerto Rican food that Abuelita and all her aunts spend the day preparing for the parties, the cutthroat games of dominoes, and finally, Abuelita's séances after the children are in bed. All of this paints a picture of pride in Sotomayor's identity as a young Puerto Rican girl.

However, Sotomayor also notes that in a variety of ways, her nuclear family doesn't embody several aspects of Puerto Rican culture. Her mother, Mami, works a nurse in the local hospital and is the only woman of her generation who works. Papi, meanwhile, struggles with alcoholism—which the entire family blames Mami for, due to the family's overwhelming belief that women are always to blame for their husbands' shortcomings. By taking note of the ways in which her nuclear family is seemingly less Puerto Rican (at least in the eyes of the rest of the family), Sotomayor learns at an early age that there isn't one way to be Puerto Rican. This becomes even more apparent after Papi's death, which heralds the end of Abuelita's parties and sees Mami beginning to speak English rather than Spanish at home with her children. As times change—and as Mami sheds the burden of her husband—Mami, Sotomayor, and Junior embark on new ways to think of their identities.

As Sotomayor gets older and especially as she begins college, she begins to see her Puerto Rican roots in a more academic way rather than just thinking of it as a personal experience. Thus in college, when the opportunity arises, Sotomayor pushes for a class on Puerto Rican history. Having never studied Puerto Rican history, Sotomayor finds the class is eye-opening as she learns about its history of slavery, oppression, and mistreatment. However, because she grew up in a family where many members spent their youth in Puerto Rico, Sotomayor is able to put names and faces to the sorts of things

she reads in her class materials. For instance, when she reads about women making pennies for hemming handkerchiefs, she thinks of her Titi Aurora and her stories—she was one of those women hemming handkerchiefs. All of this begins to help her understand that lived experience, history, and school aren't at all separate. At school, a person can put their family history in context through what they learn and conversely, a person's family history can influence what a person chooses to study. Later, in law school, Sotomayor takes this a step further when she writes a note for *The Yale Law Journal* on Puerto Rican maritime law. The note gives her the opportunity to look at Puerto Rico in yet another light—a legal one—and the interest and conversation it generates after publication impresses upon her that her identity is something to celebrate and own. This experience helps Sotomayor see that she can take pride in her identity professionally, not just personally and academically.

However, it's nevertheless important to note that while Sotomayor may have had numerous opportunities to celebrate her identity professionally, academically, and within her family, she also experiences shocking incidents of racism and prejudice because she's Puerto Rican. When she begins her first year at Princeton, affirmative action had only been in existence for a few years; no minority students accepted because of affirmative action have graduated yet. Occasionally, students, alumni, and school officials make her feel like minorities don't belong because the government “forced” the school to accept them due to affirmative action, an attitude that Sotomayor encounters again and again over the course of her career. Despite this, Sotomayor remains firm in her insistence that minority students, professors, researchers, and employees in all fields are assets and belong—their differing experiences, upbringings, and backgrounds make the world a richer place. And most importantly, it's essential to accept and celebrate one's own identity if one wants to live a happy, fulfilled life, even if that identity is occasionally a hindrance.



MORALITY, JUSTICE, AND GIVING BACK

Given that Sonia Sotomayor is an Associate Justice on the Supreme Court of the United States, her memoir is naturally concerned with questions of morality, justice, and how to create a just and equitable society through legal means. However, Sotomayor doesn't stop at simply articulating how justice works on a grander scale or how it plays out in the life of a lawyer in private practice or at the local DA's office. Rather, Sotomayor makes the case that everyone, even people outside of the legal profession, have endless opportunities to uphold justice by behaving in ways that are good, moral, and helpful to others. Sotomayor positions this constant effort to give back and help others on a smaller scale as some of the most important work a person can do, even if a person also has the ability to enact change on a larger scale.

One of the many ways that a person can create these smaller positive changes in the world is to help make a path for others who hope to follow the same trajectory. Sotomayor recognizes that this is the only reason she knows to apply to Ivy League schools in the first place—a friend who graduated a year before her, Ken, calls her in the fall of her senior year and tells her to focus on the Ivies. Without Ken’s advice, Sotomayor would’ve had no idea what Ivy League schools even were, given that their Catholic high school pushes students toward religious colleges if they advocate for college at all. Sotomayor recognizes that by attending Princeton—and by joining the student groups that recruit and support new minority students—she can do exactly as Ken did and show other kids that it’s possible for a poor Latinx student to do well at a prestigious school. Visibility, she suggests, matters a great deal. Thus, through becoming the first Latinx person and one of the first female judges on the Supreme Court, Sotomayor is able to set an example for children who look like her or share her sex. Because she paved the way, they can more easily see themselves following in her footsteps.

However, Sotomayor suggests, it’s not enough to just be visible and to set an example. It’s also important to make it clear to others that racism, sexism, and other prejudice that holds many people back is both horrific and illegal, which she has the opportunity to do after a disastrous interview with a prestigious law firm while at Yale. During a dinner interview, a partner with the firm essentially suggests that Sotomayor wouldn’t be at Yale at all without affirmative action, implying that minority or female students aren’t as smart as the white and male students that the partner is used to interviewing. Rather than let the incident slide, Sotomayor reports it to a Yale student tribunal. When the tribunal rules in her favor and the firm eventually issues a public apology, she suggests that this sets an important precedent and a warning to other powerful firms and institutions: bad behavior like the partner exhibited won’t be tolerated by Yale. This, in turn, makes Yale a more welcoming place for minority students, as it shows that the school will stand up for its students when they face discrimination and prejudice. This incident allows Sotomayor to continue her project of helping others who will come after her, as her willingness to stand up for herself and seek recourse means that someone else might not face this issue at all.

Finally, through her observations and experiences over the course of her career, Sotomayor also comes to understand that employers and bosses have a responsibility to make the workplace more accessible, flexible, and accepting of women and mothers if society expects women to work. Though Sotomayor doesn’t suffer as much as some of her peers do due given that she never has children, Sotomayor still witnesses some of her female peers experience discrimination due to their sex or their reproductive choices. This is why in her capacity as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, she

always allows the children of her clerks to call their parents at work—as the boss, she has the power to make these changes that might not rise to the level of something that might appear in front of a judge in court, but rather are small changes that she and others in charge can make to make the world a better, fairer place. By making small changes like these, Sotomayor proposes that it’s not enough to rule fairly on high profile court cases about affirmative action, discrimination, or workplace laws; laws and lawsuits alone won’t solve the world’s problems. Rather, everyone who has the power to help others should do so by setting an example, standing up for themselves and for others, and creating friendly, open environments for everyone.



SYMBOLS

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



THE RAINCOAT

The white raincoat that Mami buys for Sotomayor to take to Princeton symbolizes Sotomayor’s burgeoning adult identity and her coming of age. This is the first—and practically only—piece of clothing that Sotomayor ever falls in love with. In Mami’s eyes, this suggests that Sotomayor is becoming more comfortable finding her own style and dressing up—something that Mami, who loves fashion, is thrilled about. Even more importantly though, Sotomayor and Mami purchase the raincoat for Sotomayor to take to Princeton, where Sotomayor will begin her higher education and enter the adult world. The adult world that Sotomayor eventually inhabits, however, is very different from Mami’s adult world—Sotomayor makes more money even in her low-paying jobs than Mami ever does as a nurse—and the expensive, luxurious, and white coat symbolizes Sotomayor’s transition into that world of wealth and privilege.





QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *My Beloved World* published in 2014.

Prologue Quotes

☹☹ If my parents couldn’t pick up the syringe without panicking, an even darker prospect loomed: my grandmother wouldn’t be up to the job either. That would be the end of my weekly sleepovers at her apartment and my only escape from the gloom at home. It then dawned on me: if I needed to have these shots every day for the rest of my life, the only way I’d survive was to do it myself.

Related Characters: Sonia Sotomayor (speaker), Abuelita, Papi / Juli Sotomayor, Mami / Celina Sotomayor

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 4



Explanation and Analysis

As the young Sonia listens to her parents fight over who's going to give her the insulin shot, she realizes that she must learn to give herself the shots if she wants to have any control over her life. In describing her diagnosis and the relationship between the tension at home and her diabetes, Sonia begins to show how she developed her unshakable sense of self-sufficiency and determination that follows her throughout her life. She learned from an early age that she can't always trust the adults around her to ease her way or help her—if she wants something, she needs to work for it herself and figure out how to get there mostly on her own. Though her diabetes diagnosis is one of the clearest places this mindset first emerges, this kind of thinking follows Sonia throughout her school career. For instance, while Mami's choice to begin speaking English at home helps Sonia understand what's going on at school, but Sonia still has to apply herself, figure out how to study, and put in the work that launches her to the top of her class. Her willingness to do the work, which began to crystallize with her diagnosis, is the main quality she has to thank for her success.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☝☝ I often stewed with righteous anger over physical punishments—my own or others'—especially when they seemed disproportionate to the crime. I accepted what the Sisters taught in religion class: that God is loving, merciful, charitable, forgiving. That message didn't jibe with adults smacking kids.

Related Characters: Sonia Sotomayor (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis



In this passage, Sonia explains her difficulties with her Catholic school—namely, that it seemed as though the nuns preached one thing and practiced another. By noting the differences in what the nuns said and did, as well as how angry that disconnect made her, Sonia shows that she's

been concerned with morality and justice from a very young age. But she's not just interested in justice on a grand scale, like the kind of justice she'll eventually be able to uphold as a judge. Instead, she's interested in looking at all the small ways that she and her classmates aren't receiving justice. Though she's a child at this point and doesn't have the power, standing, or skills to make a sweeping change, she does make it clear that recognizing such injustice is the first step to making the world a better, fairer place for everyone. This sense of fairness primes her for her later careers as a prosecutor and then as a judge, where her goal is to do just that.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ I have the carried the memory of that day as a grave caution. There was a terrible permanence to the state that my mother and her father had reached. My mother's pain would never heal, the ice between them would never thaw, because they would never find a way to acknowledge it. Without acknowledgement and communication, forgiveness was beyond reach. Eventually, I would recognize the long shadow of this abandonment in my own feelings toward my mother, and I would determine not to repeat what I had seen. The closeness that I share now with my mother is deeply felt, but we learned it slowly and with effort, and for fear of the alternative.

Related Characters: Sonia Sotomayor (speaker), Mami's Father, Mami / Celina Sotomayor

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

During one trip to Puerto Rico when Sonia is young, she and Mami visit Mami's father in the hospital. This is the first time Mami meets her father, as he left her family when she was just a baby—and Sonia observes how angry Mami is about this, even though entire decades have passed. In this moment, Sonia begins to recognize the necessity of communicating openly with family and friends. Open communication, she suggests, is the only way that people can learn to trust each other and heal from any past grievances—and though Sonia goes on to credit Mami with her success, she also grows up resenting Mami because she is in part why Sonia feels so abandoned and unmoored in her youth. Therefore, it's important to her to improve her relationship with Mami, especially because she saw the tragic consequences of not working for a better relationship at this point in her childhood. By making it clear that it took

effort and time for their relationship to improve, Sonia also suggests that learning to communicate with family and have a better relationship with someone is hard work that takes practice, just like schoolwork or learning how to properly do a job. In this sense, she shows how she applies her ability to learn anything even to her family situations.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☞ The heroes were admirable if flawed, as compelling as any comic book superhero to a kid who was hungry for escape, [...] these immortals seemed more realistic, more accessible, than the singular, all-forgiving, unchanging God of my Church. It was in that book of Dr. Fisher's, too, that I learned that my own name is a version of Sophia, meaning wisdom. I glowed with that discovery. And I never did return the book.

Related Characters: Sonia Sotomayor (speaker), Papi / Juli Sotomayor, Dr. Fisher

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

Following Papi's death in April, Sonia immerses herself in books. In particular, she falls in love with a book on Greek gods that Dr. Fisher, the beloved local doctor, lets her borrow. That the book came from Dr. Fisher drives home Sonia's insistence throughout her memoir that while much of her success in life is due to her tenacity and her optimism, she also couldn't have achieved nearly the success she has without people to help her, such as Dr. Fisher. Dr. Fisher is one of the family's biggest supporters in a variety of ways—he forced Papi to take out a life insurance policy (knowing that Papi, an alcoholic, was nearing death), he leaves Mami money in his will, and he allows Sonia to borrow this book. Given his investment in the family, it's possible that Dr. Fisher sees Sonia's potential and knows that she just needs a book like this to spark her interest and her love of learning—and this is precisely what happens after she reads this book. It's also telling that, in this book about Greek mythology, Sonia sees herself and her family members in the stories. This helps her see that there's a place for her in the world beyond her tight-knit Puerto Rican community; it helps highlight the shared humanity of all people.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☞ Now suddenly lessons seemed easier. It certainly didn't hurt that I had spent the entire summer vacation with my nose in a book, hiding from my mother's gloom, but there was another reason too. It was around that time that my mother made an effort to speak some English at home.

Related Characters: Sonia Sotomayor (speaker), Papi / Juli Sotomayor, Mami / Celina Sotomayor

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 87-88



Explanation and Analysis

After Papi's death, Mami begins to speak English at home, which boosts Sonia's performance in school—for the first time, she truly understands what's going on in the classroom. This is something that Sonia highlights at several points in her memoir: that the language barrier that she and other non-English speaking students aren't unintelligent, as they might think. Rather, they simply don't understand what's going on because they don't have a firm grasp of the English language, which is often the language spoken at school. This gives Sonia another way to advocate for policies that would've helped her as a child, such as bilingual education. These policies, she knows, can make a huge difference in the lives of kids like her and help them experience academic success.

However, it's also important to note that Mami's choice to speak English at home isn't something that all kids can count on. Rather, Sonia acknowledges that she was very lucky that Mami made this choice. Luck, and the kindnesses of people like Mami, are what allowed Sonia to do so well—and gave her the environment in which she could apply herself and put her determination to work.

☞ But the more critical lesson I learned that day is still one too many kids never figure out: don't be shy about making a teacher of any willing party who knows what he or she is doing. In retrospect, I can see how important that pattern would become for me: how readily I've sought out mentors, asking guidance from professors or colleagues, and in every friendship soaking up eagerly whatever that friend could teach me.

Related Characters: Sonia Sotomayor (speaker), Donna Renella

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 91



Explanation and Analysis

As Sonia begins to succeed at school, she realizes that in order to do better, she needs to learn how to study—and so she asks a smart classmate, Donna Renella, how to study. Though Donna Renella’s guidance is what helps Sonia develop her method of studying that she uses all through school, college, and her professional years, Sonia suggests there’s a simpler lesson here than just the particulars of how to study: that it’s always worthwhile to ask for help when the opportunity or the need arises. It’s telling, too, that Sonia places this incident in a much broader pattern of finding mentors at school and at work, as well as in personal friendships. Everyone, she makes clear, has something they can teach—and that they’re probably happy to impart their wisdom and learnings, if one only asks to learn. With this, Sonia begins to suggest that it’s not enough to amass study skills so a person can learn from books or course materials. Rather, it’s far more important to learn to ask people for help and to discover role models like Donna Renella.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ Our snitching often entailed phone calls to the hospital that must have driven my mother nuts, not to mention her supervisors, bless their forbearance. I’ve always believed phone calls from kids must be allowed if mothers are to feel welcome in the workplace, as anyone who has worked in my chambers can attest.

Related Characters: Sonia Sotomayor (speaker), Mami / Celina Sotomayor, Junior

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

As Junior grows and Sonia recognizes that she won’t continue to win their physical fights for much longer, she insists that she and Junior blackmail each other instead of fight physically—hence why they consistently call the hospital to tattle on one another to Mami. However, for Sonia, the fact that they were able to do this speaks to a much larger and more important idea: that the hospital allowed Mami to feel comfortable there as a single working mother by allowing these calls. This kind of situation, Sonia insists, is extremely important—mothers will never be

totally accepted in the workplace until they can openly be parents in the workplace. Especially after her time at the DA’s Office, where Sonia saw her female friends face discrimination and fewer raises, Sonia recognizes the importance of making the workplace a comfortable place for parents and particularly mothers. Thus, in her capacity as a judge—where she’s the boss and makes the rules—she takes it upon herself to create an environment where mothers feel comfortable. This is a small but significant effort; it’s not a high-profile lawsuit or an act of Congress but is instead something that she as an individual—and everyone who holds power over employees who are parents—can do to make the world a fairer, more equal place.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☝☝ The differences were plain enough, and yet I saw that they were nothing compared with what we had in common. As I lay in bed at night, the sky outside my window reflecting the city’s dim glow, I thought about Abuelita’s fierce loyalty to blood. But what really binds people as family? The way they shore themselves up with stories; the way siblings can feud bitterly but still come through for each other; how an untimely death, a child gone before a parent, shakes the very foundations [...]

Related Characters: Sonia Sotomayor (speaker), Marguerite Gudewicz

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

After moving to Co-op City, which is extremely diverse but has a high percentage of Jewish residents, Sonia begins to see that while all the different racial and ethnic groups are different, they also have a lot of strong similarities in that they all rally around family and stories. This forms the basis for Sonia’s later belief that while her responsibility as a prosecutor and as a judge is to the Puerto Rican community who helped her to success, she also has a responsibility to all minority groups—they may be different in important ways, but they still require the same attention, kindness, and service as Sonia’s Puerto Rican community does. It’s also telling that what Sonia fixates on that binds different groups together is family. Family, in her experience, is something universally important and is the first building block in a given community. As she begins to see the same things binding Jewish, Irish, and black families in Co-op City as binds Sonia’s Puerto Rican family, she also begins to see

how these elements can bind friends together, too. One need not share blood, as Abuelita believes, to consider a person family. Rather, family means being there for each other through thick and thin, to provide support and loyalty.



Chapter 14 Quotes


☛ There it was: glowing white with toggle buttons and subtle flair of fake fur trim up the front and around the hood. As improbably white as a white couch, white as a blanket of snow on a college lawn.

“You like it, Sonia?”

“I love it, Mami.” This was another first. Unlike my mother, or Chiqui, or my cousin Miriam, or so many of my friends, I’d never cared enough to fall in love with a garment. But wrapped in this, I knew I wouldn’t feel so odd.

Related Characters: Mami / Celina Sotomayor, Sonia Sotomayor (speaker), Miriam

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

As Sonia prepares to head off for Princeton, the one thing she knows she needs to purchase is a raincoat. The coat that she and Mami find represents the new world she’s stepping into. The color of the coat in particular is what makes this one stand out to Sonia. When she mentions the white couch, it’s a reference to her disastrous interview at Radcliffe, where a woman sat with two yappy dogs on an immaculate and intimidating white couch. Sonia recognized that the couch and the furnishings were markers of wealth and prestige but at that point—and at that school—Sonia wasn’t comfortable enough to step into that world. By purchasing a coat that’s white, Sonia shows that she now feels comfortable attempting to inhabit that world. Especially since this is also the first garment that Sonia ever falls in love with, it also suggests that she’s coming of age as she takes these steps toward college. She’ll find herself there, in an educational setting, as she begins to inhabit a space between her Puerto Rican community in the Bronx and the elite world of the Ivy Leagues at Princeton.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☛ Meanwhile, the introductory surveys would involve just as much work, given their broad scope, as more specialized advanced courses and would allow me for the first time to cultivate the critical faculties that Miss Katz had tried to instill: understanding the world by engaging with its bigger questions rather than just absorbing the factual particulars. This was the way to be a student of anything, and learning it has served me ever since. As a lawyer and even more as a judge, I would often be called upon to make myself a temporary expert in some field for the duration of a case.

Related Characters: Sonia Sotomayor (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

Though Sonia is initially concerned that she’s not prepared for Princeton, since she doesn’t have the high school education that would allow her to skip straight to upper-level classes, she finds that her introductory surveys are very useful. They teach her what she wasn’t yet ready to learn in high school: namely, how to synthesize information and come up with an argument rather than just regurgitate facts and list them. She suggests that this is the true purpose of education, as learning this skill prepares a person to be a student for life—they’ll be able to study anything if they have these skills.

Then, Sonia also makes it clear that her education didn’t end once she graduated from Princeton and Yale. Rather, her education has continued to the present day, as she must continue to use these skills she learned in school to learn about the world around her. With this, she makes it clear that education can take many different forms for different people, but the goal should be the same: to learn study skills and to learn how to be a student, not just to learn the material.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☛ Minority kids, however, had no one but their few immediate predecessors: the first to scale the ivy-covered wall against the odds, just one step ahead ourselves, we would hold the ladder steady for the next kid with more talent than opportunity. The blacks, Latinos, and Asians at Princeton went back to their respective high schools, met with guidance counselors, and recruited promising students they knew personally.

Related Characters: Sonia Sotomayor (speaker), Kenny Moy

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 184-185

Explanation and Analysis

As Sonia talks about her experience with minority student groups, she explains what the groups did in terms of outreach to promising minority high school students. At a time when minority students generally didn't have parents who were college graduates or even any understanding of what the Ivy League is, this kind of outreach is extremely important. Indeed, Sonia suggests that it's one of the most important and meaningful ways in which she and her friends gave back. While affirmative action policies are beginning to gain traction at this time, and while Sonia herself is admitted to Princeton thanks to affirmative action, she also makes the case that the policy itself is only the first step to getting minority students to college and making sure they're successful. In order to accomplish these goals, it's necessary to have student groups to reach out, make sure students know that schools like Princeton are an option, and support them through their application process and beyond—otherwise, those students might not have the resources to know how to navigate the landscape of college admissions.

☞ The experience of hearing my Princeton reading echoed in family recollections had the effect of both making the history more vivid and endowing life as lived with the dignity of something worth studying. When, for instance, I had read that “a woman who takes ten hours to finish two dozen handkerchiefs earns 24 cents for them,” I could picture Titi Aurora holding the needle, my mother leaning over the iron.

Related Characters: Sonia Sotomayor (speaker), Mami / Celina Sotomayor, Titi Aurora

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

At Princeton, Sonia helps get a course on Puerto Rican history off the ground and finds the class eye opening, not least because she has family stories like that of Titi Aurora and Mami to make the history real to her. This makes it clear

to Sonia and to the reader that history isn't a long distant event that happened to strangers. Sonia's family lived it. And most importantly, while Sonia also takes history classes that focus on the United States and other parts of the world, she doesn't necessarily see exactly how those histories pertain to her until she studies the history of Puerto Rico. In this sense, this class on Puerto Rico begins to show Sonia that her Puerto Rican identity isn't something she needs to hide or keep quiet. It can—and in some cases, it should—influence what she learns and what she makes of information, as it's not just history devoid of meaning or consequence. It's her family history, in addition to the history of an entire people and place.

☞ It seems obvious now: the child who spends school days in a fog of semi-comprehension has no way to know her problem is not that she is slow-witted. What if my father hadn't died, if I hadn't spent that sad summer reading, if my mother's English had been no better than my aunts'? Would I have made it to Princeton?

Related Characters: Sonia Sotomayor (speaker), Miriam, Papi / Juli Sotomayor, Mami / Celina Sotomayor

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 200

Explanation and Analysis

As Sonia conducts interviews with her family members for her final project for her Puerto Rican history class, she speaks with her cousins about their experiences in school. She realizes for the first time just how much of a hindrance it is when a student doesn't have a strong grasp on the English language. For Sonia, this means that she's finally able to grasp just how lucky she was that Papi died and Mami took the opportunity to practice speaking English at home. Given that few in Mami's generation or older speak much English at all, Sonia can see that it would've been very possible for her to continue through school wondering if she's unintelligent—when really, her only issue would've been that she speaks Spanish and school is conducted in English. Though Sonia never stops being proud of her Puerto Rican culture, in this moment she begins to see that the language that binds the Puerto Rican community can also hinder their ability to find success in the wider world. Though she notes that the rise of bilingual education for Spanish-speaking kids begins about this time (Miriam, her cousin, is working toward a degree in bilingual education at this time), she still begins to see just how necessary it is to

know what's going on in the classroom if one hopes to be successful academically.

Chapter 19 Quotes

☞ By the time I got to Yale, I had met a few successful lawyers, usually in their role as professors. José, the first I had the chance to observe up close, not only transcended the academic role but also managed to uphold his identity as a Puerto Rican, serving vigorously in both worlds.

Related Characters: Sonia Sotomayor (speaker), José Cabranes

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 227


Explanation and Analysis

In her first year at Yale Law School, Sonia meets José Cabranes, a Puerto Rican lawyer who becomes her first mentor. José makes an impression on Sonia because he's simultaneously wildly successful, respected in his field, generous, and Puerto Rican. This combination isn't something that Sonia has seen up to this point, and it's the fact that he's Puerto Rican that makes such an impression on her. This begins to illustrate a point she makes later in the memoir: that it's important for people to see others who look like them and come from similar backgrounds being successful in a variety of fields. Seeing a successful Puerto Rican lawyer helps Sonia believe that she can also become a successful Puerto Rican lawyer. It's also important for her to see that José doesn't have to compromise on his identity to experience this success. Later, this helps Sonia feel comfortable drawing on her experiences as a Puerto Rican girl from the Bronx to, for instance, connect with juries and fight for the rights of minority communities.

Chapter 21 Quotes

☞ Guidance of senior colleagues would add seasoning over time, but meanwhile we would need every scrap of what scant training would be provided during our first few weeks. I wasn't the only one among us with minimal background in criminal law [...] But even if I had devoted all my studies to the finer points of the field, there remained essential lessons inaccessible in the classroom or from books and acquired only through the fiery baptism of the courtroom.

Related Characters: Sonia Sotomayor (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 250



Explanation and Analysis

In describing her first post-Yale Law School job at the New York City DA's Office, Sonia explains that she and her cohort of freshly hired colleagues were all underprepared for the job. This, however, is to be expected, as it's impossible to learn everything one has to know in school or from books. Rather, it's far more important and meaningful to learn from on-the-job practice, even if that does mean that Sonia's first few cases are absolute disasters.

Sonia also makes sure to note that she wasn't on her own, however. She had senior colleagues to call on to explain things for her and point her in the right direction. With this, she shows that even though she may feel like she's lost and struggling to make it in an environment where she's totally on her own, this isn't really the case. There may be situations where she's alone—as when she's in the courtroom and must at least act like a competent prosecutor, even if she isn't one yet—but she can still go before and after to those senior colleagues to help her navigate the job.

☞ Certainly, no one could accuse me of being a soft touch, but talking with Dawn always reminded me of the human costs of my success, the impact on an individual's life and his family. Her perspective allowed me to trust the voice in my own head that occasionally whispered: how about exercising a little discretion; having a little faith in human nature?

Related Characters: Sonia Sotomayor (speaker), Dawn Cardi

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 262


Explanation and Analysis

At the DA's Office, Sonia forms a close friendship with a defense attorney named Dawn Cardi, who often reminds Sonia to be human and empathetic. This is one of many instances in which a friend is able to teach Sonia something, which is a dynamic that she suggests is extremely important. Over the course of the memoir, Sonia is open about the fact that every person she meets has something to teach her,

even if they're just friends and peers rather than mentors or decorated scholars at the top of their field. This adds more nuance to Sonia's insistence that she's a lifelong student and that her education is never over, nor is it confined to a classroom. When she can continually learn from her friends, even now that she sits on the highest court in the United States, it makes it clear that she's not all-knowing—and that having the power like she has today doesn't mean she doesn't still have things to learn. As a prosecutor, Sonia gets her first taste of that power. She has the ability to advocate to send people to jail for their crimes—which is something that can significantly alter the course of people's lives and whole family's lives—and Dawn's counsel is instrumental in showing Sonia that she can indeed trust that people are fundamentally good.

☝ But as when I had described the Kitty Genovese murder in forensics competition, the difference between winning and losing came down to the appeal by emotion rather than fact alone. It was something Abuelita could have told me without ever having gone to law school. And it was something I apparently knew in high school, if only intuitively, before the awareness was pushed aside by years of learning to reason dispassionately at Princeton and Yale.

Related Characters: Sonia Sotomayor (speaker), Abuelita

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 268

Explanation and Analysis

After Sonia loses a few cases, a supervisor reminds her to appeal to the jury's emotions—and Sonia realizes that she'd forgotten the power of emotion to convince people. Especially by setting emotion and dispassionate reasoning opposite each other, Sonia forcefully makes the case that a person (and a lawyer in particular) cannot learn everything about how to do their job from school. It's necessary to remember the power of appealing to people as people with emotions and feelings. Not everyone, Sonia is forced to realize, went to law school and learned to rely on logic and legal precedent to make decisions, so it's useless to talk to a jury as though they're going to approach a case in a purely logical way. People are far more interesting and multifaceted than that—and so in order to better talk to them, Sonia has to remember who she was and what she knew as a young woman, long before she ever went to law school.

☝ To be able to relate to jurors as their own sister or daughter might, with real appreciation of their concerns and the constraints upon their lives, often put me at an advantage facing an adversary from a more privileged background—a refreshing change after years of feeling the opposite. But even more important, that connection fed my sense of purpose. Each day I stood before a jury, I felt myself a part of the society I served.

Related Characters: Sonia Sotomayor (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 271



Explanation and Analysis

As Sonia becomes more comfortable in her job as a prosecutor, she figures out how to meld her professional persona with her broader identity as a Puerto Rican woman from the Bronx. Doing this helps Sonia feel even more like she's doing good and helping her community. This is in part because as Sonia experiences more success as a prosecutor by drawing on her Puerto Rican roots, she feels more at home not just as a prosecutor, but as a female, Puerto Rican prosecutor. Her identity and her background becomes essential to her success—and this is something she never expected, especially after her experiences in school where she often experienced backlash or racism for being Puerto Rican and female. Now that she's actually working in her community, serving people who are much like those who raised her, she has a leg up over those who may have experienced easier success in school. While they knew how to tackle Princeton and Yale, Sonia knows how to communicate effectively with this community.

Chapter 24 Quotes

☝ I've always turned the families of friends into family of my own. The roots of this practice are buried deep in my childhood, in the broad patterns of Puerto Rican culture, in the particular warmth of Abuelita's embrace and her charged presence at the center of my world, the village of aunts, uncles, cousins, in-laws, and compadres scattered across the Bronx. I'd observe how the tribe extended its boundaries, with each marriage adding not just a new member but a whole new clan to ours.

Related Characters: Sonia Sotomayor (speaker), Dawn Cardi

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 291

Explanation and Analysis

As Sonia explains how she turns all her friends' children into formal or honorary godchildren, she looks back on how she came to this understanding that friends can be a form of chosen family. She recognizes that though Abuelita always gave special preference to blood family (for instance, even considering in-laws like Mami to be like friends rather than genuine family members), Abuelita nevertheless cultivated a rich and huge web of family and friends across the Bronx, all of whom were willing to step in and help out however was needed at a moment's notice. Sonia recognizes that one doesn't need to be a family member, married or otherwise, to take on this kind of a role. A person merely needs to *treat* others like family—that is, with positive regard, respect, kindness, and loyalty. By absorbing her friends' families into her blood family, Sonia expands her community and finds a sense of belonging. By doing this, Sonia ensures that she has a family wherever she goes and no matter what she does.

☝ Ultimately, I accept that there is no perfect substitute for the claim that a parent and a child have on each other's heart. But families can be made in other ways, and I marvel at the support and inspiration I've derived from the ones I've built of interlocking circles of friends. In their constant embrace I have never felt alone.

Related Characters: Sonia Sotomayor (speaker), Kevin Noonan, Mami / Celina Sotomayor, Abuelita

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 299

Explanation and Analysis

In her explanation as to why she decided not to have biological children or adopt, Sonia restates her belief that one doesn't have to go choose the route of marrying and having children in order to create a family. Rather, she knows from experience that it's both possible and fulfilling to create one's own family out of a vast network of friends and the children of those friends. Sonia has spent her life observing the different ways that Mami and Abuelita went about creating family. Abuelita, though open and loving, gave blood family preferential treatment; Mami, meanwhile, loves the family she married into and remains loyal to her siblings, but she casts a much wider net that encompasses more of her own and Sonia's friends. As an adult, Sonia comes to see that while Abuelita's way of thinking about

family isn't wrong, per se, Mami's is possibly better—and it's Mami that Sonia endeavors to take after as she creates a chosen family of friends. After her divorce, it's Sonia's friendships that keep her grounded and cared for.

Chapter 25 Quotes

☝ Trained in suspicion, skilled at cross-examining, you will look for the worst in people and you will find it. I'd felt from the beginning that these impulses were at odds with my essential optimism, my abiding faith in human nature and its enduring potential for redemption. But now I could see the signs that I too was hardening, and I didn't like what I saw.

Related Characters: Sonia Sotomayor (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 301

Explanation and Analysis



Following her divorce, Sonia begins to notice that her job at the DA's Office is hardening her emotionally and she starts to think about how to change this. With this, Sonia begins to articulate one of her most important lessons about maintaining a healthy outlook on life: that it's essential, to the greatest extent possible, to curate a life for oneself that allows a person to maintain a healthy, optimistic outlook on life. While Sonia recognizes that she learned a lot as a prosecutor, she also sees that continuing work as a prosecutor will make her into a person she doesn't want to be—and so she sets her sights on moving out of the DA's office to work that will allow her to rediscover her sense of optimism and to believe in the goodness of people again. She essentially makes the case that it's not enough to simply throw oneself headlong at a problem or at improvement, as she does throughout her time at the DA's office. It doesn't matter to her that her superiors think she could become bureau chief in a few years—that kind of success, she realizes, would negatively affect her mental health, her relationships with her friends and family, and her ability to see the world as a good place.

Chapter 26 Quotes

☝ Call it what you like: discipline, determination, perseverance, the force of will. Even apart from his saying so, I knew that it had made all the difference in my life. [...]

What Nelson saw driving me arises from a different kind of aspiration: the desire to do for others, to help make things right for them.

Related Characters: Sonia Sotomayor (speaker), Nelson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 322-323

Explanation and Analysis


After Nelson's death, Sonia takes a step back to consider why Nelson failed and why she succeeded. She references here that during one of their last visits, Nelson insisted that his brains weren't enough to catapult him to success since he didn't also have Sonia's drive. With this, Sonia makes the case that a person's intelligence is in no way a guarantee that they'll do well. What's more important is how hard a person is willing to work—and Sonia's hard work is what got her to Princeton, Yale, and eventually, to where she is now, as an Associate Justice on the Supreme Court.

However, Sonia's success isn't just a product of her desire to study and work hard. Rather, she's willing to put her head down and do the work because she wants so much to serve others. She doesn't want to be successful just to be successful; she wants to be successful so she has the ability to help others like her find success in their own lives. This desire to give back is more motivating than anything else.

Chapter 27 Quotes

☝☝ Fran's handing me the Fendi case as my first crack at civil litigation was a tribute not only to her personal generosity but to the nature of Pavia & Harcourt, where freehanded collaboration was ingrained in the culture. The people I worked with were comfortable enough in their own skin to share clients and knowledge easily. That spirit of transparent teamwork was a joy to me, and I strove to be as open and helpful to others as Fran and Dave were to me.

Related Characters: Sonia Sotomayor (speaker), Dave Botwinik, Fran Bernstein

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 339

Explanation and Analysis

As Sonia describes her introduction to Fendi (a luxury designer) thanks to Fran, she credits her opportunity to represent Fendi to the general ethos at Pavia & Harcourt. Throughout the memoir, when she describes what it's like to work at other law firms, she makes it clear that most large firms aren't especially fulfilling for young, inexperienced associates—they're there to bolster those above them. At

Pavia & Harcourt, however, their setup (associate lawyers work with partners in mentoring relationships) makes it far more likely that a young associate with a knack for preparing witnesses—as Sonia is—will be able to tackle these difficult, high profile cases long before she'd be able to at another law firm.

Given her belief in the power of mentoring, Sonia thrives in this environment. However, it's not enough to just represent Pavia & Harcourt and show what she's capable of as a young associate. Rather, she knows she must embody this mentoring spirit and be generous to those who are still below her. This is another way that she can not only help young people succeed, but make their way easier, which she insists is simply the right thing to do.

Chapter 28 Quotes

☝☝ Still, each time I found myself in a blood sugar crisis, I couldn't help but notice that some unlikely intervention had saved my life, whether a friend just happening by or phoning out of the blue, or, one time, Dawn's little Rocky, who, finding me unconscious, barked furiously, refusing to be calmed, until he drew attention where it was needed.

Related Characters: Sonia Sotomayor (speaker), Alessandro, Dawn Cardi

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 355

Explanation and Analysis

After detailing several life-threatening incidents in which her blood sugar dropped, Sonia notes that her friends were always there to help her. As she makes this connection, Sonia begins to understand that she must be open about her diabetes and her life more generally with her friends—if not for the relationships, then for her own safety. Friendship, she begins to see, doesn't just mean being there as a listening ear for her friends. She can ask for the same in return and allow her friends to help her out by giving her advice, supporting her through life's ups and downs, and at times, making sure she receives the appropriate medical attention during emergencies.



Mentioning Dawn's dog, Rocky, drives home Sonia's earlier assertion that family, friends, and people in general who care can be found anywhere—in this case, even among people's pets. It reinforces her belief that people (and animals) are fundamentally good and want to help others. As Sonia embarks on her project of improving her

relationships with people, it's essential that she realize this and take the steps to connect more fully with her community so that she can reap the benefits, not just help others.

Chapter 29 Quotes

☝☝ “I’ve spent my whole life learning how to do things that were hard for me. None of it has ever been easy. You have no idea how hard Princeton was for me at the beginning, but I figured out how to do well there and ended up being accepted to one of the best law schools in the country. At Yale, the DA’s Office, Pavia & Harcourt—wherever I’ve gone, I’ve honestly never felt fully prepared at the outset. Yet each time I’ve survived, I’ve learned, and I’ve thrived.”

Related Characters: Sonia Sotomayor (speaker), Senator Moynihan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 368

Explanation and Analysis

During her interview with Senator Moynihan’s vetting committee before he nominates Sonia to be a judge, someone on the committee asks if Sonia thinks it’ll be hard learning to be a judge. In her response, Sonia makes the case that she’s had to work hard her entire life and has never felt entirely ready to tackle the next challenge, whatever that may be—and that hasn’t stopped her. Thus, Sonia once again makes the case that it’s not her intelligence or even her optimism that will help her succeed as a judge. It’s her commitment to learning the job and doing well that will make her a great judge, just as it made her a great student, a great prosecutor, and a great lawyer in private practice. Even as she stares down potentially becoming a judge, she makes it clear that her education is in no way over, and nor should it be. If she wants to continue advancing, both in her career and as a person, she needs to be continually open to learning new things.



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.

PROLOGUE

Seven-year-old Sonia Sotomayor wakes up to her parents yelling at each other about who will give her the insulin shot. The yelling is normal, but the subject matter is new. Sonia thinks that the shot hurts, but the yelling is worse—and worst of all, if Sonia's grandmother (Abuelita) won't do it either, Sonia won't be able to spend weekends with her. She decides she must learn to give herself the shot, so she pulls a chair to the stove so she can sterilize the syringe and needle. Mami shows Sonia the process. Despite being an active child, Sotomayor knows that her life depends on being patient while she sterilizes the needle. She learns more self-discipline from diabetes than she did at her Catholic school.

Going back in time, Sonia says that her saga begins when she faints in church. The sisters call Mami, who shares that this isn't the first time this has happened and takes Sonia to the local doctor, Dr. Fisher. Dr. Fisher sends Sonia to the lab at Prospect Hospital. When the tech approaches with a huge needle, she screams, runs, and hides under a car. Later, Dr. Fisher calls Mami into his office. Sonia can see Mami crying. Dr. Fisher calls Sonia in and explains that she has diabetes. He has it too, and he assures her that she'll be fine if she changes how she eats. Then, he offers her a soda that has no sugar. Things don't add up for Sonia—a diet change shouldn't make Mami so upset.

Mami drives Sonia to Abuelita's apartment, where Abuelita tucks Sonia into bed. From the bedroom, Sonia listens to Abuelita and various family members talk about a "curse" that came from Mami's side. Abuelita vows to send word to a brother in Puerto Rico so he can pick a specific plant with which she can make a special concoction to cure Sonia's diabetes—but when she eventually does so, the cure doesn't work. Hearing her family act so afraid and learning that she needs to be hospitalized makes Sonia understand how serious this is. In the hospital, nurses draw Sonia's blood hourly every morning for a week. She also attends lectures on diabetes and understands little, so she's terrified.

By opening her memoir with her childhood diagnosis of diabetes, Sonia makes it clear that her tenacity and determination came, in part, from growing up in a family where she often had to do things herself. Her diabetes has the arguably positive side effect of teaching Sonia skills that she'll need throughout her life, which reinforces a point she makes throughout her memoir: that a person can't learn everything within a classroom setting.



Even before she really knows what's going on, Sonia is trying to understand. She does so by paying close attention to the behaviors and emotions of the people around her. And by doing this, she's able to come to the conclusion that none of this makes sense—so she must be missing something. All of this illustrates her natural inclination to watch and figure things out for herself, a skill that will be important for her to develop.



Because Sonia doesn't know what's going on and only experiences pain and confusion, she's terrified. It's also probably scary when Abuelita's herbal remedy doesn't work, as this means that an important element of Sonia's sense of self, her Puerto Rican identity, may seem less meaningful or useful—and this is probably even more disconcerting when the alternative (time in the hospital) is painful and scary.



What makes things even scarier is that Mami doesn't make Sonia go to school and even brings gifts to the hospital—Mami is a stickler for education and attendance and seldom gives gifts. On Sonia's last day at the hospital, her arm and fingers hurt before the sampling begins. She starts to cry. Mami fiercely tells the nurses that they're done. Back at home, Mami coaches Sonia through giving herself the insulin shot.

Noting how unusual it is that Mami brings gifts gives the impression that Mami isn't particularly affectionate with her children. This sets up Sonia and Mami's relationship as somewhat strained, though Mami's careful, calm coaching when Sonia administers the shot also suggests that Mami is supportive—but perhaps not always in the ways that Sonia would like.



CHAPTER 1

Sonia is only seven when she's diagnosed with diabetes. While her family sees it as a "deadly curse," for her, it's just a threat to her childhood—which is already at risk due to Papi's alcoholism and Mami's reaction to it. However, living with this adversity leads Sonia to develop a sense of self-sufficiency. She insists that she's not self-made, though; she has always had support from friends and family. Sonia's family lives within blocks of each other in the Bronx. Most of them immigrated to New York City in 1944. She plays with her cousins and everyone speaks primarily Spanish. Sonia finds her little brother, Junior, obnoxious and torments him. At school, though, she defends him.

Already, Sonia makes it clear that there are advantages to growing up in adverse circumstances. Having to constantly look out for her own wellbeing at home allows her to practice in a situation that she insists wasn't actually all that dangerous—it just seemed that way. It's also important that she notes how supportive her family is. It's not just her tenacity that gets her through; it's the fact, for instance, that she and Junior can fight so intensely at home and then defend each other in public. Being able to do both of these things, she suggests, is what creates a strong family.



Junior is born when Sonia is three, and Sonia's family moves to a new public housing project 10 minutes from their old apartment. Mami thinks the projects are safer and cleaner than the tenements, but Abuelita is shocked and angry, because she thinks the projects are isolated. Sonia knows her family is isolated, but that's because of Papi's drinking. No one visits except for Alfred, who is Titi Aurora's son and Sonia's cousin. Alfred is much older than Sonia and the family relies on him, as he often drives since Papi refuses. When Papi gets home from work, he always cooks dinner and it's always wonderful. After dinner, though, he leaves dishes in the sink and goes to his bedroom until it's time to send Sonia and Junior to bed.

Given the way that Sonia describes Mami's reasoning, it's clear that Mami is trying to do the right thing for her family. Abuelita's reaction, meanwhile, suggests that Abuelita prizes extended family loyalty over the health and safety of individual family units. It's telling, then, that it's Mami's side of the family who steps in to help Sonia's immediate family out. Mami's family and Papi's family likely have very different definitions of what it means to be a family and support each other through hard times.



Mami copes by working the night shift at Prospect Hospital and by dropping the children off with family members when she's not working. Papi's neglect makes Sonia sad—she knows he can't help himself—but Mami's neglect makes Sonia angry. Mami is always elegant, chooses to work, and insists on sending Mami and Junior to Catholic school. Sonia expects more from her mother. The environment at home makes Sonia a watchful child, and she frequently eavesdrops on adult conversations. Often, as she listens to Abuelita and her aunts, she hears them blame Mami for Papi's drinking. Sonia explains that Abuelita is extremely loyal to blood family, so the in-laws sometimes suffer. Abuelita's constant picking at Mami is hard for Sonia to understand, especially since she's *also* angry with Mami.

It's worth noting that many of the things Sonia resents Mami for—working, sending her to Catholic school, moving the family to the projects—are the very things that put Sonia in a better position to receive a good education. But as a child, Sonia doesn't yet have the maturity to take the long view, and her immaturity means that she's also not able to fully articulate her feelings about Mami, especially in light of Abuelita's anger. Though Sonia's family is supportive, she makes it clear that such support can be conditional.



One day, when Papi is sick and Mami takes him to the hospital, Tío Benny and another uncle pick up Junior and Sonia. They talk about how Sonia's apartment is a "pigsty" and Sonia burns with shame. After this, she makes a point to clean the apartment and to make Papi buy milk when they shop on Fridays. This is because Papi and Mami's biggest fight is over milk—one night, Papi's hands shake so badly that he continually spills milk. Because Papi was trying to pour milk for Sonia, she feels guilty.

Family may be there to make sure that Junior and Sonia are cared for, but again, this doesn't mean that Sonia's family is unequivocally good and supportive. Because Sonia wants to earn the respect of the rest of the family, she takes on far more responsibility than a young child should have to.



CHAPTER 2

Abuelita is throwing a party, so she invites Sonia to help her pick out chickens. Sonia loves Abuelita and they share a special bond; their relationship makes Sonia believe later in life that every child needs at least one adult who shows them unconditional respect and love. Nelson, Sonia's same-age cousin and her partner in crime, is Abuelita's other favorite, but he refuses to go to the butcher. At the butcher, Abuelita shows Sonia how to pick the best chicken. Then, they walk back to Abuelita's apartment and buy vegetables and an orange to share. Papi taught Sonia how to pick the best meat and fruit on their Friday shopping trips.

Throughout the memoir, Sonia imparts on readers the lessons she learned from her own childhood and young adulthood. Here, for example, she reflects on her close relationship with Abuelita and notes how essential it is for children to have an adult like this in their lives.



Finally, Abuelita and Sonia stop at a bodega to buy bread and milk. When Abuelita lives in a building with a bodega just downstairs, she sometimes sends Sonia with a dollar and numbers to bet for her. Abuelita is very lucky—and sometimes sees bad luck coming. When Sonia and Abuelita get back, Mami and Sonia's aunts are often already there. Sonia joins her cousins while Abuelita's husband, Gallego, picks out dance music for later. Mami always tries to make Sonia dress up for Abuelita's Saturday night parties, but Sonia can't keep her dress clean. She flies into Abuelita's arms as soon as they arrive and then finds Nelson. Nelson is a genius, and his father, Tío Benny, wants him to be a doctor. Sonia envies Nelson and his siblings, Miriam and Eddie, for having such an involved father.

At this point in her life, Sonia sees no reason why Nelson wouldn't become a doctor like Tío Benny wants—as far as she can tell, Nelson is set up for success. This also shows just how much Sonia craves stability and to have an adult in her home who cares unconditionally about her, as Abuelita does.



Wherever Sonia and her cousins play, they can always smell food and hear or see the ongoing games of dominos. At some point in the evening, someone turns off the music and everyone gathers in the living room to recite poetry. Abuelita goes first and recites a poem about Puerto Rico. Sonia explains that even for her and her cousins, who were born in the U.S., the island sparks nostalgia. The parties end late and some families head home, but the climax of the night is yet to come: the *velada*, or Abuelita's *séance*. They clear off the table and move it to the living room. Neighbors appear from downstairs, and Mami leaves for the kitchen—she thinks it's nonsense.

*Describing the parties gives the impression that they follow a predictable format, with customary food offerings and events. This family time becomes a ritual of sorts that keeps Sonia grounded in her family and in the Puerto Rican cultural elements that make the party what it is. However, when Mami refuses to stick around for the *velada*, it shows again that there's more than one way to be Puerto Rican and engage with one's culture.*



The adults force kids who are still there, usually Sonia, Junior, and Nelson, Miriam, and Eddie, to go to a bedroom and sleep. The kids lie perfectly still and Sonia thinks of what she's heard about how Abuelita and Gallego can call the spirits to ask questions. The spirits aren't scary, and Abuelita only uses her powers for good. When the adults believe the kids are asleep, they ring a bell. Nelson, Miriam, and Sonia sneak up to the doors and peer through gaps as Gallego speaks in a loud voice that doesn't sound like Spanish. When the table levitates, Miriam races back to bed. Sonia and Nelson join her when they get tired of trying to decipher Gallego's words.

Papi seldom comes to Abuelita's parties and when he does, Sonia keeps an eye out for trouble. The trouble begins when Papi's fingers start to curl and then, his face contorts. Sonia notices before Mami does and waits for Mami to notice. When Mami notices, she sharply insists that it's time to go home. At the time, Sonia doesn't understand what alcoholic neuropathy is; she just knows that Papi seems to go away and that there will be yelling back at home. It's the best when Sonia doesn't have to go home, however. She often stays the night at Abuelita's and wakes up to enjoy pancakes and one-on-one time with Abuelita.

CHAPTER 3

Aside from Nelson, Sonia's best friend in elementary school is a boy named Gilmar. One day, Gilmar shares that his parents have decided to move to California. Sonia insists that they have to tour the neighborhood so Gilmar can say goodbye to everyone. They go first to Pops, a man who sells candy. Then, they say goodbye to a Jewish friend and his grandmother and another grandmother in the neighborhood, Mrs. Beverly, whom Sonia thinks is a hero. Sonia leads Gilmar next to Mami's best friend, Ana, and her husband Moncho. Junior is there—he idolizes Moncho—and Moncho thankfully distracts Junior so Sonia and Gilmar can continue their tour unencumbered. They head for Blessed Sacrament to say goodbye to the nuns.

Sonia explains that that year, third grade was a “continuous state of dread.” She constantly gets in trouble even though she tries to keep to herself. For Christmas, Papi sends her to school with a gift for Sister Elizabeth, her teacher, but unbeknownst to Sonia, the gift is a metal ruler. Students beat Sonia up at recess. Mami believes that Catholic school is a good investment, even though none of Sonia's cousins go to Catholic school. At school, Sonia must learn discipline, but she doesn't think the way that the nuns hit kids aligns with what they teach in religion class: that God is loving and forgiving. Sonia gets into trouble because the nuns dislike working mothers, even though Mami works to send her children to Catholic school.

For the kids, the velada represents part of their culture that they can't yet access because of their youth. This begins to suggest that as Sonia gets older, she'll consistently discover new ways to interact with and think about her culture and Puerto Rico itself.



Alcoholic neuropathy is a disease in which a person begins to suffer nerve damage due to alcohol addiction. As Papi drinks, he slowly loses control of his body. That Sonia is the first to notice speaks to how observant she is, as well as how concerned she is. Though the concern suggests she's empathetic, it also stems from her sense that she has to protect herself.



It's telling that Sonia and Gilmar visit so many people who aren't family, but whom Sonia and Gilmar nevertheless love like family. Ana and Moncho in particular stand out, especially given Moncho's close relationship with Junior. This is one of the first indications in the memoir that friends can function as family members by providing care, understanding, and a sense of safety to one another. The tour as a whole introduces the reader to Sonia's childhood world and illustrates how connected she feels to her community.



Even at a very young age, Sonia recognizes how unfairly her Catholic school treats her and Mami. As far as she's concerned, they should be thrilled that Mami prizes education enough to work to send her children to a Catholic school—and yet, they resent Mami and punish Sonia for the very reason that she's there. By keying in on her early sense of right and wrong, Sonia is able to chart her path to becoming a judge—she's wanted, for a long time, to make the world a fairer place.



Back in the present, Gilmar and Sonia say goodbye to each other. Sonia tells the reader that she doesn't see California herself until her second summer of law school. She thinks of Gilmar then and all the other friends she loses touch with.

Friends are extremely important to Sonia throughout her memoir, but it's impossible for her to maintain contact with all of them—especially when she's still a child.



CHAPTER 4

During a summer trip to Puerto Rico, Abuelita introduces Sonia to her mother, Bisabuelita Ciriata. Bisabuelita is so old that Sonia is afraid to kiss her. Sonia is accompanying Abuelita on visits to family members in Puerto Rico. It seems to blur the line between city and nature. When she's little, Sonia accompanies just Abuelita to Puerto Rico. As she gets older, though, Mami agrees to go back to visit. As soon as they exit the airport, Sonia and Mami stop for a fresh coconut while Mami and Titi Aurora, her eldest sister, catch up—though Titi Aurora lives in New York, she visits Puerto Rico more often.

The regular visits to Puerto Rico make it clear that Sonia's immersion in Puerto Rican culture isn't confined to her Puerto Rican relatives in the Bronx. Rather, her family in New York has deep ties to the island, and it's important to them to maintain those connections. Given that Sonia is born in New York, it's especially important that she visit so she knows where her family came from.



Sonia, Mami, and Junior often stay with Titi Maria, Tío Mayo's first wife who helped raise Mami. Mami maintained her relationship with Titi Maria after the divorce, and Sonia tries to be like Mami and not lose contact with divorced factions of the family. Mami tries to show off Sonia and Junior to everyone she can. Sonia gorges herself on mangoes and in retrospect, she believes she could do this because was getting a higher dose of insulin than was necessary, which was common then. Even as a child, Sonia recognizes that Puerto Ricans on the island all have better jobs than her family in the Bronx, where there are Puerto Rican nurses but only one Puerto Rican doctor.

Again, Sonia distills a lesson she learned in childhood into something that readers can take away: that it's important to maintain connections with family, even when that involves navigating divorce and family politics. Doing this will give a person an even broader group to support them through good and bad times. Sonia also notes the economic differences and the differences in people's dignity in New York versus Puerto Rico. What she sees—though she likely doesn't understand it entirely—is that in New York, Puerto Ricans are a minority and thus are treated worse.



Sonia loves visiting Tío Mayo's *panaderia*, which is more than just a bakery—his wife also makes lunch for factory workers. Sonia helps with the lunch rush and runs the register when her uncle isn't around; he doesn't like women handling money. Since Mami didn't see much of the island when she was growing up, she makes a point to take Sonia to the beach, to the Parque de Bombas, and the art museum in Ponce. Sotomayor loves the art museum and studies the portraits, wondering who the people are and what the paintings' stories might be. She knows there's a lot she doesn't understand about the paintings.

It's telling that as she wanders the art museum, Sonia is acutely aware of what she doesn't know, because it speaks to her craving to constantly learn and grow. That Tío Mayo doesn't like Sonia handling money shows again that there are many different ways to be Puerto Rican. Some, like Sonia, believe women can and should be independent, even if this isn't the traditional gender dynamic.



One day during a visit, Mami announces that they're going to visit her father. This is shocking, as he left when Mami was born, but he's in the hospital now. At the hospital, Tío Mayo leads Mami and Sonia to the appropriate bed. Mami's father looks like Mami, but he's gaunt. Sonia has many questions but sits to watch. Mami coldly says that she's Celina, but her father says nothing. Titi Aurora introduces Sonia and then chats to her father. Sonia recognizes that Mami is emotionally wounded. The adult Sonia tells the reader that she thinks of this memory as a cautionary tale—Mami and Mami's father were never going to heal because they would never acknowledge the hurt and forgive each other. Sonia says that she's close with Mami now, but this is only because they learned to be close, and they saw the alternative firsthand.

Once again, Sonia takes the opportunity to sit and observe, which allows her to more fully understand what's going on around her. She discovers that while people will inevitably hurt each other, both purposefully and on accident, the real tragedy occurs when people don't then try to address that hurt and repair their relationships.



CHAPTER 5

One day in April when Sonia is nine, she and Junior head straight home from school. This is unusual—they usually go to Ana's—but Papi is home sick from work. But when Sonia and Junior come around the corner, Moncho calls to them from his window. Ana is crying. Sonia has no idea what's happening as Ana leads her across the street to her own apartment, where Alfred opens the door to reveal relatives, all crying. Mami tells her children that God took Papi. Not knowing what to do, Sonia sobs and throws herself on her bed. Ana joins her and tells Sonia to stop crying and be a big girl for Mami. Welcoming this insight, Sonia sits up and thinks of earlier, when Papi had wanted to make a Sunday breakfast. Mami yelled at him that he'd make the children late.

Because she's so young, Sonia doesn't yet know how to handle grief, but what seems to confuse her even more is that she's not sure what to do about that. Her reason for stopping crying speaks to her caring and empathetic nature—what makes her stop crying, after all, is the idea that she needs to care for Mami—and her desire to learn how to navigate different situations. Her memory that Papi wanted to cook a big breakfast speaks to just how engaged Papi tried to be, even though he often fell short as a father.



Sonia and her family spend hours at the funeral home; Abuelita and Sonia's aunts have been here for days. It's important to not leave the body alone, and Monsignor Hart is coming from Blessed Sacrament. Abuelita cries constantly. Sonia feels almost sadder for Abuelita than she does about Papi. Monsignor Hart stops in, as does Dr. Fisher. Finally, Titi Aurora tells Sonia to say goodbye to Papi and kiss his cheek. Sonia doesn't want to, but she also doesn't want to upset Abuelita, so she closes her eyes and kisses him. She's somewhat surprised when she thinks that maybe now, things will be easier.

Sonia's sense that things might be easier with Papi gone makes it clear just how stressful her family life was up until this point. Papi made her life miserable due to the conflicts his alcoholism caused with Mami—and now, all that conflict will be over.



The family says the rosary for Papi for seven nights at Abuelita's. On the final night, Sonia falls asleep and wakes up to Mami gripping her arm, angrily threatening to take Sonia away from Abuelita forever. Much later, Sonia learns that she apparently spoke in a strange voice that sounded like Abuelita's long-dead sister and said that Papi was with her and there was no need to worry. Sonia says she can't explain it—she could've just spoken in her sleep—but in any case, Mami didn't allow Abuelita to develop Sonia's "gift."

By not telling Sonia at the time what happened, Mami attempts to keep her away from a part of her Puerto Rican culture that Mami sees as threatening. Mami wants nothing more than to see her children receive an education, and she may see Abuelita's brand of spirituality as being in opposition to education.



Mami and the children stay with Abuelita after Papi dies until finally, the building manager lets Mami move into a different apartment closer to school. Mami also starts working days so she can be home after school. Alfred and Sonia's uncles help with the move and discover bottles hidden in Papi's room. Sonia learns just how much Papi had been drinking every day; Junior already knew. Sonia knows that Papi loved his family, but it wasn't enough to make him stop drinking. Abuelita and Sonia's aunts blame Mami to the end, but Sonia knows it's not Mami's fault either—Papi did this to himself. On the day they move, Sonia remembers how, on the day that Papi died, she suddenly thought about him at recess. She wonders if Papi said goodbye.

Discovering the extent of Papi's alcohol addiction impresses upon the entire family just how wrapped up in secrets and willful ignorance everyone was. It's worth noting, though, that Mami and Sonia are biologically related, while Mami isn't biologically related to these aunts. This may explain why Sonia feels some loyalty towards Mami while the rest of the family blames Mami.



CHAPTER 6

Though Sonia is relieved that her parents aren't fighting anymore, she soon becomes confused: she doesn't understand grief, either her own or Mami's. Every day, Sonia and Junior get home to a dark apartment. Mami emerges from her bedroom to cook dinner and then returns to her bedroom. Junior and Sonia do homework and watch TV. Sonia is only able to rouse Mami for grocery shopping on weekends, but Sonia worries that Mami won't know what to do with the ingredients she puts in the cart. Sonia isn't the only one worried about Mami. Ana and some friends try to get Father Dolan from Blessed Sacrament to visit Mami, but he refuses on the grounds that Mami doesn't attend church. This enrages Sonia, since Mami works to send her to school and always sends money with Sonia for the offering basket.

Even though Mami goes with Sonia to shop for groceries, Sonia is the one leading these shopping expeditions—she still has a lot of responsibility for a child. And this in turn is even more confusing for Sonia, since she believed that Papi's death would suddenly free her from these burdens. Again, it's possible to pick out Sonia's early interest in fairness and justice when she gets so upset about Father Dolan's refusal to visit. As she grapples with these injustices and inequities, Sonia begins to develop her own sense of right and wrong.



A week later, a friend's Baptist pastor agrees to visit Mami. Sonia is impressed that the pastor speaks Spanish and she's glad he tries. Mami stays in her room long into summer vacation. Anxious, Sonia feels like she needs to stay close to home, so she spends her summer reading. Mami subscribes to *Highlights* for Sonia and Junior and *Reader's Digest* for herself, and Sonia reads *Digest* and combs through the card catalogue at the library. Her favorite book comes from Dr. Fisher. It's a heavy book of Greek gods and heroes, and Sonia thinks they're versions of Abuelita's spirits. The immortals are even more compelling than comic book characters. Sonia never gives back the book.

*Sonia's belief that she needs to stay home is tragic—she's nine years old and shouldn't need to feel this kind of responsibility toward her family. However, out of this adversity comes Sonia's love of reading and her speedy progress, as she quickly transitions from reading *Highlights* (a magazine for kids) to a heavy book of Greek gods. Adversity may rob Sonia of her childhood in some ways, but it nevertheless gives her the tools she needs to succeed later in her adult life.*



Normally, Sonia can figure out what's going on when people are upset. Mami, however, gives no clues as to what's wrong. As far as Sonia is concerned, Mami and Papi did nothing but fight; she never saw them happy. Thus, Mami's grief seems irrational. Abuelita's pain is less odd, but the parties, séances, and gambling end. Sonia is a rational child, so she doesn't understand why the parties stop when Papi never came anyway and seemed to have a poor relationship with Abuelita. She figures that everyone is so upset because they feel guilty for not interceding, and she theorizes that Papi's death may have been Mami's fault—but she notes that the family believes that women are responsible for *everything* men do. Regardless, one day, Sonia pounds on Mami's door and tells Mami to stop. Then, she sobs.

Sonia's attempts to rationalize the grief of her family members speaks to how poorly equipped she is to deal with difficult emotions. While this is understandable—she's a child, after all—the conclusions she draws contain little nuance and don't leave any room for everything that Sonia doesn't know about her parents and their families. Her theory that everyone feels guilty for not stepping in may make it seem to Sonia as though families have a duty to step in and help in situations where there's substance abuse at play, something that will become important later in her life.



CHAPTER 7

Sonia says she didn't understand Mami's grief until nearly 50 years after Papi's death. She knows now that her theory that everyone felt guilty was unsophisticated. As Sonia gets older, she begins to assume that Mami was just depressed. Eventually, she asks Mami and learns about a happy version of Papi. Sonia recounts her mother's life story: Mami is born in 1927, and Mami's father abandons the family around that time. Mami's mother is unwell and near the end of her life, it affects her mind. Mami often has to lead her mother back to bed at night. They live in a wooden shack in the middle of a field, and it's Mami's job to carry water from the pump at a nearby uncle's house. Mami's mother once owned the farm, but she had to sell it to raise bail for her husband.

By going back in time to tell Mami's story, Sonia makes the case that a person can't fully understand a given situation without all the relevant context—and in this case, she needs to know that Papi wasn't always the isolated, sad man that she knew. And indeed, it's also important for her to understand that Mami grows up more or less on her own, also taking on more responsibility than she should at such a young age. Just as Sonia feels somewhat abandoned by Mami, Mami feels abandoned by her parents as well.



Some extended family members help out, but Mami's siblings are really the ones who raise her. Aurora marries at 16 and leaves for the city, but she returns every two weeks to collect handkerchiefs from women who sew them. Mami hems 24 handkerchiefs per week as her contribution to the household. Mayo feeds the family and eventually marries Maria, but he punishes Mami harshly when she misbehaves. Mami hates Mayo for beating her, and her hatred is why she vows to never return to Puerto Rico. Sonia says that now, Mami recognizes that Mayo was doing the best he could—and at least they sent her to school.

Mami's fraught relationship with Mayo may explain why she "rebels" as an adult by getting a job, sending her children to Catholic school, and moving to safer parts of the Bronx. She may be rejecting the parts of her upbringing and her culture that she believes held her back as a young person. Now that she's an adult, she can make choices for herself and make the life she always wanted.



Mami loves school, though the kids tease her and get her into trouble. She reads everything she can. When she's nine, Mami's mother dies and Mami moves in with Aurora. Mami loses track of some of her other siblings and continues to hem handkerchiefs. She and spends most of her time in the library, but her grades suffer since she reads instead of doing homework. One morning, Mami and her classmates go wave goodbye to young soldiers and are late for class. A bit later, she sees an ad in the paper for the Women's Army Corps and mails in her application immediately. She says she's 19, though she's only 17.

The Women's Army Corps asks Mami to appear in San Juan, and Aurora grudgingly sends her. Mami passes all the tests, and they tell her to reappear in four days to ship out to Miami—with her birth certificate. Aurora and Mayo find a lawyer willing to come up with a birth certificate stating that Mami was born in 1925. Sonia says that when she was a child, Mami's stories of being in the army were some of the only ones Mami would share. It was a time of discipline but also freedom and of coming of age. For many women like Mami, being in the armed forces was how they came to see themselves as American.

Mami and her fellow recruits land in Miami in December. Basic training is difficult, as the women have to learn how to use a telephone and how to speak English, for instance, in addition to how to function in the army. Mami's group heads for New York next and they work in the post office. Mami makes her first friend, Carmin, there. They explore New York together and are seeing a movie when it stops suddenly for the announcement that the Germans have surrendered.

One day, Carmin and Mami brave the subway to visit Carmin's friends in the Bronx. Mami meets Papi there. He pays attention to her and they talk about reading. He begins writing her letters, and they fall in love. Mami also falls in love with Abuelita, who's the life of the party. Joining the family helps Mami forget that she's an orphan. Both Papi and Abuelita are storytellers and lovers of poetry; this is the first time that Mami hears poetry recited. When Mami's time in the WAC comes to an end, she decides she doesn't want to go back to Puerto Rico. She and Papi marry at city hall and then they move in with Abuelita, Gallego, and several of Papi's brothers. Mami and Papi eventually get their own place downstairs and Papi does everything he can to make it beautiful.

The Women's Army Corps represents an opportunity to escape the oppression of Mayo and handkerchiefs that Mami suffers on the island—which may also explain why, as an adult, she briefly refuses to return to her birthplace. Note too that Sonia seems to imply that Mami's grades would've been fine had she done her schoolwork. This is an early indicator that a person cannot succeed without putting in the work.



For all its faults, Mami's family still comes together to help Mami follow her dreams. This likely impresses upon Mami just how important it is to support family members when opportunities like this come up. The idea that being in the armed forces helped Mami to see herself as American may also explain Mami's unwillingness to return to Puerto Rico. In the contiguous U.S., Mami may feel more powerful and American than she does in Puerto Rico.



It's telling that it's not until Mami is in her late teens that she makes her first friend. This likely makes Carmin seem even more important to Mami, and it may help Mami see that she can look outside her blood family to find support. Through the army, Mami also begins to develop a sense of self-sufficiency and the ability to navigate this new world as an adult rather than as a powerless child.



Meeting Papi and his family helps Mami learn that a person can create a family in all sorts of different ways—in this case, she can marry in and find a sense of belonging. It's likely this discovery that she belongs with this family as much as anything else that helps Mami make her decision to stay in New York. While she felt alone and powerless in Puerto Rico, in New York, she's now beginning to make a life for herself in which she has agency and support.



Papi teaches Mami to dance and gives her lavish gifts. Once, he creates a sculpture of her face to be used on a mannequin at the factory where he works. Papi received little education, but at one point, professors at the university in San Juan heard about his talent for math and offered him a scholarship. Abuelita couldn't bear to let him go, so they stayed together until Abuelita moved the family to New York. Papi arrived in New York within days of Mami. He loves his job at the mannequin factory, and when it closes, he does bookkeeping for a radiator factory. He supports Mami through a secretarial course and then her nursing course. He's thrilled when Sonia is born. Sonia interjects, noting that Mami only recently shared that Papi was the one who stayed up with Sonia when she wouldn't sleep as a baby.

Things begin to fall apart when the mannequin factory closes and when Mami moves the family to the projects. For Papi, the projects are an exile far away from his family. He was drinking before this point—he started at 13 years old, when Gallego married Abuelita—but Mami tells Sonia that it still took time before the drinking tore them apart. However, Mami still insists that Papi always cared for his children and always worked.

Sonia says that Mami couldn't have paid for Papi's funeral if Dr. Fisher hadn't forced Papi to take out a life insurance policy. He even offered to make the payments himself, which Sotomayor believes is proof that Dr. Fisher knew Papi wouldn't last. Papi's death shocked everyone *except* for Dr. Fisher, and it shocked Mami most of all—even though she's a nurse. When Mami sits in her dark room, she doesn't just mourn Papi. She mourns for her marriage and is terrified of how she'll manage two kids alone. She also feels as though being a widow is little different than being an orphan. Now, Sonia realizes that Mami was sad and afraid, not depressed.

The explanation of why Papi never attends college in San Juan suggests that even though Mami loves the family she marries into, it's not necessarily all positive—Abuelita's love, though fulfilling and uplifting when directed at her grandchildren, held Papi back as a young person. Family, this suggests, isn't always supportive in the way that Sonia suggests it should be. Despite this, though, Papi still does everything in his power to support Mami through their early married years and life as parents.



To Mami, it's less important that Papi drank and more important that he still took care of his family, even if he was drinking. Bad habits, she suggests, can sometimes be excused if a person is still able to care and support their families. What ultimately makes Papi's life so hard is being exiled—or so it feels—from his extended family. This speaks to the power of an extended family; nuclear families, Papi's struggles imply, cannot provide all the support a person needs.



Dr. Fisher emerges as one of the memoir's greatest heroes. Though it's unclear why exactly he takes such an interest in Mami's family, he nevertheless shows Sonia what it means to give back to one's community. The fact that Sonia only learns about Mami and Papi's early relationship as an adult, while writing this book, makes it clear that a person can always continue to learn about their family and the people in it.



CHAPTER 8

The morning after Sonia screams at Mami, Ana gets Sonia and Junior off to school as usual. When they get home after school, however, Mami is dressed and wearing perfume, the windows are open, and the radio is playing. Sotomayor explains that the difference after Papi died was substantial. Suddenly, the constant conflict ends. Mami still works six days per week, but she doesn't work to escape. Mami takes over cleaning the house. Sonia doesn't totally trust her new reality, especially when Mami dates, and it takes her years to get over her anger at Mami. It takes Mami years to get over her chilliness, and she's never one to get on the floor with her children—it would mess up her dress. Mami is effortlessly stylish and constantly finds fault with Sonia's clothing choices.

Despite her coldness, though, Mami genuinely cares about people and cares for most of the neighborhood as a nurse. However, she also refuses to steal supplies for friends and family from the hospital, and even refuses to steal Sonia's needles for her insulin. Mami is an exceptional listener and stops to talk with everyone, even a young Korean War vet who spends his day in the shade in his wheelchair. Sonia's bedroom that she shares with Junior is unbearably hot in the summer. Some nights, when Sonia wakes up drenched in sweat, Mami helps her change the sheets and then sits and sponges Sonia with a cool cloth until Sonia falls asleep.

Though Mami recovers after Papi's death, Abuelita never does. She wears black and never throws another party. Her eyesight begins to go so especially after she moves to the projects, she seldom goes out. Bisabuelita dies not long after Papi does and Sonia's aunts believe that if Papi, the beloved firstborn, could die, Abuelita must believe that nothing is safe. When Gallego dies of Parkinson's a few years later, Abuelita moves immediately to a senior home.

Sonia's fourth grade teacher is unusually kind and doesn't reprimand Sonia at all between Papi's death and the end of the school year. By the time that Sonia starts fifth grade in the fall, school is something to look forward to. Before this, Sonia hadn't understood what was going on. Though spending her summer reading helped, Mami also begins speaking English at home and this helps immensely. Later, Mami shares that teachers had asked that parents speak English at home when Sonia was in kindergarten, but it isn't easy until after Papi's death—Sonia isn't sure he spoke any English. Few others of Mami and Papi's generation or older speak much English.

Even though Mami makes this shift to become an involved, caring parent, it's still important to note that Sonia's anger toward her mother doesn't change until much later. There's more to being a supportive family member, this suggests, than simply cleaning the house and being home after school. It takes work to earn another person's trust, and it likely doesn't help that Mami picks at Sonia's clothing choices. It's clear, though, that everyone is happier and healthier now, which speaks to the damage that constant conflict can cause.



As an adult writing this memoir, Sonia makes the conscious effort to note and acknowledge all the ways in which Mami cared for her and for her community. This implies that Sonia realizes on some level (or at some point) that Mami is doing the best she can to keep her family and her community going. The fact that Mami cares so much for her community suggests that unlike Abuelita, Mami has a broad definition of what makes people worth caring about.



The difference in how Mami and Abuelita deal with Papi's death speaks to the different ways that grief can affect people—and it may reflect that Abuelita didn't have to deal with the day-to-day reality of living with Papi and Mami. She's mourning the loss of her beloved son, while Mami is able to recover from the loss of her beloved husband who also made her life miserable.



Sonia recognizes that Mami's shift to speaking English at home is a major gift—and it's one she wouldn't have gotten had Papi not died. This allows Sonia to see just how much she owes her success to random shifts in circumstance. More broadly, though, she discovers that her issues in school as a younger kid didn't have to do with her intelligence. She just didn't know what was going on.



Mami insists that Sonia and Junior receive an education; it is, according to her, the only way to get ahead. To help, Mami purchases *Encyclopedia Britannica*. However, she also puts Sonia in ballet, piano, and guitar, all of which are disasters. Guitar is a disaster because bullies block the way to their teacher, so Alfred insists on teaching Sonia self-defense. He shouts at Sonia and Junior like a drill sergeant and slaps Sonia, but Sonia still quits the guitar lessons.

The final reason why Sonia starts doing better in school is because her fifth grade teacher puts gold stars next to the names of excellent students. This unleashes Sonia's competitive spirit, but she has no study skills. She asks one of the smartest kids in class how she studies. Donna Renella shares that she underlines important facts when she's reading, takes notes, and rereads chapters before the test. Sonia learns through this experience that it's always helpful to ask for help from a friend or acquaintance. Soon, Sonia is one of the best students. Junior struggles in school, though he studies hard, and Mami takes the generous view that he'll get there in time. Mami never pushes her children to do better, as Tío Benny does with Nelson. She simply trusts her children and tells them that whatever they do, they must do it well.

On the first Christmas without Papi, Alfred helps Sonia carry a tree home. Papi always chose perfect trees; Alfred and Sonia's tree turns out to be very crooked. Sonia decorates, but no matter how hard she tries, she can't figure out how Papi strung the lights and hid the wires. Mami is no help. Sonia thinks that nothing good ever came to anyone who tried to figure out Papi's tricks. One year, she discovered Papi's stash of presents and found the TV. She excitedly begged Papi to watch it early, but Papi's disappointment was heartbreaking. Eventually, Sonia finishes the tree. She thinks it'd be nice to have a hug from Papi. She misses him and knows he loved them, even though he made their lives miserable.

CHAPTER 9

Sonia regularly goes to the pediatric diabetes clinic at Jacobi Medical Center. There, she meets Dr. Elsa Paulson, the first woman in power she encounters. The clinic focuses on kid-friendly education on how to live with diabetes. Sonia takes a single dose of insulin in the morning—without her shots, she'd die in days. Moderating sweets comes easily, as she hates the sensation of blood sugar spikes and drops. Since there's no way to monitor her blood sugar in real time, she pays attention to how she feels (the adult Sonia credits this habit with helping her develop sensitivity to others' emotions, a useful skill in the courtroom). Even with the best care, it's still likely that Sonia will die young. Mami is terrified of amputations or blindness, which annoys Sonia to no end.

Mami's ideas about education may also contribute to the sense that she's the black sheep in Abuelita's family. It's possible that other family members see that Mami wants her children to grow up differently from the way they did—and they may view this as an insult to how they grew up and how they live their lives.



Though Sonia has always been the sort to apply herself and work hard, adding the element of competition makes doing so even more appealing. However, even as Sonia calls on her competitive nature, she never forgets that she can't do anything alone—she'll inevitably need help, this time from Donna Renella. Mami's trust also helps, as it means that Sonia feels like she's totally in control of her academics and her future.



It's understandable that a holiday like Christmas would bring up memories of Papi and turn the holiday into a more emotional event than it might be otherwise. But for Sonia, it's not just emotional; thinking of Papi and Christmas allows her to internalize some of the lessons she learned from him. This reminds her that life with Papi wasn't all fear and anxiety. Possibly unbeknownst to Papi, he still taught her the importance of respecting others and doing a job well.



It's a testament to Sonia's optimism that she learns something that makes her a great lawyer and judge from her diabetes. To her, diabetes isn't just a dangerous disease that might cut her life short—it's something that ultimately gave her the life she currently leads. Mami's anxiety, while unhelpful and annoying for Sonia, does show just how much Mami cares for her daughter and how desperate she is to help.



Of the family, Alfred is the only one who doesn't think diabetes is a horrible disability. He makes Sonia climb to the top of the Empire State building and even puts her on a horse a few times. Eventually, Sonia decides that if she's going to die early, she shouldn't waste time. She never takes time off of school and this urgency never goes away.

During one of Sonia's appointments when she's 10, she gets a pamphlet about choosing a profession. She notes that the list of jobs that diabetics *can* hold seems short. Then, she gets to the list of professions that are off limits. Diabetics can't be pilots, bus drivers, or police officers. This stops Sonia in her tracks—she knows that detectives (aside from her beloved Nancy Drew) are often police officers, and she wants to be a detective. Crestfallen, Sonia thinks she'd be an exceptional detective if only she weren't diabetic.

However, Sonia finds the solution to her problem on TV when *Perry Mason* airs on Thursdays. Perry Mason is a defense attorney and always untangles the story behind the crime. However, though Perry Mason himself is heroic, Sonia likes Burger, the prosecutor—he's a good loser and is committed to finding the truth—and she likes the judge. The judge gets to make the final decision. Seeing the courtroom drama unfold makes Sonia feel like she's working on a puzzle. She decides she'd like to be a lawyer, but she also thinks she'd like to be a judge. Neither seems any more far-fetched than the other to 10-year-old Sonia.

CHAPTER 10

One night, as Sonia does homework in front of the TV, Mami and her friends arrive to watch *The Ed Sullivan Show*. They give Mami a hard time for letting Sonia and Junior do homework in front of the TV, but Mami insists that the kids can do what they want if they get good grades. Sonia tells the reader that she really just has the TV on for background noise and can work with all sorts of distractions. She perks up and blushes when she hears the women talking about a man that Mami wants to date. Sonia isn't innocent—her friends are starting to gossip and kiss—but she's not there yet. Fortunately, the most popular boy at school, Carmelo, befriends Sonia and keeps others from bullying her.

Again, Sonia doesn't let her diabetes lead her into a depression, nor does she indulge in feelings that her life doesn't matter because it might be short. Rather, it's motivating as she could die any time. This speaks to her optimism and her desire to do well.



In this case, diabetes does majorly influence how Sonia thinks of her life and her future. At this point, it becomes clear that Sonia's optimism isn't something she experiences all the time. Like anyone else, she experiences ups and downs—and it's perfectly normal that she'd need to grieve for a bit when she discovers she can't be a detective.



Given that Sonia initially wants to be a detective because of Nancy Drew, and then wants to be a lawyer or a judge because of Perry Mason, it becomes clear that the role models in a child's life have major sway over what they think they can be as adults. It's telling, though, that Sonia idolizes fictional characters and not real players in her life. This speaks to the fact that at this point, few in her family have had the ability to move beyond jobs that do more than pay the bills.



As Sonia befriends Carmelo, she begins to see that friends can serve all sorts of purposes. Carmelo keeps Sonia from being trampled in the school pecking order. This gives her the room to celebrate her love of academics, or at least not be punished for it by her peers. Mami's insistence that Sonia and Junior can study however they like illustrates another way that people can support each other: by giving them the freedom to make their own choices.



Sonia's friends often hang out at her apartment. Mami makes everyone feel at home, lets Sonia throw parties, and loves being able to keep an eye on everyone. Junior remains obnoxious. When Sonia is in seventh grade, Junior is big enough that Sonia recognizes she won't win their physical fights anymore. She insists that they talk things out and blackmail each other—so they take to tattling and often call Mami at the hospital to do so. Now, as a boss, Sotomayor always allows her employees to take calls from children; she believes it's essential if women are to feel welcome in the workplace. Over time, Sonia and Junior become extremely close.

Sonia realizes that if she wants to be a lawyer or a judge, she needs to learn to speak confidently in front of people. So when the church she attends with Titi Aurora asks for volunteers to read the Bible, Sonia volunteers. Her first time reading is terrifying. She shakes and feels ready to vomit, but she makes it through and knows she can do it again. Blessed Sacrament creates an eighth grade yearbook and asks outgoing eighth graders to write their "last will and testament" about their middle school life. Sisters write back with a "prophecy" for each student. The Sisters are discouraging for most of the students, though many students do go on to great heights. Surprisingly, though, the Sister who writes Sonia's prophecy expresses hope that she'll achieve her dreams of becoming an attorney and marrying.

CHAPTER 11

Sonia attends high school at Cardinal Spellman, an hour's commute from home. The school divides boys and girls for most things except lunch and a few classes. One exception is freshman Spanish. The native Spanish speakers are put in a class together with a nun from Spain, who plans to teach three years of Spanish in one year and then teach literature. The class revolts. Within a week, the students beg for Sonia to set the nun straight: as Puerto Rican kids raised in the Bronx, they've never had formal instruction in Spanish and have read, at most, a newspaper article in Spanish. The nun gently apologizes and proposes a new plan for the class, which teaches Sonia that teachers aren't the enemy.

During high school, Sonia and Miriam sign up to be maritime cadets. The point is to chaperone Nelson, who plays in the marching band. He's now a handsome girl magnet and wants to be a musician, and he's already struggling at Bronx Science. The issue isn't his intelligence; it's that his parents are divorcing. Sonia tries hard not to listen to family gossip about the divorce and feels as though Nelson is slowly drifting away.

Sonia recognizes just how valuable it was that Mami was able to take her calls when she and Junior were kids—it made her feel as though she could work and didn't always need to be home to supervise. Now that Sonia is an adult and an employer, she's able to do more than simply recognize this. She can put it into practice and make the workplace more welcoming for women and parents. This is a small thing she can do to make the world a fairer place.



Once again, Sonia is very cognizant of her strengths and weaknesses, and what she does and doesn't know—and rather than shying away from her weak spots, she confronts them head-on. It's also important, though, to note that Sonia never suggests that she feels out of place at church, at least when she attends Titi Aurora's church. The church community in this sense becomes its own kind of supportive family. And despite the difficulties Sonia has at Blessed Sacrament, the Sisters still acknowledge Sonia's dreams and express hope that she'll achieve them.



This is the first time that Sonia mentions encountering a person's preconceived notion of what it's like to be Puerto Rican or Spanish-speaking—and it's telling that she's able to resolve this issue so easily. This helps her see that if she uses her words and advocates for herself, she can make things better for herself, for others, and help someone learn important lessons of their own. It's also important that Sonia decides after this that teachers aren't evil. Realizing that they're on her side makes it far easier for her to reach out for help throughout her life.



Growing up, Tío Benny pushes Nelson to become a doctor; though the divorce certainly plays a part, it's possible that Nelson is also struggling to deal with his parents' misguided expectations of him.



The summer between freshman and sophomore years, Sonia discovers [Lord of the Flies](#). It's haunting. She wants to think about it, but doesn't just want to sit and think. She decides to get a job and announces this to Mami and Titi Carmen. Titi Carmen offers to ask her boss about a job for Sonia and later, Mami shares with Sonia how she sewed handkerchiefs as a girl and says she resented it. This surprises Sonia; she wants to work so she's not bored, not for the money. She begins to understand how hard Mami's life has been. Titi Carmen's boss agrees to hire Sonia for less than minimum wage and pay her under the table, since she's too young to work legally. She works at a women's clothing store and often catches junkies stealing. The store never makes a scene, and Sonia understands that shame is punishment enough.

On Saturday nights, two patrol officers walk Sonia and Titi Carmen home. The neighborhood is rough, so Sonia is glad for this. She spends every Saturday night talking late with Miriam at Titi Carmen's. Nelson is never home. One night, Sonia falls asleep thinking about [Lord of the Flies](#) and thinks that the junkies in the neighborhood are like the boys in the novel. In the morning, she stops at a fruit cart to buy a banana. She watches a police car pull up and the officer arrange to take two bags of fruit. The cop reaches for his wallet, but it doesn't seem genuine and the vendor waves him off. When the cop is gone, Sonia asks the vendor about it. He says that he can't sell fruit if he doesn't give some to the cops. Sonia is very upset. She knows her community needs cops and thinks that cops should be held to a higher standard.

However, Sonia remembers how, in [Lord of the Flies](#), the boys started off with law and order—but it breaks down when some become self-indulgent. She wonders which side the cops are on and remembers how when she was much younger, she'd go with Titi Aurora to her job as a seamstress. Sonia tried to be helpful, even though she was too little to do much. She knows that all those women were breaking the law, but they weren't criminals—they were just working to support their families. At that point, Sonia begins to understand how hard Titi Aurora's life has been. Titi Aurora is honest to a fault, but she breaks the law every day at work.

One evening, Sonia listens to her adult coworkers prank call people, telling women their husbands are cheating on them. Titi Carmen insists it's just a joke, but Sonia sees that Titi Carmen's "joke" is cruel in the same way that the officer stealing fruit was cruel. She realizes, at age 15, that some people can't think of another person's point of view.

Working puts Sonia out in her community in a new capacity. Especially since she focuses on the fact that she deals with instances of theft and comes to see how powerful shame is, it begins to show her that one doesn't always need lawsuits or major legislation to make a difference for someone. She also has to acknowledge the power of emotion to get what she wants. These shoplifters put things back not because she insists that what they're doing is wrong, but because they already feel emotional and ashamed about stealing in the first place. Sonia is learning to connect with people in a new way.



Once again, Sonia becomes aware of how unfair the world is. Though cops are supposed to protect everyone in the community, she recognizes that this cop is stealing—and yet, no one can make the cop feel shame, like Sonia can do with the junkies in the store. In this way, she begins to notice the power dynamics at play in her neighborhood and continues to hone her senses of empathy and justice. When she links all of this to [Lord of the Flies](#), it shows how she's also using her education to make sense of the world around her and discover new ways of thinking.



What Sonia references when she talks about Titi Aurora's seamstress job are illegal workshops that hired minority workers. Sonia recognizes that those women had little choice in the matter—they needed to make money, and this was a way to do it—but that also doesn't change the fact that they were working illegally. With this, Sonia begins to see that Puerto Ricans like Titi Aurora suffer in the U.S. in part because they're not given employment opportunities.



With this, Sonia realizes that the most important quality she can cultivate in herself is empathy. It does no one any good, she believes, to lord one's power over others, whether one is a police officer or making prank calls.



CHAPTER 12

Right before Christmas of Sonia's freshman year, her family moves to a new apartment in Co-op City, a brand-new development. It's close enough to Cardinal Spellman that Sonia can walk, though poor Junior now has to commute an hour to Blessed Sacrament. Mami is ready to move because gangs are moving into the Bronxdale projects and arsonists set fires often. Dr. Fisher enables the move when he unexpectedly leaves Mami \$5000 in his will. Sonia immediately sees why Mami wanted to make the move: the apartment is big and Junior and Sonia can even have their own rooms.

Sonia gets a job at Zaro's Bakery. She enjoys the job, and some Jewish customers assume she's Jewish—but thankfully, they don't call her a "spic" when they discover she's Puerto Rican. Gradually, Co-op City transforms into a real community as the construction wraps up. Many residents are Jewish, but people from all over the city from all different backgrounds move in. Soon, Alfred, Titi Carmen, and others move in—and Titi Aurora moves in with Sonia's family. Titi Aurora sleeps in the foyer and grumbles if Sonia or Junior stays out late, and she's a packrat. She's also frugal to a fault and takes issue with Mami's willingness to go into debt (which she always pays off) for things like Catholic school or encyclopedias.

Sonia doesn't understand how Titi Aurora and Mami get along with their differences, but she can tell that they're oddly bound to each other. She also suspects that Mami invited Titi Aurora to move in to deter Sonia and Junior from misbehaving—though Titi Aurora cannot punish the children, and most things look insignificant to Mami if they're not drugs or jail. Just as before, Sonia's friends congregate at her apartment. Once, when a neighbor calls security about the noise, Mami shouts at the security guard that if kids can't have fun at home, they get trouble elsewhere. She then invites the guard for coffee.

Sonia and Marguerite Gudewicz become best friends after a boy dumps both of them for another girl. Marguerite's house makes Sonia feel like she's back at Abuelita's, and though Marguerite's father holds racist views about Puerto Ricans, he still defends Sonia to even more racist friends and family. Sonia begins to see that there's more to New York than a small area of the South Bronx. Marguerite's German and Polish parents introduce Sonia to more vegetables, while the Jewish community introduces her to new curses. But despite all the differences between the groups, Sonia still sees that everyone is committed to their families and community—and food binds everyone together.

Again, Dr. Fisher emerges as one of the memoir's quiet heroes. He understands that if Mami wants to help her family succeed and thrive, she's going to need help—and leaving her money in his will is a way to ensure that Mami can't refuse the help. This makes the case again that Sonia isn't self-made. There have been people all throughout her life who have done amazing things for her and for her family that enable her to apply herself to school and to her work.



Especially when Mami invites Titi Aurora to live with the family, it suggests that after the death of her husband, Mami begins to develop her own ideas of what's important when it comes to family and friends. For her, it's important to maintain these ties with Titi Aurora, even if they don't always see eye to eye. This becomes an important lesson for Sonia, as it is, in many ways, the opposite of the strained dynamic that she saw between Mami and Mami's father. If people work on their relationships, they can improve them.



Mami sees that allowing Sonia's friends into her apartment is a way to make them feel safe and cared for, and it also keeps them out of trouble on the streets. This is a small way that Mami can improve her community, and it makes an impression on Sonia. Notably, that the security guard isn't the enemy here. He's also part of the community, and inviting him in for coffee makes that clear.



As Sonia's world begins to expand and she gains more experience with different ethnic groups, she begins to see that they're really not all that different. This passage speaks in particular to the idea that sharing one's food with others can create an even larger, more diverse community. And with more people in the community to care for one another, it's more likely that everyone in it will thrive.



Junior year, Sonia has a teacher named Miss Katz for history. She's different from the other teachers in that she's not a nun, and she warns against "getting stuck in rote learning," focusing on conceptual thinking instead. Sonia is intrigued and often visits Miss Katz's office. She learns about Miss Katz's freedom fighter boyfriend and learns that though Miss Katz is Jewish, nuns and priests in Latin America inspired her to work at a Catholic school. Miss Katz speaks reverently of Father Gigante, Titi Aurora's priest; he's a tenants' rights activist. Miss Katz is the first progressive Sonia sees up close, and Sonia thinks that Miss Katz is so interesting because she is so engaged in her own continuing education. But despite Miss Katz's attempts, Sonia doesn't understand critical thinking until college.

Miss Katz is Sonia's first introduction to critical thinking, and it's telling that this is so fascinating to Sonia. Miss Katz, like Dr. Fisher, shows Sonia how a person can serve their community, especially by bringing up Father Gigante's work for tenants' rights. She highlights the areas where the local community needs help and points out the people who are stepping in to fix it, which gives Sonia a road map for later.



Sonia isn't considered a beauty in high school. She barrels down the halls instead of ambling sexily, and even Mami says that she has bad taste in clothes. Boys ask her out occasionally, but she often feels like everyone's second choice. One guy, Kevin Noonan, makes Sonia feel attractive. After their first date, they're inseparable. Kevin brings Sonia a rose every day for the first month that they date. One day, Sonia drags him to meet an aunt and uncle, but Kevin goes pale and doesn't talk. Later, he admits that he's been stealing roses from that man's garden, not knowing he was Sonia's uncle.

Kevin's kindness and interest makes Sonia feel as though she has the chance to one day create a family of her own. Especially when they discover that Kevin has been stealing from Sonia's uncle, it illustrates just how widespread and close-knit Sonia's family is in the Bronx—and how without even knowing it, Kevin is already immersed in it.



Kevin spends most of his time at Sonia's apartment. They study and watch TV together, and they work on Kevin's car. They don't often go to Kevin's house, as Kevin's mother doesn't like Sonia. Eventually, Sonia introduces Kevin to Abuelita, which makes their relationship official. Everyone knows they'll get married at some point. One afternoon, as Sonia looks out her window at Kevin working on his car and Junior on the basketball court, Mami joins her and remarks on "[her] two sons."

Introducing Kevin to Abuelita—that is, the matriarch of the family—is what makes their relationship real and valid in the eyes of Sonia's family. This speaks to just how important family is to Sonia, as it reads as though she needs Abuelita's blessing before she can move forward with the relationship.



CHAPTER 13

Kenny Moy, the student coach of the girls' Forensics Club team at school, visits often to watch wrestling with Titi Aurora. Sonia joins the Forensics Club to work on her public speaking. Ken is an amazing debate coach: he can easily dismantle his opponent's position and does so without emotion. His family runs a hand laundry in East Harlem and since it's an hour away and Ken's dad is trouble, they often hang out at Sonia's apartment. Despite being Chinese, he fits right in with the Puerto Rican kids. Forensics Club ends up being great preparation for being a lawyer, and Sonia's philosophy class is also helpful. Both teach her to change people's minds—and they also teach her to listen, so she can respond effectively.

As Sonia explains how Forensics Club and her philosophy class prepared her to be a lawyer, she makes the case that it's not enough to just be smart and earn the degree. Rather, a lawyer needs to learn how to think, how to convince, and most importantly, how to listen and interpret what one hears. With this, she essentially suggests that emotional intelligence is what makes her a good lawyer—and this is also what makes her a good friend and allows her to collect friends like Ken over the course of her life.



Sonia is an exceptional listener; she began to develop the skill as a child watching for the beginning of a fight between her parents. Ken teaches her to pay attention to “vulnerable links in a chain of logic,” but Sonia knows that it’s still important to pay attention to the emotions of her listeners. For instance, at speech finals, Sonia chooses to speak about the murder of Kitty Genovese because she knows she can appeal to her listeners’ emotions. She graphically tells Kitty Genovese’s story of assault and rape and then implicates the 38 neighbors who witnessed or heard and did nothing. She insists that all humans have an obligation to care for others and wins first prize.

One night, while Sonia and Junior are doing homework, Mami bursts in and dramatically announces she can’t do it. Mami recently signed up for a course to qualify as a registered nurse. The issue is that Mami knows her stuff but is terrified in a school setting. Sonia, however, makes a habit of using reverse psychology on Mami to keep her going—so whenever Mami threatens to quit, Sonia and Junior announce that they’re done with school, too. It works.

CHAPTER 14

The film *Love Story* sucks Sonia in, like it does for most young people, and introduces her to Harvard, where the movie is set. Harvard looks like a wonderland to Sonia—and she doesn’t find out until much later that the movie was filmed at Fordham University in the Bronx. In the fall of Sonia’s senior year, Kenny calls from Princeton and describes his experience at school. He tells Sonia to “try for the Ivy League” and rattles off a list of schools; Sonia has no idea what the Ivy League is. The following day, when the guidance counselor asks Sonia if she’s interested in Fordham, Sonia says she’d rather apply to Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia, and Stanford. The guidance counselor does nothing else to help Sonia. Cardinal Spellman mostly pushes kids to parochial colleges; Kenny was the first to go to an Ivy League school.

Sonia fills out the applications, writes her essays, and takes the SAT without knowing what exactly she’s supposed to do. She notes that, at the time, if a kid didn’t go to an elite prep school or have parents who attended college, then they were naïve just like her. Financial aid is easy; no one in Sonia’s family even has a bank account. Now, she’s glad she didn’t know anything, as she believes she would’ve hesitated. In November, Sonia receives a postcard from Princeton. There are three boxes—likely, possible, and unlikely—and “likely” is marked with an X. Sonia has no idea what this means, so she takes it to the guidance counselor. Surprised, the counselor says it’s likely that Sonia got in.

With Ken’s help, Sonia is able to combine her emotional intelligence and her ability to pay attention with a newfound ability to use logic. Especially at the finals competition she describes, it’s not enough to simply give the facts of what happened to Kitty Genovese and insist that people must care for each other—she has to make her listeners feel as though if they’re ever confronted with something like this, they’ll step up and do what Kitty Genovese’s neighbors didn’t do.



What Sonia learns in school and at Forensics Club isn’t just useful at competitions and in the classroom—she can also use it to trick Mami into achieving her goals. The fact that Junior seems in on this suggests that Sonia and Junior’s relationship is improving as they get older; they can now work together toward a common goal.



It’s significant that Kenny calls Sonia and tells her to try to get into an Ivy League school. Without this kind of help, Sonia might have reached quite so high. This begins to make the case that for students like Sonia, who don’t grow up immersed in the intricacies of college admissions, students like Kenny are extremely important sources of guidance and inspiration. They’re the ones who create links between high schools and colleges and get kids like Sonia there at all.



Sonia tries to make the point here that she isn’t alone in her naïveté; there are lots of kids at this time who have never heard of Ivy League schools and don’t know that they can get there if they try. However, Sonia also makes the case that without all the information available to kids today about colleges, it was easier for her in some ways—if only because she had no idea just how selective the Ivy League schools are. In essence, she didn’t really know what she was trying for and didn’t know enough to be intimidated or nervous.



A few days later, the school nurse asks Sonia to explain why she got a “likely” and the two highest-ranking girls in the school only got “possible.” Sonia can’t answer, but she sees that the nurse wants her to feel ashamed. Later, she comes up with the perfect comeback: that she does more than those girls do with the forensics team, student government, and her job, and she’s still in the top 10. Sonia explains that she’d have to answer this question time and again over the next few years, as she went to college right as affirmative action was being implemented in Ivy League schools.

The acceptance packages pour in. Sonia decides not to pursue Columbia, since it’s close enough she’d have to live at home, while Stanford is too far away. She schedules her visit to Radcliffe, Harvard’s sister school, first. She’s immediately disappointed that Radcliffe isn’t set away from the town of Cambridge, and her interview is a disaster. A woman with a tall hairdo shows Sonia into an ornate, elegant office with a white couch, something Sonia has never seen. Suddenly, two yapping dogs appear, bark at Sonia, and then join the woman on the couch. Sonia can barely speak in the interview and leaves before touring. Once back home, she tells Mami she doesn’t belong there. Mami accepts this without question.

Yale is different. Two Latino students pick Sonia up at the train station and invite her to come protest with them. Sonia declines and goes for a walk instead. She thinks that New Haven looks depressing and threatening. When her guides find Sonia again, they join a group of Hispanic kids. Sonia spends two days with them and listens to them talk about revolution and Che Guevara. She finds their “down with whitey” talk embarrassing, since most of her classmates and teachers are white—and though she’s experienced bigotry, the narrative of perpetual class struggle doesn’t appeal to her. She can’t imagine being at Yale, especially while dating Kevin, who’s Irish.

Sonia has to take the bus to Princeton. Kenny greets her and introduces her to a small group of quietly radical kids. Kenny wisely declares that there’s nothing good to say about the social scene and the students at Princeton are odd, but Sonia will be able to hold her own intellectually. Sonia’s admissions interview goes well and Princeton offers her a full scholarship, finalizing her decision. Sonia doesn’t understand the power of Ivy League schools until she sees people react to the news that she’s going to Princeton. Everyone at Prospect Hospital congratulates Sonia, which she finds confusing—many of her peers are also going to good schools.

Sonia recognizes that this nurse believes that Sonia doesn’t deserve to go someplace like Princeton—possibly because she’s Puerto Rican. With this, Sonia is introduced to the racism baked into the college admissions system. Affirmative Action seeks to remedy some of this racism and bias, but clearly it’s not yet changing minds. And because Sonia is one of the first to attend, she becomes the face of the program, for better or for worse.



Sonia’s interview at Radcliffe is her first brush with ostentatious wealth and power. It’s understandably overwhelming, and the impossibly immaculate white couch in particular impresses upon Sonia just how wealthy this place is—they can afford to have furniture that will get dirty, as they can either clean it or replace it when that inevitably happens. When Mami so calmly accepts Sonia’s assessment of Radcliffe, it again shows how Mami empowers Sonia by trusting her to make her own decisions.



The way that Sonia talks about her race suggests that she doesn’t believe it’s the only thing people should notice or know about her—everyone, she seems to suggest, is more than the color of their skin or where their grandparents came from. She’s well aware that white people can be kind and generous, just like they can be racist and terrible—and given how much weight she places on the family she knows she’ll build with Kevin, she knows that this school isn’t right.



Even if most of Sonia’s peers have never heard of the Ivy Leagues, it’s clear that the adults in her life have—and they understand the significance of attending Princeton. Sonia’s confusion, in a way, reflects how naïve she still is about the whole thing, as she fails to grasp why people are so excited for her when so many of her peers are also going to college.



At the end of summer, the hospital staff gives Sonia money they collected and beg her to buy new shoes for college. This is nothing new; everyone hates Sonia's shoes. She plans to buy a new raincoat, however, and Mami takes Sonia shopping. After a long search, Sonia falls in love with a bright white **raincoat** with toggle buttons in an expensive shop. It's the first garment she ever falls in love with, but it's too small. Mami asks the saleswoman for help ordering a larger one. The woman ignores Mami and then is condescending until Mami mentions that Sonia is going to Princeton. The woman's demeanor changes immediately and she orders the coat. Mami later comments on people's reactions to Princeton and says she doesn't know what Sonia got herself into.

The raincoat is white, just like the couch at Radcliffe—so in a way, the raincoat becomes a symbol that Sonia is moving into a new world by going to Princeton. This is reinforced by the fact that she finds the coat in such an expensive shop. As awful as the saleswoman's behavior is, it impresses on Sonia again that she's doing something amazing and unexpected by going to Princeton. She's beginning to learn that her intelligence and her drive can take her all manner of unexpected places if she works hard.



CHAPTER 15

Princeton seems like something out of a science fiction novel because most of Sonia's classmates seem to come from another world. One afternoon, as Sonia chats with a girl from Alabama whose father, grandfather, and brother went to Princeton, the girl comments that "unusual" people come to Princeton—while gesturing to Sonia's roommate Dolores and another friend. Both Dolores and the friend are Latina. Sonia immediately begins chatting with Dolores in Spanish. Dolores and Sonia take a while to get to know each other—Dolores is afraid of Puerto Ricans because of *West Side Story* and Sonia thinks Dolores is a shy country girl, but they become close friends.

Sonia has been mistaken for being Jewish before; it's likely that she can pass as white while Dolores and this friend cannot. Because of this, Sonia has a unique window into her peers' casual racism, which makes her feel even more alone at school. It's fortunate that Sonia does end up befriending Dolores, as Dolores seems just as out of her element as Sonia is. By befriending each other, they can give each other support that they can't get elsewhere at school.



Sonia is quiet most of the time. She's shocked when she hears people talking about being invited to weddings where they don't know the couple and have to send gifts—this isn't how Sonia's community does weddings. Sonia takes refuge in the library and during her first week, she reads up on different subjects before committing to classes. Since there's no official pre-law curriculum, Sonia is free to choose all her own classes. She decides on introductory surveys and is thrilled with her choices until she returns to the dorm. She worries she's wasting her time when she hears that her classmates are taking upper level courses, and she fears she's not smart enough.

At this point, Sonia equates upper-level courses with superior intellect, and lower-level courses with a lack thereof. This, of course, is simply a reflection of the fact that her classmates are probably better prepared for college and got versions of these intro courses in high school. Sonia isn't unintelligent; she just has to catch up.



Sonia discovers that the surveys involve just as much work as upper-level courses and, importantly, help her learn to engage critically with a subject, as Miss Katz tried to teach her, instead of just regurgitating facts. Later, as a lawyer and a judge, Sonia has to become an expert in whatever a case requires, so this skill proves very useful. During a psychology lab, she has to overcome her fear of rats, which terrify her. She does well until the final weeks, when she finds her rats eating one that died. She runs from the room screaming. After this, she can't bring herself to go back. Her professor credits her for her attempt to overcome her fear and her grade barely suffers for not being able to finish.

Sonia has to participate in the work-study program as part of her scholarship. Since she can type, she gets a job in the Computer Center doing data entry for grad students and researchers. She earns twice what she would at the cafeteria, and she can set her own hours. Sonia holds the job for her four years at Princeton. During her senior year, she has the idea to enter the text of her thesis on punch cards like they use for data entry. Her boss is intrigued and assigns another operator to type the thesis—so it's possible that Sonia submits Princeton's first word-processed thesis.

Freshman year, however, Sonia struggles. She gets a C on her first paper in history class, even though she loves the class and the professor, Professor Weiss. Professor Weiss explains that Sonia's paper is full of facts, but there's no analysis. She realizes she's lost until she runs into Kenny one day and remembers Forensics Club. She realizes that she needs to treat her papers like debates by mapping out her position and persuading her reader. This isn't easy, as Sonia also realizes that her written English is weak. The following year, she discovers that this is because she uses Spanish grammar structures. Over the summer, she works on grammar and vocabulary.

Sonia comes to realize that she's not unintelligent; she just doesn't come from money. She had no idea until arriving at Princeton that she grew up in a bubble, and she constantly discovers things she doesn't know about. At one point, she enters data about how people pay for college. She freezes when she sees that people have trust funds and million-dollar incomes. Mami, in contrast, makes less than \$5,000 per year. Sonia vows to be a student for life and says she doesn't regret this, even now that she doesn't have to try so hard to fit in.

In college, Sonia finally begins to learn how to think critically about academic topics. It's telling that she adds the aside that she uses this skill throughout her life and career. This suggests that while learning to think critically certainly makes someone a better student while they're in school, it's also a useful skill to have in the real world. Even if a person's job doesn't require them to be learning about things all the time, life is still more interesting if a person can engage critically with the world around them.



Having the Computer Center job not only gives Sonia the freedom of having cash on hand, it also helps her learn important skills—and possibly gives her the distinction of having the first typed thesis at Princeton. Her education, in other words, isn't confined to the classroom.



Sonia applies herself outside of class by teaching herself English grammar and vocabulary. When she incorporates what she learned in Forensics Club, it also shows her ability to synthesize her learnings over time and approach problems from different angles.



Realizing that it's her economic standing that sets her apart from her peers allows Sonia to see just how important it is that she does well at Princeton. If she succeeds in becoming a lawyer, she'll be able to give back to her community and will have higher earning power than the generation before her.



CHAPTER 16

Every week, Abuelita sends Sonia a dollar wrapped in a napkin. Kevin's visits from SUNY at Stony Brook every weekend, armed with care packages from Mami. Dolores offers to sleep in a friend's room when Kevin is there, but later, Sonia learns that Dolores thought she was very wild. In reality, Sonia is anything but—she and Kevin study all weekend. Mami visits a few times with Junior, Kevin, and cousins.

When Sonia goes home for her midterm break, Mami is in a panic. She's in the final stage of her nursing degree and has to write a paper in English—and she tries to force Sonia to write it. Sonia compromises by editing the paper. As Mami becomes more and more hysterical, Sonia and Mami make a bet: if Mami passes and Sonia wins the bet, Mami will buy her a ticket to Puerto Rico. Sonia wins. Later that semester, Abuelita's envelopes stop. Sonia calls home and learns that Abuelita is in the hospital with advanced ovarian cancer. Mami convinces Sonia to stay at school until the end of the term. On Christmas Eve, the crowd at the hospital vanishes and Sonia and a cousin decide to fetch Abuelita a Christmas tree. They reminisce the entire walk about Abuelita.

Abuelita is delirious and calls for her long-deceased sister. When Sonia is the only one in the room with her, Abuelita demands a cigarette. Sonia tries to refuse, but finally lights a cigarette for her grandmother. Abuelita takes one puff and dies. At the funeral, Nelson shows up high on heroin. Sonia is enraged and sad. Nelson has been flunking out of college programs for years now. He's brilliant, but he won't show up and do the work. In the weeks after Abuelita's death, Sonia understands how devastated Abuelita was when Papi died. Sonia feels unmoored, but she can still feel Abuelita's protection.

CHAPTER 17

Sonia soon becomes friends with Margarita Rosa, who's a few years older and a role model. They often study together, and Margarita encourages Sonia to join *Acción Puertorriqueña*, the Latino student group. Sonia says that it's important to have a place where a person feels like they belong and doesn't feel like a stranger. She finds that with *Acción Puertorriqueña*. *The Daily Princetonian* publishes letters often that insist students admitted due to affirmative action don't belong, so the pressure for Sonia and her minority peers to succeed is immense.

For both Kevin and Sonia, what matters most is school, though their devotion to each other is still obvious. Similarly, Mami's visits with Junior are a way to show Sonia that she cares and will always be there to support her, no matter where she goes.



Even as Sonia busies herself with school, her connections to her family in the Bronx remain. It's still a priority for her to see Mami succeed and earn her nursing certification, and Sonia's close connection with Abuelita means that she feels as though she can't leave Abuelita alone at Christmas. In particular, it's telling that Mami works so hard to earn this degree. It begins to suggest that Sonia's tenacity and drive might not have just been the result of a fraught and anxious childhood—she may have learned this dedication in part from Mami.



Nelson's appearance and his dependency on drugs makes Abuelita's death hurt even more for Sonia. Sonia seems to still believe that Nelson doomed himself by getting into heroin—when in reality, addiction isn't that simple and it's been clear for a while that Nelson didn't see himself following the same kind of academic path as Sonia does. His intelligence, this suggests, isn't enough to make him a doctor like Tío Benny wants.



Acción Puertorriqueña is as much a way to bring students together to make the university a better place as it is a tool to connect minority students to each other. They're under so much pressure because there are people at the school who don't think they belong there, so it's essential that they find this group who are there to support and encourage each other.



Sonia, Margarita, and Ken all feel a bit like they were admitted on accident. Because they all feel so uneasy, the group focuses on freshman admissions. It's the early days of affirmative action, especially in the Ivy Leagues, so no minority freshmen have alumni or wealthy parents. Instead, most minority freshmen look to their immediate predecessors, as Sonia looked to Ken and to the Latinx students who showed her around Yale. The group also protests, but Sonia focuses her efforts on increasing hiring of Hispanics at Princeton. Sonia asserts that the administration genuinely wants to be more diverse, but they don't know how to reach out to Puerto Ricans or Chicana students. The administration finally listens when Acción Puertorriqueña files a complaint. A month later, the school hires a Hispanic dean of student affairs.

The Mexican Americans have their own group, but often they join up with Acción Puertorriqueña on issues or for parties. Eventually, Acción Puertorriqueña adds “y Amigos” to the end of its name to draw in other minority groups. The minority groups form their own governance board and Sonia sits on the board for a while. However, she doesn't want to simply concern herself with minority issues and self-segregate. To branch out, she serves on the student-faculty Discipline Committee.

Sonia begins to find herself and where she fits into the wider world when she works with Professor Winn to run a course on Puerto Rican history. She learns about Puerto Rican's tragic colonial history and the betrayal that Puerto Ricans felt once Spain ceded it to the U.S. Most important, Sonia reads an anthropological study of a family that goes from San Juan to New York. Most Puerto Ricans find the book offensive, but Sonia also sees her family reflected in it. She recognizes, though, that the book fails to appreciate Puerto Rican culture and the people's resilience. In class, students fight about whether Puerto Rico should be independent, a commonwealth, or a state.

Mami and Sonia take a trip to Puerto Rico. This is the first time that Sonia sees the island as an adult and after her history class, what she sees makes more sense. She can see that there's poverty, but there's also old money. It's an election year, and Sonia is awed that so many people are politically involved. It contrasts wildly with home, where Puerto Ricans feel like their votes don't count. On the island, Puerto Ricans don't feel like a minority—they feel entirely American. Sonia realizes that if the community in New York wants to escape poverty, they must look to the island and its pride.

Sonia makes the case here that one of the most effective ways to counter the racism that minority students encounter is by trying to make their group as welcoming as possible—and by doing everything in their power to bring in more minority students. By focusing on hiring a Hispanic administrator, Sonia and her friends also seek to make Princeton look and feel as though people who look like them and who come from similar backgrounds can be successful. With a Hispanic dean of student affairs, Hispanic students can see that they can hold powerful places in college administrations if they want to.



Though Sonia definitely feels connected to the Puerto Rican student group and the other, broader minority student groups, she also doesn't believe it's helpful to focus only on minority groups. This is because she recognizes that people everywhere share similar concerns—and she can help address those in mainstream organizations too.



For Sonia, getting to learn about Puerto Rico in the classroom is eye opening, and not just because this is the first time she's done so. Finally, she can place her own experiences and her own family history in the context of something much larger—the history of a distinct island and its experiences with colonial rule. Learning about Puerto Rico also helps her see that she doesn't have to hide that she's Puerto Rican and cares about Puerto Rico at school. She can celebrate her roots, and she can study them.



Sonia's education gives her a new lens through which to view the island. Learning more about Puerto Rico's political process gives her a foundation for understanding the election itself and the engagement of the people—and importantly, she sees how important that engagement is. With this, she learns that if she wants to help her Puerto Rican community at home, she'll need to figure out how to make them feel like their votes count.



For a final project, Professor Winn suggests a family oral history. Sonia enthusiastically works on it and records as many conversations and stories with family as she can. Mami opens up about her childhood and her time in the army. Hearing her family's stories, the history of the island comes to life—reading about what women who sewed handkerchiefs made, Sonia thinks of Titi Aurora and Mami. Abuelita's first husband fought in World War I and then rolled tobacco. Sonia learns that her family may be descended from Puerto Rican pioneers. Her family prospers and struggles as the island's economy changes. She insists that even as her family made their lives in New York, they remained Puerto Rican.

One way they maintained their links to Puerto Rico is through language—though Alfred talks about Spanish being a curse. Miriam agrees; she's currently working on a degree in bilingual education so she can be the teacher she wishes she had. Sonia suddenly realizes that students who don't understand what's going on at school have no way of knowing that they're intelligent; the language barrier holds them back. Recently, Sonia found these recordings. They're embarrassing now—she takes offense at her family's prejudices and sounds like a know-it-all. Sonia writes her senior thesis on the island's first elected governor and his modernization efforts. She feels she needs to know that Puerto Rico can birth leaders.

One day, Sonia reads in the paper that a Hispanic man who speaks no English ended up on a flight that was diverted to Newark. No one could explain in Spanish what happened, so they took the angry man to Trenton Psychiatric Hospital until a family member showed up. Sonia is incensed. She calls the hospital and learns that there are many patients there who don't speak English and don't have access to translators. She finds this cruel, so she organizes a volunteer program to install volunteers there to translate. They also throw parties. She finds the work surprisingly satisfying. While Dolores plays guitar and sings at a party, Sonia watches a nonverbal woman tap her foot.

Again, because Sonia grew up immersed in Puerto Rican culture, learning about Puerto Rican history isn't just a boring history class for her. Rather, she's learning about her family and the broader political, social, and economic contexts that shaped her family's journey to the Bronx. At this point, Sonia also begins to connect with Mami and learn about how awful Mami's childhood was, which helps Sonia begin to develop a sense of empathy for her.



It's telling that one of the things that marks Sonia and her family as being proudly, undeniably Puerto Rican is also what makes it difficult for them to succeed in New York. However, Sonia and Miriam are also of the mind that speaking Spanish shouldn't be a curse. It shouldn't hold kids back, because Spanish-speaking kids aren't unintelligent. Rather, they just need different tools than their English-speaking peers. This is one thing that people can do in schools to make the world a fairer place.



Talking with her family about how to improve education and working with Acción Puertorriqueña to improve Princeton is one thing, but Sonia wants to give back to the wider community. Working with the psychiatric hospital to provide translating services is a tangible way to give Spanish-speaking patients dignity and some control over their lives. Through this, she learns the importance of helping others who don't have a voice.



CHAPTER 18

Sonia gets back to her dorm to find a friend waiting for her. The friend discovered the invitation to join Phi Beta Kappa in the trash and assures Sonia that it's not a scam. This isn't the first time during Sonia's senior year that something like this happens. When she receives the call that she won the Pyne Prize, Sonia has to ask a friend what the Pyne Prize even is. She's shocked to learn that it's the highest award given to a graduating senior. A friend takes Sonia to Macy's and helps her pick out a suit for the award luncheon. At the luncheon, Margarita Rosa and other Hispanic alums are there, along with Mami. Most of the other attendees are white. Sonia receives the award for her work on joining the old, white, and racist Princeton with a new, diverse Princeton through Acción Puertorriqueña.

In her acceptance speech, Sonia says that Princeton's minorities enabled her success—and in this sense, *everyone* who has worked with her also earned the award. She says that going forward, she hopes that she and Princeton can move beyond simply recognizing minorities. She imagines all the minority students who will make Princeton more diverse. Later in the year, Professor Winn calls Sonia aside to tell her she's going to graduate summa cum laude. She has to look up what this means and feels like she's still an outsider. Over the summer, Sonia works in a corporate Manhattan office and is very disappointed at how unproductive it is. She and Junior grow closer as he begins his journey to become a doctor.

Most important that summer is Sonia and Kevin's wedding. They decide to get married so that Kevin can follow Sonia to Yale, which they can't do unmarried. Mami wants an extravagant wedding; Sonia wants a small, frugal affair. They argue loudly about the dress, but the dressmaker tactfully creates a simple design with embellishments that please Mami. Marguerite is the maid of honor and hosts the bridal shower. This becomes an issue, as there are different cultural expectations amongst the Polish, German, Irish, and Puerto Rican guests. They compromise by giving the traditional Puerto Rican gifts—which are risqué—while the rest of the guests are distracted.

On the day of the wedding, many women drag Sonia out of bed, put makeup on her, and get her dressed. They realize then that Sonia hasn't eaten anything. A cousin fetches Sonia a sandwich and she gives herself her insulin. After the ceremony, the party rages for hours. Sonia and Kevin splurge on a room at a hotel overlooking Central Park and eat greasy burgers. In their room, Kevin opens the last of their gift envelopes. It contains drugs from his college friends. Sonia makes him flush them down the toilet.

As Sonia receives the invitation for Phi Beta Kappa and accepts the Pyne Prize, she has to confront the fact that even though both of these things are clear indicators of her success, she's still well behind her peers. Again, this is because she doesn't come from money and didn't grow up breathing the intricacies of college Greek organizations and awards—but this doesn't mean she doesn't belong or doesn't deserve the distinction. And as in her youth, as Sonia experiences this success, her family and friends rally around her to celebrate her and remind her of where she came from.



Sonia is well aware of the fact that she's receiving the Pyne Prize for the work that many people did together, and so it's important to acknowledge them. With this, she demonstrates her commitment to fairness and kindness. And for her, the journey isn't over. She may have done great things during her time at Princeton, but this doesn't mean that the work is over. Because she's paved the way for other minority students to continue her work, the Pyne Prize may be more within their reach in the future.



Symbolically, making Marguerite the maid of honor is a way for Sonia to thank Marguerite and publically honor their friendship. Navigating the different cultural expectations for the bridal shower speaks to how integrated Sonia's Puerto Rican family has become in the wider community. They're no longer part of a purely Puerto Rican community. Especially since Sonia is marrying into an Irish family, the family's idea of who can be classified as family has to expand.



At least on important days like this one, it is possible to momentarily forget Sonia's diabetes, but the threat her diabetes poses never fully goes away. By bringing up this narrowly avoided catastrophe, Sonia makes it clear that diabetes doesn't stop being an issue once she's no longer a kid. This is a challenge she'll face her whole life.



CHAPTER 19

Sonia and Kevin set about playing house in New Haven. Kevin applies to medical school and contemplates studying law, but he's unsure of what he wants to do. He takes a job as a lab assistant. They find an apartment a mile from campus and adopt a dog. Kevin and Sonia split chores and Sonia learns how to cook through calls with Marguerite's mother. Marguerite visits often with her future husband, Tom.

Yale Law School is uniquely small, and Sonia's class is brilliant. Fellow students have already earned PhDs in philosophy, math, and physics; there are several Rhodes scholars and an opera singer. Grading is pass-fail and students aren't ranked. Sonia works hard, but she knows she could be humiliated at any point—teachers teach by interrogating students. She knows this will prepare them to be lawyers, but she still feels out of her depth. She can follow arguments but can't come up with them herself. Because of this, Sonia realizes that to become a lawyer, she'll have to learn a new way of thinking.

Sonia doesn't feel isolated at Yale, in part because the first-year students are divided into small groups. She also feels connected to the other female students, as they're still a minority. Her best friends, however, are Felix Lopez, Rudy Aragon, Drew Ryce, and George Keys. They look out for Sonia and form close friendships with Kevin, too. Sonia and Rudy co-chair LANA, the Latino, Asian, and Native American student association, where they focus on the same issues of recruitment that Sonia did at Princeton. Drew runs the bar for grad students and gives Sonia a job as a bouncer. Sonia invites all four home for Thanksgiving, and they all love Mami.

At Yale, Sonia meets her first true mentor. She learns best by watching others and believes others always have something to teach, but mentorship takes this to the next level. She meets José Cabranes through a Princeton friend a year behind her, who's working on issues of U.S. citizenship for Puerto Ricans. José is an expert on the topic, so when the friend meets with José, he invites Sonia along. José offers Sonia a job doing research for his book and shows her what it's like to do pro bono work. He's generous to everyone and shows Sonia that it's possible to be a successful lawyer and be openly, proudly Puerto Rican. She realizes she can't imitate him, so she listens to his advice seriously—and never follows it.

The close relationship that Sonia shares with Marguerite's mother speaks to Sonia's willingness to learn from anyone. It also shows how she goes out of her way to nourish her relationships, whether they be with friends or family, until those people feel like family members.



Once again, it doesn't take Sonia long to identify her problem: she may have made strides to learn critical thinking at Princeton, but she's not thinking critically enough to call herself a lawyer yet. It's still commendable, though, that she recognizes this weak spot, as it gives her something to work towards. Because she understands exactly what her problem is, she's able to take the steps to remedy it.



At Yale, Sonia has much the same positive experience with minority student groups as she did at Princeton. This helps her realize that by immersing herself in these minority communities, she can make a home for herself anywhere—as these problems that the organizations are trying to solve exist everywhere. Inviting her friends home for Thanksgiving is a way for Sonia to drive home how close they all got, as inviting them for Thanksgiving makes them feel more like family.



Up until this point, Sonia's professors and teachers have all been white. She's never met a Puerto Rican person in a position of power like this, so José is a refreshing shock for her. It's interesting, though, that what's so compelling about him is his generosity and his pro bono work. This shows Sonia that as she becomes successful, she can't just leave her community behind. It's her responsibility to return and do what she can to make her world a better place for the people who look, talk, and grew up like she did.



Without grades, students distinguish themselves by getting on *The Yale Law Journal* through writing a note, which is a thorough paper. Notes must be written on an unresolved legal problem, and it's not a simple task. Through her work with José, Sonia begins to see Puerto Rican citizenship in legal terms and sees that there are lots of questions about it. She decides to focus on the legality of statehood and on Puerto Rico's seabed rights. Her note is accepted and published.

Out of the blue one day, Rudy tells Sonia that she argues like a guy. Sonia is seething immediately, but Rudy and Felix insist it's a good thing when she speaks in class. Sonia tells the reader that in a way, Rudy is right; she isn't apologetic and tentative, but she *doesn't* speak in class. She speaks up the first time in her third year to correct a professor's math—twice. Her confidence increases not long after, during a mock trial competition. Sonia notices one man on the jury who seems totally unengaged and approaches him after. Though he doesn't want to tell her what he didn't like about her approach, he eventually admits he doesn't like “brassy Jewish women.”

Over Sonia's second summer at Yale, she gets a job as a summer associate at a top Manhattan law firm. They ask her to contribute to a brief for a huge antitrust case, but she struggles to formulate good arguments. She eventually passes her assignment to a more experienced associate, and when she sees what he writes, she realizes how poorly she did. She knows she's not thinking like a lawyer yet and to make matters worse, the firm doesn't offer her a job. This is unusual, and Sonia feels like a failure. To figure out what she did wrong, she signs up for an antitrust class and works on writing briefs. The trauma of this failure haunts Sonia until she becomes a judge.

Sonia's paycheck means that she and Kevin can take a honeymoon. Their road trip is eye-opening as Sonia sees landmarks she's only ever read about. She takes the time to think about her future. Her classmates want to make lots of money. Though Sonia sees that it's important for minorities to reach the upper echelons, she doesn't want to just make money. She considers José's suggestion that she clerk for a judge, but it sounds too academic. (This, she realizes later, is a mistake; now, she encourages minority students to prioritize clerking.) She considers the State Department, as the public service aspect is appealing, but she realizes that this possibility will be dependent on where Kevin gets accepted to grad school. She still wants to be a judge, but this remains a dream. They end their trip with visits to Dolores and Ken Moy.

This note helps Sonia distinguish herself among her classmates, but it's also significant in that it emphasizes that Puerto Rico isn't a niche interest for Puerto Ricans—it's something that will interest everyone who reads the law journal's publications. Her education, again, helps her connect with her family history and drives home that she doesn't have to hide her roots.



For Sonia, the man on the mock jury doesn't give her much useful information—mostly, he shows her that he's racist and prejudicial. (And, ironically, Sonia isn't even Jewish.) However, this man's critique, in addition to Rudy's, speaks to Sonia's growing confidence, willingness to voice her opinion, openness with who she is. Even if others take offense to that, Sonia's confidence will no doubt help her as she moves forward and becomes a lawyer.



Failure, though painful and humiliating, doesn't mean that Sonia gives up. Rather, her tenacity means that she quickly identifies her problem, owns it, and sets about doing everything she can to fix it. It's this willingness to tackle her failures in this manner that helps her succeed, as it means that she's always able to look for ways she can improve. As before, the issue is that she's not yet thinking critically enough, or in the right way, to be a good lawyer.



Sonia is disinterested in wealth for wealth's sake. Instead, Sonia's desire to give back and help others is what drives her, which is why she considers the State Department. However, she also believes she must set the record straight for current or future law students since she has the chance: she made a mistake by not clerking and she feels she has to admit that so she can help those who come after her.



Back in New Haven, Sonia heads out to a recruiting dinner with the Washington firm Shaw, Pittman, Potts & Trowbridge. A Princeton friend, Scott, encourages Sonia to attend the dinner. At dinner, the partner asks Sonia if she believes in affirmative action. He insinuates that minorities can't be as successful as their white peers and implies that Sonia doesn't belong at Yale. Scott apologizes to Sonia after the dinner. By the next day, George, Rudy, and Felix are ready to punch the partner, but Sonia goes to the private recruiting interview anyway. The partner is pleasant, but he insults Sonia again when she calls out his racism of the night before.

Sonia decides to address a formal complaint to Yale's career office, challenging the firm's right to recruit on campus. The complaint sparks interest across the school and eventually, the country. Sonia is glad to bring the partner's behavior to light, but she also wants a career in law—she doesn't want to be blacklisted. A tribunal negotiates a full apology from the firm. When everything calms down, Sonia remains firm in her belief that affirmative action is a good thing. She may have been accepted through a "special door," but she still worked hard to earn her place—and she succeeded. Junior experiences similar success thanks to affirmative action, but again, it's his hard work that gets him through. When Sonia's note for *The Yale Law Journal* is ready for publication, the editors send a press release. The note is well received and makes Sonia feel ready to enter the world.

CHAPTER 20

One evening, as Sonia makes the long trek to the restroom, she passes a presentation in a conference room and steps in—there's free cheese and wine, and the speakers are public-interest lawyers. A speaker begins who seems wildly uncomfortable speaking. He piques Sonia's interest when he says that his crew of several hundred assistants all try cases, even in their first year on the job. The job offers new graduates more courtroom experience than they'll get anywhere else. Sonia remembers an associate at her summer job who immersed himself in a case, only for a senior partner to shine in court. After the presentation, Sonia approaches the speaker, the New York district attorney Robert M. Morgenthau. He offers to speak to her about a job the next day.

The DA's Office isn't a popular place to work, but Bob Morgenthau already has Sonia's resume and has spoken to José when Sonia arrives for her appointment. Rudy notes the poor pay, but Sonia will still make more than Mami and doesn't mind. She follows her instincts and takes the job, against the advice of most people at Yale. She wonders if Bob Morgenthau and the DA's office stirred up her latent love of Perry Mason and his desire for justice.

The partner's racism and prejudice is inexcusable, and it's telling that Sonia's friends all rally to try to help her set things right. It's especially telling that Scott stands up for Sonia, as he could damage his own reputation by supporting her. This speaks to the caliber of Sonia's friends—they are, for the most part, willing to do the right thing, even when it's hard and could damage their own careers. This, she suggests, is the mark of a good friend.



Sonia knows she can't make too much of a fuss or no firms will want to work with her. On the other hand, though, she understands that it's essential she call out the partner's racist behavior so that students who come after her won't have to deal with him. When she talks about affirmative action and her support for the policies, she makes the case that simply admitting minority kids is only the first step. Those kids don't then get to skate by; they still have to apply themselves like everyone else to succeed.



Given Sonia's desire to give back, hearing public interest lawyers speak is likely very exciting. These are the people who are actually doing the work to give back to their communities and make people's lives better. Plus, under Robert Morgenthau, Sonia won't have to toil under senior partners for years before she herself can shine. And while Sonia doesn't necessarily want glory for the sake of it, she does want to work in a collaborative environment where her work is valued, which essentially means not working at a large firm.



Given Sonia's humble beginnings, it's far easier for her to accept the poor pay of the DA's Office since it'll still mean she's doing well compared to Mami. And more importantly, she believes that there, she'll be able to make a tangible difference in others' lives.



CHAPTER 21

Rookie assistant DAs (ADAs) are known as “ducklings,” and it’s not a term of endearment. Sonia and her fellow 40 ducklings will receive guidance from senior colleagues, but most of them must figure things out on the fly in the courtroom. She explains that in 1979, New York City is swimming in a wave of crime. The city is in trouble financially, so budget cuts mean there isn’t enough staff to deal with criminal cases—and people begin to complain about police brutality. ADAs are assigned to trial bureaus to learn the job prosecuting misdemeanors, and they begin by learning how things work at the office. They join cops on patrol and spend a day every week interviewing officers and witnesses to draw up charges.

Bob Morgenthau is highly efficient. Each prosecutor handles a case from beginning to end, he collaborates with his counterparts in other bureaus, and he sets up special offices to investigate, for instance, sex crimes or Chinese gangs. His efficiency doesn’t help much when it comes to space, however; Sonia’s desk is first in a doorway and then a cramped shared place. It’s freezing in winter and boiling in the summer. Sonia has little time for anything but work as Kevin gets accepted into a grad program for biochemistry at Princeton. They live in student housing in Princeton, and Sonia commutes two hours by train to work. Sonia notes that she didn’t notice that the hours were straining their marriage—at the time, she is just happy to see Kevin thriving in his program.

In her practice hearings, Sonia plays the part of the defense attorney and realizes a witness omitted information. She gets the information, and later, the senior assistant DA tells Sonia that she’s the first person to ever spot the hole in the witness’s story. Because of this, Sonia is the first of her cohort to get a case assignment that goes to trial mere weeks after she starts. She learns on the spot that the defendant is a young black man charged with disorderly conduct. He’s a college student, and his public defender is intent on getting the case thrown out as to not ruin his life. The judge and the defender insist they’ll go to trial on Monday. It’s Friday. The judge tells Sonia that if they don’t start “wah-deer” on Monday, she’ll dismiss the case.

Learning the job of an ADA means that Sonia really has to learn how her city works. Now, she’s working with the cops whom she saw abuse their station when she was a teenager.



The way that Bob Morgenthau runs the office means that Sonia never has to deal with the issues faced by the associate she described in the previous chapter, whose hard work was never acknowledged. Here, everything she does is acknowledged because she follows a case from beginning to end. As Sonia immerses herself in work, however, she implies that things aren’t going especially well at home. This suggests that, at this point, Sonia possibly isn’t giving enough time and support to her loved ones.



Being the best in her class comes with downsides, as Sonia is the first to have to figure things out in real time. Clearly, law school and the practice hearings weren’t enough to prepare Sonia to actually take a case to court—there are some things she has to learn on the fly, by doing them. This on-the-fly learning, however, teaches Sonia to think on her feet and to ask for help. It’s also essential that she know who to ask for help—clearly, neither the judge nor the defender are going to enlighten Sonia as to what’s going on.



Sonia runs to her advisor, who explains that “wah-deer”—*voir dire*—is jury selection. The trial is a disaster. The public defender destroys Sonia and the defendant’s grandfather appears to have a heart attack during Sonia’s remarks. The jury finds the defendant not guilty. Soon, Sonia discovers that for trial lawyers, flukes like the heart attack happen regularly. Her second case is a mess too. The defendant is a man who fought with his wife on the subway and beat her on the platform. The wife unsurprisingly refuses to testify, so Sonia subpoenas her. The wife doesn’t show for trial because she scheduled an abortion that day. Sonia feels horribly guilty and sad.

The defense attorney is Dawn Cardi, and it’s her first trial. She stumbles horribly, seems to be on Sonia’s side at times, and has to run to her swearing-in ceremony while the jury is out. The jury finds the defendant guilty. When the judge sentences the defendant to a year in jail, both Dawn and Sonia are horrified. Dawn explains that the man’s family depends on his job and support, and Sonia realizes that putting this man in jail might protect his wife in the short term, but it’ll be the end of the family. She speaks up in support of Dawn and suggests the man be put on probation and made to attend a domestic abuse treatment program. Sonia approaches her bureau chief, John Fried, after, afraid she ruined her reputation—prosecutors should be tough. He says that Sonia did what she thought was right.

Sonia and Dawn gradually become friends, despite the unofficial rule that prosecutors and defense attorneys shouldn’t mix. They talk about the sexism they experience and though they often begin on opposite sides of an argument, they usually realize their differences are a matter of personality. Dawn distrusts authority, so she supports the underdog. Sonia loves rules, so she has more faith in the process of law and of the system. Sonia says she doesn’t think that prosecutors and defense attorneys are natural enemies; they just play different roles. She suggests that in order to serve everyone, it’s important to set the integrity of the system above one’s individual goals. However, as she helps Dawn on several cases, Sonia learns the power of mercy.

For Sonia, what happens during her second case reminds her that context is key—there’s clearly more going on in this couple’s marriage than just a single incidence of assault, and Sonia likely made that woman’s day even worse by trying to subpoena her. And this is still true, even though she’s trying to protect this woman from an abusive husband. Through this, she learns that cases have far more nuance than she may have initially thought—and it’s important to understand that nuance to do her job well.



With John Fried’s blessing, Sonia begins to trust her gut and understand that sometimes, doing the right thing and protecting innocent people doesn’t always mean throwing bad guys in jail. Rather, protecting the community can mean reeducating people and making sure that families have breadwinners with them and able to work, not behind bars. This shows that Sonia’s sense of morality remains strong, even though that has the potential to ruin her chances of becoming a successful prosecutor with a tough reputation.



Even though Sonia and Dawn are essentially on opposite sides of the fight in the courtroom, this doesn’t mean that they’re enemies—and indeed, they should work together to discover the truth and only punish those who deserve it. The way that Sonia describes the relationships between defense and prosecution recalls the way she described Perry Mason earlier. It takes everyone—Perry, Burger, and the judge—to make the show work and find justice, and the same is true in real life.



Being competitive, Sonia racks up convictions. She loves her work and prepares the best she can. She loves the challenging cases the most and earns a reputation for being tough. However, Dawn always asks Sonia to remember the cost of her success—she can seriously impact people’s lives. So when difficult cases come up, Sonia goes to talk with John Fried, who is extremely fair. Sonia quickly moves up to prosecuting felonies. As she moves up, Warren Murray replaces John Fried as bureau chief. This is worrying, as he’s a tough prosecutor. One of Sonia’s first cases has almost nonexistent evidence. Warren agrees that the evidence is weak but insists the jury will acquit the defendant. Sonia angrily refuses to prosecute and Warren explains he just wanted to make sure that Sonia was sure.

Sonia meets Judge Rothwax while he’s throwing a fit about a delayed case. He warms to her instantly when she promises to be ready for trial the following week. He deals with felony pretrial motions and is known as the “Prince of Darkness” for the way he treats defendants and lawyers. However, though Sonia doesn’t agree with some of his controversial views and dislikes his evil persona, she admires his passion, intelligence, and integrity. He becomes a mentor and shows Sonia what it’s like to be a judge.

Soon after moving to felonies, Sonia prosecutes the same defendant in two back-to-back trials. She loses both to an experienced defense attorney and goes to Warren for advice. He identifies immediately that she appealed to logic rather than morality in her remarks to the jury. He tells her that she must make the jury feel it’s their *moral* duty to send people to jail. With this, Sonia gives herself permission to use her emotional intelligence and never loses another case. She insists that it’s important to pay close attention to the jury and to remember that she’s talking to people, not lawyers. She also discovers that what she learned as a kid in the Bronx is as useful as what she learned at Princeton and Yale. She sees how laws affect people, and she learns that her background is more than just a problem to solve: it helps her connect.

Just as in high school and college, Sonia applies herself to her job and does whatever she can to be the best at it that she can be. Now, though, doing well isn’t just about Sonia’s own personal success—it’s about hopefully improving the lives of the people she serves. Sonia has to remember that there’s a human cost to what she does, even if she believes that people who commit crimes should end up in jail. Despite Warren Murray’s dramatics, he nevertheless supports Sonia and gives her the confidence to continue to follow her instincts.



Judge Rothwax shows Sonia that being a judge can be as much about one’s performance as it is about their intellect and grasp of the law. Even if she doesn’t appreciate his persona, she still makes a point to learn everything from him that she possibly can, demonstrating that she’s willing to learn from anyone, no matter who they are.



With Warren’s help, Sonia comes into herself when she realizes that she must combine the rationality she learned in law school with the emotion that guided her as a young person. With this, she’s able to finally own the fact that she’s Puerto Rican and use that to her advantage. Sonia is able to do this, in part, because of mentors like José who showed her this was possible while she was in college. At this point in her life, she reaches a more holistic understanding both of her upbringing in the Bronx and of the law, since she’s been on both sides.



CHAPTER 22

In the spring of 1980, not long after Sonia starts at the DA's Office, Bob Morgenthau encourages her to join the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund (PRLDEF). Though Sonia feels stretched thin, she believes in the group's mission and agrees. The organization is made up of experienced professionals. It wins victories that help thousands of people by expanding voting rights or striking down discriminatory hiring practices. Sonia works on the litigation and education committees, which hire staff lawyers and develops LSAT materials for Latino students. Through her involvement, she learns the work of politics.

Things come to a head when the staff lawyers strike. Sonia sympathizes with them, but she understands that she has a duty to protect the organization financially. She learns that it's fine to support the little guy, but she suggests that the little guy will *still* fail if the larger organization is neglected. She sees this firsthand a year later, when Prospect Hospital goes bankrupt and Mami loses her job. It destroys the entire neighborhood, and Sonia wonders what the hospital could've done to stay afloat.

Working with PRLDEF is Sonia's first experience doing pro bono work. She serves for 12 years until she becomes a judge. She also gets involved with the State of New York Mortgage Agency, which helps make mortgages available to working-class families. Though Sonia supports the mission, she knows that even Mami wouldn't qualify for a loan with them. She especially likes working on issues that affect her Puerto Rican community, such as education and economic development. However, she also sees that no group is an island—she must work for everyone. To do this, she joins New York City's Campaign Finance Board. She loves that it seeks to squash corruption by creating rules, and it provides room to compromise. Because Sonia always registers as an independent, she gains a reputation as a good mediator. Through these organizations, Sonia meets politicians who eventually make her a judge.

It's telling that no matter where Sonia goes, she finds a way to give back. As a professional, she can continue the line of work she did with Acción Puertorriqueña by working on improving Latinx people's chances of getting into law school (the LSAT is a test that law schools use to vet applicants). The idea that she learns politics through this suggests that she's learning how to connect with more people and make connections that will help her in the future.



Through her work with PRLDEF, Sonia learns the importance of looking at the bigger picture and not just the individuals involved in a given issue. By looking at the larger picture, she seems to suggest, it's possible to save entire neighborhoods, like her own in the Bronx. This is one of the bigger-picture ways that she discovers she can give back and help others.



Even though Sonia supports the mission of the New York Mortgage Agency, she still sees that it's not perfect by any means. Being able to notice these imperfections allows Sonia to channel her energies into making them better, even if she never gets this particular organization to the point where Mami would qualify for a loan. Her affinity for working on issues that affect the Puerto Rican community reflect what she learned in school and through her own experience—it's important to make sure that kids like her have access to education, and it's important to make sure that adults in the community are able to support their families.



CHAPTER 23

In the summer of 1981, Sonia and Kevin vacation at Cape Cod. They fight constantly and Kevin admits he doesn't feel connected to Sonia. They've never spoken much about their feelings before. Back home, Sonia discovers that her driver's license with her married name on it finally arrived, five years after they got married. When Kevin suggests it won't be hard to change it back, Sonia suddenly realizes that their marriage is over. She calls Mami after Kevin leaves for work, which she's never done before. Mami agrees that Sonia can come home. Sonia and Kevin decide that Sonia gets the credit card debt and their Honda, though she doesn't know how to drive a stick. Kevin tries to teach her, but it goes horribly. The night before Marguerite and Tom arrive to move Sonia out, Sonia dreams she's driving the Honda. The next morning, Sonia drives without issue.

For a year after she moves out, Sonia and Kevin attempt to rekindle their relationship, but it doesn't work. At one point, Kevin admits that he struggled because he can't keep up with her—he wants to be needed, and he knows that won't happen. Sonia is surprised, because she's never thought of need as being essential to a relationship. For that matter, she's always depended only on herself, even though she loves her family and friends. She can see in retrospect how their marriage dissolved, but she remains fiercely independent even after their divorce. They divorce in the spring, when Kevin moves to Chicago to follow his thesis advisor. Kevin's mother is heartbroken, having finally come around to Sonia. Sonia sells her wedding ring to pay for the divorce, and Judge Rothwax immediately uses Sonia's maiden name when asked and corrects anyone who doesn't.

CHAPTER 24

Sonia only feels sad and lonely when she's not working, so her friends step up to distract her and help her feel better. Nancy Gray invites Sonia to sleep on her couch sometimes and acts as a counselor. She also takes Sonia shopping and tries to boost Sonia's confidence. Sonia begins to realize that she doesn't have her own sense of style, and she'd like to change that. By summer, Sonia knows she needs a break from Mami. Nancy suggests that Sonia join her in a group house on Fire Island. That house isn't right for Sonia, but Nancy points Sonia to a quieter house and Sonia signs up sight unseen. On her first trip, she arrives late and gets lost. Her housemates are lovely though, and they play games and cook together. She's still friends with everyone in that house.

As Sonia's marriage falls apart, she calls on her friends and her family to support her through it—and they all come through, surprisingly well in Mami's case. For Sonia, this is proof that she's done a good job of surrounding herself with people who will love and support her unconditionally. It's also important to pay attention to the language that Sonia uses to describe the end of her marriage. It's not a failure, it's just over. With this, she makes it clear that she hasn't failed at life because she separates from Kevin. Rather, her life is simply taking a different course—one filled more with friends than with Kevin.



As Sonia and Kevin talk through where they went wrong, it becomes clear that Sonia's self-sufficiency presented a challenge for Kevin. It may have gotten her through a turbulent childhood and school experience, but it kept Kevin from having his needs met—specifically, the need to be needed by his spouse. This, once again, isn't a failing on her part—it's just the way she is, and it gives her something to learn from. Sonia highlights the strength and support of her community when she mentions Judge Rothwax's immediate shift to using her maiden name. This is a way for him to show respect and insist that others do the same.



Following her divorce, Sonia essentially embarks on a mission to make more friends than she's ever had. Nancy emerges as one of Sonia's biggest cheerleaders, while the Fire Island group follows Sonia throughout her life—a testament to Sonia's ability to both make and nurture lasting friendships. She also recognizes that if she ever wants to have a good relationship with Mami, she needs to help their relationship by giving it some breathing room. This self-awareness is likely what enables Sonia to make such lasting friends.



Dating is hard, since Sonia still lives with Mami. Mami panics if Sonia is out late and yells at her to go to bed. Dawn suggests that Sonia rent the apartment next to hers in Carroll Gardens. It's close to work and the community is close-knit. Sonia tells the landlord that she'd like Mami to see the apartment first, which immediately endears her to him. Marguerite lends Sonia the money for the deposit and teaches Sonia how to handle money. Having grown up living paycheck to paycheck, Sonia has never saved or taken on debt. With her own place, Sonia enjoys developing her sense of style.

The best part of living in Carroll Gardens, though, is Sonia's friendship with Dawn. Sonia spends most evenings at Dawn's apartment, chatting about work and discovering that their backgrounds are very common. Sonia loves Dawn's husband, Ken, and Dawn's children become Sonia's unofficial godchildren. Sonia tells the reader that she always turns her friends' families into her own family. She remembers Abuelita's tribe, but she also remembers how Abuelita favored blood. Mami, however, treated *everyone* as family, blood or not. Sonia tries to emulate Mami. She joins one friend for Passover, Mami and Dawn for Thanksgiving, and spends Christmas with Junior. She visits friends like Ken Moy whenever she's in the area.

Sonia says she loves children. She's accumulated more godchildren than anyone else she knows—she's godmother to Marguerite's daughter, Alfred's son, and some of those children's children. Kiley, though, is different. Junior calls in the middle of the night to tell Sonia that he rushed his wife, Tracey, to the hospital. Sonia flies to Detroit immediately to be with them. Kiley is born at one pound, 11 ounces. Sonia feels close to Junior as she watches him try to keep it together; the prognosis isn't good. Finally, after days, Tracey can hold Kiley. When Junior and Tracey move to Syracuse, Sonia takes every opportunity to spend time with Kiley.

Given how much Sonia loves children, people often ask when she'll have children of her own. Because she's diabetic, the risks are high, and Sonia still fears she won't live to old age. She considers adoption, especially after Junior and Tracey adopt twins. Sonia sees the twins as proof that adoption is emotionally satisfying, but she decides to not become a mother. However, she didn't make this choice because of her career. She thinks the idea of "having it all" is silly, as she believes that working parents consistently feel like they're neglecting either their work or their children. Because of this, Sonia does whatever she can to make mothers feel comfortable in her chambers.

Now that Sonia is on her own, her friends all step up to make this transition as easy and pleasant as possible for her. Marguerite's contribution in particular gives Sonia a sense of dignity and purpose as she learns to manage her money and achieves real independence for the first time in her life. And with her newfound independence, Sonia can begin to figure out exactly who she is and who she wants to be in the future.



As always, what pulls Sonia through difficult times are her close friendships—especially as her friends begin to have children. Now that she's an independent adult, Sonia can set about creating her own extended, chosen family exactly how she wants. She can take the good she learned from Abuelita and throw out the bad (the insistence on blood family over everyone else) and combine it with what she learned from Mami. Doing so means that Sonia never has to be alone, even as she lives alone.



Especially as Sonia accumulates godchildren and spends time with Kiley, she sees that she can be a meaningful presence in children's lives without having kids of her own. She remembers from her own childhood how important her relationship with Abuelita was; Abuelita was the person who showed her unconditional love and support. Being able to pay that forward within her own friends and family is one way that Sonia can improve her world.



In discussing her own choice to not have children, Sonia touches on the idea of "having it all." To her, even though she chose not to have kids, it's still important to speak up for those women who do have children—as they often face a difficult choice between working and parenting. This is why, in her capacity as a boss, Sonia takes action to make her chambers a safe and comfortable place for mothers to work. This is a small, tangible way that she can begin to remedy the sexism that plagues the workplace.



During Sonia's time at the DA's Office, women are just beginning to enter the legal field en masse. Dawn observes that only defendants accused of rape are happy about a female defender, and women at the office aren't promoted as quickly. Casual sexism runs rampant; Nancy once asks a judge to stop calling her "honey" in the courtroom, and he ignores her. Sonia is often mistaken for an assistant when she's in charge. Sonia is silent in these situations; Nancy and Dawn react loudly. Sonia believes the unequal treatment has to do with old habits dying hard, though she allows that the environment is "inhospitably male." Sonia believes that she couldn't have been so successful at the DA's office as a mother, though she sometimes wonders if she'll regret her choice. Ultimately, she knows that people can create families in all sorts of ways, including through friendship.

Sonia, Dawn, and Nancy face unique challenges as female lawyers and as working women in general. However, Sonia insists that sexism is something that can be learned and unlearned. Her framing of her choice not to have children—that it is, in part, responsible for her success, but it might be something she'll regret—speaks to just how important family is to her. But though blood family is important, it's more important that she keep herself safe and devote herself to her chosen family, which is just as supportive and meaningful.



CHAPTER 25

Sonia finds the DA office's mission alluring. She gets to help protect the public, though the 15-hour days distracted her from her troubles with Kevin. After her divorce, Sonia begins to examine how her job is changing her. She notices that her colleagues are often cynical and desperate. She and her colleagues look for the worst in people, and she can see that she's hardening and becoming less sympathetic. She begins to doubt the value of her job when one day, she opens a file and sees that it's a man she already convicted—and after getting out of jail, he committed the same crime again. Now, it's a felony. It starts to make everything seem futile.

Seeing that a man will go to jail for committing the same crime again begins to make Sonia think that the justice system she believes in so strongly doesn't actually work the way it's supposed to—clearly, jail wasn't enough to deter this man from committing the crime a second time. She also draws on her ability to reflect and examine herself, which is why she's able to notice that she's becoming a bit cynical and less sympathetic. However, noticing is only the first step—she now has to decide what to do about it.



At this point, being a judge seems like a worthy and even attainable goal. Sonia sets her sights on the federal bench, though getting there will be difficult. Most federal judges either come from prominent law firms or careers in government, so Sonia decides to move to civil law to gain experience. Bob Morgenthau tries to dissuade her. He doesn't know she wants to be a federal judge and says that if she stays, she could become bureau chief and then a state judge. He assigns her several high profile, challenging cases to delay her departure. The first is an investigation of police brutality, brought by a Harlem minister. She doesn't prosecute, but through her attempts to find witnesses she begins a practice of cultivating better relationships with the community.

The outcome of this first trial would, in theory, help Sonia see that her job isn't entirely useless. She may not prosecute, but she does begin to create some positive changes in the relationship between the DA's Office and the community. This is essential if Sonia and her colleagues want to truly serve their community—if the community doesn't trust them, the DA's Office can't do their jobs at all. Bob Morgenthau's imagined trajectory for Sonia speaks to how highly he thinks of her, and how he'll likely support her if he ever does get wind of her aspirations.



Second is Sonia's first murder trial, the case of the Tarzan Murderer. She's the assistant prosecutor. When the perpetrator is arrested, he's on parole for violent crimes and has a \$200 per day drug habit. He ruins the lives of his victims and their families by robbing them and shooting anyone at home. The trick is to prove it's the same perpetrator in each of the 11 incidents. They decide to file to try all of them together. Sonia makes the case to Judge Rothwax and he agrees to let Sonia prosecute the 11 incidents in one trial—proof, Sonia believes, that she can now think like a lawyer. They find 40 witnesses to testify and Sonia visits their apartments to see the damage. It's heartbreaking. The Tarzan Murderer himself is disturbing. He clearly feels no remorse and Sonia is glad that he receives 67 years in prison.

The last of the cases concern child pornography. Sonia discovers that while it's easy to understand that child pornography is amoral and uniquely awful, it's hard to understand the extent of how horrible it is until one sees it. Sonia knows she has to get the films admitted as evidence in order to convince the jury to convict and focuses her attention on building her argument that the defendants are guilty. The first, Scott Hyman, is the retail front of the operation and was caught by an undercover cop. His partner, Clemente D'Alessio, is harder to pin down; the evidence against him is circumstantial. The investigation and police work is sloppy, but Sonia has a recorded phone call between Hyman and D'Alessio that clinches her case.

Sonia is unusually nervous for opening arguments. She takes six days to present her evidence. She has recordings of Hyman boasting about how easy it is to get the films and plays the recording of Hyman and D'Alessio's conversation. Finally, she shows 13 films. They're horrifying; a journalist sitting in to research a book takes off her glasses and refuses to watch. Sonia's closing argument runs two hours. The jury finds the defendants guilty. Everyone expects this, so Sonia puts her efforts into making sure D'Alessio and Hyman receive as much jail time as possible. She makes the moral case that the children were robbed and raped, and both defendants serve jail time. After this case, Sonia refuses Bob Morgenthau's offer to let her head an office focusing on child pornography. It's time to move on.

For Sonia, this case is proof that she's able to synthesize information, appeal to people's emotions, and use logic to convince individuals like Judge Rothwax that what she thinks is correct—in short, all the makings of a lawyer. However, she can't forget that this isn't just about her own personal successes. She's getting a violent murderer off the streets, potentially for the duration of his life, and making sure that no one else has to suffer as his victims' families have.



The child pornography case gives Sonia clear moral standing—she doesn't have to convince the jury that what Scott Hyman and Clemente D'Alessio did was wrong; she just has to convince them that these men are the ones behind the crime. If she's successful, she'll be able to remove some evil characters from her community and make it a better place. This case, then, begins to show the difficulty of her job: she has to take on these emotionally taxing cases if she wants to truly feel like she's doing something, and that's not sustainable.



As she describes this case, Sonia makes it clear to readers unfamiliar with the legal process that getting a guilty verdict from the jury is only the first step. Where it counts, especially in a case like this, is in the sentencing. In that situation, Sonia has to make the case to the judge that they should give D'Alessio and Hyman as much time as possible to keep them off the streets and protect vulnerable children. Bob Morgenthau's offer to let her head a child pornography office speaks to Sonia's success, but again, part of maintaining her optimism and willingness to work means knowing when to quit.



Sonia takes a trip to Puerto Rico. Her thoughts, however, are with Nelson in New York, who cleaned up after joining the military. He married, had a daughter, and then was diagnosed with HIV linked to past needle use. Now, he remembers his childhood premonitions of an early death. As they chat, Sonia realizes that a person can be addicted to drugs and still function in society. She shares how she always admired his brilliance, but Nelson insists that he always admired Sonia—she could always study and learn something, but he doesn't have her determination. Nelson admits that a few months ago, Sonia unknowingly drove him to pick up heroin. Sonia feels naïve as Nelson deliriously begs for forgiveness. In July, she wakes up and senses Nelson. Tío Benny calls with the news that Nelson died.

Nelson makes the case that his intelligence wasn't enough to save him or to guarantee success. Without the determination to apply himself, he was lost and vulnerable to the allure of drugs and other vices. Seeing Nelson at the end of his life, however, forces Sonia to think about how she thinks of good and bad, especially when it comes to drugs. Unlike some of the people she likely prosecuted for crimes related to drugs, Nelson didn't do awful things to other people—he, like Papi with alcohol, was too deep in the throes of addiction that he couldn't help himself.



CHAPTER 26

Sonia says that if she tries to emotionally understand how she and Nelson turned out so different, her thoughts turn to nightmares. Instead, she turns to reason and wonders why, when Nelson was set up for success, she succeeded instead. She suggests that part of it was “machismo,” which she didn't experience. However, Nelson also made it clear that he lacked Sonia's determination. Sonia says her determination comes from her desire to serve others and to be the best person she can be—and she learned by example. Abuelita was her best example and her protector throughout her childhood. Eventually, Sonia realized that her good fortune was a blessing she couldn't squander—she had to give back.

For Sonia, it's not enough to simply work hard, be competitive, and succeed. Her work and her success has always been motivated by her desire to better herself so she can help others. While she doesn't say whether this motivated Nelson at all—it's possible to argue that by the time he cleaned up and had children, it might have—but for Sonia, it's been a constant presence throughout her life. She believes she owes it to the family who helped her get where she is today.



Sonia says that to her as a child, lawyers and judges were superheroes. They help people—and more than that, they help on a grand scale, unlike teachers or doctors who help individuals. Part of her understanding grew out of seeing the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and the southern judges who defied mobs. In 1968, Sonia sees her first lawyer: Robert F. Kennedy, who stops to campaign in the Bronx. When he's killed soon after, it impresses upon young Sonia that being a lawyer is noble and necessary. She came to believe even more in this in Princeton, working with student groups and at the psychiatric hospital. She realized then that her community extends far beyond the Bronx. She always feels obligated to serve.

Even though Sonia also dedicates herself to making small changes (such as allowing children to call their parents employed in her chambers), Sonia nevertheless understands the importance of the bigger changes that shaped the US, such as the Civil Rights Movement. It takes both these smaller, individual actions and large scale legislation and court rulings to make the world a better place. And Sonia also begins to understand that if she really wants to give back, she needs to understand that her community is much larger than just her family and friends.



CHAPTER 27

In 1986, Sonia finds herself in the parking lot where the World Series is being played. She's on the back of a motorcycle, chasing a truck full of counterfeit Mets gear. She goes back in time to explain how she got there. Once she finishes Bob Morgenthau's difficult cases, she quits. She doesn't want to get stuck in a large firm working as an underling, and the tiny firm Pavia & Harcourt stands out. It represents clients like Fendi and Ferrari, and two of the nine partners are women. Best of all, associates work directly with partners in mentoring relationships. Sonia knows she'll learn and advance. Sonia interviews many times and learns that George Pavia fears that she'll be bored and move on. She convinces him otherwise.

Sonia's first cases as a beginning associate are eclectic, but they draw on Sonia's skills as a prosecutor. A few days into the job, a colleague who hears Sonia's phone calls spreads the word that Sonia is "one tough bitch." This shakes Sonia, but she realizes that at the DA's Office, she learned to be abrasive. She sees just how different private practice is when Dave Botwinik assures Sonia that she can accept gifts from clients. Sonia goes to Dave for guidance; he's comforting and extremely honorable. He always observes the unspoken rules of being a lawyer, and he teaches Sonia about the grain trade.

Over the years, Sonia learned to never reveal that she can type—making that public means she'll end up an informal secretary. She types in front of Dave once, but he stands up for women in the office. Fran Bernstein rises above all of this and types for hours, writing elegant prose with no need to edit. Though she intimidates Sonia at first, she soon becomes a friend and a mentor. Sonia is shocked the first time that Fran asks her to write a brief, as Sonia's writing is still subpar. Fran graciously accepts the brief and encourages Sonia. Sonia only resists Fran in one regard: Fran encourages Sonia to register as a Republican in order to associate with power. Sonia admires Republican economic policy, but she dislikes their social views. She remains an independent.

What makes Pavia & Harcourt so appealing is that Sonia will get to live her dream of spending all her time in a mentoring relationship, where she can make a difference and where her contributions are appreciated. It also doesn't hurt that the firm seems to be progressive when it comes to gender parity, given the two female partners. In all ways, Sonia sees that this firm could become like a family to her if she can convince them to hire her—and thanks to her tenacity and ability to advocate for herself, they do.



As Sonia makes the shift to private practice, she has to work on cultivating a persona that matches her new workplace. While her hardened persona may have served her well at the DA's Office, it's not as useful here. Again, this speaks to Sonia's ability to identify the problem and set out a path to fix it. By finding herself another mentor, she ensures that she has help along the way.



Fran is another example of a stellar mentor. She shows Sonia that while refusing to type may be necessary sometimes, she can simply ignore the noise and type anyway. Her gracious acceptance of Sonia's subpar brief also speaks to her willingness to help others get better. Everything that Sonia does is, at this point, a learning experience for her—briefs aren't Sonia's forte, but with Fran's help, she's able to improve. But as with Sonia's other mentors, she retains her independent streak and doesn't take everything they say as law.



One day, Fran asks what Sonia knows about designer handbags and introduces her to the world of Fendi. Fran works in intellectual property, which is a new field at this time. Fake Gucci, Fendi, and Rolex products are all over Manhattan's streets, and Fran understands the danger of not protecting a trademark. Fendi is the first to appreciate Fran's attempts, as a large retail chain begins to sell knockoff Fendi bags. She asks for Sonia's help in prosecuting the retail chain. One afternoon, while Fran is preparing witnesses, she leaves Sonia in charge while she takes a phone call. As a prosecutor, Sonia got good at preparing witnesses. As she works with one witness, she realizes that Fran is standing behind her. Later, Fran suggests to Alessandro, the Fendi family lawyer who acts as an interpreter, to ask his uncle to allow Sonia to take the case to court.

With this, Sonia's friendship with the Fendi family begins. Fran gives Sonia the case not just because she's generous, but because Pavia & Harcourt believes in collaboration. Sonia attempts to be just as generous with young associates and becomes more attentive to how others see her. It's sometimes difficult—when the firm hires Theresa Bartenope as a secretary, Sonia convinces Theresa to work as her paralegal instead. Theresa always appears when Sonia calls looking terrified and finally, someone tells Sonia that Theresa is afraid of Sonia's brisk demeanor. In reality, Sonia simply stops noticing social cues when she's busy. It made her a good prosecutor, but Theresa encourages Sonia to be kind and to pay attention.

The Fendi case with the retailer is settled mid-trial, but Sonia works closely with Fran on intellectual property cases. She says that litigation isn't effective, however, when there are so many counterfeit goods in the street. Trademark owners join together to apply for court orders allowing Pavia & Harcourt to seize counterfeit goods. Sonia works with private investigators to track down manufacturing points and helps Fran work up an affidavit. The investigative work is thrilling. Sonia joins their private investigator on raids to ensure everything is done right. Once, they discover a building filled with hundreds of counterfeit handbags. Sonia sends an associate to file the affidavit, and young Asian guys surround him at the courthouse asking ominously for Sonia. Sonia finds it ironic that she's in more danger representing luxury goods than she ever was prosecuting murderers.

Here, Sonia learns that she doesn't have to get rid of everything she learned at the DA's Office now that she's at a private firm—some things she learned will come in handy. And indeed, it's Sonia's eclectic education in law that makes Fran decide to put Sonia in charge of the case. Fran's willingness to stand back and let Sonia take this one speaks not only to her own generosity and willingness to help Sonia, but to the firm's commitment to helping everyone improve as well. In an environment like this, Sonia can thrive and begin to truly come into herself as a lawyer.



It's not enough for Sonia to simply do a good job at work and win in court. For her, it's necessary to give back in every way she can, whether that's by helping the younger associates or giving Theresa more power and responsibility. And Sonia's willingness to learn from anyone shines when she insists that Theresa is the person who encourages her to be kind and to pay attention to others. Even those who are under her in the pecking order are worthy teachers.



Just as she's done throughout her school career, Sonia figures out how to expand her projects to do the most good and accomplish her goal. In this case, that means accepting that courtroom wins don't actually do much—but what does work is getting into the street and doing fieldwork with an investigator. This flexibility means that Sonia is able to be successful in a variety of different situations and in different groups, as it's not difficult for her to figure out how to get the best results from any given situation. Her flexibility and her determination allow her to do her job well.



Two years after Sonia begins working with Fran, Fran's breast cancer returns. Fran continues to guide Sonia over the phone as she receives treatment. In Sonia's fourth year at the firm, Fran comes into the office for the first time in months to vote for Sonia to become a partner. She takes Sonia to dinner that night and shares that Sonia will become a partner. Later that evening, Fran insists that Sonia needs to upgrade her wardrobe to properly represent Fendi. Sonia knows this isn't true; she's already good friends with Alessandro and eventually helps him and his wife, Fe, move to New York. Sonia loves that Fendi is a family business, and she learns about wealth as she vacations with them in Europe. Most important, though, is Sonia's friendship with Alessandro—his parents have been to Thanksgiving at Mami's.

For Fran, it's extremely important that she do whatever necessary to make sure that Sonia succeed and continue to work on intellectual property law—and at this point, that means coming into the office and voting for Sonia to become a partner. This is how she can make sure that Sonia has the tools she needs to continue the work. For Sonia, however, she knows she's already set up, simply because she has close and supportive relationships with Alessandro and the other Fendi family members. For her, these relationships are more important than the money and prestige she'll earn as a partner.



CHAPTER 28

A few weeks after Sonia's dinner with Fran, George Pavia and Dave tell Sonia she was elected to partner—but they see she wants to be a judge, suspect she'll end up on the Supreme Court, and ask that she just stay with the firm until she becomes a judge. It's odd to offer someone partnership if they're going to move on, but Sonia is mortified—she's never voiced her desire to be a judge. Fran dies the following spring. Sonia is devastated and is reminded of her own mortality. Sonia tells the reader that diabetes always lurks in her mind, even now that medical advancements have caught up. That doesn't stop her from living like she might die any time.

Though Sonia is mortified, George and Dave's keen observation suggests that Sonia is already acting in such a way as to showcase her aspirations—which is a good thing, as it means that Sonia is probably behaving in a way that's very fair, level headed, and that's rooted in her understanding of the law. Fran's death makes it clear to Sonia that she still has troubles and issues to tackle in her life, aside from becoming a judge. Her body could still betray her.



One day at the end of June, Sonia and friends celebrate her birthday in Sonia's backyard. Exhausted, Sonia goes to lie down. She feels light-headed and can't move. As she pulls herself off the bed, Theresa appears. Sonia can't tell what Theresa is saying, but Theresa has a plate of cake. Sonia smashes the cake into her mouth and explains when she recovers that she experienced a sugar low. Some of her friends are vaguely aware that Sonia is diabetic, but most thought she was drunk. Though Sonia doesn't hide it on purpose, it's a habit to hide it and she doesn't want to seem vulnerable—and as a kid, disabilities were private. As a teen, she had to hide that she carried needles due to the prevalence of heroin.

Now that Sonia is a successful adult surrounded by caring and attentive friends and family, she's able to see that some of the coping mechanisms she developed as a child aren't useful anymore. Most important of these is her secrecy surrounding her diabetes. While it was necessary to keep it a secret when she was a kid, she now sees that her relationships with her friends will be stronger if she's open and shares what's actually going on in her life with them.



In college, diabetes seemed like a nonissue. Sonia stopped going to Jacobi Medical Center, so she doesn't discover treatment advances until much later. She managed by eating well and managing how she felt, though her changing adult body made this difficult. The exercise at Princeton caused her blood sugar levels to drop instantly, and she struggled to wake up most mornings. Throughout most of her adult life, Sonia follows the same regimen she did as a child. Finally, at 30, she seeks a specialist and begins a new regimen.

Now, looking back, Sonia can see and describe for the reader just how much of an issue diabetes has been for her throughout her life—even though, at the time, it didn't seem that bad. By recognizing this, Sonia learns to take better care of her body and takes the steps she needs to in order to protect her life and make it more likely that she'll be able to be successful in her personal and professional lives.



Keeping track of her sugar levels means she'll live a normal lifespan, but things can still change in an instant like at the party. Another time, Sonia passes out in a hotel room in Italy. Alessandro forces the concierge to open the door and gets her to the hospital. Every time a crisis hits, Sonia notices that friends save her. She decides after the Italy incident to be open about her diabetes. A plus side to this is that now, she can show diabetic children they can be judges. Sonia doesn't tell Mami about these close calls until this book is published, and Junior tries to tell Mami that this is because she always reacts poorly when Sonia tells her anything.

Sonia says that her secrecy and self-reliance begins and ends with Mami. Sonia is a great counselor to her friends, but she never shares her own struggles. Sonia doesn't begin to evaluate this until she's at the DA's office and decides to work on self-improvement. The best indicator of her success, she says, is in her relationship with Mami. For years, she thought of Mami as cold and unapproachable, but this is because she knew nothing about Mami. Finally, when Sonia confesses that she feels distant from Mami, Mami asks for forgiveness—she didn't grow up seeing kindness and empathy. As Sonia struggles to open up to Mami, she remembers Mami sponging her on hot nights. And as Sonia tries, Mami tries too, ultimately becoming more affectionate and demonstrative.

A friend helps Sonia develop her own sense of style and upgrade her wardrobe. Sonia dates, but nothing sticks, and her friends are always there for her. To help herself heal from heartache, Sonia takes salsa lessons, learns to swim, and during her first term on the Supreme Court, she learns to throw a baseball. Most consequentially, Sonia quits smoking after years of trying—seeing Kiley pretend to smoke pushes her over the edge. She figures she can't be a judge and call recess to smoke, though she does fantasize about a final cigarette on her deathbed, like Abuelita. One day, as Sonia drives a Ferrari racecar, she remembers her past and sees Abuelita's smile.

Diabetes forces Sonia to see the truth: that as much as she's trained herself to be independent and able to take care of herself, she still needs the support of her friends. This is especially true because of her diabetes, but she also suggests that a more open relationship with one's friends will be helpful for anyone. Showing diabetic kids that they can be judges is another small way that she can give back to a different community that's close to her heart.



Finally, Sonia discovers that she can apply her ability to identify a problem and go about fixing it to her personal life in addition to her life as a student. Now, she applies these lessons of how to learn and how to practice to her relationship with Mami. It's important to note that Mami seems just as willing to change as Sonia is, which is likely one of the main reasons why Sonia has success here. However, Sonia also has to recognize that Mami has always been there for her, just not always in ways that Sonia would've preferred.



By constantly working to learn something new and better herself, Sonia makes sure that her life is interesting—and she's able to make herself a better person for the people around her. She understands just how important it is to be a good role model to the next generation, which is why she's finally able to quit smoking.



CHAPTER 29

In 1990, Sonia joins Alessandro and Fe in London for a Boxing Day celebration. When she returns to work, her office is empty of her papers. There's an application form for a federal judge position on her desk. Sonia races with it to Dave's office. He explains that it's from Senator Moynihan's judicial selection committee and promises to give Sonia her files back if she fills it out. The application is extensive, but Dave gives Sonia his assistant and a paralegal to help. It takes a week to complete it and detail every bit of her life. The committee will use the application to investigate Sonia's past for ethical issues. The committee quickly schedules an interview, which Sonia preps for feverishly. In her preparations, she discovers that it's unusual to become a judge in one's 30s but not impossible.

Sonia's interview takes place in a downtown law firm. She answers questions with ease until someone asks if she thinks it'll be hard to learn to be a judge. She says that she's spent her life learning to do hard things, and she always succeeds. The committee is impressed with what she tells them about the Tarzan Murderer and child pornography cases. Though Sonia acknowledges that she has gaps in her knowledge, she points out that it's always possible to look things up. Not long after, Senator Moynihan's office invites Sonia to meet him in Washington. Senator Moynihan is easy to talk to and their conversation meanders. After an hour, he asks to nominate her. He warns that it might take a while with the Bush administration, but promises to get her through. She accepts.

By this point, Mami and Omar have been together for several years. Sonia invites them over to share the news. Mami reacts with enthusiasm until she learns that Sonia won't make more money, won't travel, and won't be able to socialize with interesting people. Mami is incredulous, but Omar reminds her that this must be important work. Sonia sits back to wait for the political process. Fortunately, Senator Moynihan has an agreement with his Republican counterpart to allow him to nominate judges, despite there being a Republican president. It takes 18 months of interviews and waiting. A number of Latinx organizations rise up to support Sonia, as she'd be the first Hispanic federal judge in New York. Numerous colleagues, including Bob Morgenthau, offer to talk to the right people.

In August 1992, the U.S. Senate confirms Sonia's nomination. Her public induction ceremony in October is moving and humbling, as she recognizes that the role of a judge is far more important than she is as an individual. She once again feels as though she's in an alternate reality. This is heightened when Sonia moves to Manhattan to follow the rule that judges live in their jurisdiction. Dawn is aghast. Mami, meanwhile, decides to move to Florida with Omar right after Sonia's induction.

Dave's willingness to give Sonia so much help with the application speaks to his willingness to support Sonia on her journey to become a judge. It also speaks to the collaborative and supportive nature of the firm in general—the people there want to see their own succeed, and so they're more than willing to throw valuable resources at any problem that comes their way. This also reminds Sonia that while her tenacity and determination are her own, she can't do things like this by herself. No matter what she does, she'll always need help of some sort.



For Sonia, the question of whether it'll be hard to be a judge is almost silly—her entire life has been hard, and in some ways, the entire point of her life has been to overcome adversity and succeed. Becoming a judge, if the committee and the president accept her application, will be no different. This makes it clear, too, that Sonia's education is far from over. As a judge, she'll have to learn yet another way of thinking and conducting herself so she can best perform her job.



Though Bob Morgenthau is the only person she names, the fact that so many former colleagues and bosses offer to put in a good word for her speaks to Sonia's ability to form positive relationships with everyone. In a way, her desire to bring everyone into her inner circle makes becoming a judge much easier, as she has a bunch of people willing to advocate for her. With this, she suggests that it's not just for one's personal fulfillment that people should fill their lives with interesting, supportive people. Those people can—and will—move mountains to help.



Becoming a judge is a testament to Sonia's perseverance and her ability to set concrete, achievable goals for herself—and then throw herself into working to achieve them. When she insists on moving so she's following all the rules, it shows that her childhood sense of right and wrong is still alive and well—and is probably part of the reason she's a judge at all.



Before Mami and Omar finish their drive to Florida, though, Sonia gets a call from Puerto Rico that Titi Aurora died. Titi Aurora moved to Puerto Rico to put her second husband in a nursing home and had recently fought bitterly with Mami over Mami's move to Florida. Sonia knows she has to tell Mami in person and wonders what bound Mami and Titi Aurora to each other. Thinking about their relationship, Sonia realizes that people are imperfect, but everyone brings something meaningful to a relationship. When Sonia arrives at Mami's apartment, Mami already heard the news. They fly to Puerto Rico together.

Even through her grief over Titi Aurora's death, Sonia can still come up with lessons that will help her going forward. In this case, she reminds herself that everyone—herself included—is imperfect, but that doesn't mean that people shouldn't have close, meaningful relationships with others. And now that Sonia and Mami have become so close, Sonia knows that she has to do the right thing and go to Mami in person. This is how she can show Mami she cares and understands.



Theresa follows Sonia from Pavia & Harcourt and is a reassuring presence. For Sonia's first month as a judge, she's terrified of her own courtroom. At first, she solves this by holding everything she can in her chambers. But finally, a case comes to trial and Sonia has to preside over the courtroom. Her knees knock, just like they did when she first read the Bible in church. She begins to ask questions and her panic disappears.

When Sonia's first experience as a judge in a courtroom mirrors her first experience reading in church, it shows that not much changes—but as always, Sonia can turn to her curiosity and get over her fear. She can, and will, continue to better herself by remaining curious about the world around her.



EPILOGUE

Sonia says that, looking back, it seems like it's been a long time since she became a judge. As a judge, she's continued her professional journey and her journey to support her friends and family. Six years after becoming a judge she's nominated to the Second Circuit Court of Appeals; 12 years after that, she's nominated to the Supreme Court. The hearings and vetting process gets increasingly harder, but her community of supportive friends and colleagues grows. As her first official act as a judge of the Second Circuit, Sonia marries Mami and Omar. This is Sonia's way of thanking Mami.

By making it clear that she continues to learn and grow even after achieving her goals, Sonia drives home that people should never stop being students. Whether they need to continue to learn for their job or not, life is richer and more fulfilling when a person can continually find things to strive for and learn about. Marrying Mami and Omar helps Sonia reaffirm her love for her family, and to show Mami that she's a part of Sonia's success.



Sonia has to learn to think like a judge, just as she learned to think like a lawyer. She's happy to do so, and she loves teaching and talking with her clerks. Her education continues on the Supreme Court. People ask her often what she wants her legacy to be. Her goal is to have her legacy grow to be something more than she can imagine at this point.

For Sonia, it's not enough to say that she wants to be remembered. Rather, what's important is that her words take on greater meaning as time goes on—so that they can teach others about the law, about learning, and about family.



Sonia recalls a memory from high school. During her junior year, she attended a conference of girls from Catholic schools. In discussions, she fought constantly with one girl. Sonia loved the argument more than her ideas and she wanted to learn. She could tell that this girl, though, was growing increasingly angry. When the conference was over, Sonia asked what the hostility was about. The girl accused Sonia of not being able to take a stand and of not having any principles. Sonia figured that if a person held onto principle too tightly, they'd miss out on context and stop thinking.

At this conference, the point for Sonia is to argue, not necessarily to defend her position at all costs. This points back to how much she loved Forensics Club—she can defend anything and relishes the opportunity to learn about it. And she also understands that if she doesn't continue to learn, she'll never be able to figure out how she feels about something. Without continually discovering new things, a person's ideas become stagnant.



Sonia has spent her life dealing with that girl's accusation. She believes that there's something wrong with a person without principles, just as there are values that cannot be compromised. However, she still believes that it's important to judge each situation based on context and treat individuals with dignity and respect. She says that she's always been able to find something to learn from every person and experience. Sonia hopes that she'll continue to evolve as a person and not just as a judge.

Sonia recalls seeing Mami cry as Sonia took the oath of office for the Supreme Court. She admires Mami and credits Mami with teaching her compassion and courage. She watched Junior cry, along with family from New York and Puerto Rico, and she felt the presence of friends who recently died, including Dave Botwinik. When Sonia caught the president's eye, she felt a surge of gratitude. She suddenly remembered running in Puerto Rico with a melting sweet treat, feeling overjoyed just to be alive. Sonia feels blessed.

Even as a judge, the most important part of Sonia's job is to hand down rulings that give people dignity and respect. In this sense, her community is still the most important thing in her life—she wants to make sure that she's helping everyone in it feel welcome and at home, even as that community expands to now include the entire United States.



As she celebrates this achievement of being sworn into the Supreme Court, she makes it clear that she didn't do it alone—Dave helped her, Mami and Junior helped her, and her Puerto Rican family and history helped her get to this point. Without her family and the support of her culture, she couldn't have gotten here.





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