

With the Fire on High



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ELIZABETH ACEVEDO

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

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It's worth keeping in mind that Emoni, as a teen mother who also graduates high school and is bound for college in the fall, is the exception among American teen mothers rather than the norm. While her racial identity (as Black and Latinx) and her family's low income are factors that the CDC has found can contribute to higher rates of teen pregnancy, the CDC has also found that only about 50 percent of girls who have a child while in high school go on to graduate, compared to 90 percent of their peers who don't become parents. Since the 1990s, teen pregnancy rates have been decreasing in the U.S., something the CDC and other research organizations attribute to more teens choosing to delay sexual activity, increasing access to birth control, and evidence-based sex ed programs (in states and counties that don't implement evidenced-based sex education programs, teen pregnancy rates tend to be higher). *With the Fire On High* also highlights the racial and ethnic makeup of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, which has the second-largest Puerto Rican population of any U.S. city. As Emoni notes, while Black, Hispanic, and Latinx neighborhoods in Philadelphia tend to have historically higher crime rates, communities are robust, close-knit, and thriving. Indeed, Puerto Rican people who live in Philadelphia tend to be more likely to be solidly middle-class than Puerto Ricans living elsewhere in the U.S.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Acevedo cites the Dominican author Junot Díaz ([The Brief](#)

[Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao](#)) as a major influence on her writing, as well as Jacqueline Woodson's 2014 verse novel [Brown Girl Dreaming](#). *With the Fire On High* is one of several contemporary novels that explores unplanned pregnancies, particularly among teens. Angie Thomas's [Concrete Rose](#) is a prequel to her hit 2017 novel, [The Hate U Give](#); it follows [The Hate U Give](#)'s protagonist, Starr's, 17-year-old dad as he balances new (and impending) parenthood and finishing up high school. *How To Love* by Katie Cotugno is another young adult novel that follows a teen's choice to keep her pregnancy and parent her baby. Various other novels, including *Unpregnant* by Jenni Hendriks and Ted Caplan, *You Don't Know Me But I Know You* by Rebecca Barrow, and *Girls Like Us* by Randy Pink, explore abortion and adoption. Food, cooking, and baking appear in various forms in many young adult or middle grade novels, ranging from the more serious like *With the Fire On High* to the whimsical. *A Wizard's Guide to Defensive Baking* by T. Kingfisher takes place in a magical world where the young protagonist, a witch, has a familiar that takes the form of a sourdough starter; while in Jenny Han's [To All the Boys I've Loved Before](#), baking elaborate treats is protagonist Lara Jean's preferred relaxing hobby. [Like Water for Chocolate](#) by Laura Esquivel and *Chocolat* by Joanne Harris are intended for adult readers, but they treat food with a similar almost-magical tone as Emoni's food in *With the Fire On High*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** With the Fire on High
- **When Written:** 2019
- **Where Written:** Washington, D.C.
- **When Published:** 2020
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult Novel
- **Setting:** Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- **Climax:** Emoni learns she's been accepted to Drexel University.
- **Antagonist:** It's possible to see Tyrone and his parents as antagonists, though financial issues, prejudice against teen parents, and her own pride also work against Emoni.
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

A Complicated Legacy. Despite records from the 15th century detailing Christopher Columbus's cruelty toward native populations, it's only in the last half-century or so that historians have begun to grapple with his role in decimating

indigenous American and Caribbean populations through genocide, slavery, and spreading disease. Indeed, in the century after Columbus's death, he was mostly remembered as an ineffective colonial administrator. In the aftermath of George Floyd's murder by police officers in 2020, most American public monuments depicting Columbus were removed.

The First Cookbook. The first cookbooks are actually a series of clay tablets, known as the Yale Culinary Tablets, which date to 1700 B.C.E. The recipes are mostly lists of ingredients, and it's believed the dishes were intended for royalty.



PLOT SUMMARY

Emoni got pregnant her freshman year of high school. Her boyfriend at the time, Tyrone, was charming—though he kept seeing other girls and was dismissive and cruel to Emoni throughout her pregnancy. Emoni decided to remain pregnant and then parent her daughter Emma (whom Emoni calls Babygirl) with her grandmother 'Buela's support. 'Buela has raised Emoni from infancy; Emoni's mom died in childbirth, and Emoni's dad, Julio, returned to Puerto Rico to deal with his grief. He visits every summer.

Now, Emoni is starting her senior year of high school. She's excited and scared when she discovers that her school is offering a culinary arts class—she's wanted to be a chef since she was a kid, and 'Buela even insists that Emoni has a way with spices and **food** that borders on magic. Though she wants to take a real culinary arts class, she also worries about giving up her study hall. The class also includes what's bound to be an expensive spring break trip to Spain, which Emoni isn't sure she can afford. Additionally, she's not certain that college is the right path for her, even if she enrolls in a culinary arts program. Emoni remains uncertain, but she signs up for the class.

Throughout the first few weeks of school, Emoni remains skeptical of the culinary arts class and of her teacher, Chef Ayden, who reminds her to follow recipes instead of spicing things her own way. Also complicating things is the fact that Malachi, a new boy, clearly has a crush on Emoni—but Emoni has no interest in dating and doesn't trust boys after Tyrone. Still, she agrees to go out for water-ice with him after school, and her best friend Angelica tags along. Angelica gives Malachi her seal of approval.

Things come to a head between Emoni and Chef Ayden when he tells her to throw away a dish in which she deviated from the recipe. Enraged, Emoni skips class for a week. That Saturday, Angelica is celebrating her six-month anniversary with her girlfriend, Laura, and Emoni has agreed to cater their dinner. Malachi helps Emoni cook and carry the food to Angelica's house. The next morning, Tyrone confronts Emoni: a friend saw Emoni with Malachi, and Tyrone doesn't want Emoni dating

other people. This conversation upsets Emoni, so 'Buela suggests they go out for lunch. 'Buela takes Emoni to a fancy restaurant, Café Sorrel, and insinuates that she knows Emoni has been skipping her culinary arts class. However, the food at Café Sorrel wows Emoni, and she gets to meet the chef—who knows Chef Ayden and says he'll teach Emoni the skills she needs to thrive in a professional kitchen. On Monday, Emoni apologizes to Chef Ayden and promises to work hard. He appoints her the head of the fundraising committee: she has to come up with ways to raise thousands of dollars for the class trip to Spain.

Over the next several weeks, the culinary arts class puts several of Emoni's ideas into action. They open up the school's training restaurant and begin serving lunches to teachers, and they convince the principal to let them cater the annual Winter Dinner. Emoni and Chef Ayden work on the Winter Dinner menu together, and Emoni's classmates help develop a silent auction fundraiser. The dinner is a huge success—though by the end, each student is still responsible for almost \$300 for the trip. Emoni is certain she can't come up with the deposit by the deadline, though she's flattered when the chef from Café Sorrel, Chef Williams, gives Emoni her card and offers Emoni a job. Later that week, Emoni's Aunt Sarah, who lives in North Carolina and emails recipes back and forth with Emoni regularly, unexpectedly gifts Emoni \$300 for the trip.

Malachi and Emoni have been spending more time together, and he invites her to bring Angelica, Laura, and Babygirl to Disney On Ice. The evening is magical, and when Malachi walks Emoni and Babygirl home, Emoni makes it clear that she likes him—but she wants to take things slow. He's fine with this.

Just before winter break, Emoni gets caught with her phone at school and a security guard takes it away. This means that Emoni only finds out early that evening that Babygirl's daycare has been trying to contact her—Babygirl is sick, and Tyrone's mom, Mrs. Palmer, ended up picking her up. Emoni is so upset after Mrs. Palmer brings Babygirl back that when 'Buela (whom Emoni thought would pick Babygirl up) gets home, Emoni asks where 'Buela has been. 'Buela has been seeing the doctor a lot recently, and Emoni is certain that something is wrong with her grandmother. But 'Buela admits that she's been lying about having doctor's appointments so she has an excuse to take time for herself. Emoni and 'Buela remain at odds with each other over the break.

When Emoni approaches her boss at her after-school job, Steve, about taking time off to go to Spain, he insults her and cuts her hours. Eventually, Emoni quits when it costs more to travel to work than she earns. The next few months pass in a blur and soon, it's the end of March. 'Buela's friend Mr. Jagoda drives Emoni to the airport; Emoni lands in Madrid several hours later. Unfortunately, Emoni and her nemesis, Pretty Leslie, are both staying with a woman named Señorita Mariana. But on the plus side, Emoni is apprenticing with a chef named

Chef Amadí, who encourages Emoni to follow her instincts and pair herbs and spices as she sees fit. Chef Amadí puts Emoni in charge of coming up with the daily lunch special, a challenge that many of her classmates aren't getting in their apprenticeships.

Emoni and Malachi decide to go out one night; they end up at a bar where several of their classmates, including Pretty Leslie, are drinking. Pretty Leslie is drunk, and she insults Emoni—and then vomits in the bar. Emoni and Malachi help her back to Mariana's, and the next morning, Leslie and Emoni speak honestly for the first time. Leslie admits that she's jealous that Malachi chose Emoni, and she's also resented how perfect and put-together Emoni has always seemed. The following night, their last night in Spain, Emoni and Malachi hang out at Malachi's host parents' house while his host parents are out. They decide not to have sex, but they kiss and have a good time anyway.

When Emoni gets back from Spain, all her college admissions decisions are available. To her surprise, only one of four schools she applied to accepted her: her reach school, Drexel. It has a renowned culinary arts and restaurant management program. 'Buela is thrilled, and she finally tells Emoni that she's tired after raising three generations of children. In fact, she's dating Mr. Jagoda and he'd like to marry her. Emoni tells 'Buela to accept. Later, Julio cries when Emoni calls and tells him she got into Drexel. Emoni spends weeks worrying about what she should decide to do, but she finally mails her decision.

Julio shows up unexpectedly the night before Emoni's high school graduation. She fully expected him to miss it and show up in July, as usual. But surprisingly, Julio says that he'd like to try to stay longer and help Emoni with Babygirl so she can attend college. He also says that he refuses to eat Emoni's cooking because it reminds him of Emoni's mother, and the memories are too painful. However, he eats a bit of Emoni's bread.

Emoni and her classmates graduate the next day. Soon after, Tyrone shows up unannounced and says that he'd like to start taking Babygirl for longer weekend visits and a summer vacation—and he'd also like to offer Emoni and his daughter more financial support, now that he has a job. Several days after this, Emoni goes to Café Sorrel and asks to speak to Chef Williams. She asks for a job: she'll be attending Drexel's culinary arts program part time in the fall, but she'll be able to work the lunch rush. Chef Williams hires Emoni to start that day. Later in the summer, Emoni plans to visit her Aunt Sarah in North Carolina for the very first time while Tyrone takes Babygirl on vacation.

Emoni Santiago – The protagonist of the novel, Emoni is a 17-year-old senior at Schomburg Charter. She's also the mother of two-year-old Babygirl, whom she coparents with Babygirl's dad, Tyrone. After her mom died in childbirth, Emoni's dad, Julio, left Emoni with his mom, 'Buela, who has been Emoni's parent and caregiver since then. 'Buela is convinced that Emoni's talent for **cooking** and combining spices and herbs borders on magic. Though Emoni isn't sure of this, she dreams of becoming a chef—so she's thrilled when Schomburg offers a culinary arts elective for the first time. Over the course of the school year, Emoni learns to balance her creativity and natural talent with the norms of a professional kitchen. She takes on most of the responsibility for fundraising for the class trip to Spain, which helps her feel competent and powerful. However, throughout the year, Emoni remains unsure of herself and conflicted: she's not sure how (or even if) to balance college with caring for Babygirl, and she's reluctant to enter a relationship with Malachi, a new boy whom she likes, but whom she's afraid is going to hurt or manipulate her like Tyrone did. Ultimately, with 'Buela and her friend Angelica's support, Emoni decides to attend Drexel University's renowned culinary arts program part-time so she also has time to work in an upscale restaurant. It's important to Emoni to live and work in Philadelphia so she can one day give back to her community.

'Buela/Gloria – 'Buela is Emoni's paternal grandmother who raised Emoni from infancy. She was also instrumental in helping Emoni through Babygirl's infancy, though in the present, she's making sure Emoni takes on more responsibility for Babygirl. A Black, middle-aged Puerto Rican woman, 'Buela is an avid Eagles football fan and is often impeccably dressed. After spending decades working as a seamstress, 'Buela got her hand caught in a sewing machine, resulting in injuries that left her unable to work. So, she's been supporting herself, Emoni, and Babygirl on her disability checks and some side gigs. 'Buela is extremely supportive of Emoni: she insists that Emoni's **cooking** talents border on magic, and despite the financial difficulties college will pose, she desperately wants Emoni to attend college. However, in some ways, Emoni takes 'Buela's support for granted. Early in December, 'Buela reveals that she's been lying about attending doctor's appointments to have an excuse to get out of the house and remember who she is when she's not parenting her granddaughter or great-granddaughter. Several months later, 'Buela admits that she's been dating Mr. Jagoda and might like to marry him, in part because he allows her to feel like herself, Gloria, rather than just a caregiver.

Babygirl/Emma – Emma—whom Emoni calls Babygirl—is Emoni and Tyrone's two-year-old daughter. She was born in August, right before Emoni started her sophomore year of high school. In the present, Babygirl is just beginning to attend daycare and has recently started spending every other



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

weekend with Tyrone and his parents. Though Emoni loves how obviously happy Babygirl is to be getting new experiences at daycare, she wonders if Babygirl's more frequent tantrums have to do with Tyrone and his parents spoiling her. Over the course of the novel, Babygirl gradually adjusts to her weekends with her dad; by the end of the novel, she no longer sobs when Tyrone takes her on his weekends.

Malachi Johnson – Malachi is a new student in Emoni's grade from Newark; he quickly becomes her love interest. Though Malachi is tall and adorable, Emoni is initially unwilling to get close to him or give him a chance. Part of this is because Malachi and Pretty Leslie quickly form a close friendship, though Malachi doesn't realize that Pretty Leslie has a crush on him (while Emoni is well aware). When it comes to his budding relationship with Emoni, Malachi is kind, courteous, and accommodating. He tries to make it clear that he doesn't need to have sex in order to enjoy a relationship with her, and he's willing to take it slow if that's what Emoni wants. He also has no issue with the fact that Emoni is a mother; indeed, he adores Babygirl. Though he's a good cook, Malachi dreams of becoming a doctor and eventually returning to practice in Newark. Eventually, he shares with Emoni and 'Buella that he moved to Philadelphia after his younger brother was shot, and his mom feared for his safety.

Angelica – Angelica is Emoni's best friend. She's beautiful, with her hair often done in colorful styles, impeccable makeup, and on-trend clothes. Since coming out to Emoni several years ago and the rest of Schomburg Charter last year, Angelica has recently begun dating a girl named Laura, whom she met at a summer arts camp. Angelica dreams of being a graphic designer and of attending Pratt Institute in New York; she spends much of the novel perfecting her portfolio and worrying about whether she's good enough to get in. According to Emoni, Angelica is the best of the best; ultimately, Angelica does get accepted to Pratt. Over the years, Angelica and Emoni have supported and defended each other from bullies, as when Emoni was pregnant, and when Angelica first came out. In the present, Angelica encourages Emoni to be careful, but she also encourages Emoni to follow her heart and date Malachi—and she pushes Emoni to follow her dreams to study culinary arts. Angelica also dotes on Babygirl and crafts Babygirl's Halloween costume from scratch.

Tyrone – Tyrone is Babygirl's father. He and Emoni dated briefly when Emoni was a freshman (he's a year older), had sex a handful of times, and then broke off their romantic relationship not far into Emoni's pregnancy. Emoni describes Tyrone as a pretty boy who's skilled at using "pretty words" to get what he wants—that is, he knew how to flatter Emoni and convince her to have sex with him. She sees him as untrustworthy and disappointing due to his behavior. He saw other girls while Emoni was pregnant (and blamed his desire to not be exclusive on Emoni's changing body), and while he

refused to take the paternity test, he didn't stand up for Emoni when his parents insisted he take one. Emoni recognizes that Tyrone is a good dad—he shows up on time to get Babygirl, and Babygirl clearly adores him—but a terrible partner. For instance, he jealously tries to forbid Emoni from dating (though he continues to date lots of girls), and he's unsupportive of her college plans or her dreams to be a chef. Ultimately, after Tyrone gets a job and his own apartment, Emoni agrees to let him to take Babygirl for longer weekend visits and okays a weeklong vacation in the summer.

Julio/Emoni's Dad – Julio is Emoni's dad. He lives in Puerto Rico, where he works as a barber and is also a heavily involved community organizer. Emoni's relationship with him is fraught: after Emoni's mom died giving birth to Emoni, Julio left his hours-old daughter with his mother, 'Buella, and returned to Puerto Rico alone. So, Emoni feels abandoned and as though he doesn't truly care about her or support her—this is why she calls him by his first name instead of Papi. She accepts his yearly summer visits and sometimes appreciates his regular phone calls, but she also resents that he does little to support her financially and refuses to talk about her mom. It's not until the end of the novel, when he unexpectedly shows up in Philadelphia to attend Emoni's high school graduation, that the two finally speak honestly and Emoni tells him how she feels. Julio admits that he can't bring himself to stay in Philadelphia very long because it brings up too many painful memories of Emoni's mom. This is also why he always refuses to try Emoni's **cooking** when he visits. However, on this visit, he asks if he could stay and try to provide more support for Emoni and Babygirl so Emoni can more easily attend college.

Aunt Sarah – Aunt Sarah is Emoni's aunt; she was Emoni's mom's sister and lives in North Carolina. Though Emoni has never met Aunt Sarah, the two began exchanging emails a few years before the novel begins, and they maintain a relatively close relationship this way. They most often exchange family **recipes**. Aunt Sarah is the only person in Emoni's family willing (and able) to talk about Emoni's mom, so she's an important source of information for Emoni. Emoni and Aunt Sarah strengthen their relationship over the course of the novel, and Sarah rallies Emoni's Raleigh relatives to donate money for Emoni's trip to Spain. At the end of the novel, Emoni finally agrees to visit Aunt Sarah in person later that summer.

Emoni's Mom – Emoni's mom died giving birth to Emoni, but she nevertheless looms large over the novel. Emoni thinks often about what kind of person her mom was, and what her mom would want for Emoni. As the novel progresses, Emoni also discovers that her dad, Julio, is still haunted by memories of her mom—this is why he can't bring himself to stay in Philadelphia or eat Emoni's **cooking**, as the city and the food reminds him of his deceased wife. Since 'Buella didn't know Emoni's mom well and Julio refuses to talk about her, Emoni learns about her mostly through her mom's sister, Aunt Sarah.

Emoni's mom shared Emoni's love of cooking, and at the end of the novel, Emoni makes her mom's pound cake recipe.

Chef Ayden – Chef Ayden is Emoni's culinary arts instructor; she describes him as a Black man with a belly and perfectly smooth skin. At first, Emoni finds Chef Ayden insufferable: he demands obedience and perfection, and he seems not to understand that his teenage charges hear sexual innuendos in everything he says. Though he insists he can teach his students to succeed in a professional restaurant setting, Emoni struggles to believe this—he refuses to let her spice recipes her way, even though he admits her **food** is delicious. However, once Emoni decides to set aside her pride and allow Chef Ayden to teach his way, she finds him an important ally. He instills in Emoni the basic skills (like knife handling and proper food storage) that she'll need in a restaurant setting while also giving her the opportunity to almost singlehandedly develop the menu for the Winter Dinner. In Spain, Chef Ayden also shows Emoni that he understands and values her talent by apprenticing her to Chef Amadí, who practices a more instinctual cooking style. Though Emoni knows little about Chef Ayden's personal life, she ascertains that he attended Le Cordon Bleu in Paris and is highly educated—and respected—in the culinary arts field.

Ms. Fuentes – Ms. Fuentes is Emoni's Advisory (homeroom) teacher. She's young, hip, and is generally well-liked among the students, Emoni included. Emoni appreciates Ms. Fuentes because Ms. Fuentes is so supportive and encouraging—she was a huge advocate for keeping Emoni at Schomburg Charter when Emoni got pregnant, for instance. However, over the course of the novel, Emoni begins to see Ms. Fuentes as somewhat out of touch and naïve. Ms. Fuentes encourages Emoni to apply to Philadelphia colleges and insists that Emoni will need a college degree to succeed, though Emoni isn't convinced this is true. As Emoni sees it, Ms. Fuentes doesn't understand Emoni's reality: Emoni has to balance being a parent, making money, and getting an education, and for much of the novel, Emoni suspects that her education will need to take the lowest priority. However, Emoni ultimately takes Ms. Fuentes's advice and enrolls to attend Drexel's culinary arts program in the fall.

The Chef/Chef Lisa Williams – Chef Williams is the executive chef at Café Sorrel, an upscale restaurant in Philadelphia. Until Emoni learns her name, she simply refers to her as “the chef.” Emoni first meets Chef Williams when 'Buella takes her to Café Sorrel for lunch. Later, Chef Williams attends the Winter Dinner and gives Emoni her card, as she's impressed with Emoni's **cooking**. Unwittingly, Chef Williams encourages Emoni to go back to culinary arts class with Chef Ayden, as she knows Chef Ayden and says that he'll prepare Emoni well for a career in the restaurant industry. At the end of the novel, Chef Williams hires Emoni at Café Sorrel.

Chef Amadí – Chef Amadí is the chef whom Emoni apprentices with while on her class trip to Spain. She's a young woman, only

in her late 20s, and she believes in using instinct and a sort of magic to create her North African-inspired Spanish dishes. For instance, she encourages Emoni to “listen to” the herbs in her herb garden as Emoni gathers a bunch for seasoning a rabbit dish. She teaches Emoni to trust her instincts and reminds Emoni that **cooking** for people is giving them a gift. She also helps Emoni realize that it is, in fact, possible to marry her instinct and talent for flavors with the professional norms that Chef Ayden taught in his class; instinct and professionalism, Chef Amadí argues, aren't mutually exclusive.

Pretty Leslie – Pretty Leslie is one of Emoni's classmates. She's one of only three kids from Emoni's neighborhood to get into Schomburg Charter, but she and Emoni aren't friends—in fact, Pretty Leslie is cold and mean to Emoni for much of the novel. This has to do, in part, with the fact that Pretty Leslie has a crush on Malachi and is jealous that he's interested in Emoni, not her. But Pretty Leslie later reveals that she was put off by how proud and superior Emoni acted when she got pregnant, as though she was better than everyone else. She also resents the way Emoni seems to sweet-talk the teachers. For much of the novel, though, Emoni doesn't know this and simply tries to avoid Pretty Leslie's wrath whenever possible. She's not entirely convinced that Malachi is right that Pretty Leslie has had a difficult past and just lashes out in inappropriate ways. Ultimately, though, Pretty Leslie confirms Malachi's assessment. She'll be the first person in her family to graduate high school and attend college. After she drunkenly is cruel to Emoni in Spain, the girls speak honestly with each other and form, if not a friendship, then an understanding and a truce.

Mrs. Palmer/Tyrone's Mom – Tyrone's mom, Mrs. Palmer, is an antagonist of sorts. She's never liked Emoni. When Emoni was pregnant with Babygirl, for instance, Mrs. Palmer wanted Emoni to get an abortion and demanded (unsuccessfully) that Tyrone get a paternity test, as she was certain Emoni was having sex with other guys. In the present, Mrs. Palmer insinuates that Emoni is an unfit mother and insists that Babygirl show up at her home on visitation weekends dressed in church clothes. Due to this pattern of behavior, Emoni is shocked to discover at the end of the novel that she's also been bugging Tyrone to support Emoni and Babygirl more financially.

Steve – Steve is Emoni's manager at the Burger Joint. A middle-aged white man who does very little work himself, he makes work very difficult for several employees, including Emoni. He resents having to schedule her around her school and childcare responsibilities, and though he doesn't fire her, he severely cuts her hours when she asks for the week off to go to Spain, ultimately leading her to quit. Emoni also thinks the Burger Joint's **food** is terrible, which she blames Steve for.

Mr. Jagoda – 'Buella initially introduces Mr. Jagoda as a friend and acquaintance from her doctor's office, but she later reveals that he's her boyfriend and, depending on whether she agrees to marry him, her fiancé. A Polish immigrant, Mr. Jagoda is the

office manager at his son's doctor's office, which is where he meets 'Buela. He kindly shows up to help Emoni at various points, as when he attends the Winter Dinner fundraiser and drives her to the airport. 'Buela describes how he makes her feel like Gloria and a woman when they go on dates, rather than just a mother, grandmother, and caregiver.

Amanda – Amanda is one of Emoni's Culinary Arts classmates; they're in the same cooking group along with Richard for much of the school year. In Spain, Amanda apprentices with a baker—meaning she starts work very early in the morning—and so she doesn't take advantage of Spain's low drinking age to drink at bars and clubs.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Laura – Laura is Angelica's girlfriend; they met at a summer arts workshop for teens. She attends a different school and is heavily involved in her school's theater program. Though Laura appears only briefly in the novel, Emoni appreciates Laura for how giddy and happy she makes Angelica.

Richard – Richard is one of Emoni's Culinary Arts classmates; they're in the same cooking group with Amanda for much of the school year. He's a tall, burly Polish boy who often takes charge during class, though Emoni knows he's softhearted and a true Philly boy.

Auntie Jordyn – Auntie Jordyn is Malachi's maternal aunt and his caregiver in Philadelphia. She's a tiny woman who works at the Wells Fargo Arena, where she's able to get Disney on Ice tickets for Malachi and his friends.

Señorita Mariana – Señorita Mariana is Emoni and Pretty Leslie's house mother in Spain. She's a bit younger than 'Buela and lives alone above an old music shop. Though Emoni sees little of Mariana while in Spain, Mariana does introduce Emoni to the Spanish word *duende*, which refers to inspiration and passion.

Principal Holderness – Principal Holderness is the principal of Schomburg Charter. He seldom appears in the novel, and Emoni has little to say about him—except that when she got pregnant, he wanted her to transfer to a program for pregnant teens.

Mamá Clara – Mamá Clara runs the daycare that Babygirl attends.

Don Alberto – Don Alberto is a patron at Chef Amadí's restaurant in Spain. He tells Emoni that her **chicken dish** brought back happy childhood memories of his aunt.

a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



COMING OF AGE AND TEEN PARENTHOOD

With the Fire On High follows 17-year-old Emoni through her senior year of high school. While Emoni's friends, teachers, and even her grandmother, 'Buela, insist that senior year is Emoni's last chance to experiment and find herself before she must face the realities of the adult world. But Emoni doesn't fully buy that this is the case: between caring for her two-year-old daughter, Babygirl, juggling a part-time job, worrying about college applications, and keeping up in school, Emoni struggles to find the time to be a kid herself. *With the Fire On High* illustrates how Emoni's coming-of-age journey is necessarily complicated by the fact that she's a teen parent and so *can't* focus solely on her own wants and needs. In one anecdote Emoni shares from when she first found out she was pregnant, she describes 'Buela asking her what she wanted to do about her pregnancy. If she has the baby, this is the last time, 'Buela warned, that anyone would ask Emoni what *she* wanted—after having a child, her priorities will necessarily shift to focus on Babygirl first and herself second. So, throughout the novel, Emoni struggles to balance her own dreams and desires with the fact that she must consider Babygirl before making any decision.

This leads Emoni to, for instance, question whether to take a culinary arts elective. Though Emoni has dreamed of being a chef since she was Babygirl's age, taking the class means she won't have an in-school study hall where she can do homework. The class also entails a week-long trip to Spain, something that's expensive and will mean Emoni can't work that week or care for Babygirl. Ultimately, though, as Emoni throws herself into her culinary arts class and takes on responsibilities for organizing class fundraisers, she manages to strike a balance between chasing her dreams and caring for her family. Though she certainly has to make sacrifices (such as only signing up to attend college part-time so she has time to work), the novel suggests that by prioritizing her dreams and seeking an education in culinary arts that will prepare her to be a chef one day, Emoni will ultimately be in a better position to care for Babygirl as she formally enters adulthood.



CREATIVITY VS. PROFESSIONAL NORMS

Seventeen-year-old Emoni is passionate about **food** and cooking. Her grandmother, 'Buela, insists that Emoni's talent borders on actual magic, as Emoni can intuit what flavors work well together and create dishes so good that they often make people cry. Because of this, Emoni is thrilled when her high school decides to offer a culinary arts elective—finally, she believes, she'll be able to hone



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

her skills and prepare for a career in the restaurant industry. However, Emoni is shocked when Chef Ayden, her teacher, insists on spending the first few weeks learning knife skills and safe food handling practices. When the class finally does begin cooking, Emoni is enraged on the day that Chef Ayden tells her to trash a recipe that she spiced differently than the recipe called for. Thus, much of Emoni's journey centers around her struggle to marry her instincts and creativity with professional norms, something *With the Fire on High* suggests is necessary if Emoni is ever going to move beyond cooking as just a hobby.

At first, Emoni chafes under Chef Ayden's tutelage. His admonishment that she can't sneakily add ingredients to recipes because she may inadvertently poison a patron doesn't seem reasonable when, in Emoni's experience, her dishes consistently bring people to happy tears. But eventually, Emoni realizes that cooking Chef Ayden's way doesn't mean she can't be creative—she just has to learn basics and professional norms first. After applying herself for months in his class, she spends her class trip to Spain apprenticing with Chef Amadí, who allows Emoni to make up recipes for the daily lunch special. Her creativity, Emoni realizes, is still an asset; her dishes in Spain still move patrons to tears. But she also knows that without the skills she learned from Chef Ayden, she'd never be able to singlehandedly plan, prep, and plate identical meals for 20 to 30 patrons in only a few hours, while also following professional food safety standards. Indeed, this experience leads Emoni to see Chef Ayden as one of her biggest allies and supporters, despite their rocky start: he makes sure she has the skills to help her talents shine in a professional setting, not just in her home kitchen.



FOOD AND CONNECTION

With the Fire On High is, at its heart, a story about the power of **food** and cooking to bring people together. Seventeen-year-old Emoni wants to be a

chef because when she was three or four, she discovered that comfort food spiced just right can bring people to tears by causing them to recall happy memories of years past. For instance, both Emoni and 'Buela take comfort in the other's cooking. Emoni's dishes bring back happy memories of 'Buela's childhood and young adulthood in Puerto Rico, while 'Buela's food makes Emoni feel safe, secure, and cared for like the child she still technically is. Emoni also maintains a relationship with her Aunt Sarah in North Carolina as they email recipes back and forth, sharing their love of food virtually though they've never eaten together in person. Rejecting food, on the other hand, is something the novel suggests creates strife and tension. Emoni is enraged and skips her Culinary Arts class for a week after Chef Ayden tells her to throw away a dish in which Emoni deviated from the recipe, and it takes time for Emoni to trust her teacher again after what she perceives as a cruel rejection. For much of the novel, Emoni doesn't understand

why her dad, Julio, flat-out refuses to eat her cooking when he visits from Puerto Rico every summer, and this contributes to the tension in their relationship. However, when Julio visits for Emoni's high school graduation, he finally reveals that eating Emoni's food is simply too painful for him—it dredges up memories of Emoni's mother, who died giving birth to Emoni. His willingness to finally tell the truth and sample a bit of Emoni's bread, however, coincides with his announcement that he'd like to spend more time in Philadelphia to try to help Emoni, 'Buela, and Babygirl so Emoni can more easily attend college. With this, *With the Fire On High* highlights food and cooking's power to not just connect people to their roots and their memories, but also to bring people together and begin healing old wounds.



CAREGIVING, INDEPENDENCE, AND IDENTITY

As 17-year-old Emoni and her grandmother, 'Buela, navigate the trials of raising a toddler and as Emoni completes her senior year of high school, *With the Fire On High* suggests that being a caregiver can't—and perhaps shouldn't—be a person's sole job and identity marker. While the novel goes to great lengths to show how fulfilling caregiving can be, it also doesn't shy away from portraying how essential to a person's mental health having a life and identity outside of parenthood or guardianship is. Through Emoni's first-person narration, she makes it very clear that she needs time and space away from her daughter. As much as she loves Babygirl and being a mother, she also makes sure to carve out time for herself by going out for afterschool treats with her friends and ultimately going to Spain on a class trip. In Emoni's mind, it's not strange that she needs time apart from Babygirl to develop other aspects of her identity—she's 17, and all the adults in her life tell her that she's *supposed* to be doing this.

However, Emoni's understanding that she needs this time away from Babygirl doesn't mean that she's able to extend this same understanding to 'Buela. 'Buela, Emoni eventually realizes, has spent her entire life raising children. After she raised Emoni's dad, Julio, Julio essentially abandoned hours-old Emoni with 'Buela—and when Emoni had Babygirl at age 15, 'Buela stepped up again to raise another child. Throughout the novel, 'Buela subtly implies that she's tired after spending decades being a parent and grandmother first and her own person second. Ultimately, she reveals that she's been lying about going to doctor's appointments, as this has been the only way she can justify getting out of the house for some time to herself. 'Buela's lie, and her reason for lying, highlights what the novel suggests is an uncomfortable truth about caregiving. It's tempting (and even easy) to believe that caregivers' only concern should be the children in their care. This is, however, not at all the case, and believing this denies caregivers the freedom to develop their identities separate from the roles they play in their

families.



SUPPORT, COMMUNITY, AND MENTORSHIP

Emoni knows that she can't do everything alone—she has a two-year-old daughter, Babygirl, and her grandmother 'Buela's support has been essential as Emoni progressed through high school. Still, Emoni nevertheless struggles to accept various kinds of help from friends, family, and teachers. Part of this is because Emoni is a naturally independent person, so *With the Fire On High* suggests that part of Emoni's transformation from child to adult hinges on her discovery that she can (and should) rely on her family, friends, and community to support her as she moves forward in life. But more broadly, Emoni also discovers that everything she wants to do—from being a chef, to raising her daughter, to even being in a romantic relationship—isn't something she can do alone. Rather, it takes teamwork and community to accomplish a goal, even if that goal is simply to have fun or make good **food**.

Emoni learns most of these lessons in her Culinary Arts class. At the beginning of the school year, Emoni is incensed when her teacher, Chef Ayden, punishes her for altering recipes. Part of being a good restaurant employee, he insists, is being a team player and following the chef's instructions—not taking a dish into one's own hands. Eventually, Emoni realizes that in this context, Chef Ayden is right—she and her classmates have to work together and follow recipes exactly to cater the successful Winter Dinner, and she understands that it would've insulted her classmates' hard work to alter recipes without consulting them. Learning this lesson in class later prepares Emoni to accept more help from her dad, Julio, and Babygirl's dad, Tyrone, as she pieces together a childcare schedule for Babygirl that will allow her to attend college and work after graduation. It's only through accepting support from friends, family, teachers, and mentors, Emoni realizes, that she'll be able to achieve her dreams and confidently step forward into her future.



SYMBOLS

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



FOOD AND COOKING

The various foods Emoni makes, and the process of cooking, represent connection. When Emoni is only three or four, she takes over stirring a pot of food from 'Buela, and her seasoning choices lead 'Buela to cry—the food makes her remember her childhood and young adulthood in Puerto Rico. This teaches Emoni that food is about more than feeding

people; food spiced just right has the power to connect people to the past, to different locales, and to other people.

In the present, Emoni and her Aunt Sarah's relationship highlights the power food has to bring people together across a great distance. Though Emoni and Aunt Sarah have never met in person (Aunt Sarah lives in Raleigh), the two regularly exchange family recipes via email and stay connected to each other that way. As Emoni remixes family recipes and sends her altered recipes back to Aunt Sarah, she honors her family's culinary history while also carving out a place for herself within the family. Julio also reinforces this symbolism when he reveals that he never eats Emoni's cooking when he visits Philadelphia because it brings up painful memories of Emoni's mom—it connects him to the past and to his deceased wife, but it's too painful for him to purposefully feel that connection. More broadly, though, while she's in Spain, Emoni discovers that her cooking has the power to connect her to people who speak a totally different language and who otherwise have no connection to her or her family. A restaurant patron, Don Alberto, tells Emoni that the chicken special she developed for Chef Amadi's restaurant brought up childhood memories of his aunt. Though Emoni has always been aware that food is about more than just feeding people, the reactions she elicits from friends, family, and even strangers with her cooking highlights food's power to bring people together.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Quill Tree Books edition of *With the Fire on High* published in 2021.

5. Magic Quotes

☞ All I know is she cried into her plate that night. And so at the age of four, I learned someone could cry from a happy memory.

Ever since then 'Buela is convinced I have magical hands when it comes to cooking. And I don't know if I really have something special, or if her telling me I got something special has brainwashed me into believing it, but I do know I'm happier in the kitchen than anywhere else in the world. It's the one place I let go and only need to focus on the basics: taste, smell, texture, fusion, beauty.

Related Characters: Emoni Santiago (speaker), 'Buela/Gloria

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 16-17

Explanation and Analysis

Emoni recounts for the reader how, when she was four years old, she took over working on a pot of food from 'Buela and managed to make it so good that it made 'Buela cry. Specifically, it brought up memories of Puerto Rico for 'Buela. This helps readers understand why Emoni loves cooking so much, and what exactly makes her good at it. Whether or not she's magic, Emoni can craft meals that help people connect to their past, their homes, or to loved ones. She realizes that this, in and of itself, is a special power—and ideally, she'd like to deploy this power in a restaurant setting, where many patrons can eat and experience her food.

Moreover, cooking gives Emoni a place where she can let go and relax. Cooking is her “me time,” which is something she makes clear at various points that she dearly needs as a parent to a toddler who's working hard to keep up with her senior year of high school. Still, at this point in the novel, cooking is a hobby for Emoni. She'd like it to be a profession, and over the course of the novel, Emoni learns how to marry her instinct and her magic with standard food handling practices, thereby preparing her for a career in the restaurant industry.

11. The New Guy Quotes

☝ “I think you should write about the one that scares you most. Taking risks and making choices in spite of fear—it's what makes our life story compelling.”

There's that word again. She walks away but I have a feeling her advice wasn't about the essay prompt at all.

Related Characters: Emoni Santiago, Ms. Fuentes (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

In Emoni's Advisory (homeroom) class, she and her advisor, Ms. Fuentes, have been discussing whether Emoni should take the new culinary arts class. Ms. Fuentes is now ostensibly giving Emoni advice about which college admissions essay topic to choose.

Emoni isn't certain about taking the culinary arts class. She's a teen mom who's trying to juggle parenthood, an afterschool job, school, and possibly college—so taking on

one more class (and giving up the study hall she currently has that period) seems wildly impractical to her. But Ms. Fuentes also seems to quietly imply here that Emoni is allowing her fears to hold her back, something that could hurt Emoni in the long run. To take Ms. Fuentes's advice at face value, she's suggesting that what makes a person interesting is the scary choices they make. But the subtext is that a person must then be willing to make those scary choices if they want to be interesting.

In Emoni's case, Ms. Fuentes is also asking Emoni to consider that taking the culinary arts class is the only way she's going to be able to dip her toes into the professional restaurant industry with few upfront costs or negative consequences. It's not college—she's not paying for the classes, and she won't have to commit to them for several years—but it will still help Emoni decide if she wants to pursue cooking as a career. So while Emoni sees the class as a risk, it's not as big of a risk as it could be. And it could make Emoni's life richer—and help her achieve her dreams.

18. College Essay: First Draft Quotes

☝☝ My grandmother chose to raise me when my father settled me onto her lap, asking her to watch me for a while, and then left the hospital. “A while” became seventeen years. It was in that exchange of my body from his hands to hers that the entire course of my life changed.

Related Characters: Emoni Santiago (speaker), 'Buela/Gloria, Babygirl/Emma, Julio/Emoni's Dad, Emoni's Mom

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

In a draft of her college admissions essay, Emoni shares how she came to be raised by her grandmother, 'Buela, after her mom died in childbirth. First, it's worth considering the language Emoni uses to describe 'Buela taking on her care. 'Buela, Emoni writes, “chose” to raise her—she wasn't forced, and she could've just as easily refused to raise Emoni. Caregiving, Emoni believes, is something that people take on willingly, which is what she did 15 years after this incident when she chose to have and parent Babygirl. 'Buela set an example for Emoni by making it clear that anyone can be a parent when they choose to parent the children that come to them.

However, what Emoni also doesn't touch on in this passage is the amount of grief and betrayal she feels because her

dad essentially abandoned her (Julio returned to Puerto Rico after this and only visits in the summers now). 'Buela's choice to raise Emoni is important and meaningful, but it doesn't entirely erase the fact that Emoni's dad isn't there for her. This helps explain why, throughout the novel, Emoni is generally unwilling to let Julio into her life or ask him for help. She feels abandoned by her father and has way more loyalty to 'Buela—the person who's consistently been there for her—than to the man who has never been around when she needed him.

24. Tantrums and Terrible Twos Quotes

☹☹ ['Buela] sits down next to me and removes the book from my hands. I sigh and put my head on her shoulder. She pats my face and I snuggle more deeply into her side.

“You want me to read to you?”

“I don't think the *Applied Mathematics* textbook will allow you to practice your character voices,” I say, closing my eyes. She shifts a bit and I hear her pick up the book.

“Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away.”

Related Characters: Emoni Santiago, 'Buela/Gloria (speaker), Babygirl/Emma

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 78-79

Explanation and Analysis

Emoni has just gotten Babygirl to bed after Babygirl threw a tantrum; she wanted Emoni to read her *The Runaway Bunny* one more time. Now, Emoni and 'Buela are sitting together before Emoni prepares to start her math homework.

Though Emoni is a parent, this passage highlights that in important ways, Emoni is still a kid. She still craves care and comfort from an adult—and it seems as though she does indeed stay to listen to another repetition of *The Runaway Bunny*, a classic 1942 picture book by Margaret Wise Brown. So, though Emoni is trying her best to grow up (as by focusing on her math homework rather than on relaxing), 'Buela makes it clear that Emoni can, in fact, still be a kid in short moments like this.

The Runaway Bunny's inclusion in this passage is also interesting. The book is about a young bunny that wants to run away, as the first line suggests. As he turns into various items or beings (like a sailboat or a mountain climber), his mother pursues him, assuming whatever form is necessary to catch her baby bunny and bring him safely home. It's

possible to read *The Runaway Bunny* as representing Emoni's unspoken (at this point) desire to run away and be something other than a high school senior and a teen mother. Her life is difficult, and as her exhaustion reveals, she has to work really hard to make everything work. But she still has if not a biological mother, then a guardian in the form of 'Buela who's always going to be there for her, supporting her and reminding her of where she belongs and where she's loved.

25. Fickle Fatherhood Quotes

☹☹ And maybe because I struggle to learn certain lessons, this one has taken me years and years to learn: You can't make too much space for a father like mine in your life. Because he'll elbow his way in and stretch the corners wide, and when he leaves all you have is the oversized empty—the gap in your heart where a parent should be.

Related Characters: Emoni Santiago (speaker), 'Buela/Gloria, Babygirl/Emma, Julio/Emoni's Dad, Emoni's Mom

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

Emoni is explaining why she and Julio, her dad, have such a fraught relationship: last summer, he left suddenly without saying goodbye, and he never apologized. Further, Julio abandoned Emoni with his mother, 'Buela, when Emoni was hours old, immediately following the death of Emoni's mom in childbirth. So, Emoni feels as though her dad is constantly abandoning her in ways big and small. It's healthier, in her experience, to focus on the people she has in her life, who do support her, like 'Buela, and keep Julio at a distance. Though she wants him to be a bigger part of her life, allowing him to try seems like a poor idea, given his past behavior.

This illuminates why, throughout the novel, Emoni is reticent to ask Julio for help or support. In her experience, he seldom comes through, at least in the way she'd like him to. However, the novel also shows that Emoni has a habit of writing people off, in part because she doesn't trust them to help and in part because she's an independent person who wants to be able to do things on her own. In this sense, a huge part of Emoni's development throughout the book happens as she learns that it's not a bad thing to ask for help or trust people. Indeed, even Julio comes through in the end, highlighting that perhaps Emoni has been selling other people short and depriving herself of support she could


really use.

29. Catharsis Quotes

☝ I let go of a breath I didn't know I'd been holding. I don't know much about pathogens and storing sugar, but damn if I don't know how to cook good food that makes people hungry for more, that makes people remember food is meant to feed more than an empty belly. It's also meant to nourish your heart. And that's one thing you won't ever learn from no textbook.

Related Characters: Emoni Santiago (speaker), 'Buela/Gloria, Chef Ayden

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

After Chef Ayden scolded Emoni in class for not having studied for a quiz on safe food handling practices, Emoni makes dinner for herself and 'Buela. As usual, the meal moves 'Buela to tears and makes her remember things from her childhood in Puerto Rico. This is extremely gratifying for Emoni. The way Emoni sees it, being able to make 'Buela cry happy tears because of something Emoni cooked means that Emoni is tapping into what cooking is all about. Indeed, as Emoni says here, food is “meant to nourish your heart” in addition to getting a person the fuel they need to get through their day. In Emoni's mind, knowing how to store sugar correctly or knowing everything there is to know about foodborne illness isn't nearly as important as being able to use food to connect with people.


However, this passage also illuminates what Emoni has to learn over the course of the novel: how to marry her intuitive way of cooking with professional food handling practices. If not handled, prepared, or stored properly, food that tastes amazing can make people seriously ill. This isn't something that seems to have crossed Emoni's mind at this point. Further, knowing how to behave properly in a professional kitchen is the only way Emoni is ever going to be able to work as a professional chef. In fact, learning the skills that Chef Ayden is trying to teach her is the only way that Emoni will be able to move past cooking as a hobby and turn it into a career.

30. Pudding with a Pop Quotes

☝ He clears his throat and it seems almost like a memory has him choked up. “This is delicious, but I want to make sure you follow the ingredients list. If you work under a chef and they give you clear directions, it's disrespectful to try and modify their recipe without first consulting them. Whether or not you think the flavors will work.”

Related Characters: Chef Ayden (speaker), Emoni Santiago

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

On the day that Emoni's culinary arts class makes chocolate pudding, Emoni decides to garnish it with smoked paprika. Chef Ayden loves it, but he still scolds Emoni for not following directions. First, Chef Ayden's reaction gives Emoni more proof that she's naturally talented at pairing flavors: her pudding can overwhelm Chef Ayden, who's not a warm and fuzzy person. However, Chef Ayden also admonishes Emoni for altering the recipe without permission. As Chef Ayden notes, Emoni's actions were disrespectful and wouldn't fly in a professional kitchen, no matter how good at pairing flavors Emoni is. He's trying to teach her professional norms, which will help her succeed in a professional kitchen in the future.

What Emoni takes away from this experience, though, is that she maybe isn't supposed to alter recipes—but people like it when she does, so she believes she can get away with it. Indeed, Emoni goes on to alter another recipe in Chef Ayden's class, which he ultimately asks her to throw away to make a point. So even though he's trying to help her prepare for a career in the restaurant industry, Emoni is picking and choosing what advice to take—and what the advice she chooses to take isn't necessarily what will help her going forward.

31. Living Large & Lavish Quotes

☝ “Fuentes knows any school I apply to will have to be in Philadelphia. She's had me research La Salle, Temple, St. Joseph's. She's pushing for Drexel, which has a culinary arts program, but you know I'm not good at school, so a scholarship is out of the question. I don't even want to think about taking out loans. And how can I work full-time and go to school full-time and raise Babygirl full-time? I think in order of most important, school is at the bottom, right?”

Related Characters: Emoni Santiago (speaker), 'Buela/Gloria, Babygirl/Emma, Angelica, Ms. Fuentes

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis



On the bus home from school, Emoni and Angelica discuss Emoni's college plans—including whether college is even the best choice for her. As Emoni sees it, college perhaps isn't the best choice, particularly since she's not in a great position to earn a full-ride scholarship (which she believes she'd need to justify school over work). Many of Emoni's calculations, however, come down to what she thinks she must do to manage her various responsibilities, including working a part-time job and caring for Babygirl. What Emoni seems to think, though, is that she has to commit full-time to school, work, and Babygirl—which doesn't leave her any room to accept help, or any room to take some time for herself. She's confiding in Angelica now, highlighting how strong and supportive their friendship is, but she doesn't seem to acknowledge that there are people in her life who will happily help her raise Babygirl if it means that Emoni can attend school.

It's also worth keeping in mind that Emoni still remembers how her middle school counselor steered her away from an academically rigorous high school with a renowned culinary arts program, entirely because Emoni's grades weren't exceptional. For better or for worse, this taught Emoni to judge her worth by her grades and to assume that since she struggles in school, nobody will ever give her a chance to prove what else she can do. Though Emoni is annoyed by Ms. Fuentes and her unwavering optimism at various points throughout the novel, it's worth noting that Ms. Fuentes is doing the exact opposite of the counselor by pushing Emoni to apply to Drexel. Ultimately, Ms. Fuentes ends up being right to do this: Drexel accepts Emoni, gives her a partial scholarship, and allows her to attend part-time. So though Emoni isn't willing to acknowledge it at this point, she does have people who are willing to support her, push her, and advocate for her.

33. Santi Quotes

☝☝ But Malachi isn't listening to Leslie. His eyes are on me. If there was one thing I learned once my belly started showing it's that you can't control how people look at you, but you can control how far back you pull your shoulders and how high you lift your chin. Boys think of only two things when they find out you had a baby: thing (1) that you're too much baby-mama drama, or thing (2) that you're easy.

Related Characters: Emoni Santiago (speaker), Babygirl/Emma, Malachi Johnson, Tyrone, Pretty Leslie

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

In the hallway at school, Pretty Leslie has just revealed to Malachi that Emoni has a daughter in a blatant attempt to convey to Malachi that he should choose to pursue her romantically, rather than Emoni. Emoni, who has had negative experiences with boys, expects that Malachi will play right into Leslie's plan. In Emoni's experience, if Malachi takes option one, he'll choose Leslie to avoid any drama; if he chooses option two, Emoni will reject him, as she's very against having casual sex with anyone at this point in her life. However, Malachi goes on to defy Emoni and Leslie's expectations and ask Emoni out for ice cream. This suggests that Emoni may be selling herself short by thinking so little of any boy who tries to court her. As she describes controlling her own reaction to boys finding out she has a child, it becomes clear that Emoni has spent two years now building up her armor to withstand unwanted advances and cruel comments from boys. However, as her relationship with Malachi in the coming months shows her, she is perhaps cutting herself off from important connections by assuming that boys fit one of two molds, and that neither mold is a flattering one.

37. School Quotes

☝☝ I look at Ms. Fuentes. She's young, maybe early thirties, not like a lot of the teachers at the school. And she's hip to most things like fashion and music, but she doesn't have a kid. She doesn't have a grandmother who's spent the last thirty-five years raising a son and then her son's kid and now her son's kid's kid. No, Ms. Fuentes has a job that she seems to like, and she can afford nice perfume, and cute outfits, and pretty manicures, and to give out advice nobody asked for.

Related Characters: Emoni Santiago (speaker), 'Buela/Gloria, Babygirl/Emma, Julio/Emoni's Dad, Ms. Fuentes

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

Ms. Fuentes is trying to convince Emoni to choose to go to college rather than get a job after high school, which Emoni

isn't sure is the right choice for her. Emoni finds Ms. Fuentes's insistence that she knows what's best for Emoni grating. As Emoni sees it, Ms. Fuentes hasn't had to work nearly as hard as Emoni or 'Buela do just to make ends meet—in fact, Ms. Fuentes seems to be living the good life and be dispensing advice from a position of naivete. So in this moment, Emoni stops seeing Ms. Fuentes as a real ally and instead, sees her as a condescending, uninformed adversary.

The novel, however, suggests that Emoni's outlook is rooted in her own fears about her future. Emoni does end up deciding to go to college in the end, in part thanks to Ms. Fuentes's pushing and support. But for now, Emoni simply can't conceive of how she can possibly make college work with all her other responsibilities. She's ultimately able to make it work because she decides to accept help from other people in her family and community, including from Ms. Fuentes. For now, though, she's cutting herself off from the people who'd like to help her see that really, things will be okay if she can bring herself to take the chance.



39. Basura Quotes


☝ “It's not the recipe I gave you. It doesn't have the same ingredients, and the cut on these is wrong.”

“It tastes good, it's well-balanced like you tell us to do, and the presentation is flawless,” I say through my teeth.

He grabs a fork, stabs the dish, and pops it in his mouth. He's quiet for a long moment. And I can tell he loves it. He shakes his head. “Cumin, basil, oregano.” His eyes pop open. “None of those ingredients were in the recipe. This isn't the same dish at all. I can't grade something that is more about creativity than execution. That wasn't the point of today's evaluation. So I won't say it again: trash it.”

Related Characters: Emoni Santiago, Chef Ayden (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

In Culinary Arts, Emoni has presented a dish for grading on which she deviated from the recipe in several ways. Chef Ayden tells Emoni to throw the dish away, despite likely thinking it tastes good. In doing so, Chef Ayden escalates how he criticizes Emoni to try to make a point. Prior to this, Chef has scolded Emoni for not preparing dishes according


to the recipe, but he's stuck to scolding her rather than flat-out refusing to grade her. He's explained why she can't do this sort of thing in a professional restaurant, and he's asked her to change her behavior. Emoni, however, hasn't listened—and now, Chef Ayden's behavior is a rude awakening. He makes it clear that at least in a professional setting, what Emoni is doing isn't okay—indeed, if she did this on the job, she'd risk getting fired for insubordination. In a professional kitchen, Emoni's creativity could be a boon if the chef chooses to put her in charge of recipes. But if that's not in her job description, she can't do it. In this way, it's possible to see that Chef Ayden is just trying his best to prepare Emoni for a career in the restaurant industry by teaching her these lessons now, when the worst that will happen is she'll be embarrassed and get a failing grade on this dish.

40. Home Is Where Quotes

☝ “In a couple of months you'll be an adult. I trust you with that child; I should trust you with yourself.”

And although her trust should make me feel better, I feel a slight pang in my chest. Every day it seems 'Buela is stepping back, not just giving me full rein in Babygirl's life, but also in my own. And I know I should love the freedom, but I don't think I'm ready for all the safety nets to be cut loose. Doesn't she know I still need her? That I still wish someone would look at the pieces of my life and tell me how to make sure they all fit back together?

Related Characters: Emoni Santiago, 'Buela/Gloria (speaker), Babygirl/Emma, Chef Ayden

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis



Following a disastrous Culinary Arts class in which Chef Ayden tells Emoni to throw away a dish she spiced her own way, Emoni skips her last period class and goes to pick up Babygirl. There, she runs into 'Buela, who isn't upset to have caught Emoni skipping class. As 'Buela sees it, she's giving Emoni the freedom that Emoni needs and deserves. Emoni is nearly 18 years old; she'll be an adult soon, and part of being an adult means that Emoni will be able to make choices about how she spends her time—including whether to go to a specific class on any given day, or to school at all. While Emoni realizes logically that she should be thrilled that 'Buela is treating her like such an adult, in reality, it

makes her feel panicky and as though 'Buela is throwing her into the deep end of a swimming pool when Emoni doesn't know how to swim. Emoni isn't entirely secure in her decision to skip today—but she's also not entirely secure in any of the many decisions she'll have to make over the next several months. She's approaching 18 and has a child of her own, but she's still a kid and craves an adult's comfort and support.

41. I Been Grown Quotes

☝ “Emoni, pregúdate, are you ready? If you have this baby, your life will no longer be about you. Every decision you make will have to include this child. You can't be selfish anymore; you can't put your wants above the baby's. This is the last time someone will ask you what you want before asking you what your baby needs. Piénsalo bien.”

Related Characters: 'Buela/Gloria (speaker), Emoni Santiago, Babygirl/Emma, Tyrone

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

Emoni recalls 'Buela's tearful reaction to discovering that 14-year-old Emoni was pregnant and the advice she gave to Emoni about how having a baby would affect Emoni's life. 'Buela makes it clear to Emoni here that having a baby will change Emoni's life forever, and not just because her body will change and she'll have to deal with Tyrone, Babygirl's dad, forever. Instead, the biggest change will be that Emoni won't be able to be a selfish kid anymore. She'll no longer be able to decide that she'll do something because she wants to—her baby will always come first. Put very simply, having a baby will force Emoni to grow up long before she's actually ready to do so.

Though Emoni goes on to acknowledge that she had no idea what this meant at the time, the novel on the whole highlights how becoming a teen parent has forced Emoni to grow up and complicates her coming-of-age journey. While most of Emoni's peers are focused on romantic exploits, getting into college, and having fun, Emoni is focused on making enough money to keep her family afloat and ensuring that Babygirl is well cared for. These more adult concerns weigh on Emoni and mean generally that she's on a different track than her peers are.


55. New Beginnings Quotes

☝☝ Chef Ayden isn't angry with me. Chef Ayden thinks I could own or be head chef of a restaurant one day. Chef Ayden wants me to lead a fund-raising committee.

I've seen chefs on TV time and time again say they had to pay their dues. And I never knew exactly what that meant but now I think I get it. It's about doing the grunt work behind the scenes, washing dishes, folding napkins, taking stock, before you ever touch a recipe. It's about being the creative mind behind raising a shit-ton of money so you can go on a trip abroad.

Related Characters: Emoni Santiago (speaker), Chef Ayden

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

Emoni has returned to Chef Ayden's class to apologize for her earlier behavior and ask for his forgiveness—and he puts her in charge of the fundraising committee for the class trip to Spain. First, the fact that Chef Ayden seemingly isn't angry with Emoni at all suggests that he understands why she behaved the way she did. Indeed, he goes on to acknowledge that Emoni has something special, implying that he does appreciate her creativity and talent—he just believes she has to learn how to do things the right way before she can have free rein to experiment.

Then, putting Emoni in charge of the fundraising committee is Chef Ayden's way of showing Emoni that he genuinely thinks she's special and can be successful in the restaurant industry. He even notes prior to Emoni's musings that this leadership opportunity will prepare her for managing a restaurant one day, something that's extremely attractive to Emoni. With this, he establishes himself as one of Emoni's biggest supporters. He knows she can go far, and as long as she's willing to play by his rules, he's more than willing to give her opportunities.

And Emoni is now willing to play by Chef Ayden's rules and internalize what he has to teach her. This, she believes, means that she needs to be ready to “pay [her] dues,” or do some of the dirty work that goes on behind the scenes in a kitchen. She's learned, in some respects, that being a chef isn't just about wearing the uniform and cooking—it's about supporting the whole restaurant, which includes washing dishes, making sure there's enough food to cook, and coming up with ways to keep the restaurant afloat financially. This contrasts dramatically with her earlier assertion that she just wanted to “chef it up,” or cook and


ignore all the dirty work. Emoni is coming of age and learning how to function respectfully and successfully in a professional kitchen.

68. Winter Dinner Quotes

☝️ Chili aioli would make this bomb. A sweet and savory bite. I almost walk to the spice cabinet, then stop myself. That's not the recipe.

Related Characters: Emoni Santiago (speaker), Chef Ayden, Richard, Amanda

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 220

Explanation and Analysis

While prepping sweet potato bites for the Winter Dinner, Emoni finds herself thinking that chili aioli would make the bites even better—but she stops herself before altering the recipe. This is a huge moment for Emoni, as it shows that she's internalized Chef Ayden's coaching to not alter recipes without first consulting the chef. And she understands now why she shouldn't do that: to alter the dish without asking permission would be disrespectful to all her classmates who worked so hard to help develop the recipes as they are. Put simply, Emoni has learned to work as part of a team, and she recognizes that her role in the team is to support the collective vision. Her job isn't to yank the team in a different direction by doctoring the recipes—it's to make what they've already come up with the best it can possibly be. Having learned this, Emoni is better equipped for a career in the restaurant industry, where she'll spend several years or longer supporting chefs' visions for their food, rather than developing recipes herself.



76. When It Rains Quotes

☝️ The guard is new, and I know he doesn't know me or my circumstances because all he can do is remind me of the same tired rules. "If you want your phone back, you'll need a signed release form from your parent or guardian."

And I almost laugh in his face when he utters those words. I can sign permission slips for my own daughter but can't sign one for myself.

"Sir, I really think you should speak to my advisor. I have a kid. I need my phone."

Related Characters: Emoni Santiago (speaker), 'Buela/Gloria, Babygirl/Emma, Tyrone, Ms. Fuentes

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 251

Explanation and Analysis

Emoni has gotten caught with her phone at school, which results in the guard taking her phone and requiring that 'Buela sign a form so Emoni can get it back tomorrow. As Emoni points out in her inner monologue, the situation is somewhat absurd: she's a parent who can sign permission slips for Babygirl, and yet Emoni doesn't have the right yet to sign forms to get her own phone back from school security. This highlights the difficult spot that Emoni is in developmentally, given that she's a teen mom. While some might find it ridiculous that 18-year-old high school seniors are also still treated like small children at times like this, Emoni notes that the stakes are much higher for her, given that she has a daughter to care for and needs to be accessible during school hours. Indeed, because Emoni's phone is confiscated here, she's not aware that later in the afternoon, Babygirl comes down with a fever—and the daycare ends up calling Tyrone's mom, as they weren't able to get ahold of Emoni or 'Buela. The fact that Emoni's school still sees her as a child in need of a guardian severely compromises Emoni's ability to effectively parent her child.

77. It Pours Quotes

☝️ She's off before I can wave back. Before I can say thank you. Before I can say I always have plenty of Children's Tylenol. Before I can ask her why Tyrone wasn't the one to pick up Babygirl, or why I'm accused of being the irresponsible one but he's so often excused from having to be as much of a father as I am a mother.

Related Characters: Emoni Santiago (speaker), 'Buela/Gloria, Babygirl/Emma, Tyrone, Mrs. Palmer/Tyrone's Mom

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 257

Explanation and Analysis

When Babygirl came down with a fever at daycare, the daycare wasn't able to get ahold of Emoni or 'Buela, so they called Tyrone. Tyrone's mom, Mrs. Palmer, ended up picking Babygirl up, and has now dropped Babygirl off with Emoni—after insulting Emoni and even suggesting that

Emoni is an unfit mother.

Emoni is enraged by Mrs. Palmer's treatment, which she sees as wholly unfair. Emoni knows that she's doing her best with Babygirl—indeed, she got her phone taken away at school earlier because she was trying to check in with 'Buela about their afternoon plans. And as she notes here, she has enough Children's Tylenol on hand to be able to take care of any of Babygirl's fevers or illnesses. She's not unprepared; rather, what she's running into is the fact that Mrs. Palmer sees a teen mom and assumes that that mom is irresponsible and doesn't know how to care for a child.


Mrs. Palmer's criticism becomes especially grating when Emoni considers how, from her perspective, Mrs. Palmer doesn't expect the same kind of investment from her own son, Babygirl's father. As Emoni notes, Tyrone didn't pick up Babygirl—he called his mom and asked her to do it. Yet Mrs. Palmer isn't scolding him for not having Children's Tylenol. In addition, even though Tyrone is barely in Babygirl's life, Mrs. Palmer implied earlier that she'd almost rather see Tyrone take full custody of Babygirl than leave things as they are now. Emoni can't do anything about Mrs. Palmer's treatment or insults, in part because she knows pushing back won't help things at all. Instead, all she can do is acknowledge that Mrs. Palmer's issues only highlight Mrs. Palmer's own prejudices against teen parents, at least when those parents aren't her own child.

78. Blood Boil Quotes

“'Buela fiddles with her wedding band before looking at me. 'I'm not sick, Emoni. I've lied to you. I haven't had all those doctor's appointments. I just needed a private afternoon with my thoughts where I'm not in this house. Where I'm Gloria again, and not only 'Buela. I don't know how to explain it. And I don't want to talk about it.”

I bury my face in Babygirl's neck so neither one of them can see the tears in my eyes, the relief laced with hurt.

Related Characters: 'Buela/Gloria (speaker), Emoni Santiago, Babygirl/Emma, Mrs. Palmer/Tyrone's Mom, Mr. Jagoda

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 261

Explanation and Analysis

Things came to a head earlier this afternoon, when Emoni's phone got taken away and Mrs. Palmer ended up picking up sick Babygirl from daycare. Fearing that 'Buela is seriously ill

and was at the doctor's again, Emoni has asked why 'Buela has had so many doctor's appointments. 'Buela's answer, however, shocks Emoni. For one, it's surprising to discover that 'Buela lied to Emoni, rather than state outright that she needs some time to herself. Then, it makes Emoni feel a bit like a burden herself, since she realizes she's one of the people who keeps 'Buela from being able to be anything but 'Buela, a grandmother and caregiver.

Broadly, though, 'Buela's response highlights the importance of recognizing that caregivers can and do have lives outside of their caregiving responsibilities. 'Buela wants to be Gloria—herself, on her own—rather than 'Buela, or a grandmother and caregiver. While her methods for getting this time to herself are hurtful to Emoni, the fact remains that Emoni, perhaps, assumed that 'Buela didn't need such time to recharge and spend time on her own.

89. Game Time Quotes

““Can I tell you the oddest thing about your hen? I've been having a bad day. Everything was going wrong, including my stove not wanting to turn on, which is why I came out for dinner, on a Monday of all days! But from the first bite of your food...it reminded me of my favorite aunt. Sitting at her knee when she told me stories and shucked peas.” His voice gets rough at the end and I give his hand a small squeeze.

Related Characters: Don Alberto (speaker), Emoni Santiago, Chef Ayden, Chef Amadí

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 293-294

Explanation and Analysis

On Emoni's first day apprenticing in Chef Amadí's restaurant in Sevilla, Chef Amadí tasked her with creating a chicken dish to serve as the lunch special. Here, a patron, Don Alberto, is telling Emoni about his emotional response to her food.



This moment with Don Alberto shows Emoni that Chef Ayden has in no way squashed her creativity by insisting throughout the school year that she learn to follow recipes and conduct herself appropriately in a professional kitchen. Rather, this shows her that thanks to Chef Ayden, she's now able to bring her talent for pairing herbs and spices to more people because she now knows what skills and behaviors are expected in professional kitchens. Indeed, Emoni had to

use math and safe food handling practices that Chef Ayden taught her to prep this chicken for 20-30 patrons. She married those teachings with her own knowledge of spices, and now, she's been able to give Don Alberto (among others) a meaningful, or at least delicious, dining experience. That her chicken made him think back to this memory of his aunt also shows Emoni that she has in no way lost her touch—indeed, she can still cook food that can bring people to tears or dredge up old memories, even in a professional setting.

98. Smooch Quotes

💬 I think about Babygirl. How I wake up every day expecting to see her crib and how it clogs my throat with tears not to be near her. How I miss 'Buela's shuffling slippers, and her yelling directions at the Eagles' quarterback. How I need to find a new job and figure out what I'm going to major in if I'm accepted into college. My life when I get back is full of people I love and the responsibilities I have. And I love them, and miss them, but I also want to hold this feeling of freedom tight in my fist, because it has wings and I know as soon as I loosen my grip it will fly straight away.

Related Characters: Emoni Santiago (speaker), 'Buela/Gloria, Babygirl/Emma, Malachi Johnson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 319

Explanation and Analysis

Emoni and Malachi are out one evening in Spain, and they're preparing to share their first kiss. Malachi has asked what they'll do about their relationship when they get home, which prompts Emoni to think about all her responsibilities at home—and decide that for now, she'd like to forget them and enjoy her evening with Malachi. In doing this, Emoni allows herself to do what 'Buela has been doing by lying about going to doctor's appointments. In both cases, the women get a chance to be on their own and figure out who they are outside of their roles as parents and caregivers. Emoni's trip to Spain also allows her to set aside all the big, scary choices she's preparing to make about college and work. She's choosing, essentially, to give herself this gift of enjoying the evening and doing what makes her happy. Still, Emoni can't totally ignore her responsibilities to 'Buela and Babygirl—she adores them and knows she can't abandon them. But now, she's discovering that she can feel that love and also give herself the time and space to figure out who she is, and what she wants out of her life.


109. Surprises Quotes

💬 I didn't think I would be accepted into Drexel. My grade point average was a little below what they say a student needs, so I'm still shocked. Unlike the guidance counselor in middle school, Ms. Fuentes pushed me to apply even though it was a reach school. It's close to home. It's a great school. And it has a culinary arts program that focuses not only on cooking, but also on restaurant management.

But I don't know how I'll help pay bills if I'm also paying for school.

Related Characters: Emoni Santiago (speaker), 'Buela/Gloria, Babygirl/Emma, Julio/Emoni's Dad, Ms. Fuentes

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 351

Explanation and Analysis

Emoni has recently learned that she got into Drexel, her reach school. But she fears she can't afford the costs to attend, and so she's preparing to speak to 'Buela about turning down their acceptance. Emoni's main reason for choosing to work instead of attend college reinforces both where her loyalties lie—with 'Buela and Babygirl—and her fears, as she's afraid of being a burden on others and trying something new and scary. As Emoni sees it, part of growing up and becoming an official adult means that she should be taking on more financial responsibility for her daughter so that 'Buela doesn't have to. Attending college full-time, she realizes, will make this exceedingly difficult due to the time commitment. So, college simply looks unattainable to her.

However, this ignores the fact that Ms. Fuentes—to say nothing of 'Buela and Julio—believes that Emoni is capable of excelling at Drexel and believes it'll give Emoni the leg up in the restaurant industry that Emoni really wants. Even Emoni can acknowledge that Drexel's program would prepare her well for a career, as she'll learn not just how to cook but also how to manage the financial and personnel side of owning and running a restaurant. Ultimately, the novel implies that Emoni should listen more to these people who want to support her, rather than to her fears and to people like the middle school counselor, who steered Emoni away from a more prestigious high school based on Emoni's grades.

“I go to the doctor so much because sometimes I need to get away from all of...” She swirls her hand in the air and “all of” must mean everything in the house. “I go to the doctor to remind myself I am more than a great-grandmother to a toddler, and a grandmother to a teen mother, and a mother to a rascal of a son.”

She clears her throat. “Okay... The real reason I ‘go to the doctor’ so much is because of Joseph, Mr. Jagoda. [...] And nena, it’s...” she pats her chest, and I know just what she means. “He isn’t perfect! I mean, he’s a Giant’s fan, for God’s sake, but he makes me feel like a woman. Not only a mother so many times removed.”

Related Characters: 'Buela/Gloria (speaker), Emoni Santiago, Babygirl/Emma, Malachi Johnson, Julio/Emoni's Dad, Mr. Jagoda

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 354

Explanation and Analysis



When Emoni approaches 'Buela to suggest that perhaps attending Drexel in the fall isn't a good idea, 'Buela finally shares why she's been making up doctor's appointments: she's been going on dates with Mr. Jagoda, and those dates make her feel like herself and a real person, not just a caregiver. 'Buela tells Emoni this to try and impress upon Emoni that it's totally fine—and a good thing—for Emoni to pursue things that make her happy. Parenthood certainly can be one these things, but it's also important to find time for the things that remind Emoni of who she is when she's not being Babygirl's mom. For Emoni, this is cooking. Cooking makes Emoni feel competent, secure, and as though she can do anything. So, in 'Buela's understanding, pursuing a culinary arts degree is something Emoni should do in order to preserve her solo identity.


'Buela isn't entirely aware of it, but Emoni knows exactly what 'Buela means about how Mr. Jagoda makes her feel because Emoni has been dating Malachi, a boy from school. Just as Mr. Jagoda makes 'Buela feel like a woman rather than a mother, Malachi makes Emoni feel like more than just a teen mom.

117. The Rising Quotes

“Your grandmother says your food reminds her of Puerto Rico. But for me? Your food doesn't make me think of back home, it makes me think of the home I had here. Every single one of your dishes makes me think of your mother. It kills me to see memories of her face every time I take a bite of something you made. It kills me to be here in Philadelphia, and every street corner reminds me of her. I always think with time it will get easier. But it hasn't.”

Related Characters: Julio/Emoni's Dad (speaker), Emoni Santiago, 'Buela/Gloria, Babygirl/Emma, Emoni's Mom

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 378

Explanation and Analysis

Julio shows up without the warning the night before Emoni's high school graduation and refuses Emoni's offer of some beer bread. But for the first time, he explains why he doesn't want to eat Emoni's food. Julio's explanation impresses upon Emoni that her special gift with food does indeed work on her dad; that's the entire reason he refuses to eat anything she makes. She also gets to hear that her food has the power to bring up sad memories as often as it brings up happy ones: Emoni's mom died giving birth to Emoni, and Julio normally refuses to speak about her at all due to his crushing grief. This highlights, too, that even if Emoni doesn't entirely realize it, her cooking does connect her to her mom—even if she's never made a recipe her mom developed.


This is a big moment for Emoni, as it finally helps to better understand why Julio left her with 'Buela in the first place and why he's been so distant since her birth. It doesn't necessarily mean that Emoni's anger at her dad disappears instantly—it doesn't. Rather, Julio's confession helps Emoni see Julio as a fully formed person who has absolutely made mistakes and hurt her. But with this, he and Emoni finally have the language and the tools to begin speaking more openly to each other and to ultimately move forward. Indeed, moments after this revelation, Julio does agree to take a bite of Emoni's bread—and he says he'd like to stay longer to try to help Emoni with Babygirl so she can attend college. Speaking about food (and beginning to eat it) becomes a way for Emoni and Julio to connect and heal the rift in their relationship.

118. Promotion Ceremony Quotes

“Although my food still doesn’t give me any memories, it has always been looking back; it’s infused with the people I come from. But it’s also a way for me to look forward: to watch the recipes that from my roots transform, grow, and feed the hungriest places inside of me.”

Related Characters: Emoni Santiago (speaker), Julio/Emoni’s Dad, Aunt Sarah, Emoni’s Mom, Chef Ayden

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 382

Explanation and Analysis


Emoni is describing the feast she’s put together to celebrate her graduation with friends and family, and she says explicitly what food means to her. She continues to maintain that food is about way more than just making sure people don’t go hungry. Food is instead something spiritual and something symbolic, which connects Emoni to her past, to her family, and to her future. Over the course of the novel, Emoni has remixed family recipes from her Aunt Sarah, learned to cook in a professional kitchen, cooked in Spain, and has begun to repair her relationship with her dad. Food has helped her do all of these things or has been the reason for doing those things in the first place. By remixing her family recipes, for instance, Emoni is able to connect with older generations, but she’s also able to carve out a space for herself in the family and make way for future changes. Similarly, Chef Ayden showed Emoni how to combine her intuitive understanding of herbs and spices with professional norms, enabling her to take her cooking hobby to a professional kitchen. Cooking is, in this sense, Emoni’s past, present, and her future.

119. Moving Forward Quotes

“I understand. And although I’ll be attending Drexel’s Culinary Arts program on a part-time basis, it’s not too far from here, so I can go to classes in the morning and be here by the lunchtime rush. My family is helping me out to make sure. I can commit to the long hours.” I give her a soft shrug. “I want to stay in Philly and work in Philly and learn from a restaurant in Philly. Because I think I have a lot to offer my hometown and the places I’m from.”

Related Characters: Emoni Santiago (speaker), Babygirl/Emma, Chef Ayden, Ms. Fuentes, The Chef/Chef Lisa Williams

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 385

Explanation and Analysis

Emoni has approached Chef Williams, the head chef at Café Sorrel, to ask for a part-time job while she’s in college. The fact that Emoni is doing this in the first place shows that Emoni has finally learned that she was wrong earlier to think that she needed to choose either being a parent, a student, or an employee. Now, she’s willing to call on her ever-expanding support network to piece together care for Babygirl, which allows Emoni the time to work and attend school. And school, she notes here, also doesn’t need to be a full-time thing; part-time options exist exactly for students like Emoni, who have lots of responsibilities outside of just getting a degree. This is also the first time that Emoni confirms explicitly that she’s going to school at all, something that’s been somewhat up in the air for several weeks by this point. By choosing to attend school, Emoni is choosing to believe in all the people who pushed her to take that leap, including Ms. Fuentes and Chef Ayden.

Finally, Emoni justifies her desire to work in Philly by essentially insisting that she’d like to be able to someday do for others what her family, friends, and mentors have done for her. Emoni is in no way done learning and being the mentee; there are plenty of people left in Philly who still have something to teach her. But Emoni is now confident in her abilities and in her place in the world—and with that, she realizes she has a responsibility to give back and help other young people who, like her, perhaps don’t see themselves becoming a professional chef or attending college.



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.

1. EMONI'S "WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU LEMONS, MAKE LEMON VERBENA TEMBLEQUE" RECIPE

This recipe serves "Your heart when you are missing someone you love." It's a **pudding** made with coconut milk, some sugar, lemon verbena and vanilla, and a garnish of cinnamon. After the pudding cooks on the stove and thickens, it's poured into a cereal bowl to set in the fridge. When it's set, the cook removes the bowl and sprinkles the domed pudding with cinnamon. It's best eaten "cold while daydreaming about palm trees and listening to an Héctor Lavoe classic."

Opening the novel with a recipe helps readers understand the role food plays in Emoni's life. This pudding isn't just a tasty treat. Rather, its whole purpose is to help soothe one's (presumably Emoni's) heart as she misses someone. Who that person is is left unclear, but it does indicate that Emoni has close relationships with people and wishes she could be around her loved ones more often.



2. DAY ONE

Babygirl doesn't cry as Emoni re-braids one of her braids for the fourth time. They're both going to be late, but Babygirl is unworried—she's watching *Moana*, and Emoni can play with her hair forever if Babygirl is in front of *Moana*. 'Buela tells Emoni to get going while she fixes Babygirl's hair. Emoni can't be late for school, though 'Buela knows that Emoni wishes she could take Babygirl to daycare herself. Emoni worked hard to get Emoni into a good daycare with Mamá Clara, but now that Babygirl is actually going, Emoni is an emotional wreck.

Emoni reads as a dedicated parent. She wants Babygirl to look nice, for one, and she also went out of her way to get her daughter into a "good" daycare so Babygirl will have a good start to her education. This passage also reveals who, perhaps, Emoni was missing when she made the tembleque in the novel's opening: her daughter. Further, Emoni misses her daughter because she has to balance parenthood with her own education.



Emoni spins Babygirl's chair so they're facing each other and tells her that Mommy needs to go to school. Babygirl should be nice and pay attention to Mamá Clara. Babygirl nods seriously as Emoni gives her a kiss and then reminds 'Buela that she already packed Babygirl's snacks and some water, so that Babygirl won't drink so much sugary juice today. 'Buela scoffs. She raised both Emoni's dad and Emoni, so she's an expert. But 'Buela tells Emoni to have a good first day of school. Emoni pulls the door open and listens to the sound of the street. As she closes the door behind her, her breath catches—everyone she loves is inside. Hearing 'Buela tell Emma (Babygirl) to be a big girl today, Emoni tells herself that she also has to be a big girl.

Emoni is still a student, and whether she's in high school or college, it's clear that needing to parent her daughter competes with school for Emoni's full attention. Still, this passage makes it clear that Emoni isn't raising Babygirl alone: she has her grandmother's help getting Babygirl to daycare so that Emoni can focus on her own education. When Emoni takes 'Buela's advice and reminds herself to be a big girl, it's a reminder that Emoni is still a child herself. She still needs an adult to reassure her that she's going to be okay, just like Babygirl does.



3. EMMA

Emoni wanted to give Babygirl “a nice name,” a name that doesn’t expose too much about her the way Emoni’s does. People judge Emoni the moment they see her name on paper, and Emoni didn’t want that for her daughter. That’s why she fought Tyrone, Babygirl’s dad, so hard to name her Emma. As they fought over the name, Emoni realized she’d do anything to give Babygirl the best opportunities. Fortunately, Tyrone was late to the appointment to fill out the birth certificate, so Emoni got her way. A name doesn’t guarantee anything, but Emoni hopes it’ll give Emma the chance to prove herself.

Emoni doesn't specify what she means about her name exposing too much about her, but Emoni is a variant on Imani, a Swahili name—in other words, it highlights Emoni's ethnicity in a way that she believes causes people to judge her. So, though Emoni later describes how proud she is to be Black, she also shows here that it's hard work to balance her pride with the reality that people judge her on paper. Emma, she hopes, won't experience this, as her name is a more traditionally “white” name.



4. SISTER FRIENDS

Angelica is waiting on the corner for Emoni, rocking red-streaked hair, red lipstick, and absurdly tight leggings. Emoni teases her about what the boys at school and Angelica’s girlfriend, Laura, will think. After Angelica came out last year, she met Laura at a summer graphic design workshop. Angelica responds by asking if Tyrone is still being a “dick.” Emoni loses herself in her thoughts—Tyrone is, and it’s not making things any easier for Emoni, who’s beginning her senior year of high school. Further, ’Buela is insisting that Emoni take on more responsibility for Babygirl.

This passage subtly implies that Angelica and Emoni have vastly different concerns. Angelica is worried about looking good, while Emoni is trying to balance coparenting, being a more active parent herself, and finishing high school. The simple fact of having a child makes Emoni's life much harder than Angelica's, as she has less time to be a kid and enjoy this final year of childhood.



Angelica pulls Emoni out of her reverie by asking what Emoni made last time Angelica babysat Babygirl. It was *pollo guisado*, and Emoni asks if it was good. Angelica says it was so great that she would love it if Emoni catered her six-month anniversary **dinner** with Laura next month. As the girls get on the bus, Emoni says she’s not a caterer. But she pulls out her phone and takes notes on the meal anyway.

Though Emoni insists she isn't a caterer, she also seems to see catering Angelica and Laura's anniversary meal as a way to connect with her friend and give Angelica an important gift. Food, in this sense, is how Emoni strengthens her relationships with her friends and loved ones.



5. MAGIC

’Buela always tells the story the same way. In it, Emoni is only three or four, and at this time ’Buela usually comes home, turns on the radio, and **cooks**. This day is different, though, and ’Buela is in such a bad mood that she throws her rag down and walks out the front door. Emoni and ’Buela can’t agree on what ’Buela was cooking, but little Emoni pulls up a chair and begins stirring and adding spices. When ’Buela returns, she throws a fit—Emoni could hurt herself or burn the house down. But Emoni doesn’t burn anything, and when ’Buela tastes the food, it tastes so much like Puerto Rico that she cries. Emoni learns that day that happy memories can make people cry.

It's implied that before Emoni even picks up the spoon herself, cooking is something she associates with happiness and positivity. 'Buela's daily cooking seems happy and lighthearted, given the radio in particular. So, it's perhaps not surprising that young Emoni wants to experience that for herself and goes on to pick up the spoon. It's also revealed that Emoni was either very lucky or naturally talented, since she not only kept the food from burning, but also spiced it perfectly. This experience also teaches Emoni that through food, she can connect them to their pasts and to happy memories.



Since then, 'Buela has been convinced that Emoni's talent for **cooking** is magic. Emoni's not sure about that, but she's happier in the kitchen than she is anywhere else. She can imagine a dish in her head, add spices, and make something new and wonderful. Angelica, 'Buela, and Emoni's Aunt Sarah all have theories about where Emoni's talent comes from, but Emoni just knows she can make something good. And if need be, there's always lime and hot sauce.

'Buela seems to refer not just to Emoni's exceptional cooking, but to the fact that a three-year-old managed not to burn the food. Either way, Emoni decides to focus on the fact that she has a gift and should use it to connect with other people. She instinctively knows how to pair spices, but the true magic happens, she suggests, when she serves her concoctions to other people.



6. THE AUTHORS

Angelica and Emoni part ways at Emoni's Advisory (homeroom) classroom. Her Advisory teacher is Ms. Fuentes, and Advisory is Emoni's favorite class. The same kids have been in the class since freshman year. Ms. Fuentes greets Emoni when she enters and asks how Emoni's summer was. She teases Emoni for her monosyllabic answers and then asks about Emma. Emoni says Emma's great and tells Ms. Fuentes a bit about her part-time job at the Burger Joint. Looking concerned, Ms. Fuentes asks if Emoni can handle so much and reminds her that senior year is stressful. Emoni knows this, but she has to work—'Buela's disability checks only go so far. Then, Ms. Fuentes says she has a surprise for Emoni later.

While Emoni appreciates Ms. Fuentes for her support and enthusiasm, it also starts to look a bit like Ms. Fuentes is a bit out of touch with the realities of Emoni's life. Emoni makes it seem like really, she has no choice but to balance school, a job, and childcare. The fact that this all is going to make senior year more stressful is kind of beside the point. However, note that Emoni doesn't explain this to Ms. Fuentes, which suggests that perhaps, she doesn't fully trust Ms. Fuentes to understand and support Emoni despite this challenging situation.



7. THAT GIRL

Emoni was "that girl" girls' moms warn them not to befriend—or become. She was heavily pregnant by the end of her freshman year; Babygirl was born in August. Emoni's body certainly changed, but the biggest changes she experienced as a pregnant teen had nothing to do with her body. 'Buela had to take on more sewing jobs, old men started shaking their heads, and younger men would leer at her on the train but not give up their seats.

Emoni implies that growing a baby and developing a belly weren't nearly as traumatic or difficult as the burden she ended up placing on 'Buela, or the way that people started treating her. She was suddenly unable to ignore that she'd ended up in a situation that most people looked down on.



When it first came out that Emoni was pregnant, Principal Holderness called a meeting with the guidance counselor, 'Buela, and Ms. Fuentes. Principal Holderness wanted Emoni to transfer to an alternative school for pregnant teens. But Ms. Fuentes and 'Buela had clearly conferred beforehand, and they fought to keep Emoni at Schomburg Charter. Emoni realized they were trying to let her be a "regular kid" as long as they could. Suddenly, petite Emoni was "a bloated teen warning" who took up too much space.

By keeping Emoni at Schomburg Charter, 'Buela and Ms. Fuentes show that they understand Emoni is just a kid and should be treated as such. The fact that she was pregnant was just one aspect of her identity—and as her guardian and support network, it was going to be their job to make sure she enjoyed as normal a life as possible, given the circumstances.



8. IMMERSED

Ms. Fuentes shares two announcements with her Advisory class. First, they're getting a new student tomorrow. This elicits groans; nobody wants to talk to a new kid. Second, she's handing out a list of new electives. Emoni takes the list and studies it as the bell rings. In addition to the usual offerings like dance and photography, there's a class titled Culinary Arts: Spain Immersion. There hasn't been a culinary arts class at Schomburg in years, though the school has a classroom kitchen and a café. Emoni is thrilled—until she remembers that the responsible thing to do senior year is to stay in study hall during the elective class period.

At lunch later, Angelica suggests that Emoni take graphic design with her—but then says that Emoni must be excited for the culinary arts class. Emoni pulls out her phone, which is against the rules, but she needs to check in with 'Buella about Babygirl's drop off and 'Buella's doctor's appointment later. Once the girls are seated, Angelica says Emoni is trying to be a martyr and convince herself she has to give up on the things she wants to do for 'Buella or Babygirl's sake. Emoni says she just wishes she had everything figured out, but Angelica warns her that senior year is Emoni's last chance to try something new and be a teen.

Emoni admits that learning to cook Spanish **food** would be fun, but Angelica says the class isn't just about learning to cook—there's a weeklong trip to Spain in the spring. Schomburg has offered immersion classes before, but Emoni has never wanted to take a class she knows she can't afford. Emoni is privately certain she can't afford this class and should keep her study hall. Instead of dreaming, she focuses on her sandwich and how she could make it tastier. She can't make her life better, but it helps to focus on what she can change.

9. KITCHEN SINK CONVERSATIONS

As soon as Emoni gets home that afternoon, she scoops up Babygirl and settles her on her hip. Babygirl snuggles into Emoni's neck. Out of nowhere, Babygirl says, "Chugga, chugga, choo-choo train!", and 'Buella explains that she was very interested in a train book at daycare. As Babygirl babbles, Emoni asks 'Buella if she's going to be late for her doctor's appointment and what the appointment is for. 'Buella just says it got pushed back a bit, and Emoni doesn't pry further. 'Buella then reminds Emoni that she's at Bingo tonight, so Emoni will have to put Babygirl to bed herself.

The announcement about the new kid is inconsequential to Emoni next to learning about the culinary arts elective. This represents everything Emoni has ever wanted to do: she'll be able to learn how to be a real chef while she's still in high school. But already, Emoni recognizes that signing up for the class isn't as easy as checking a box. She has other responsibilities, and she wonders if doing well in her other classes and caring for Babygirl, for instance, should outweigh getting to do something that will make her happy.



Emoni frames it as somewhat absurd that she's still expected to adhere to school rules about having her phone. She's a parent, after all, and she needs to be able to communicate with people about Babygirl—being a senior in high school doesn't change that. However, Angelica essentially proposes that Emoni should take the opportunity to be a selfish kid and sign up for the culinary arts class, as she'll never have more support and time to do the things she loves than she does now. Emoni is still technically a kid, and as Angelica sees it, Emoni should take advantage of that fact.



Once Angelica brings up the travel component of the culinary arts class, Emoni is certain the class is a bad idea. Affordability aside, the travel component means Emoni won't be around for a week to care for Babygirl or work. As Emoni sees it, it's more practical (and less heartbreaking) to focus on cooking as a hobby and stay focused in her other classes.



It's worth noting that at daycare, Babygirl is getting new experiences that Emoni and 'Buella can't provide at home. Emoni gets much the same kind of experience as she goes to high school and spends the day with her friends, learning things. And if Babygirl is encouraged to get so excited about a train book, the passage implies, why shouldn't Emoni be able to get excited about a cooking class?



'Buela asks Emoni about school and what Emoni is going to make for dinner. Emoni sets Babygirl up watching PBS, peruses the fridge, and begins pulling out ingredients. She mentions there are new electives this year and one of them is a **cooking** class, but she'll probably stick with study hall. 'Buela takes over chopping an onion and asks if Emoni wants to take the class. Emoni mentions that it includes a trip to Spain, and 'Buela observes that Emoni wanted to go to culinary school but it's "a little late for that now." Emoni's not sure what she means by this. 'Buela asks if the school will make students pay for the trip and then, with a smile, says they can revisit this later.

Like Emoni, 'Buela seems pretty practical. Saying that it's "a little late" for Emoni to go to culinary school suggests that 'Buela thinks Emoni should perhaps stick to cooking as a hobby; still she's also not writing the class off entirely. Rather, it's something that she and Emoni will have to discuss—which means that she may actually agree with Angelica and encourage Emoni to take the class. Helping Emoni cook is another way 'Buela shows her granddaughter her support.



10. CHEFDOM

Emoni has always wanted to be a chef. She started watching **cooking** shows and taking notes on her phone early. 'Buela allowed Emoni to experiment with more interesting ingredients, like gizzards and fancy Italian sausage (some of which Emoni bought with her own money). For Emoni's 12th birthday, 'Buela bought her a real knife set.

This passage lays out how supportive 'Buela has been of Emoni's passion for cooking. That young Emoni purchased some of the ingredients herself highlights how passionate she is about food, flavors, and experimentation. She wants to learn, and as a kid, it's up to her to give herself these learning experiences.



In eighth grade, when Emoni was applying for high schools, she told her guidance counselor she wanted to be a chef. But instead of pushing Emoni toward the school with a prestigious culinary arts program, the counselor said Emoni's grades weren't good enough and pushed her toward Schomburg Charter, which had a lottery. Only three kids from the neighborhood—Emoni, Angelica, and Pretty Leslie—got in. Emoni's not a bad student, she's just better with hands-on stuff than she is with memorization. But this means that Emoni has never been able to take a culinary arts class before.

In contrast to 'Buela, the counselor at Emoni's middle school doesn't encourage Emoni to follow her passions and pursue the education Emoni truly wants. And this has had long-term consequences: Emoni is working at a burger joint, and she's never had formal cooking instruction. This has relegated Emoni's passion to just a hobby, when Emoni would much rather it be a career that will allow her to one day make a living.



11. THE NEW GUY

The next day, Ms. Fuentes introduces Malachi Johnson to the Advisory class. He's from Newark. The guys all slouch or crack their knuckles, while the girls—aside from Emoni—straighten up. She's not interested in him, but he's cute enough to steal someone's heart. Emoni is convinced he's an unintelligent sporty guy until he speaks and sounds like a total nerd. Once he's taken his seat, Ms. Fuentes tells the class to work on their college essay prompts while she chats individually with students about electives.

As Emoni sees it, she definitely doesn't have time to think about boys when she has so much else on her plate. So even as Malachi starts to look more attractive (since he's nerdy, not unintelligent, and sporty), Emoni remains aloof. Ms. Fuentes's desire to talk to every student about electives suggests that she prioritizes getting her students what they need and want out of high school.



Emoni can't decide whether to write about having Babygirl, being raised by her grandmother, or her love of **cooking**. The essay is supposed to be "compelling," but how is Emoni supposed to know what college admissions counselors will find compelling? Ms. Fuentes sneaks up behind Emoni and jolts her out of her thoughts by saying she's thrilled Emoni has decided to take the culinary arts class. The travel portion will be an amazing opportunity. Not wanting to share that she's already worried about the cost, Emoni says she hopes the class will be great and asks which essay topic she should choose. Ms. Fuentes tells her to choose the one that scares her the most, as making scary choices is what makes life compelling. Emoni is pretty sure that advice has nothing to do with the essay.

Though Emoni has lots of good essay topics to choose from and is trying to take the essay seriously, she also seems to wonder if an essay about Babygirl isn't going to sway admissions officers. After all, Emoni has encountered other adults who find having a baby as a teen shameful rather than a point of pride. Keep in mind that Emoni hides that she's worried about the costs associated with the cooking class. This reflects Emoni's pride and independence, but it also means that she's not able to ask for help early. Ms. Fuentes's advice to make the scariest choice suggests that, at least as Ms. Fuentes sees it, Emoni is right to take the class: it scares her, after all.



12. ON LOSS

Tyrone has always been a "pretty boy." Emoni met Tyrone her freshman year at a party. He used "pretty words" and took Emoni downtown on their first date. To this day, Emoni can't say why she chose Tyrone. Maybe she never expected him to pick her—she was skinny, not curvy. But it seemed like everyone was having sex, and Emoni thought, why not? And why not Tyrone? He was nice and it was nice to be chosen.

Emoni looks back on her younger self with sympathy. She desperately wanted to be wanted, and she chose to have sex with Tyrone more because of that than because she genuinely wanted sex. Sharing the story of how she became a teen parent helps readers understand how much Emoni has grown in the ensuing years: she went from making choices because "why not" to carefully considering all her options.



On the day Emoni lost her virginity, she and Tyrone went to his house. Sex was more technical than Emoni expected—and it hurt. It was over so fast, and Emoni was so disappointed. Tyrone wasn't nice or sweet when she needed him to be, so she put on her pants and left. That afternoon, Emoni fried **plantain** and ate so much she felt sick. Whenever she eats fried plantain now, she cries and feels pain between her legs. Since Tyrone, Emoni has stopped talking to boys like him. She knows now they'll say whatever it takes to get what they want.

Sex wasn't the emotional experience Emoni hoped it would be, and it didn't make her feel loved or wanted, either. That fried plantain brings up tears and physical pain for Emoni highlights that Emoni's magic with cooking works even when she's the one eating the food. The plantain connects her to an earlier, sad time—and it continually reminds her that she shouldn't trust boys. Whether she's right or wrong in this regard remains to be seen.



13. FAREWELLS

Before Emoni knows it, it's Saturday morning—"visitation time." Tyrone's parents have pushed for a paternity test for Babygirl for her entire life, but Tyrone knows Emoni was a virgin before him and never agreed to the test. But this meant that Tyrone's parents wouldn't let him have Babygirl at their house; he's had to come to Emoni's to visit his daughter. Since the middle of summer, though, Tyrone's parents have been allowing Tyrone to take Babygirl every other weekend. It's been a difficult transition, though Tyrone is always right on time.

Tyrone and his parents' lack of support has complicated Emoni's transition into parenthood. This has meant that most of the childrearing work has fallen to Emoni and 'Buela over the last two years, while Tyrone has been freer to do as he likes. As Tyrone increasingly steps up, though, it means that Emoni and 'Buela get more time for themselves.



When Tyrone crouches down to hug Babygirl, she runs into his arms. Babygirl is freshly braided and wearing nice clothes, as Tyrone's mom insists. Emoni tries not to be jealous of the adoring way Babygirl looks at Tyrone as she hands over the baby bag. She also tries not to sniff Tyrone's intoxicating scent. When she mentions she packed snacks and juice boxes, Tyrone reminds her she doesn't have to. After 'Buela says goodbye to Babygirl, Tyrone opens the door and begins to walk through—and as Babygirl realizes Emoni and 'Buela aren't coming, she screeches and tries to squirm away. It breaks Emoni's heart, but she doesn't move as Tyrone buckles Babygirl into his mom's Lexus and drives away. Emoni and 'Buela tell each other Babygirl will be fine and head for the kitchen; Emoni has time to make **tembleque** before work.

As demanding as being a parent is for Emoni, it's still difficult to share her daughter with Tyrone. Babygirl still finds this difficult as well—though she adores Tyrone, she's also used to her mom and great-grandmother being there for her, not him. Though Emoni isn't cooking, per se, making sure Babygirl has snacks and juice that she's used to is Emoni's way of using food to show Babygirl she cares. Finally, noting that Tyrone's mom drives a Lexus highlights that Tyrone's family is well-off financially, in contrast to Emoni's more precarious financial situation.



14. LOVERS & FRIENDS

When they first found out that Emoni was pregnant, Emoni and Tyrone tried to make a “non-relationship” work. But Tyrone didn't want anything serious, and his parents insisted that a 14-year-old who got pregnant was probably having sex with lots of people. Even now, Emoni isn't sure she can forgive Tyrone for not defending her to his parents. To be fair, Tyrone is a good dad—but he also gets to run away and avoid responsibility. When Emoni was pregnant, he accused her of being emotional and continued to see other girls. He also convinced her that it wasn't a big deal to have sex, though Emoni didn't feel good about it. Tyrone is a great dad and a terrible boyfriend. Emoni once read that the best thing a dad can do for his kid is love the kid's mother, but she'd rather Tyrone leave her alone.

Ironically, Tyrone's parents insisted on portraying Emoni as a hypersexual villain while ignoring their own son's role in the ensuing pregnancy. This and Tyrone's lack of support made things more difficult for Emoni, as she didn't just have to deal with being pregnant at 14. She also had to deal with Tyrone's lack of support, his choice to pressure her and invalidate her concerns, and his parents' antagonism. All of this makes Emoni feel like Tyrone isn't on her side. He's never been there for her when she needed him, even if he does show up and do the bare minimum for his daughter.



15. RETURNS

It's Sunday night, and Emoni and 'Buela are eating 'Buela's **tostones** and waiting anxiously for Babygirl. They've been anxiously tiptoeing around each other all weekend, unwilling to say that they miss Babygirl. As soon as Tyrone brings Babygirl back, Emoni hugs Babygirl close and tells the toddler how much she missed her. The relief in the house is palpable as Emoni and 'Buela listen to Babygirl babble about her weekend.

As difficult as it can sometimes be for Emoni to balance her caregiving responsibilities with the rest of her life, it's still difficult for her to let Babygirl go. Things only feel good and right at home when Babygirl is home, too. As normal as this might seem to Emoni, though, it does mean that she continues to see Tyrone as an enemy of sorts and not part of her extended support network.



16. MAMA

Emoni finds it strange to become a mom when she's never had a mother to set an example. 'Buela raised her and 'Buela is Emoni's parent, but Emoni also knows 'Buela believes she failed Emoni's dad. Emoni has lots of questions about her mom, such as if her dad would still be around if her mom was alive, or if Emoni would've gotten pregnant at all. Emoni is only in contact with one person on her mom's side of the family, her Aunt Sarah in North Carolina. Since Aunt Sarah got a smartphone a few years ago, she and Emoni have been emailing each other recipes.

Aunt Sarah invites Emoni to visit every summer, but that's when Julio visits and Emoni isn't willing to take Babygirl that far on the bus. Still, Emoni treasures her relationship with Sarah, since she's the only one willing to talk about Emoni's mom. Emoni misses her mom even though Emoni has never met her. Emoni likes to imagine her mom as loving but strict, the kind of mom who likes painting nails and shopping but will also demand good grades and constructively criticize Emoni's cooking. The only picture of herself, her mom, and her dad, Julio, that Emoni has is of her mom and Julio near the end of her mom's pregnancy.

17. NEW THINGS

In the morning, Emoni says goodbye to Babygirl and hurries to school. She hates saying goodbye, though she knows she must in order to care for her daughter. In Advisory, Emoni gets her revised schedule and discovers that she was accepted into the **culinary arts** class. Emoni shakes with excitement.

18. COLLEGE ESSAY: FIRST DRAFT

In her essay, Emoni writes that her dad, Julio, only visits her once per year. According to 'Buela, Julio couldn't handle single parenthood after Emoni's mom died. He'd been willing to stay in Philadelphia when his wife was alive, but once she died, his "itch" to return to Puerto Rico got worse. 'Buela chose to raise Emoni when Julio handed Emoni over in the hospital and asked her to watch her "for a while." That turned into 17 years, and it changed Emoni's life. For most people, it's probably true that you're stuck with your family. But Emoni believes everyone makes choices about who they keep in their lives, and she chooses not to dwell on Julio's shortcomings as a parent. Instead, she focuses on 'Buela's choice to raise Emoni and give her a chance.

Emoni acknowledges that two different things can be true here: she misses her deceased biological mom, and she also sees 'Buela as her primary mother figure. And while Emoni values 'Buela's choice to raise her, she also can't help but wonder if she would've gotten better support from her biological mom. As Emoni and Aunt Sarah exchange recipes via email, Emoni continues to connect with people through food.



Emoni's family situation, and specifically the fact that she's already a mom, means that she's not able to fully connect with her mom's side of the family. For now, she feels more connected to Julio's side and unable to leave her life in Philadelphia. Due to people's unwillingness to talk about Emoni's mom, Emoni is able to make up essentially whatever she wants about her mother. In this way, she's also able to map out the kind of mom she wants to be—she can set an example for herself as she parents Babygirl.



It's important to note here that Emoni acknowledges that she has to get some space from Babygirl in order to be a good parent. It's healthy and necessary, she realizes, that she have time at school to figure out who she is—and take a culinary arts class.



In this passage, Emoni makes it very clear that forgiving Julio for abandoning her as an infant is an active choice she's made. This may inform some of how she interacts with Tyrone: she's willing to allow Babygirl to take whatever Tyrone can offer, rather than dwelling too much on Tyrone's many shortcomings. Indeed, Emoni highlights that as she sees it, what's most important is celebrating and thanking the people who have stepped up to raise her, namely 'Buela. 'Buela, Emoni understands, didn't have to raise her granddaughter. But in choosing to parent Emoni, 'Buela gave Emoni a priceless gift of lifelong support.



19. AN ART FORM

Emoni struggles not to cry as she enters the classroom kitchen. She's never been in a professional kitchen before, and she admires the shelves of bowls and utensils, the stoves, and the gleaming walls of refrigerators. When the teacher, Chef Ayden, enters the classroom, Emoni is certain this is what it must feel like when a conductor steps in front of an orchestra. But just as Chef Ayden stands in front of the class, Malachi hurries in late and stands next to Pretty Leslie. Emoni is annoyed, though she's not sure why.

Chef Ayden addresses the class. He says this is a real kitchen with real **food** and knives, not just a classroom. They're also going abroad in the spring, though not if students are late to class. He tells them he's going to run this class like a kitchen—do the students understand? Everyone nods or mumbles a yes. Looking each student in the eye, Chef Ayden says that cooking is about respect, and any chef who is disrespectful isn't a chef. Students unwilling to show respect should drop the class.

Then, Chef Ayden tells students how to rent their chef's jacket and hat, raises a butterknife, and announces that today, they'll learn how to use knives. Emoni can't help but sigh. It seemed at first like Chef Ayden knew what it's like to grow up in the city, where kids start **cooking** and using knives early—and where kids get stabbed in the street. Clearly, he's not a city person. Pretty Leslie pipes up that everyone here knows how to hold a knife, and she thought this was a cooking class. Chef Ayden says this is a culinary arts class, so it'll teach students about science and creativity. If students just want to learn to cook, they can consult the internet. They should stay if they want to "make art." Nobody leaves the room.

20. MALACHI

Malachi jogs to catch up with Emoni, calling her by her last name, Santiago. Emoni briskly tells him he can use her first name, but she privately doesn't want Malachi to think she wants to chat. But Malachi barrels ahead, asking if Imani is a day during Kwanzaa and admitting he didn't think Emoni was "Black-black." He figured she was Spanish given her curly hair and light skin, and he tugs one of Emoni's curls. Thoroughly annoyed, Emoni explains that her dad is Puerto Rican and darker than her mom, whose family is "straight-from-the-Carolinas Black." Emoni knows he's not trying to offend her—he's trying to charm her—but she doesn't want this. Suddenly, Malachi smiles a gorgeous smile and Emoni mentally curses. As they reach Emoni's English class, Malachi suggests he'd like to try Emoni's **cooking** and tells her goodbye, calling her "Santi."

Cooking is extremely important to Emoni. It's something she takes very seriously, so it's offensive to her to see Malachi seemingly not taking the class nearly as seriously. That she's unable to put her finger on this, though, highlights that she's still a teenager who's learning how to identify and manage confusing or difficult emotions.



Initially, it seems like Chef Ayden and Emoni are going to get along swimmingly. He also values timeliness and seriousness, and he and Emoni seem to share a similar reverence for cooking and food. With this, Chef Ayden begins to emerge as a potential mentor for Emoni—that is, if she's swayed by his speech and thinks he's worth respecting.



At this point, it seems uncertain whether Emoni is fully sold on Chef Ayden's class. Like Ms. Fuentes, he seems out of touch with his students' lived realities—to Emoni, starting with basic knife skills seems like he's babying them. It's worth noting, though, that readers have no indication of how good (or technically correct) any of these kids' knife skills are, so they may still have something to learn from Chef Ayden. However, he begins to win students over when he explains the difference between just cooking and "mak[ing] art."



Recall that Emoni has no interest in getting involved with boys after Tyrone—and at first brush, Malachi seems to be just as charming (and therefore just as dangerous) as Tyrone was. His assumptions about her ethnicity also highlight some of the assumptions Emoni undoubtedly deals with on a daily basis: she is Black and Puerto Rican, but clearly, some people don't see either one or the other. As Malachi says he'd like to try Emoni's cooking, cooking and food continue to emerge as symbols for connection. Malachi wants to connect with Emoni, and given that they're both at least marginally interested in cooking (since they've signed up for the culinary arts class), he sees this as an obvious in.



21. BLACK LIKE ME

Nobody in Emoni's neighborhood (which is predominately Spanish-speaking Caribbean folk and Black transplants from the South) questions what race she is. But Latina grandmothers in other neighborhoods scoff when Emoni can't answer their questions in Spanish. Emoni understands a lot of Spanish thanks to 'Buela, but at home, they mostly speak English. Sometimes, not speaking better Spanish makes Emoni feel like a "Bad Boricua." However, others wonder if Emoni is "Black American enough." In their eyes, being Puerto Rican cancels out being Black, despite Julio having darker skin than Emoni's mom.

Julio is proud of his African roots and constantly reminds Emoni of where her ancestors came from. 'Buela is also proud of being Black. So, Emoni constantly educates people about how most people abducted from Africa were taken to the Caribbean or Latin America. She also defends her Black American roots and remembers the wisdom that her female ancestors from the South have been passing down since they first set foot in America. Emoni passes this wisdom on to Babygirl. Emoni's ancestry is complicated, but she's not a long-division problem that needs to be divided in pieces. She's wholly Black.

Here, Emoni further explains why people find it difficult to reconcile her ancestry with her appearance. Part of this is cultural: Emoni doesn't speak much Spanish, so she feels less connected to Spanish-speaking Puerto Rico in some ways (this is why she calls herself a "Bad Boricua; Boricua is a term Puerto Rican people use to describe themselves). Add to this the fact that some people don't think Emoni is "Black [] enough," and Emoni can't win. The racial judgment Emoni experiences mirrors the way that Emoni also has to put up with people's assumptions and rudeness about her being a teen parent.



As Emoni sees it, the people trying to fit her into a specific box don't understand how rich Emoni's life is because she can connect to both her Puerto Rican and Black American roots. And really, thanks to Julio, Emoni knows that the two are more connected than most people think, as descendants of people abducted in Africa inhabit both the American South and the Caribbean. The "wisdom" Emoni seems to pass on to Babygirl is to take pride in who she is, even if their ancestry is complicated.



22. THE READ

After English, Angelica asks who Emoni was talking to before class. Emoni tries to avoid the question, but she explains that Malachi is new and from Newark. Angelica then asks how the **culinary arts** class went. Emoni says dismissively that they just learned about tools, and she asks if Angelica's graphic design class also started learning about tools. Angelica says she'll spend the first two weeks learning the computer programs, but she's more interested in hearing about Malachi. It's comforting for Emoni to hear that Chef Ayden isn't babying the culinary arts class. Emoni refuses to say more about Malachi and insists that even if he would make a cute prom date, she's not going to prom.

As Emoni gets into this conversation with Angelica, her purpose is to see if Chef Ayden is treating the culinary class like they're little kids, or if it's normal for classes to begin with an overview of the associated tools. To her surprise and relief, Angelica shares that learning about tools is pretty normal, regardless of what a person is learning about. This suggests that part of Emoni's struggle in the culinary arts class will be simply learning how such a class works. It's not just about food and flavor; it's also about learning technicalities and best practices.



23. SALTY

During Emoni's shift at the Burger Joint that evening, a woman asks Emoni what **burger** she'd recommend. Steve, Emoni's manager, appears out of nowhere to say the Joint Special is the best. Emoni tries to keep a straight face: she detests Steve, and that burger is disgusting. The woman nods but asks Emoni again for her recommendation. Trying to smile, Emoni says the milkshakes are good—they're made of real ice cream—and the number six is "popular." At this, the woman leaves the restaurant. Emoni takes the next customer's order. As she turns around to prep it, Steve berates her for causing the restaurant to lose business. He asks what her favorite sandwich off the menu is. They're all gross, so Emoni reiterates that the number six is popular. Steve tells Emoni to figure out how to be a "team player" or find a different team.

The way Emoni describes the food at the Burger Joint and the way the restaurant is set up suggests that the restaurant is an independent fast-food restaurant. It's not fine dining, which is where Emoni would like to focus her efforts—which is also why Emoni takes such offense to the "disgusting" burger and the other bad food. She knows food can be better than this, so it goes against everything she holds dear to make herself say something nice about the food. This does highlight one of Emoni's big problems, though: she's principled, and this sometimes mean she struggles to get along with others who think differently.



24. TANTRUMS AND TERRIBLE TWOS

As Emoni finishes reading Babygirl a bedtime story, Babygirl asks Emoni to read it again. Emoni says it's time for bed: she has to go do homework. As Emoni carries Babygirl up the stairs, Babygirl screeches and starts to throw a tantrum. This will disturb 'Buela, who's absorbed in the first Eagles game of the season. Emoni explains that they can't read it again, wondering if Babygirl has been throwing more tantrums recently because Tyrone and his parents are spoiling her.

School and parenting once again battle for Emoni's attention. And though she's been able to give Babygirl quality time together, it's now time for Emoni to focus on school and herself. That Emoni immediately wonders if Tyrone is spoiling Babygirl highlights again that Emoni doesn't see Tyrone as an ally. Instead, he's someone who is, perhaps, undermining her efforts to raise Babygirl.



As Babygirl wails and tosses stuffed animals out of her crib, Emoni counts under her breath. 'Buela appears behind Emoni and says Emoni screamed the same way when she was little. But 'Buela doesn't step in to help. This used to upset Emoni, but now, Emoni appreciates that 'Buela lets her be Babygirl's mom. When Babygirl throws a doll at Emoni, Emoni uses Emma's real name and scolds her. Emoni wants nothing more than to stroke her exhausted daughter and read her the book again, but soon, Babygirl quiets and falls asleep.

As Emoni gets older, she appreciates 'Buela more and more. She realizes that 'Buela is allowing Emoni to be independent and make choices for herself, something that will prepare Emoni for true adulthood after she graduates high school. 'Buela also makes it clear that she knows exactly what Emoni is going through, since 'Buela raised Emoni. This suggests that Babygirl's tantrum is probably normal, not Tyrone's fault.



Downstairs, Emoni trades out *The Runaway Bunny* for her math textbook and apologizes to 'Buela for interrupting the game. 'Buela says it was halftime anyway and pulls Emoni into a hug. She offers to read Emoni a story, but Emoni points out that there are no fun characters in her math textbook. Still, 'Buela picks up *The Runaway Bunny* and begins to read.

The Runaway Bunny is a poignant choice in this situation—it's about a young bunny who wants to run away, and it's possible to read that young bunny as a symbol for Emoni. Emoni craves independence and fewer responsibilities, but unlike the bunny, she can't run away from 'Buela and Babygirl. And reading Emoni a picture book also highlights that despite Emoni's age, she is still a child who craves support and attention from her caregiver.



25. FICKLE FATHERHOOD

For all his faults, Emoni has always appreciated that Julio loved to read to her—though he didn't believe in children's books and read mostly nonfiction to her. Every July, Julio arrives with his barbering supplies to work in the mornings and attend events in the afternoons. This last summer, he helped out a lot with Babygirl, and Emoni saw what kind of a dad he might've been had Emoni's mom lived. But then, as he does every year, Julio suddenly returned to Puerto Rico at the beginning of August without saying goodbye. Babygirl was distraught. A week later, he called and asked for Angelica's Netflix password. After so many years, Emoni has learned not to give Julio too much space in her heart. She knows if she does, he'll leave a gaping hole "where a parent should be."

Though Julio has never been particularly present, Emoni continues to try not to hold that against him. Instead, she focuses on what he has given her: a love of reading, and a good summer with Babygirl this last year. Still, Emoni can't ignore that she feels as though her dad is betraying her time and again when he runs away—and this last time, when he runs away from Babygirl, as well. It seems like seeing Julio hurt Babygirl in this way makes his betrayal even more painful for Emoni, since it doesn't just hurt her anymore—it's also hurting her daughter, someone she loves and never wants to see in pain.



26. EXHAUSTION

After Advisory the next day, Malachi observes that Emoni—whom he calls Santi—was quiet in class. Emoni is too tired to object to the nickname, so she says truthfully that she was up late working. Though he tries to ask about her college essay, Emoni asks why he's walking with her when they don't have **Culinary Arts** until afternoon. He says he's just walking her to class. At this, Emoni stops short and says she'll be friendly, but she and Malachi aren't friends. (The toddler books Emoni has been reading advocate for direct communication and explicit instructions, and boys often seem a lot like babies.) Malachi agrees that they don't have to be friends, but he asks to walk the same direction and for recommendations of things to see in Philly. Emoni is happy to talk about her city.

Emoni continues to keep her guard up around Malachi, seemingly fearing that allowing friendly banter will make her vulnerable to his charm and handsomeness. Note, too, that she doesn't tell Malachi outright that "working" last night meant doing her own homework in addition to reading to her toddler daughter; for now, she seems interested in concealing the fact that she's a parent from Malachi.



27. A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Emoni's Philadelphia neighborhood, Fairhill, reminds her of Charles Dickens's novel [A Tale of Two Cities](#). Most residents are Puerto Rican, though the neighborhoods look nothing like Puerto Rico. Outsiders call the area "the Badlands" because there's such a high crime rate, but there's more good in the area than bad. There are gang fights, but there are also dance performances, a great rec center, and a barbershop that leaves a cooler of water on the sidewalk in the summer. People are afraid to come here because it's supposedly dangerous—but when outsiders move in, good things like farmers' markets and regular trash pickup happen. Recently, Emoni has noticed more sold signs on houses and white people on public transit. The neighborhood is both sweet and sour, and a person has to get to know Fairhill to get to know Emoni.

Emoni has a love-hate relationship with gentrification, or the process of typically white, wealthy folks moving into her neighborhood. Gentrification brings about good things like farmers' markets, as she notes. But gentrification also tends to displace a neighborhood's original residents, in this case Puerto Rican people. In general, though, Emoni proposes that people misjudge her neighborhood in the same way they misjudge her. They see what they expect to see—a Black and Puerto Rican teen mom, or a supposedly scary neighborhood—and ignore all the good things, like Emoni's passion for cooking and the kindness and community spirit that exists in Fairhill.



28. FAIL

In addition to teaching students to **cook** and work in a professional kitchen, Chef Ayden is also making everyone prepare for the ServSafe test, which will enable students to work in real restaurants. His favorite test prep method is a verbal pop quiz. Now, he turns to Emoni and asks what temperature chicken is done at. Emoni didn't study the temperature portion since "chicken is done when it's done," so she explains what color the chicken should be when you cut into it. He cuts her off and asks her for the information necessary to label food in the freezer. Emoni lists several things. Chef Ayden says Emoni isn't technically right or wrong—she understands in practice what works, but cooking is "more than just instinct." When he turns to Pretty Leslie, Emoni drops her head in shame.

One of the ways Chef Ayden treats his class like a real kitchen rather than just a classroom is by preparing students to get an industry certification through the ServSafe test. Though Emoni wants to be a professional chef, she's not taking studying for the test seriously: even if she knows what chicken looks like when it's done, that's not going to cut it on a test that expects a specific temperature and will consider any other answer wrong. And telling Emoni that cooking is more than instinct also tears down what Emoni loves best about cooking: using her instincts to pair spices.



29. CATHARSIS

That afternoon, 'Buela turns on the kitchen radio. It begins to play Marc Anthony, one of Emoni's favorite singers. Then, 'Buela pulls out fresh herbs, hands Emoni a knife, and rinses a cutting board. When Emoni's emotions are in such turmoil, she's not sure what to **cook** and she lets her hands guide her. Pushing aside how angry she is—that Babygirl's grandma insists Babygirl look like a doll before she accepts her granddaughter, that Culinary Arts is now her hardest class, that her job is so awful—Emoni chops and stirs. When she's done, she discovers she's made rice with black-eyed peas. The chicken is perfectly cooked without a thermometer, and the salad looks tasty.

This passage helps illuminate the emotional role cooking plays in Emoni's life. She wants to cook professionally, but at this point, cooking is a beloved hobby and her own form of therapy. 'Buela's quiet presence and her help in the kitchen also highlights that she's an essential support person for Emoni. She supports Emoni as Emoni takes care of her own emotional needs and works through this difficult transition period. However, Emoni doesn't seem to thank or acknowledge 'Buela at this point, suggesting that she may be taking 'Buela's support for granted.



Following the culinary arts textbook guidelines for plating a meal, Emoni plates 'Buela's meal. 'Buela closes her eyes as she tastes it and is in tears within moments. Normally, Emoni doesn't ask people why they react to her **food**, but today, she asks 'Buela what she feels. 'Buela says she's remembering wanting to leap into the ocean and swim away as a girl, but also being afraid the ocean would swallow her. She adds that the memory "warms [her] up" and reiterates that Emoni has magic. Relieved, Emoni realizes that she might not know how to properly store sugar, but she knows how to remind people that "food is meant to feed more than an empty belly." A textbook can't teach that.

Emoni might find Chef Ayden's teaching methods demoralizing, but she is still learning from the class materials if she's following her textbook's plating guidelines. Still, as far as Emoni is concerned, making the meal look pretty (and proper food handling practices) aren't nearly as important as what her food can do: connect people to their pasts, their homes, and to other people. That is, Emoni didn't use a thermometer to cook the chicken tonight, but it's more important to her that her dish elicited this emotional reaction from 'Buela.



30. PUDDING WITH A POP

Nobody tells you that a culinary arts class is so much work. Mondays are demonstrations days, on Wednesdays the students learn a new recipe, and on Fridays, students make the recipe on their own and get graded. They've been **cooking** for two weeks, but still, they spend more time cleaning than cooking. Two people have already dropped the class. Though Emoni dreads the quizzes, she loves learning about how kitchens and restaurants work. She motivates herself to study by reminding herself that she doesn't want to make people sick, but she just wants to "chef[] it up."

Today, students are making **pudding** from scratch. Chef Ayden guides them through the process. As Emoni puts her ingredients away, a red bottle catches her eye, and she sprinkles some on her pudding. When she sets her pudding down in front of Chef for grading, Chef says the pudding looks great and asks what she put on top. Emoni doesn't answer until he's taken a bite (which makes him close his eyes) and asks again. When she explains it's smoked paprika, he asks if she was trying to show off. He asks why she did it and says that the pudding is delicious. However, while he appreciates creativity, Emoni must follow the recipe. Altering a chef's recipe without asking is disrespectful.

However, Chef Ayden still invites the rest of the students to try Emoni's **pudding**, which makes all the boys snicker. Emoni flushes with embarrassment and pride and hurries out of the classroom as soon as the bell rings. Malachi catches up to her and giggles at the look on her face, but he defends Chef by suggesting that Chef doesn't see teens with dirty minds when he looks at the class—he sees chefs in training. When he laughs again, Emoni blurts that Malachi has a nice laugh. She adds that they're not friends. Shrugging, Malachi says Emoni has a nice laugh too, and he thanks her for making him laugh.

Emoni expected the culinary arts class to be fun and allow her to express her creativity. Instead, she finds that it's grueling work, and she doesn't seem to appreciate why this is so. Specifically, the resigned and annoyed way she describes cleaning rather than cooking suggests that she doesn't appreciate how big of a deal preventing foodborne illness is in professional restaurant settings. Intellectually she understands that it'd be awful if she made someone ill, but expressing herself and "cheffing it up" is still more important to her.



When Emoni dusts her pudding with the smoked paprika, she's doing what she does best: combining flavors that not only taste good, but wow the people who eat her food (including Chef Ayden). So, it's a nasty shock when Chef Ayden both praises and scolds Emoni for her creativity. As he sees it, Emoni is breaking the first and most important rule in the kitchen, which is to be respectful of one's colleagues. This, he suggests, means following the chef's recipe, not undermining them by spicing it differently.



To make things worse, Chef Ayden (seemingly unwittingly) makes a sex joke that turns Emoni into a laughingstock. Now, she's not just a rulebreaker: she's also a target. Despite Emoni's best efforts (and her words), she and Malachi seem to be becoming closer friends, or at least people who enjoy spending time together. Importantly, Malachi seems able to help Emoni feel better about being humiliated in class, which may make him a more desirable friend.



31. LIVING LARGE & LAVISH

On the bus after school, Angelica lists all the schools with graphic design programs where she's planning to apply. Then, she admits she's not sure she'll get in, since they only accept the best. Emoni reminds Angelica she is the best. Angelica sighs and asks where Emoni plans to apply. Emoni lists several Philadelphia schools, including Drexel, which Ms. Fuentes is really pushing for. But Emoni says she'll never get a scholarship with her subpar grades, and she doesn't want to take out loans. And really, isn't it more important to work so she can care for Babygirl than go to school? Angelica points out that Emoni can't work at the Burger Joint full-time, but Emoni says she's just focusing on Angelica's anniversary menu. Both girls tell the other to remember they have more to offer the world than they think they do.

Both Emoni and Angelica struggle a bit to believe in themselves and that the world will accept them and appreciate their talents. This becomes especially apparent as Emoni insists she'll never get a college scholarship. Indeed, it seems almost like Emoni is simply echoing the middle school counselor who pushed her toward Schomburg Charter due to her subpar grades. Still, Emoni is trying hard to justify this outlook, as when she suggests that making money and supporting Babygirl is more important than college.



32. IMPOSSIBILITIES

It's been a week since the **pudding** debacle. Today, Chef Ayden announces they'll be working with saffron and asks them to pair up so there's enough to go around. Pretty Leslie squeezes in next to Malachi, who shrugs at Emoni. Emoni is the odd one out, so Chef asks if she'll work on her own or join a "threesome." Ignoring the snickers, she says she'll work alone. It takes almost the entire class to make paella. Then, Chef makes an announcement: they'll be going to Sevilla, Spain in March, and the administration just finalized the budget. Each student will need to raise \$800 by December 15, though the class will hold fundraisers too. Emoni's heart hurts. That's way too much money. The trip to Spain would change Emoni's life, but Emoni crushes her hope.

Though Emoni is also trying to ignore her classmates' inappropriate giggles, her independent nature shines through as she insists she'll work alone. And it continues to guide her as she writes off the trip to Spain altogether. As far as she's concerned, it's entirely impossible for her to singlehandedly raise \$800 in a few months. While that might be true, focusing on that ignores the fact that Emoni is part of a team of kids who will all work together to come up with the money and bring individual costs down. Emoni's independence, at this point, is hurting Emoni and making her miserable.



33. SANTI

Emoni is one of the last students to leave the room. When she steps into the hallway, she tries to avoid Pretty Leslie giggling at Malachi, but Malachi calls Emoni over to ask her something. Pretty Leslie asks Emoni how Babygirl is in a fake whisper. Emoni forces herself to keep smiling—she's not ashamed of Babygirl or of being a mom. She says Babygirl is doing great and then looks Malachi in the eye. His dimples are gone. Pretty Leslie tells Malachi she couldn't imagine being a parent in high school, but he's not listening. As he stares at Emoni, Emoni keeps her shoulders back. Most boys think she's dramatic or easy once they learn she's a mom. But surprisingly, Malachi invites Emoni to get **ice cream** after school. Emoni accepts, enjoying Pretty Leslie's confused face.

Pretty Leslie is clearly trying to make Emoni look undesirable in front of Malachi by mentioning that Emoni has a daughter. With this, the novel illustrates how being a parent in high school makes being a normal teen difficult (if not impossible) for Emoni, given that some people (like Pretty Leslie) see Emoni's choice to have and parent a child as shameful. Malachi is, perhaps, more mature than Emoni has given him credit for, though, since he doesn't seem to care that Emoni is a parent and asks her out anyway.



34. THREE'S COMPANY

After school, Emoni tells Angelica—who's incredulous—about how Malachi asked her out. Angelica is certain Pretty Leslie was trying to claim Malachi for herself, but Emoni isn't convinced. They reach the front of the school, where Malachi leaves a group of boys and immediately introduces himself to Angelica. She asks what he's doing with Emoni, and he invites her to join them for **ice cream**. Angelica and Emoni know exactly where to go, so they head for the train station. On the train, Malachi asks Angelica about Emoni, and Angelica tells him embarrassing stories. Finally, they get off at the boardwalk and enter a water-ice shop, which the girls insist is better than ice cream. Malachi doesn't argue.

Once Malachi, Angelica, and Emoni have their **water-ice**, they walk to the water and admire the beautiful day. After a brief exchange about the culinary arts class, Angelica warns Malachi to get Emoni home safe and then excuses herself to go meet Laura. Malachi gives Angelica his winning smile—and even Angelica falters. She taps his dimple, tells Emoni to be careful, and leaves.

The mood grows more serious and Emoni asks why Malachi ignored Pretty Leslie earlier. He explains that he knows what it's like to have secrets and didn't like how Pretty Leslie tried to use Emoni's family situation to "bag some dude." He also says he'd like to become friends. Emoni doesn't ask about Malachi's secret—if he wanted to tell her, he would. Then, she says she needs to get home to Babygirl. She doesn't say that she, too, wants to be friends.

35. PHONE CALLS

Emoni convinces Malachi he doesn't need to walk her home from the train station. She enters the house with a smile, but 'Buela isn't smiling—she expected Emoni 30 minutes ago and Emoni hasn't been answering her phone. 'Buela says she had to leave for a doctor's appointment 15 minutes ago. Emoni asks if everything is okay. She explains to readers that 'Buela was a seamstress in the alterations department at Macy's for decades, until she got her hand caught in a machine. Now, Emoni fears that something is seriously wrong or that 'Buela is sick and unwilling to tell her. Emoni feels panicky; she can't live without 'Buela.

Malachi continues to demonstrate that he cares about who Emoni really is, which means accepting her daughter and getting to know her friends. He's much less focused than, say, Pretty Leslie on conforming to what supposedly normal high school kids are supposed to care about, like keeping up appearances. Water-ice (also known as Italian ice) is a classic Philadelphia treat, but it's not very popular outside the city. By introducing Malachi to a local delicacy, Emoni and Angelica help Malachi integrate into the Philly community.



Notice that in this passage, the conversation mainly centers on food—the water-ice and the culinary arts class. Malachi, Angelica, and Emoni thus continue to connect over food. When Angelica (who, recall, is attracted to girls exclusively) seems taken in by Malachi's cuteness and charm, it suggests that Emoni is perhaps working harder than she's letting on to resist Malachi.



Here, Malachi essentially says that he finds Pretty Leslie's earlier behavior catty and unattractive. He's far more interested in being honest and open, which he does here by saying outright that he'd like to be friends. This is difficult for Emoni, though, as she's not used to this kind of openness. So, she's unable to say that she also wants to be Malachi's friend.



In some ways, Emoni is extremely mature. She takes on a lot of Babygirl's care, she grocery shops, and she has a job. But in other ways, Emoni is still a kid who needs her own caregiver. So, it's a scary proposition to consider that 'Buela may be unwell—and might even be sick enough to die—as this would leave Emoni without the most important person in her support network. This tension illuminates the extra difficulties she faces as a teen parent.



'Buela assures Emoni she's fine; this is just a follow-up appointment, and she's anxious because Julio called. He's called twice in the last week, but Emoni has been avoiding him after how he left last summer. Emoni goes to Babygirl in the living room. She thinks it's silly for her dad to call his mom to get ahold of her, but 'Buela tells Emoni to call Julio. Squatting in front of Babygirl, Emoni brightly tells her daughter that when Babygirl's an adult, they'll both call each other.

Emoni finds Julio confusing. He encourages kids in Puerto Rico to read, raises money for local causes, and hosts political lectures. But he never sends money home and seems not to care about his own family. Now, Emoni wipes Babygirl's cheek and straightens the sofa cushions. Thinking about Julio makes her feel itchy and like screaming, even though she loves him. After a minute, 'Buela says Emma recently had a **snack** and that she'll pick up dinner for herself on her way home.

36. JULIO, OH JULIO

When Julio picks up the phone, Emoni can tell he's at his barbershop working. He says 'Buela told him Emoni is taking a **cooking** class and is going to Spain, which annoys Emoni—why does 'Buela nag her to call Julio if 'Buela tells him everything anyway? Emoni says she'll only go if she can afford it, and Julio launches into one of his favorite history lessons. He dislikes Europe and tells Emoni to be proud and not “bow down to her oppressor.” Emoni says she's pretty sure they're going to Spain because Chef Ayden likes Spanish food, not because Spain was a colonial power. They discuss Babygirl for a bit and then say goodbye. Neither says “I love you.” Julio doesn't apologize for abandoning Emoni, and Emoni doesn't tell him she's angry he left.

37. SCHOOL

In Advisory, Emoni nods at Malachi. 'Buela's reaction to Emoni getting home late reminded Emoni that she doesn't have time to flirt, so Emoni focuses on the questionnaire Ms. Fuentes handed out. When Ms. Fuentes comes to Emoni to ask about Emoni's college plans, Emoni notes that the guidance counselor isn't convinced Emoni's grades are good enough to get in anywhere. She's thinking about getting a job instead. Ms. Fuentes asks if this is about Emma, which is partly true. But Emoni says she wants to be able to care for Babygirl herself so 'Buela doesn't have to. She just wants to study **culinary arts**, and maybe it's better to learn on the job than spend money on school.

Emoni takes Julio as an example of how not to parent. She doesn't want to have the same kind of relationship with Babygirl when she's older as Emoni has with Julio now; she'd rather engage more openly and directly with her daughter.



Objectively, Emoni can acknowledge that Julio does lots of good things. But she can't shake the feeling that he doesn't care about her the way she'd like him to. This may explain why she relies so heavily on 'Buela: 'Buela is the only adult who's consistently been there for Emoni throughout her childhood.



Emoni's annoyance at Julio's history lesson is palpable. She seems to not have anything against Spain, while Julio believes that Spain should still be held accountable for the horrific things it did as it colonized the Americas. This disagreement may contribute more to Emoni and Julio's fraught relationship. It's also hard for Emoni to enjoy this conversation much since she doesn't get to share any of her own news, something that causes her to feel even more like a child and less like the young adult she actually she is.



As far as Emoni is concerned, she has to keep her priorities straight—and her first priority, she believes, should be Babygirl. Thus, she can't justify flirting or even just being friends with Malachi, and college looks less important when cooking is a field where one can reasonably expect to learn on the job and work their way up. Notice, too, that Emoni seems aware that she can't rely on 'Buela forever. She needs to become independent at some point, if only so 'Buela doesn't end up singlehandedly raising three generations of kids.



Ms. Fuentes clearly doesn't like this answer. She says it'll be better if Emoni has a college degree, because then she'll have options if **cooking** doesn't work out. Emoni tries hard not to visibly react, but she says college isn't the only way to make something of herself. Ms. Fuentes is young and is usually pretty hip and with it, but she's not a parent and isn't trying to keep her grandma from having to spend her entire life raising kids. She doesn't get it. Emoni doesn't say that she'd rather save to send Babygirl to college than go herself, or that her own hopes and dreams seem so unattainable that it doesn't seem worth it to try.

As Ms. Fuentes pushes for Emoni to think more seriously about college, she begins to alienate Emoni. This causes Emoni's support network to shrink, as now Ms. Fuentes seems less equipped to help support Emoni as Emoni plans her future. Emoni also sadly realizes that since Ms. Fuentes isn't a parent, she doesn't fully grasp the fact that Babygirl truly is Emoni's first priority. Getting Babygirl a good education is more important now to Emoni, and to make sure that happens, Emoni has to make money.



38. GOING PLACES

At lunch, Emoni praises Angelica's latest work, an album cover for a rapper who graduated last year. Angelica insists it's nothing, but it's true art. Emoni is certain Angelica is going places—and Emoni will be left behind. Emoni begins to mix her **chicken nugget** sauces, so Angelica asks what's wrong; Emoni is clearly upset. Shrugging, Emoni says she's mad at Julio, 'Buela is seeing the doctor a lot, and she's not sure what to do about college. They discuss upcoming college admissions deadlines, and then Angelica abruptly asks what Emoni is going to be for Halloween. Emoni realizes she can't take Babygirl out herself—Halloween is on a day she works—but she should find a costume in case 'Buela wants to take Babygirl. Angelica offers to make Babygirl a costume and as the girls laugh, Emoni's chest feels a bit lighter.

While the adults in Emoni's life are making Emoni feel alone and unsupported, Angelica now steps in to fill the gaps they leave. It's somewhat emotionally taxing for Emoni to boost Angelica's confidence when she believes that she herself isn't going to make much of herself, supporting Angelica nevertheless helps Emoni connect with her friend. And Angelica's clear investment in getting Babygirl dressed up for Halloween also makes Emoni feel more supported. Angelica realizes that these days, Emoni is far more interested in supporting and dressing up Babygirl than herself, so Angelica's offer makes Emoni feel like she's doing the right thing.



39. BASURA

The next day, when Emoni sets her plate down in front of Chef Ayden for grading, he tells her to throw it away. It's not the **recipe** he assigned. Emoni argues that it tastes good and is presented well, and Chef puts a bite in his mouth. Though Emoni can tell he loves it, he says the point is following instructions, not creativity. Emoni throws away her plate. Ignoring Malachi's warning, she approaches Chef after class and asks why he made her trash the dish. He says that even if it tasted good, she didn't prepare it right. She's not being respectful, and she needs to learn the rules before she can break them.

Chef Ayden sets out clear guidelines for how to be a good restaurant employee: mainly, one must follow directions to the letter. And note that while he acknowledges that Emoni's creativity isn't a bad thing (since her food does taste good), reworking dishes in a professional restaurant isn't going to end well for her. Essentially, if Emoni really wants to pursue a restaurant career and not get fired, she must learn to follow directions.



Emoni argues that she shouldn't have to learn how to make a bad recipe well, but Chef Ayden says it's about more than that. Does she remember what temperature a medium-rare **flank steak** gets cooked to? She doesn't, so the hypothetical patron will be unhappy and won't come back. And if Emoni decides to "express herself" and put cayenne on a dish when it's not in the ingredient list, she could make a patron who's allergic really sick. Emoni knows she's been dismissed. She's not sure she's coming back.

Chef Ayden continues to highlight that restaurant patrons come into restaurants with expectations: that they'll get the steak cooked to order, and that they won't be surprised with ingredients that might hurt them. This is hard for Emoni to grasp because she's such an intuitive chef, but Chef Ayden makes it clear that Emoni must internalize these professional norms if she wants to be successful in a professional kitchen.



40. HOME IS WHERE

Emoni cuts her last period class for the first time since she was a freshman and walks all the way to Babygirl's daycare. Babygirl is the one person who can cheer her up. When Emoni gets there, she sees Babygirl inside playing with a play kitchen. The sight makes Emoni tear up just as 'Buela comes up behind her. Emoni asks if 'Buela is going to ask why she's not in school, but 'Buela says that Emoni is almost an adult. She trusts Emoni to take care of herself. This makes Emoni feel worse. Doesn't 'Buela know that Emoni still needs support and reassurance?

Aside from being cute, seeing Babygirl with the play kitchen reminds Emoni how much power she has to shape Babygirl's worldview—Babygirl is, no doubt, emulating what she sees her mom doing at home. 'Buela's choice then to shrug off Emoni skipping and respect Emoni's independence makes Emoni feel even more adult and on her own—when what she'd really like right now is an adult to tell her things are going to be okay.



41. I BEEN GROWN

Teachers seem to forget that Emoni has been making hard choices for years. She had to decide to wean Babygirl early so she wasn't dripping breastmilk at school, or to send Babygirl to daycare. Emoni had to decide whether to have a baby, which was the hardest decision she's ever made. Tyrone's parents wanted Emoni to get an abortion, but Tyrone left it up to Emoni. 'Buela cried; she thought she'd raised her last kid. But 'Buela told Emoni that if she decided to have the baby, this would be the last time anyone would ask her what she wanted—everyone will prioritize the baby if Emoni stays pregnant. Julio said nothing when she told him. Emoni eventually went to the free clinic, where the doctor talked through all the options. But Emoni realized there was no perfect answer. Just the right answer for her.

Here, Emoni begins to highlight the fact that being a kid and being a parent aren't at all the same thing. She may be young, and she may still be under her teachers and caregivers' jurisdiction a lot of the time, but she's also responsible for Babygirl—and this means making choices her same-age classmates have never dreamed of making. As Emoni explains, choosing to have a baby meant that she essentially forfeited her ability to make decisions just for herself. Despite Emoni's uncertainty elsewhere in life, she implies that having Babygirl was the right choice for her. So, hopefully, Emoni will be able to find the same kind of peace and confidence as she makes decisions about her future.



42. HURRICANE SEASON

On Sunday night, 'Buela is busy watching the news while Emoni studies for her ServSafe test and waits for Babygirl to get back from Tyrone's. Suddenly, 'Buela gasps: a hurricane is threatening Puerto Rico. The last time a hurricane hit, Emoni and 'Buela couldn't get ahold of Julio for three weeks. Emoni had never been more frightened, even when she was in labor—and her mom didn't survive labor. Ignoring her hurt feelings, Emoni calls Julio and asks if he's seen the forecast. Normally, he shrugs her concern off, but he assures her that the barbershop is storing provisions and has a generator. He's keeping people safe. He can hear 'Buela say that he needs to fly to Philadelphia, and he tells Emoni that he's not leaving. Puerto Rico is his home, and he needs to help his home and his community.

Emoni might find Julio trying and exasperating at times, but she does love him and want him to be safe from dangerous natural disasters. Indeed, noting that Emoni was more afraid during the hurricane than she was during labor highlights how much she cares about Julio, despite his faults as a parent. However, as Julio explains why he won't leave Puerto Rico, it again shows Emoni that she and 'Buela come second to her dad's life and community in Puerto Rico. It contributes to her sense that he cares more about other people than he does about her, his daughter—something that's difficult for Emoni to grasp as a parent herself.



43. EMONI'S "NO USE CRYING OVER SPILLED STRAWBERRY MILK" RECIPE

This recipe serves a person's "ego when you're full of regret." Emoni lists the ingredients and instructs cooks to thicken the **strawberries**, water, and sugar for three Cardi B songs. This makes a syrup that then gets added to milk. The drink is best enjoyed while playing with one's toddler and listening to Rihanna.

As with the tembleque recipe that opened the novel, there's little indication why exactly Emoni is making strawberry milk, except that she's regretful. This suggests that something is going to change for Emoni; she'll regret some choice she's made thus far.



44. SKIPPING

Emoni spends the week doing homework in the library during Culinary Arts and refusing to answer Malachi's questions. She knows she's going to fail, and that Ms. Fuentes is going to find out, but she can't bring herself to formally drop the class. On Friday night, Malachi and Pretty Leslie walk into the Burger Joint, and Pretty Leslie smiles wide. She greets Emoni in a fake voice and orders a **burger** with complicated substitutions, and she then says Emoni must be thrilled to work here and get to learn so much about food. Emoni uses the same voice and script she uses for every customer, even as she takes Malachi's order. As they walk away, Steve tells Emoni to stop "fraternizing" with her friends.

This week, Emoni experiments with essentially getting a study hall instead of another class during the Culinary Arts period. When Malachi and Pretty Leslie come to the Burger Joint, it's again obvious that Pretty Leslie is trying to insult and make things difficult for Emoni—it's clear to Leslie and Emoni that working fast-food isn't actually teaching Emoni much about food. If Emoni wants to learn, she'll have to return to Chef Ayden's class.



45. FORGIVENESS

When Emoni gets home from work, she kisses 'Buela and goes to check on Babygirl, who's already asleep. Soon, Emoni is going to have to figure out how to fit another bed in her room. This is supposed to be Tyrone's weekend, but he and his family are out of town, so Emoni is glad to have Babygirl. Back in the living room, Emoni sits next to 'Buela and thanks her for putting Babygirl to bed. 'Buela says Julio called and asked for Emoni to call him back; it has nothing to do with the storm. Emoni laughs and asks who he thinks he is, but she knows 'Buela doesn't see Julio's behavior as all that bad. She warns Emoni to let go of her anger, and Emoni agrees to call.

Note that when Emoni gets home, her focus is on Babygirl and figuring out how to rework her life to accommodate her growing daughter. Her focus, in other words, isn't on herself; it's on the person she's responsible for. As she sees it, Julio demanding a phone call from her through 'Buela is doing the exact opposite, as it seems like he's not respecting her autonomy or helping her as she matures. 'Buela is also in a tough spot here, as she might have more empathy or insight into why Julio behaves the way she does (since she's his parent), though she's also Emoni's primary caregiver. Put simply, her loyalties are split.



Instead of calling Julio, Emoni calls Angelica. Emoni is going shopping in the morning, so if Angelica wants anything different for her anniversary **dinner**, she needs to say so now. Angelica says she just wants something fancy, preferably something Emoni is learning about in class. (Emoni hasn't told Angelica or 'Buela that she's been skipping.) Emoni says she has it all figured out.

Rather than call Julio, who makes her feel abandoned, Emoni calls Angelica. Angelica is not only supportive; in asking Emoni to cater her anniversary dinner, Angelica is also letting Emoni shine and do what she loves and does best. Keeping it a secret that she's skipping, though, again highlights Emoni's independent streak—in addition to possible shame about choosing to fail a class.



46. SISTERHOOD

As soon as Emoni started to look visibly pregnant, people began saying mean things. Students had gotten pregnant before, so maybe it was just that Emoni is petite or that people couldn't figure out why Tyrone chose her. Angelica shut everyone down if they said something mean about Emoni. When Angelica came out to Emoni that year, Emoni learned what "it meant to be a fierce friend." When Angelica came out to everyone else junior year, Emoni defended her like Angelica defended Emoni years earlier. Emoni ignored the teasing and held Angelica's hand in the hallway. Holding on like this is what it means to be a sister.

Both Emoni and Angelica have shown up for each other over the years. This helps explain why, in the present, Emoni turns to Angelica so often: Angelica has consistently been there for her, even during really difficult periods of her life. Still, it's worth remembering that Emoni doesn't feel comfortable in the present telling Angelica the truth about what's going on in her culinary arts class. On some level, Emoni may fear disappointing Angelica and losing her support as well.



47. INVITATIONS

Emoni normally doesn't pick up unknown numbers, but she's distracted putting groceries away and answers—and it's Malachi. He nervously explains that he wants to apologize for Pretty Leslie's behavior yesterday. Emoni says it's fine; she's learned that the things that make her feel ashamed are usually other people's problems. After a moment, Malachi asks if he could see Emoni and if they could talk. Emoni asks Malachi if Pretty Leslie is busy then immediately regrets it. Then she says she's not interested if Malachi is flirting with both of them. Quietly, Malachi says Leslie is his friend and they've been through a lot of the same stuff. This is news to Emoni, but she accepts Malachi's invitation to help her **cook** later.

Though Emoni likely would deny it, her jealousy in this passage is palpable. On one level, she wants to trust Malachi and possibly even get involved with him romantically, and so she fears that Pretty Leslie is going to ruin her chances with Malachi. To make things more complicated, Emoni has to balance her desire to get close to Malachi with her more adult responsibilities. Malachi's insistence that Leslie has been through difficult things is interesting, as it suggests that there's more to Leslie than Emoni realizes.



48. SOUS CHEF

As Emoni tries to get Babygirl to eat **lunch**, 'Buela grills her about Malachi. She wants to know where he's from, if he's nice, and if he and Emoni are dating. Emoni says they're barely friends, but 'Buela says she just thinks Emma is too young for Emoni to bring boys around. This feels like a slap, but Emoni says she's not sure she'll even introduce Malachi to Babygirl. She ultimately decides not to.

'Buela acts as the concerned caregiver for both Emoni and Babygirl in this passage. She of course wants Emoni to have friends and do fun things, but she also feels compelled to look out for Babygirl and ensure that Emoni isn't going to somehow confuse the toddler.



Later, as Malachi and Emoni are **cooking**, 'Buela steps into the kitchen and asks Malachi how he's liking the cooking class. Emoni shoots him a look—she doesn't want 'Buela knowing she's skipping—and somehow, he understands. He tells 'Buela that he cooked a lot growing up—his mom worked, and it was his job to feed his little brother. His face falling, he explains that his brother was shot last year, which is why his mom sent him to live with his aunt. Now he doesn't cook much. Emoni stops herself from reaching out to Malachi, but 'Buela pulls him into a hug. She says she's glad he and Emoni are friends—but they shouldn't become more than that. With this, she heads for the TV.

Finally, Malachi reveals what seems like the family secret he didn't share with Emoni when they got water-ice: that his brother was killed. This turns Malachi into a more complex person in Emoni's mind, since he's experienced his fair share of pain, suffering, and experiences that have forced him to grow up before he's ready. In this sense, he and Emoni have a lot in common, as they've both filled caregiver roles for younger family members. It also helps that Malachi's past makes him more acceptable to 'Buela, which means Emoni might feel less guilty about spending time with him.



Emoni thanks Malachi for sharing his story and doesn't press for more information. She explains that 'Buela loves the Eagles, but she's watching college games tonight. Immediately, Malachi pulls Emoni into a hug. He smells so good. He whispers that they *are* friends, especially if 'Buela thinks so—though she has awful taste in football teams. Emoni smiles and insists that the Eagles are going to win the Super Bowl this year.

Emoni is beginning to come around to being honest with Malachi about what she'd like from their relationship. Still, she's not yet willing to explicitly say that she wants friendship—this is why she settles for arguing with Malachi about the Eagles, rather than contradicting his assertion that they're friends.



49. ANNIVERSARY

When Angelica opens the door, Malachi and Emoni enter with bags of **food**. The house smells like Angelica cleaned—though Emoni knows she hates cleaning. After a few shrugs and sideways glances, Angelica asks Malachi to check that she set the table correctly while she talks to Emoni. In the kitchen, Angelica loudly asks if Malachi isn't dating Pretty Leslie. Emoni rolls her eyes, says she just needed help carrying bags, and preheats the oven.

Angelica might be supportive of Emoni, but she's not as subtle as Malachi was around 'Buela. Still, it's a sign of Emoni's comfort level with her friend that she doesn't seem embarrassed by Angelica speaking so loudly and outright about Malachi.



Angelica nervously pulls down two plates, which she says are Thanksgiving plates. Noticing her shaking hand, Emoni grabs Angelica's hand and asks what's going on. With some coaxing, Angelica admits that she and Laura haven't had sex yet, and she's afraid of not knowing what to do. Emoni assures Angelica that Laura loves her and will be happy to take it slow. She also notes that she "put a little extra magic" in the **meal**, so she can guarantee that things will be fine. Then, Emoni walks Angelica through plating the meal and gives her friend a hug before leaving with Malachi.

Angelica might seem confident and self-assured most of the time, but here, she reveals her insecurities. This also demonstrates how comfortable she is around Emoni—Emoni is her main support person as she processes potentially having sex with Laura later. Emoni's maturity shines through as she soothes Angelica. She recognizes that this is a huge deal to her friend, and she goes out of her way to not make Angelica feel weird or uncomfortable about confiding in her.



50. NETFLIX, NO CHILL

On the street, Malachi compliments Emoni's **steak** and says that the mac and cheese made him remember learning to make boxed mac and cheese with his brother. Emoni lets him take the bag of dirty dishes—it's nice to let someone else carry them for a change. Then, checking her phone, Emoni asks if he wants to come back to watch TV and eat leftovers. Malachi agrees, as long as they don't watch a scary movie. At this, Emoni giggles like she hasn't in years. She never thought she'd feel this way about a boy again, which feels so silly to say since she is just 17. They sit on opposite ends of the couch, watch a movie, and chat during the commercials. When Malachi hugs Emoni goodbye, she knows he'll be trouble.

Though Malachi wasn't even the intended recipient of Emoni's meal, this doesn't mean he doesn't experience her magic touch with food. Recalling this memory of his brother highlights Emoni's skill at bringing people together and connecting them to their past. Still, Emoni can't ignore that she's in a difficult spot, given that she's a teen parent. On one hand, she feels too old and mature to be flirting like a normal 17-year-old. But on the other hand, Emoni is indeed 17—and she can't ignore that she's attracted to Malachi, like she previously implied any normal 17-year-old girl would be.



51. RAMIFICATIONS

Just as 'Buela is on her way out the door for church the next morning, Emoni's phone rings. Emoni is busy washing dishes, so 'Buela answers it. It's Tyrone. Emoni dries her hands and takes the phone. He asks what Emoni is doing bringing other guys around Babygirl. Emoni is enraged—this is none of his business—but she says that Babygirl didn't meet Malachi. Tyrone accuses her of being the guy's "side piece," but Emoni reiterates that Babygirl was asleep. When Tyrone asks to speak to 'Buela to verify, Emoni refuses. Tyrone sees all sorts of girls, and neither of them is a kid. He hangs up on her. 'Buela suggests that Emoni gets dressed; they can go for breakfast. Emoni tries not to cry.

Though Emoni is angry with Tyrone, she maturely tries to maintain her composure and respond logically rather than emotionally. The same cannot be said for Tyrone—he seems to jealously want to control not just who his daughter sees, but who Emoni sees, too. Emoni asserts her independence when she refuses to put 'Buela on the phone; she realizes that giving in to Tyrone's controlling behavior will only show him that he can continue acting this way. Despite how maturely Emoni handles this conversation, it's still nice for her when 'Buela steps in to help her feel better afterward, like one might do for a much younger kid.



52. CAFÉ SORREL

It normally takes a while to get out the door with a toddler, but due to Emoni's shaking hands, she, 'Buela, and Babygirl don't leave the house until noon. Emoni and 'Buela's tight budget means they don't eat out much, so Emoni is surprised when 'Buela leads her onto the train and to a nice restaurant called Café Sorrel. Emoni takes note of everything and comments on how fancy the restaurant is. 'Buela says she likes this place, which is odd—it's a newer restaurant, and when would 'Buela have ever come here?

Eating out is something that Emoni and 'Buela have had to cut down on to make ends meet, highlighting again the strain that caring for yet another child puts on their family. That 'Buela is clearly familiar with Café Sorrel is a clue that she's been spending her time doing things that Emoni doesn't know about. But for now, it's inconceivable to Emoni that 'Buela would surprise her like this. Emoni sees 'Buela as a caregiver first, and someone who might also enjoy going to nice restaurants a distant second.



Before Emoni can ask any questions, the server comes back with menus and descriptions of the seasonal specials. 'Buela tells the server that Emoni will order, since she's taking a culinary arts class. The server expresses interest, but Emoni is certain he's just being polite. Emoni orders a few of the cheapest **dishes** she can find. Once the server is gone, 'Buela asks how culinary arts is going. Emoni can tell 'Buela knows she's been skipping, and 'Buela says she just hopes that Emoni isn't "scared about the challenge." When Emoni refuses to speak more about the class, they discuss Emoni's other classes until the food arrives.

It seems like 'Buela is trying to build Emoni up by encouraging her to order and then by subtly suggesting that Emoni is letting her insecurities get the better of her about the culinary arts class. While Emoni seems able to appreciate the gesture from an objective standpoint, her independence (and her shame) means that she doesn't feel totally comfortable confiding in 'Buela about her fears regarding the class.



The **food** is exceptional. There's a flavor in Emoni's risotto that she can't place, and when the server comes to take their plates, she asks what it is. He doesn't know. As Emoni is wiping Babygirl's face, the chef herself appears beside Emoni, ready to answer Emoni's question. Emoni tries not to act too starstruck as she asks about the flavor, and the chef says it was orange zest. The server appears with the check for 'Buela, and he mentions that Emoni is taking a culinary arts class. Once it comes out that Emoni is still in high school, the chef says she's friends with Chef Ayden. He's a "hard-ass" but will teach Emoni how to marry her instinct with technique and worth ethic. Chuckling, the chef says lunch is on her.

It's important to keep in mind that meeting the chef is, for Emoni, like meeting a celebrity. Emoni already admires the chef's food, so getting to meet her and ask her about the flavors just turns the chef into more of a star. Additionally, it comes as a shock that the local restaurant industry is so small that the chef knows Chef Ayden. With this, the chef unwittingly encourages Emoni to return to class—after all, she implies that with Chef Ayden's instruction, Emoni could be like her one day. Chef Ayden's teaching methods suddenly don't seem so bad when Emoni sees firsthand where his instruction could get her.



53.

In an email to Aunt Sarah, Emoni writes that she's thrilled the hurricane was mostly just rain by the time it hit North Carolina. She says Julio is okay; he's accepting donations of canned food and bottled water. Then, Emoni thanks Aunt Sarah for the **fried green tomatoes** recipe—it was lovely to hear about Sarah and Emoni's mom eating green tomatoes off the vine. Emoni describes having to look hard to find green tomatoes, but the fried tomatoes were perfect. She's going to keep working on her remixed recipe, and she'll send it when it's finished. Finally, Emoni thanks Aunt Sarah for the invitation to visit at Christmas, but she says she can't come with Babygirl or leave Babygirl home.

Recall that Emoni and Aunt Sarah have been emailing about food and family recipes for several years now. This highlights how, in the novel, food is a symbol for connection and has the power to bring people together. Though Emoni and her aunt have never met and eaten together in person, they still share a loving, supportive relationship due to their shared interest in cooking. However, this only goes so far at this point, since Emoni isn't yet willing or able to bridge the distance and visit Aunt Sarah in person.



54. TASTE BUDS

Emoni oversleeps on Monday, so Babygirl is late for daycare and Emoni doesn't get to school until after Advisory. She still doesn't know what to do about Culinary Arts, but fortunately she has lunch to think about it. At lunch, Angelica says that her night was perfect: she and Laura had "deep conversations" and their time together was magical. And the **food** was so, so good; Angelica will always think of that night when she has "chimi-chimi sauce." Laughing, Emoni says Angelica certainly spiced up the night. She's shocked when Angelica blushes—Angelica never blushes. Angelica is clearly in love.

Once again, Emoni gets proof that she has a way with food: she made Angelica and Laura's night even more perfect, thanks to the carefully planned meal she cooked for them. This offers Emoni one more reason to return to Culinary Arts class. In addition to making her friend's night with her food, Emoni's experience with the chef showed that she can make complete strangers' days—if she has the skills to work in a professional restaurant.



55. NEW BEGINNINGS

Emoni hurries so she's the first one to Culinary Arts. When Chef Ayden says they missed Emoni last week, Emoni says she's not a quitter. She didn't understand why he was making her throw **food** away that she thought was good, but she thinks she gets it now. She promises to work hard and learn. She explains that she visited Café Sorrel over the weekend, and it made Emoni realize that she can be like the chef one day. Chef says nothing for a minute, and then he says Lisa (the chef) is excellent. Then, he says they're looking for someone to head the fundraising campaign for the Spain trip. It would prepare Emoni to be a head chef to take on this leadership position, so would she like it?

Emoni is so shocked she barely understands. But she knows now that being a chef is about “pay[ing] [your] dues” by folding napkins, doing dishes, and raising money. She reaches out to shake Chef Ayden's hand. He says that she has what it takes to be a good chef someday, and he would like to acknowledge that she has “something special.” Still, he won't treat her any differently.

It's a huge step for Emoni to approach Chef Ayden and admit that she was wrong. She's essentially expressing interest in setting aside her independence in favor of being part of the team that is her class. Chef seems well aware that this is a huge shift for Emoni. By offering her the lead fundraising position, he implies that he forgives her any rudeness and establishes himself as one of her biggest supporters. Noting that it will prepare her to be a head chef one day suggests too that he believes that she can indeed attain that position.



It's no doubt a huge boost for Emoni to hear that she has “something special” from the very person who's made her doubt whether she's cut out for chef work. But here, Emoni shows that she knows that chefs aren't solo performers. They're part of a team, and if she wants to be a chef one day, she must grow into a good team player.



56. GUESS WHO'S BACK?

None of the other students seem surprised to see Emoni back in class, but Malachi smiles and Pretty Leslie looks angry. Malachi and Emoni texted a bit on Saturday, but Tyrone's call destroyed some of the magic. Chef Ayden tells Emoni to work with Richard and Amanda rather than by herself, and then he hands out the recipe. Emoni spends the class cutting and sauteing root vegetables at Amanda and Richard's request. She's shocked when, at the end, the **dish** looks beautiful and tasty (though she would've changed the recipe a bit). Chef Ayden praises the group when he tastes the dish, and in the hallway, Malachi catches up to Emoni to say he's glad she's back. She's glad, too.

By insisting that Emoni work with Richard and Amanda, Chef Ayden forces Emoni to set aside her independent inclinations and work with others. This might be a huge ask of Emoni, but she's clearly taking it seriously—she has a lot of the cooking skills already, so most of what she's learning in class is how to take direction from others and support someone else's vision. And happily, Emoni finds the experience very satisfying, suggesting that she'll continue to attend class and learn.



57. VISITATION

Before Emoni knows it, it's Saturday and she's struggling to get Babygirl's shoes on so Tyrone can take her. Though Emoni clearly needs help, Tyrone is just angrily sitting and doing nothing. When Babygirl accidentally kicks Emoni in the nose, 'Buela takes her into the bedroom so Emoni and Tyrone can talk. Tyrone insists he has nothing to say, but Emoni persists. She points out that there are all sorts of pictures on social media of Tyrone with girls and Babygirl—and she notes that she and Tyrone will be Babygirl's parents forever, so they can't act like children. Emoni understands now that it's true you become your own parents: she sounds like 'Buela.

Emoni points out that Tyrone is in no way acting his age, or like the father he is. Instead, he's acting as much like a toddler as his toddler daughter is. It's possible to see, in Emoni's speech to Tyrone, that she's internalized lessons from Chef Ayden's class already. Essentially, she's asking Tyrone to realize that they must be a team and parent Babygirl together. They can't just ignore each other or try to control each other. And she comes at this calmly, making it clear that she, at least, is ready to be on the same team with him.



Sighing and looking ashamed, Tyrone says it's fine that they decided not to stay together, but he thought Emoni wasn't going to see other guys. Slowly, Emoni says she can date. She says it's fine that Tyrone has people around checking in on Babygirl, but it's not okay for him to keep tabs on her dating life—it's just going to hurt Babygirl. Tyrone says nothing, but when 'Buela returns with Babygirl, he takes the toddler and asks Babygirl to kiss Emoni goodbye. This is as close as Emoni will get to an apology. Babygirl barely stirs when she realizes Emoni and 'Buela aren't coming with her, so Emoni closes the door. 'Buela says that Emoni is doing well, but Emoni feels lost.

Up until Malachi entered Emoni's life, dating didn't seem all that attractive, and so there was no issue with Tyrone. Now, though, Emoni is entering a slightly new phase of life, one where she must balance romance with being a coparent to a toddler. Once again, Tyrone seems to be the one struggling with this transition the most, highlighting his immaturity. This becomes especially apparent as Babygirl doesn't fuss about leaving her mom and great-grandma—she, too, is growing up.



58. PROPOSALS

Over the next week and a half, Emoni throws herself into coming up with fundraising ideas. Angelica suggests silent auctions, while 'Buela suggests a bingo night at the rec center. Julio encourages Emoni to keep the fundraising local and gives her a letter template she can use to petition the district council member. Emoni spends her afternoons researching and taking notes, and Angelica and Malachi help with charts and checking her math. She practices her presentation in front of 'Buela. Emoni might be the committee chair, but she knows Chef Ayden is right: she needs a team.

Emoni is taking Chef Ayden's advice to heart and is working hard to work with all the people who want to help her. Specifically, calling on Julio for help helps Emoni start to strengthen their relationship, offering hope that they might be able to improve things between them before the end of the novel. It also seems like a surprise to Emoni that so many people are happy to help, suggesting that prior to this, she never expected help and so seldom received it.



Now, Emoni is presenting her ideas to Chef Ayden. She tells him that the class should hold a bake sale, but she'd like to use the proceeds to buy **food** and revive the student café and begin serving lunch to staff and teachers. She also thinks they should speak to the principal about catering the Winter Dinner; it would be a great learning opportunity. Chef Ayden says he's impressed, but Emoni's class is the only one advanced enough to make saleable food—can she convince classmates to come in early to cook? Emoni knows she can do this.

Emoni's proposals certainly have a monetary aspect to them—catering professionally and running a restaurant will make money for the class. But practically speaking, Emoni's suggestions also mean that she and her classmates will get even more of an education in how the restaurant industry works, and what it takes to make it in the business. As Emoni advocates for herself and her classmates, she also gains confidence and continues to mature.



59. THE BRIGHT SIDE

As Emoni finishes washing dishes that night, she's disappointed when 'Buela says that Babygirl is already asleep. But Emoni says she needs to talk to 'Buela about something else: if Emoni is able to raise enough money to fund the trip to Spain, she doesn't want to assume that 'Buela will just take care of Babygirl all on her own. She doesn't think she can ask Tyrone, since he's in school and his parents work odd hours at the hospital. Sighing, 'Buela says she always wanted to travel with Emoni's grandfather, but then he died and "here they are." But Emoni won't have this opportunity again, so she'll call Tyrone's parents and they'll work something out as a graduation present for Emoni. She then says she's proud of Emoni and asks if Emoni has filled out the FAFSA yet. Emoni hugs 'Buela.

In this passage, Emoni applies what she's learning in Culinary Arts to her family life. She realizes that it's inappropriate to assume that 'Buela is just going to let her skip off to Spain. 'Buela, to her credit, wants to support Emoni and is happy to do so. But there's also a bittersweet tone to her response: "here they are" seems to refer to the fact that 'Buela is caring for more generations of kids (and trying to send one to college) instead of saving her money and traveling. She, like Emoni has for much of the novel, is prioritizing her caregiving charges rather than her own desires.



60. TEAM PLAYER

Amanda is absent today, so Emoni takes a more active role in Culinary Arts. She follows the recipe and Richard's instructions to blanch and salt **asparagus** and then start the orzo. Today is a grading day and Emoni doesn't want to let Richard down, since he and Amanda always do so well. So, she carefully measures salt, pepper, and lemon. When Chef Ayden tastes it, he says it's great—though it could use a bit more salt. After asking a few quiz questions (which Emoni and Richard answer correctly), he dismisses Emoni and Richard. Emoni can't help herself: she says that she and Richard followed the salt measurement exactly, so if the recipe isn't salty enough, Chef needs to change it.

As time passes, Emoni becomes increasingly invested in supporting her cooking group. Today, this becomes even more important with Amanda absent, as Emoni gets to make more choices than normal and must actively choose to follow the recipe as written. Emoni's confidence is growing: she not only answers the quiz questions correctly, she also informs Chef Ayden that his recipe isn't quite right. This is, perhaps, a bit rude of her, but as she sees it, she's doing her part to make sure the recipes—as written—are the best they can be.



61. COVEN

Angelica bursts in Emoni's front door with bags of fabric that she got from Laura, who works for her school's theater. She says that now, they can make Babygirl's Halloween costume. Emoni reminds Angelica that she won't even be able to take Babygirl trick-or-treating since she works on Halloween, but Angelica insists that she and 'Buella will figure something out. 'Buella walks into the room, and when Angelica says it's time to work on Babygirl's costume, 'Buella offers to take measurements. The women discuss what Babygirl should be, and Emoni suggests that she be a chef. Babygirl smiles like she knows "she has a coven of women holding her down."

Just as Emoni and her Culinary Arts classmates work together to make delicious food, Emoni, Angelica, and 'Buella (and Laura, to some degree) rally to support Babygirl and make her Halloween one to remember. As Emoni describes Babygirl's "coven of women," she highlights the importance of this community. She knows full well that she can't raise Babygirl alone—she needs her friends and family members to support her and ease her way.



62. DREAMS

Sometimes, Emoni wonders what her mom would've dreamed for Emoni had she not died in childbirth. Emoni is thankful and lucky to have 'Buella, but 'Buella isn't the sort of guardian to smack a counselor for not encouraging Emoni to apply to a certain school. She takes things in stride. Emoni dreams daily about what Babygirl will be and do, and she whispers these dreams to Babygirl. She promises Babygirl she'll fight for her. Emoni wants Babygirl to know that her mom might not have been the most powerful or successful, but she did do everything to ensure Babygirl's success.

Once again, Emoni takes the opportunity to illustrate how many of her own dreams and desires she's had to put aside to best support Babygirl. Going to Spain, for instance, isn't as easy as coming up with the money—Emoni has to arrange childcare for her daughter. And as much as Emoni wants to go to Spain and be a chef, what she wants more is for Babygirl to know that she's loved and supported.



63.

In an email to Aunt Sarah, Emoni thanks her aunt for the **mac and cheese** recipe and attaches a picture of her spiced-up version, as well as a picture of Babygirl on Halloween. She explains that Angelica and 'Buella took Babygirl to the rec center's costume contest, where she narrowly lost to an infant. Then, Emoni asks for Aunt Sarah's stuffing recipe. She plans to use it as part of a fundraiser for the Spain trip.

As Emoni attaches pictures of Babygirl in particular, she connects more with Aunt Sarah and lets her aunt in on more of her everyday life. She also reveals that she's been talking to Sarah about Spain, since she's asking for the stuffing recipe. Using the family stuffing recipe for the trip shows how Emoni continues to blend her personal life with her (hopefully) professional life.



64. EVERY DAY I'M HUSTLING

It's been two weeks since Emoni submitted the fundraising proposal, and her schedule now takes over her life. She gets up an hour and a half early and spends several mornings per week going to school early to **cook**. The students are only supposed to go early one day per week, but Emoni fills in for whoever can't make it. The school restaurant is full every day, and they're raising about \$700 per week. Still, Emoni knows they need to raise a bunch of money at the Winter Dinner. Emoni is also still working at the Burger Joint, getting math tutoring, and spending all her free time with Babygirl. Soon, it's the middle of November. Soon, Emoni will find out whether her class can go to Spain—and whether her ideas matter.

Though Emoni is exhausted, she also seems to find it satisfying to have so much on her plate that she genuinely loves and cares about. With this, the novel suggests that Emoni doesn't necessarily need to prioritize Babygirl over everything else; she can, in fact, do things she loves too. In addition to raising money for Spain, Emoni is also getting valuable experience working in the school restaurant. This will prepare her to hopefully work in a professional restaurant later.



65. OUT OF THE FRYING PAN

In the school kitchen early one morning, Emoni puts her **rolls** in the oven and then approaches Chef Ayden. He looks tired—he's been here every morning to supervise, and Emoni has never wondered if he has a family. She says she has ideas to elevate the food at the Winter Dinner, which is traditionally simple and comes from a can. But they could do individual portions of mac and cheese, or chorizo stuffing bites. Grinning, Chef asks her to write up her ideas so they can figure out portions. Emoni returns to her bread, feeling like hope is rising inside of her.

It's a sign of Emoni's burgeoning maturity that she realizes she knows so little about who Chef Ayden really is. She's becoming more curious about other people, and she's humanizing adults. Asking to revamp the Winter Dinner menu allows Emoni to use what Chef Ayden has taught her and marry it with her natural talent. That Chef Ayden seems perfectly happy to support Emoni in this endeavor shows how trusting their relationship has become now that Emoni values his instruction.



66. CRUNCH TIME

It's two weeks to Thanksgiving and four weeks to the Winter Dinner. The deposit for Spain is due just a few days after the Winter Dinner, and Emoni can tell that Chef Ayden is worried the class won't make it. When Emoni gets to Culinary Arts in the third week of November, there are no recipes. Instead, Chef says that today, they'll brainstorm how to raise more money at the Winter Dinner. Richard suggests that they get people like his dad, who's a landscaper, to donate services to auction. Amanda suggests opening the dinner to the public, and Emoni takes notes. Just as Chef looks ready to shut down brainstorming, Emoni says that they should advertise on social media. She also suggests they approach Principal Holderness with their ideas. The worst that could happen is he says no—but it doesn't hurt to ask. Chef agrees.

As Emoni becomes more attuned to Chef Ayden's fears and inner thoughts more broadly, she feels more like she's part of a team working toward a larger goal. This becomes even more apparent as she helps her classmates advocate for more fundraising opportunities to Chef Ayden—he's not the enemy here, but his first instinct also seems to be to not support yet more work for himself. However, he supports his students and Emoni specifically, albeit subtly. He becomes a safe figure to practice communicating with, and he then gets out of Emoni's way and lets her try out these new ideas.



67. TO THE BONE

Emoni has never worked as hard as she does, or been more exhausted than she feels, in the following week. And Emoni is usually exhausted just from caring for Babygirl. Some nights she wants to cry from exhaustion. Tyrone has Babygirl for Thanksgiving, so Emoni and 'Buela eat a quiet **dinner** together and watch an Eagles game. When Emoni's phone rings, she knows it's Malachi. He asks what she made. She says she made chocolate pudding and that he should try some.

Despite Emoni's exhaustion, Thanksgiving week is still a happy time: she gets to connect with 'Buela over their meal, and she's becoming more open and herself around Malachi. Additionally, Emoni doesn't seem particularly upset, per se, that Babygirl is with Tyrone for the holiday. She's allowing herself to draw more on her community so she can feel fulfilled—and get a much-needed rest.



68. WINTER DINNER

On the afternoon of Monday, December 9, the only people left in the building are teachers, custodians, and the Culinary Arts class. The students are busy prepping, but they stop to listen to Chef Ayden's speech. He directs students to bring menu questions to him or Emoni, and he says the recipes all call for the correct amount of salt. Emoni is nervous, and she even squeezes Malachi's hand. He squeezes back, which just makes Emoni's heart race faster.

Chef Ayden continues to boost Emoni's confidence by making it clear to the rest of the class that she's one of the people in charge of the food tonight. Noting that the recipes all call for just enough salt is another way that he subtly tells Emoni that he's taking her and her concerns seriously: he is, perhaps, learning something too and is refining his recipes based on her instinct.



At Chef Ayden's signal, Emoni joins Richard and Amanda at their station to prep the **sweet potato casserole** bites. As they assemble the bites, Emoni starts for the spice cabinet. Chili aioli would elevate this recipe—but she stops herself, because that's not the recipe. Emoni works tirelessly the whole night until finally, she and her classmates leave to greet the guests. She feels naked: she's responsible for whether people enjoy the meal.

Emoni's first thought as she cooks is to doctor the recipe to make it even better. When she decides to temper her instinct to do that, it highlights that she's now taking Chef Ayden seriously. She realizes that changing the recipe at this point might yield good food, but it's not what she and the team decided on—and it would be disrespectful to Chef Ayden and her classmates to change the recipe.



69. A NUMBERS GAME

The students who were **cooking** enter the gym as Chef Ayden shakes Principal Holderness's hand. Chef reminds the guests that this was a fundraiser for their trip to Spain as Principal Holderness opens an envelope and announces that the class raised \$2,000. Emoni mentally does the math: each student now owes about \$275. Emoni can't come up with that much money by the end of the week, but she blinks back tears and reminds herself that this is a happy moment. The lights illuminate lots of people Emoni recognizes, including some of 'Buela's church friends and several of Julio's friends. Amanda and Malachi hug Emoni, and Amanda says they did something amazing tonight. Emoni agrees, though she's still trying not to cry.

This is a bittersweet moment for Emoni. On one hand, she and her classmates did do an objectively amazing thing: they fed several hundred people with recipes they developed, cooked, and served all by themselves. Still, Emoni can't ignore that it's also true that at this point, it doesn't look like she'll be able to go to Spain. This makes her feel somewhat distant from her peers, as she believes it's a given that they'll all be able to come up with the money and go on the trip.



Emoni begins to cut through the crowd to find 'Buela when a woman steps in front of her. It's the chef from the fancy café 'Buela took Emoni to, and she says that Chef Ayden has been bragging about Emoni to her. She'd like to pay Emoni her compliments—the **meal** was wonderful—and gives Emoni her card. Emoni is so starstruck she can barely stick the card up her sleeve before 'Buela wraps her in a hug. 'Buela says she could tell Emoni made the sweet potato dish, and Babygirl could tell, too. Then, 'Buela introduces Emoni to Joseph Jagoda, who works at her doctor's office; the office donated to the trip. Emoni hugs other friends and then sweeps Babygirl into her arms. She doesn't know where the rest of the money will come from, but she's proud of what she did to make this night happen.

Emoni is perhaps too emotional and blindsided to fully appreciate everything the chef says in this conversation. But the chef makes two things really clear: that Chef Ayden thinks very highly of Emoni, and that she, too, thinks Emoni has a knack for flavors. These compliments boost Emoni's confidence, especially when 'Buela so effusively compliments Emoni directly after. Though Emoni is proud of herself, her primary focus remains the same: Babygirl. Getting to her daughter, and sharing a special moment with her, makes Emoni feel like all of her hard work was worth it.



70. HOOK, LINE, AND SINKER

Emoni's classmates are still excited the next morning. Chef Ayden reveals that he tried to cancel the restaurant **lunches**, but the teachers threw a fit. Now, the restaurant will be open Tuesdays and Thursdays starting in January, and students who work shifts will earn extra credit and keep their tips. Emoni needs both. As Emoni cleans her station after class, she miserably remembers asking 'Buela to lend her the money for the deposit last night. 'Buela had already spent her money on a donation and Christmas gifts, and she looked so sad and ashamed that Emoni told her not to worry about it. Julio is currently working on a fundraiser to educate local kids, and he'll prioritize educating them over sending Emoni to Spain.

It's a sign of how skilled Emoni's whole class is that the Schomburg teachers revolted at the possibility that the restaurant might go away—they've come to rely on the exceptional food the students can produce. Still, Emoni can't really take much pride in this compliment, as she's so stressed about the money for the trip. At the moment, it doesn't seem to Emoni like she can rely on people like 'Buela and Julio to come through for her. However, it's also worth noting that Emoni just assumes Julio wouldn't help her—she hasn't asked, so she may be incorrect to think this way.



Malachi interrupts Emoni's thoughts to ask her if she'd like to go to Disney On Ice with him this weekend, since he has access to tickets. Emoni says she doesn't really date, but Malachi says it's not a date: Angelica and Laura, Babygirl, and 'Buela can all come. A lump rises in Emoni's throat. She's always wanted to see Disney On Ice. So, she accepts his invitation for Saturday.

Malachi might not be able to help with the money, but he can take Emoni's mind off of her misery with the offer of Disney On Ice this weekend. By inviting Emoni's friends and family, Malachi also shows that he's interested in getting to know all about Emoni, including her loved ones.



71. COMPLICATIONS

Emoni has always suspected Malachi was interested in her. She believes his actions; after Tyrone, she'd never believe a guy who just *tells* her he's interested. She has no idea what to do about Disney On Ice, but she invites Angelica and Laura as she and Angelica ride the bus that afternoon. Angelica accepts. She follows Emoni home; she's going to take a bag of clothes to sell for Emoni. Hopefully the proceeds will help. After digging through the clothes, Angelica asks if this is a double date. She's impressed when Emoni says Malachi invited Babygirl and 'Buela, too. When Emoni says that Angelica "knows how [she is] with boys," Angelica says Emoni's just afraid of getting hurt and doesn't think she can take the time to date.

Angelica has been pretty willing to give Malachi the benefit of the doubt from the beginning. Now, though, her task is to assure Emoni that spending time with Malachi isn't going to ruin Emoni's life—if Emoni trusts him, she can enter into a relationship with him, if she wants. Angelica also notes that Emoni allows her responsibilities to get in the way of doing the things she wants to do, whether that's dating or taking the culinary arts class. And perhaps, Angelica seems to imply, Emoni doesn't need to let this happen.



As Emoni and Angelica fold and bag the clothes, Emoni argues that she truly doesn't have time. But at the door, Angelica suggests that maybe, Emoni shouldn't worry about having time. Maybe she should do what makes her happy and comfortable. A relationship with Malachi could look however Emoni wants it to look, and Emoni is already good at making "ingredients that shouldn't work" delicious.

Encouraging Emoni to see a relationship with Malachi as just a new way of combining "ingredients that shouldn't work" is an attempt to get Emoni to see that dating Malachi wouldn't be an awful thing. Further, Angelica explicitly says that Emoni shouldn't allow her other responsibilities to entirely get in the way of having fun—Emoni can have nice things, even if she is a busy mom.



72. PRIDE

On Wednesday, two days before the deposit is due, Emoni approaches Chef Ayden. Chef has been happier and clearly relieved since the Winter Dinner, and he calls Emoni "the fundraiser of the century," a sentiment Emoni doesn't share. She's been able to come up with another \$100 thanks to her clothing sales and a gift from 'Buela, so she slides the money to Chef and asks if she can have more time for the deposit. Chef says that if he'd known, they could've worked something out, but he'll speak to Principal Holderness and pay her deposit himself if he has to. But Emoni can tell that, like 'Buela, that's a lot of money for Chef Ayden to come up with in a few days.

As Emoni sees it, she's actually a bit of a failure as a fund-raiser, since she has no idea how to come up with the other \$200. But though Chef Ayden seems pretty unrelatable at the beginning of this conversation, when he begins by praising Emoni, he looks far more relatable by the end. Emoni suspects that he, too, lives more or less paycheck to paycheck, as she and 'Buela do. So, though Emoni doesn't get what she needs or wants out of this conversation, she does grow a bit closer to her teacher.



On Thursday morning, Emoni just wants to stay in bed. She soothes Babygirl, who wakes up from a bad dream, and tries not to snap at 'Buela. On the bus, Emoni hides from Angelica by checking her email. She has an email from Aunt Sarah, but it's from a website and not her normal email address. The first thing in the email is a dollar amount: \$300. Then, Aunt Sarah writes that she got the aunts and cousins to pitch in so Emoni has pocket money for Spain. She says she's proud of Emoni and that Emoni's mom would be proud of her, too. Emoni trembles. Now, Emoni knows there's lots of magic in the world.

It turns out that Emoni's support network is bigger and stronger than she thought. Aunt Sarah has never helped out like this before, but in this instance, she serendipitously comes through and shows Emoni that she (and Emoni's other Raleigh relatives) care about her and want to see her succeed. That Emoni thinks of this as a kind of magic highlights how unexpected this kind of support is for her.



73. ON ICE

Emoni has never considered actually going to Disney On Ice, though she's seen the commercials for years. She feels giddy as she waits in line with Laura, Angelica, Babygirl, and Malachi. 'Buela declined to join them. When they reach the front of the line and Malachi steps up with the tickets, Angelica quietly asks Emoni how Tyrone took this outing. Emoni says nothing, so Angelica hisses. Emoni says she knows Tyrone dates and has girls around Babygirl, and he can't stop her from taking Babygirl to Disney On Ice. Laura notices Angelica throw up her hands, but Angelica and Emoni smile big, fake smiles and insist everything is fine. Malachi tells Emoni to smile: he gets the tickets from his aunt, who works here, and they're about to meet her.

While anyone can enjoy a show like Disney On Ice, Emoni's excitement about seeing it casts her in a somewhat childish light. This isn't a negative thing; rather, it reminds readers that Emoni is just a kid, even though she's also a parent to her own child. However, not all is light and bright and innocent, as Emoni can't totally escape her more mature responsibilities—which, if one believes Angelica, should've entailed letting Tyrone know about Disney On Ice. But Emoni seems to fear that Tyrone would just ruin this night for her, and she'd like to have this moment of happiness for herself.



74. SIDE BY SIDE

Malachi leans down to hug a tiny woman he calls Auntie Jordyn. He introduces Angelica, Laura, Emoni, and Emma, and Auntie Jordyn smiles. Malachi clearly inherited his smile from her side of the family. Then, Auntie Jordyn turns to Emoni and says she's glad to meet her, since Malachi talks about her all the time. With this, she ushers the group inside. Emoni's heart twists—Malachi talks about her?—but soon, she's caught up in the music, the lights, and the skaters. At one point, when Babygirl is on Angelica's lap, Malachi tells Emoni to smile and takes her hand. He says what's happening between them is "the greatest show on earth."

Meeting Auntie Jordyn is emotional for Emoni, as she makes it abundantly clear that Malachi really likes Emoni and isn't afraid to tell people about her. This is in sharp contrast to Emoni's relative secrecy when it comes to Malachi; she's only been as open with 'Buella about him as she felt was strictly necessary. His openness helps Emoni feel better about letting him take her hand and remind her that while they're here to see Disney On Ice, they can also find joy in the relationship forming between them.



75. CHIVALRY

Emoni and Babygirl are outside with Angelica and Laura after the show; Malachi is inside still with Auntie Jordyn. It's already dark and freezing cold, and Emoni tells Angelica and Laura that they can get going. She loves seeing how happy Angelica is around Laura. A moment later, Malachi comes outside and says that Auntie Jordyn ordered them a ride-share. Emoni says she doesn't have a car seat for Babygirl, but Malachi says he requested a car with one. When the car arrives, he folds the stroller and then walks Emoni inside once they get out. Babygirl is asleep and though it's too early, Emoni puts her in her crib.

Ordering a ride-share with an appropriate car seat shows Emoni how attuned Malachi is to her needs. She seems to initially expect that he wouldn't have thought of such a thing, but his thoughtfulness helps Emoni see that Malachi is willing to accommodate and support the different things Emoni needs as a parent to a toddler.



Malachi is in the bathroom when Emoni gets downstairs, and he comes up behind her while she's rinsing a glass in the sink. He slips an arm around her waist, startling her and causing her to drop the glass. They clean up the mess and Emoni comments that Malachi is great with kids. Malachi notices Emoni's hand is bleeding, so he cleans and dresses the small wound—and kisses her knuckles. Emoni knows he dreams of becoming a doctor and practicing in his Newark neighborhood. He'll be so good at it, and he's working towards exactly what he wants. Emoni, though, has no idea what she wants—she hasn't applied to any colleges yet.

Tension rises between Emoni and Malachi—they're both clearly interested in a relationship with the other, but Emoni in particular is nervous and feels unprepared for such a thing. Part of the problem is that seeing Malachi so sure of what he wants makes Emoni feel even more lost, since she hasn't yet applied to college or even decided if she's going in the first place. For now, Babygirl remains Emoni's whole world, and she's not yet sure if she wants to let Malachi (or college) into her bubble.



Emoni asks what she and Malachi are doing. Malachi says that they're taking it slow, since that's what it seemed like Emoni wants. Deciding to be honest, Emoni says that she's not sure of anything in her life except for Babygirl—but she thinks she likes him, and she'd like to keep doing this. Malachi squeezes her hand and Emoni continues. She says she doesn't want to disappoint him, but she's not sure when, or if, she'll be ready for more. Confused, Malachi asks if she's talking about sex, and Emoni says she's not ready. To her surprise, Malachi just says, "Okay." He says they'll keep talking, puts his forehead to hers, and says he's going to walk to the train. As he leaves, he promises that he's not going anywhere.

Emoni seems to fear that if she's unwilling to have sex with Malachi, he'll no longer be interested in spending time with her. Thus, it's nerve-wracking for her to admit that she's not ready for sex—she fears she could be essentially telling him to get lost. Malachi continues to surprise her, though, and show her that not all guys are like Tyrone. Indeed, he's willing to connect with Emoni on her own terms, slowly and respectfully. He also seems fully respectful of the fact that Emoni's first priority is Babygirl.



76. WHEN IT RAINS

There are only three more days of school before winter break, and Emoni is busy and distracted. This causes her to break the biggest rule at Schomburg Charter: she gets caught with her phone. The security guard, who's clearly new, takes it from her while Emoni is trying to remind 'Buela that she's going shopping later. Almost laughing, Emoni tells the guard she has a child and needs her phone, but he insists on taking it. Since the office staff usually side with the guards, Emoni will have to wait until tomorrow.

Emoni picks up groceries on her way home, but when she gets home, 'Buela and Babygirl aren't there. Emoni is worried; she hopes 'Buela didn't see the doctor again today, and she plans to sit 'Buela down to try to ask what's going on. Something is clearly wrong with 'Buela. Emoni tidies anxiously and decides that something must be wrong. Finally, the phone rings. It's Mrs. Palmer, Tyrone's mom. She huffily explains that Babygirl has a fever; the daycare couldn't get ahold of Emoni or 'Buela, so they called Tyrone. Mrs. Palmer has Babygirl now, and she asks to speak to 'Buela (she always treats Emoni like Emoni is too young to care for her own kid). Emoni offers to come get Babygirl, but Mrs. Palmer says she'll drive Babygirl over.

Emoni's more adult status as a parent collides here with the fact that she is technically just a kid. Realistically, it doesn't make total sense that a student who's also a parent can't use their phone to coordinate childcare. But because Emoni is a student who has no choice but to follow school rules (or try not to get caught breaking them), she's forced to step back into a more childlike role.



The events in this passage drive home how stuck Emoni is, as a teenager subject to school rules who's also a parent. Since her phone got taken away, she had no way to know that Babygirl was ill—and 'Buela is mysteriously absent. Now, Emoni has to face the consequences in the form of Mrs. Palmer's scolding. Mrs. Palmer, it seems, has no interest in treating Emoni like the young adult she is. Rather, she sees Emoni as immature and irresponsible and 'Buela as the real parent in the situation.



77. IT POURS

Emoni stops herself from pushing past Mrs. Palmer to unbuckle Babygirl herself. Though Emoni doesn't like Mrs. Palmer—she's unpleasant and acts like she's better than everyone—the gentle way the woman hands Babygirl over makes Emoni almost like her. Emoni politely apologizes and thanks Mrs. Palmer. In response, Mrs. Palmer says that she can't step up every time Emoni and 'Buela are “too negligent to take care of Emma,” and she'd fully support Tyrone if he ever decides to take Emoni to court for custody.

Emoni immediately stops smiling and addresses Babygirl. Mrs. Palmer cuts Emoni off and insists that she'll confuse Emma by not using her real name, but Emoni ignores her now. As Emoni turns away, Mrs. Palmer holds out a paper bag with Children's Tylenol in it, since Emoni probably didn't have any and it's good to have extra if she does. Emoni accepts the bag as Mrs. Palmer tells her to be more responsible with her phone. Mrs. Palmer drives away before Emoni can thank her and say she has Children's Tylenol. There's no time to ask why Tyrone didn't pick up Babygirl, and why she's in trouble for being irresponsible when Tyrone only has to do the bare minimum.

At first, it seems like this might be an alright interaction with Mrs. Palmer for once. However, Mrs. Palmer reveals her true colors when she accuses both Emoni and 'Buela of being “negligent” when it comes to Babygirl. Note, though, that Mrs. Palmer seems not to find Tyrone at all negligent, though he's also Babygirl's parent and didn't even pick Babygirl up from daycare.



Everything Mrs. Palmer says seems designed to be invalidating and cruel to Emoni. Obviously, Mrs. Palmer implies, a mom as (supposedly) irresponsible as Emoni wouldn't have Children's Tylenol on hand—but on the off chance Emoni does, then Mrs. Palmer is just doing a nice, grandmotherly thing by buying more. Emoni may have made a mistake with her phone, but she's also far more responsible than Mrs. Palmer gives her credit for. And Emoni also recognizes that Mrs. Palmer is unfairly punishing her—after all, as Emoni notes, Tyrone didn't pick up Babygirl and administer the Tylenol, and he's Babygirl's dad.



78. BLOOD BOIL

Emoni mutters about Mrs. Palmer and is momentarily angry at 'Buela—had 'Buela picked up Babygirl, this wouldn't have happened. But 'Buela isn't Babygirl's mom. Emoni gets Babygirl some juice and Tylenol. She wonders if Babygirl picked something up at Disney On Ice or if the house is just too cold. Just then, 'Buela walks in with groceries, twinkling eyes, and her hair done. Emoni immediately starts to sob and ask where 'Buela was. 'Buela points to a note and snaps that she also texted Emoni. They discuss Babygirl's fever and Mrs. Palmer's threat about custody, glaring at each other.

As Babygirl starts to cry, Emoni sweeps the toddler into her arms. Before she carries Babygirl upstairs, Emoni asks 'Buela why she's seen the doctor so much recently. 'Buela admits that she's been lying. She hasn't been seeing the doctor, she has just been taking afternoons to be herself, Gloria, and not 'Buela. She doesn't want to talk about it. Emoni starts crying again, both hurt and relieved.

Though Emoni's first instinct is to blame 'Buela, she realizes this isn't appropriate or the most mature: Emoni is Babygirl's primary parent, and so it's her responsibility to be there for her daughter. Still, Emoni is a kid herself and she craves 'Buela's support, especially after Mrs. Palmer's custody threat. For her part, 'Buela seems somewhat distracted and as though she's had a great afternoon, which no doubt contributes to Emoni's emotional reaction.



'Buela's admission is a bombshell for Emoni. 'Buela has left clues throughout the novel that she's tired after raising three kids now, and that she'd perhaps hoped to have some time to be Gloria in her older age. This highlights the necessity of caregivers having a life outside of their caregiving responsibilities, something that Emoni didn't seem to fully grasp 'Buela needed.



79. HOLIDAYS

'Buela usually makes a big fuss out of Christmas Eve, while Emoni usually goes to Angelica's on Christmas Day. Since Babygirl is over her cold, Emoni lets her observe both traditions. Angelica gives Emoni a beautiful dress that makes Emoni feel like an adult, while Emoni gives Angelica a box of handmade **macarons**. On Christmas morning, Malachi calls Emoni to sing carols for her. Emoni and 'Buela are finally able to put aside their argument, at least a little bit.

For New Year's Eve, Emoni makes Aunt Sarah's **black-eyed peas** recipe, but with a twist: she simmers them in grapes, since both the peas (according to Aunt Sarah) and grapes (according to 'Buela) are supposed to bring good luck. Emoni spends the rest of the break working and applying for colleges. But the more she thinks about it, the more she thinks she doesn't even want to attend Drexel for its culinary arts program. She'd rather just go to work and learn on the job.

As is traditionally the case, the Christmas holidays allow Emoni to connect more deeply with her family and friends. Food plays a big role in this: the macarons allow Emoni to show Angelica how much she cares and supports her friend. The dress Angelica gives Emoni, on the other hand, signals that Emoni is growing older—she's beginning to look more like the adult that she's ostensibly been since Babygirl's birth.



The holidays show Emoni that perhaps she doesn't need to seek a formal education to make magic with food. Food already allows her to connect different parts of her family history and carve out a spot for herself in her family, and she's seen time and again how her talent allows her to help other people connect to their pasts. So, keeping in mind the financial strain that college would put on her family, Emoni reasons that she can pursue a career without a formal education.



80. NEW YEAR, NEW RECIPES

On the first day back at school after the break, Chef Ayden hands out the final itinerary for the Spain trip. So, at the Burger Joint later, Emoni knocks on Steve's office door. He's perusing social media on the computer, but he tells Emoni that she'd better not be here about a schedule change. She starts to say that she needs a favor, but he cuts her off and lists all the scheduling conflicts he needs to work around for her. He snaps that she always makes excuses, and this isn't "an extracurricular program for struggling moms." Knowing he likes to be flattered, Emoni says she appreciates how hard he works to help student employees. He asks what she wants.

Emoni tells him about the class trip to Spain and offers to work extra days to make up for the days off. Steve says this sounds like a vacation, and Emoni has already taken too many vacation days over the holidays. He suggests that since Emoni is a senior and won't be here next year anyway, they look at "other options." Emoni asks if he's firing her for asking for time off. He denies it, but Emoni has seen him do this before: he cuts people's hours until it costs more to get to work than they earn. Steve says he'll hire new people to cover Emoni's shifts. Leaning over his desk, Emoni says Steve is a kind man and she'll tell 'Buela to pray for him. Hopefully he realizes how spiteful 'Buela is.

81. MONEY TALKS

Abuelo, Emoni's grandfather, died before Emoni was born. He didn't have a job with benefits or life insurance, but luckily Julio was grown by the time he died. However, things got harder for 'Buela when she adopted Emoni and realized she'd raise Emoni on her own. Money got tighter when 'Buela hurt her hand and started receiving disability. She still does some sewing work, but it takes time. And 'Buela maintains that she's glad it was her dominant hand, not her left hand with her wedding ring, that's scarred. When Emoni got pregnant, it became clear that 'Buela's disability checks and her side jobs wouldn't do much. Emoni has been working since eighth grade to help out. But without her job at the Burger Joint, Emoni has to find a new way to help.

Steve reads as a wholly unsupportive and hypocritical employer. He doesn't have to work hard while at work, but he finds it wildly offensive that Emoni does anything other than accept her assigned shifts with a thank you. Indeed, his comment about how the Burger Joint isn't "an extracurricular program for struggling moms" suggests that he may see Emoni as a teen mom—and a problem—first and foremost, and perhaps not a person with a life of her own at all.



Emoni might be considering skipping college, but this doesn't mean she devalues education altogether. Steve, on the other hand, seems to devalue any educational experiences that might also be fun (at least if those experiences are inconvenient for him). Emoni, it's worth noting, is also doing the responsible thing by asking for the time off months in advance. Now, though, she has to accept that Steve has never been supportive—and at this point, likely never will be.



This chapter lays out clearly how difficult finances are for Emoni and her immediate family, especially given that 'Buela both can't work and has ended up raising more children than she planned to. Knowing this information helps readers understand why Emoni was so intent earlier in the school year on coming up with the money for the Spain trip on her own: she doesn't want to be even more of a burden to her struggling grandmother. Still, 'Buela also insists that there are things more important than money—such as one's relationships, as symbolized by her undamaged left hand with her wedding ring on it.



82. FLASH

Before Emoni knows it, it's March; she's going to Spain in less than a month. She's quit the Burger Joint, and she and Malachi are still "Friends who hold hands and sometimes flirt." He's going to Morehouse, so no matter what they'll be far away come fall. To make matters worse, Tyrone is taking Babygirl this weekend. After he carries her out to the car, Emoni asks 'Buela if they can have lunch together and watch a sports movie. But 'Buela pulls on her coat and says she's going out. Emoni doesn't ask where she's going, but she knows 'Buela is having "Gloria Time."

Once 'Buela is gone, Emoni considers calling Angelica or Malachi. Instead, she goes to the kitchen and puts together a **lasagna** and a salad. She desperately wants to talk to someone on her phone, but instead, she sets the table, pours herself a small glass of wine, and sits down to eat. She doesn't know what she's going to be, but soon she's going to be an adult.

Though Emoni is excited to go to Spain soon, the rest of her life seems to be unraveling. She knows she'll soon have to say goodbye to Malachi when he leaves for college, Babygirl is moving ever further away from her as Tyrone becomes more involved in Babygirl's life, and 'Buela's need for time alone seems to still sting. However, Emoni does her best to be respectful of 'Buela's needs. This suggests that Emoni realizes that both she and 'Buela need and deserve time to themselves—'Buela through her "Gloria Time," and Emoni by going to school and Spain.



Emoni has done a lot of work to let people into her life. Now, though, she recognizes that she also wants to be able to be okay by herself, entertaining and feeding herself. This, she believes, is something adults should be able to do—and with adulthood looming, it's time to practice.



83. SPAIN

Emoni is finally leaving for Spain. 'Buela confirms that Emoni has packed everything appropriately, and Emoni nods dutifully. As 'Buela calls Mr. Jagoda to confirm what time he needs to pick Emoni up to drive her to the airport, Emoni goes upstairs and scoops Babygirl into her arms. Emoni hasn't been so scared and excited since she had Babygirl. She can't wait to "birth a new version of [her]self" in Spain.

Though Emoni doesn't question his role in 'Buela's life, it's worth considering that Mr. Jagoda seems like an awfully present and helpful friend to 'Buela, if he's willing to take Emoni to the airport. Emoni sees her trip to Spain as an opportunity to briefly reinvent herself and see who she is when she doesn't have Babygirl to ground her.



84. ARRIVAL

The plane lands in Madrid in the afternoon. Emoni spent the flight sleeping on Malachi's shoulder, but now, she's in her assigned seat next to Richard and Amanda. As the class gets off and goes to get their luggage, it's a mess: Pretty Leslie brought two suitcases and a duffel bag. Emoni and Malachi lean against the wall, watching Chef Ayden count everyone, and they say that they're here. They still have to take a bus to Sevilla, but they made this trip happen. And the class looks so American and beautiful and happy.

As Emoni and her classmates land in Spain, Emoni is overcome with pride. Her observation that the class looks so beautiful and happy highlights how normal, and yet how exceptional, her classmates are. They worked extremely hard to get here, and now, all Emoni has to do is sit back and enjoy her first trip to another country.



85. ROOMMATES

The bus to Sevilla is tiny. Chef Ayden sits near the driver and begins speaking to him in Spanish. Malachi asks Emoni what Chef is saying. Emoni deadpans that it's something about a black market and Liam Neeson rescuing them. As Malachi naps, Emoni studies the scenery. She falls asleep, too, and wakes when they reach Sevilla. Pretty Leslie comments on "Gypsies" on the sidewalk, and Malachi says loud enough for everyone to hear that calling them "Gypsies" isn't okay anymore. Finally, the bus stops in a parking lot. Chef explains that the students will be staying with host families. They'll spend mornings on tours and afternoons apprenticing in local eateries. They'll be staying in pairs—and Pretty Leslie and Emoni are roommates.

"Gypsy" is now considered a slur, given how much discrimination and cruelty Roma people have suffered in Europe. Using this slur unwittingly makes Pretty Leslie look somewhat provincial—and like an even less desirable roommate for Emoni than she did already. Recall that Pretty Leslie has previously tried to sabotage Emoni's romantic prospects with Malachi. Chef Ayden has seemed fairly oblivious to his charges' interpersonal dealings, so he may simply be unaware of the bad blood between Emoni and Pretty Leslie.



86. THE FIRST NIGHT

Señorita Mariana, who's a bit younger than 'Buela, grabs Emoni's bookbag and tries to take one of Pretty Leslie's suitcases, but Leslie won't let her. They walk down a hill and into an old music store; the apartment is upstairs. Emoni grabs one of Pretty Leslie's bags going up the stairs. Señorita Maria shows the girls the bedroom and the bathroom, and she says they'll have **dinner** soon. As soon as she leaves, Pretty Leslie snags the bed furthest from the door; she's certain Mariana is going to try to murder them. Emoni accuses Pretty Leslie of being a brat. They all eat dinner in silence and go to bed early.

Pretty Leslie comes off as scared and judgmental; Emoni, for her part, gives no indication that there's anything wrong with Mariana. Pretty Leslie's refusal to connect with either Emoni or Mariana suggests that she may not get as much out of the trip as she could otherwise. Part of the point of the trip is to expose the class to new people and a new culture, and if Pretty Leslie remains so judgmental, she'll shut herself out from those possible connections.



Back in the bedroom, Emoni puts on pajamas and crawls into bed without brushing her teeth. Once Pretty Leslie comes back from the bathroom and they turn out the light, Emoni thinks of 'Buela and Emma and asks Pretty Leslie if she'll get homesick. Pretty Leslie tells Emoni to stop trying to be friends, but Emoni admits she's never been away from home. Sighing, Pretty Leslie says it's only seven days, and she asks if having a "Spanish" parent means that Emoni has been to the Dominican Republic "or whatever." Though Emoni answers, Pretty Leslie just snores.

Emoni is trying to be friendly with Pretty Leslie; she recognizes that this is going to be a miserable trip if the two can't at least get along superficially. But Pretty Leslie remains as judgmental as she was earlier in the evening. She has no interest in getting to know Emoni better, and this means that Emoni is left to navigate her living situation in Spain mostly on her own.



87. CHEF AMADÍ

Emoni and her exhausted classmates listen to local chefs introduce themselves. The last chef to do so, Chef Amadí, is maybe only in her late 20s, and she makes North African-inspired modern Spanish food. Chef Ayden then announces which students are apprenticing with which chefs. Malachi will learn butchery and curing, while Emoni will be working with Chef Amadí.

Noting that the kids are exhausted suggests that they're having a hard time staying engaged and focused on their apprenticeships. Given her youth, Chef Amadí seems as though she may be more easily able to connect with her young apprentice.



88. CLUCK, CLUCK

To start, Chef Amadí asks Emoni to identify some herbs. The bay leaf is slightly different than what Emoni is used to, but she identifies it and other spices. At another station, Chef Amadí shows Emoni how to slice octopus. Emoni stops herself from reaching for spices without permission. Then, Emoni asks about Chef Amadí's last name, which she didn't realize was Spanish. Chef Amadí explains that she takes after her Spanish father, but her family is from Morocco—and all of the Iberian Peninsula has been influenced by the Moors.

Then, Chef Amadí says Chef Ayden told her that Emoni has “an affinity with the things that come from the dirt,” which is a lot coming from him—he believes in hard work, not talent or instinct. She asks if it's true. Emoni's eyebrows shoot up. Chef Amadí says that Emoni identified herbs that look different outside of this region, and she seems like she instinctively knows how to pair spices or slice vegetables—is it true? 'Buela has always said that Emoni is magic, but Emoni doesn't really believe it. So, Emoni says that she experiments a lot and watches Food Network. Chef Amadí cuts her off and says that Emoni can call it what she wants, but she must remember that **cooking** for others is giving them a gift.

Chef Amadí says that this afternoon, Emoni is going to develop a **chicken dish** to serve as the Monday special. The restaurant opens in 90 minutes, and Emoni can do whatever she wants with the chicken.

89. GAME TIME

Chef Amadí's restaurant is small; it's only a few tables and 20-30 patrons per afternoon. Remembering Chef Ayden's instructions, Emoni calculates how much **chicken** she'll need, preps it, and creates a uniform spice mix. She's ready to go when the first patron arrives, and she works tirelessly for the next four hours. Emoni's shift is over. Taking off her chef's jacket, Emoni steps into the dining room just as a man compliments Chef Amadí on the special. Chef Amadí introduces the man, Don Alberto, to Emoni. In Spanish, he tells Emoni the chicken was wonderful and that he's been having a bad day—but Emoni's chicken brought back a happy childhood memory of his aunt.

Moor generally refers to Muslim people from North Africa, particularly those who conquered what's now Spain and Portugal between the eighth and 11th centuries. Thus, Spain is a place where cultures clashed—and this is evident in its culture, architecture, and culinary traditions. Emoni is intrigued to get this history lesson alongside a cooking lesson, though when it comes to the food, she still has to remind herself to be respectful and a team player.



Though it perhaps shouldn't be, it's a shock for Emoni to learn that Chef Ayden has been saying such kind things about her. Specifically, it's noteworthy that he so admires her “affinity with the things that come from the dirt” (that is, spices and herbs), since Emoni has seen firsthand that he values following rules and learning standard practices. Even though Emoni has received similar compliments her entire life, she's not yet confident enough in her abilities to own them. It's possible, though, to read this as her having learned to be humble—which she wasn't when, at the beginning of the school year, she spiced dishes her way without consulting Chef Ayden first.



Unlike Chef Ayden, who is big on getting students to follow recipes, Chef Amadí is happy to let Emoni figure out how to feed people this afternoon. She trusts Emoni's instincts—even if Emoni doesn't yet trust herself.



In Chef Amadí's restaurant, Emoni finally has the opportunity to marry her intuitive understanding of spices with the practical skills she learned in Chef Ayden's class. He taught her how to make sure she had enough food for the patrons, but the magic that occurs when she spices the chicken is all Emoni. Don Alberto's compliment shows Emoni how effectively she's been able to marry her way and Chef Ayden's way of cooking. Put differently Emoni's gift isn't obscured by the fact that she knows how to properly prepare pounds of chicken for restaurant consumption.



90. WINNING

Emoni hurries to the rooftop **paella** restaurant to meet her classmates, who all look as energized as she feels. She sits next to Malachi and tells him that she prepared the daily special. Pretty Leslie leans over, shocked that Emoni had so much responsibility. Emoni hadn't considered how big of a challenge that was, but she realizes now her classmates aren't getting the same kind of experience. A bit later, Emoni excuses herself to call 'Buela from the bathroom and get an update on Babygirl.

While everyone is clearly having a good time already, Emoni also realizes that Chef Ayden has given her a really special opportunity. He hand-picked the restaurateurs to take on his students, and he clearly took Emoni's desires into account when he paired her with Chef Amadí. This reminds her too how much of an ally he is. Still, Emoni's heart is in Philly with her daughter—she can't fully escape her parenting responsibilities.



91. THE ROOTS

At Chef Amadí's restaurant the next day, the chef instructs Emoni to "listen" to the herbs and clip a bundle of herbs. Emoni is pretty sure the herbs aren't talking, but she instinctively knows what she wants. When Emoni is done cutting, Chef Amadí asks what they should serve with **rabbit**. Emoni suggests mushroom harissa rice.

Though Emoni might object to Chef Amadí's language, the two women clearly think about food in much the same way: they let the flavors lead the way and guide the rest of the dish. This gives Emoni more insight into how some chefs may think more like her, but that few—if any—chefs will approach food exactly the same.



Later, Emoni tells Pretty Leslie about her day (she needs to talk to someone about it, since her call to 'Buela and Babygirl focused on Babygirl and cooled Emoni's excitement). Leslie is busy parting her hair crookedly, but she says that Chef Amadí must be a "crackhead" and should be teaching Emoni the basics. These days, Emoni thinks Pretty Leslie talks like this to everyone, not just her. So she asks if Leslie wants to be a chef. It takes a minute for Leslie to respond, but she says that she'll be the first person in her family to graduate. Her home life isn't great, and she just wants to do something "major" that reminds people she was here. Emoni thinks Malachi was right that Leslie is more than she seems. Emoni feels the same way.

In some respects, Emoni seems a bit unwilling to tell 'Buela all about the amazing things she's getting to do in Spain. On some level, she seems to want to focus on Babygirl on the calls to feel involved in her daughter's life. Back in the bedroom, Emoni and Pretty Leslie begin to connect a little bit. Though Leslie remains rude and standoffish, Emoni also realizes that Leslie is someone she can empathize with: they both want to leave their mark on the world.



92.

In an email to Aunt Sarah, Emoni thanks her for the **cobbler** recipe—Emoni tweaked it a bit and served it at the restaurant this afternoon. She explains that Babygirl has been throwing tantrums, but hopefully Babygirl will settle into a routine once she goes to Tyrone's tomorrow. Emoni describes some of the amazing food she's had in Spain and promises to send along a cookie recipe once she perfects it. She also attaches a picture that Chef Amadí took of her working earlier.

Aunt Sarah and Emoni continue to connect through sharing recipes, highlighting food's connective power once again. As Emoni suggests that Babygirl might settle once she's at Tyrone's tomorrow, it implies that she's beginning to see Tyrone and his family in a new light. They're not interlopers—they are, for better and for worse, Babygirl's family members whom Babygirl loves and trusts.



93. CHECK-IN

The next morning, April 1, half the class anxiously checks their emails: today is the day college acceptance emails go out. Emoni doesn't plan to check hers until she gets home, and Amanda is going into a job-training program, so she's less excited. Chef Ayden announces that the students will have a free morning to explore. As he sends them off, he asks Emoni to chat for a minute. He says he went to school in Paris with Chef Amadí, and he wants to make sure she and Emoni are getting along okay. Emoni is surprised and impressed, and she realizes how little she knows about Chef Ayden. But she's glad he's her teacher, and she's glad she's paired with Chef Amadí—and she tells Chef Ayden so. Chef Ayden sends Emoni off to meet Malachi, loudly and jokingly warning her not to spend too much time with him.

By deciding to just not worry about college admissions decisions while in Spain, Emoni turns her trip into a time capsule of sorts. Here, she's stuck in time and doesn't have to think too hard about the future or the past. Instead, she can just enjoy and learn, and she can also figure out who she is without the responsibilities that she has at home. Chef Ayden offers Emoni another reminder that he's fully in her corner when he checks in about how she's getting along with Chef Amadí. He made sure to pair Emoni with a chef who was going to nurture Emoni's preferred intuitive way of cooking, highlighting again that he does want to support the chef she is, not turn her into a robot.



94. GILDED

Emoni is entranced by the Catedral de Sevilla, which is covered in gold and silver. There's a coffin in the middle, held up by four metal figures in crowns and armor. Emoni listens to the tour guide say that this is Christopher Columbus's tomb; places all over the world have parts of his body so they can say they're his final resting place. Malachi asks Emoni if she's okay. She leads him away and says she might not be. "Boricua," she explains, refers to the Borinken people who lived in Puerto Rico before Columbus arrived. According to Julio, the word meant "Land of the brave and noble lords." Emoni gestures to the gold, which she notes likely came from Puerto Rico. Nobody remembers the enslaved people who dug up the gold. Their descendants are still in Puerto Rico. The cathedral suddenly looks less beautiful to Emoni.

Suddenly, Emoni's feelings about Spain become complicated when she realizes she's looking at Christopher Columbus's tomb. Columbus's cruelty toward native peoples in the Caribbean is well documented, and he's often credited with beginning the colonialism movement that ultimately wiped-out native populations in the Caribbean and in the Americas. So, it's wildly uncomfortable to see such a person entombed in gold mined by enslaved people—with absolutely no acknowledgement of the terrible things Columbus did.



95. HISTORIES

Outside the cathedral, Emoni is still quiet. Julio constantly lectures Emoni about Puerto Rican history, but it hasn't resonated with her before today. Spain is complicated for Emoni—she feels like Spain is a part of her, even if she's not sure she likes that. Sensing her mood, Malachi invites her to go see the castle. They join a tour group when they notice Amanda and Pretty Leslie, and Malachi raises his hand to answer what's different about this part of the castle. He explains that it honors Islam, and the docent says he's correct: this part of the castle was built after the Muslim conquest of Spain. Emoni studies the garden, realizing that worlds collided here.

Spain is complicated for Emoni for a couple of reasons. Modern Puerto Rican people tend to be able to trace their ancestry to Spain and West African countries, in addition to indigenous populations who initially inhabited the island—so while Emoni resents Spain for wiping out her ancestors, other ancestors are also from Spain. It helps her feel a bit better, though, to be reminded that non-white people did rule Spain for a time; this is evident in the Islamic style architecture in parts of Spain. In this sense, Spain is just as nuanced and diverse as Emoni's "straight-from-the-Carolinas Black" and Puerto Rican identity.



Emoni asks how Malachi knew that. He explains that Malcolm X is his idol, he's studied Islam, and that history is his favorite subject. Emoni is shocked she didn't know this—and she realizes she wants to know everything about Malachi. Feeling freer than she's ever felt at home, she invites him to get **ice cream** later. He asks if this is a date, and she says it is.

It's significant that Emoni comes to a happier understanding of Spain's history thanks to Malachi. This establishes him even more fully as someone she wants in her life, as he can add new layers to things for her. Inviting him for ice cream is, once again, an invitation to connect over food.



96. THE CHASE

After dinner, Chef Ayden reminds the students to get home to their host families quickly. Emoni and Pretty Leslie have been the only ones going home; everyone else has been out every night drinking real absinthe and dancing. Pretty Leslie gives Emoni a dirty look when she sees that Emoni is staying out with Malachi. As Malachi and Emoni walk, Emoni asks if Pretty Leslie was upset when Malachi stopped talking to her. He says he still thinks Leslie is cool, but she just says silly things when she's trying to impress him. Emoni doesn't pry further, but she lets Malachi take her hand. He puts their hands in his coat pocket, and Emoni is suddenly overcome with emotion. She doesn't want this moment to end, and she doesn't want to get hurt. Emoni stops and reaches up to kiss Malachi—just as a little boy snatches her purse.

For the most part, Emoni has spent the novel playing by the rules and trying to appease adult authority figures. Now, though, it's a sign of how free she's feeling that she feels okay disobeying Chef Ayden and staying out late with Malachi. She's beginning to let go of what other people think, and instead, she's focusing on what she wants. This is, of course, thwarted when she attempts to kiss Malachi and her purse is immediately stolen—she can't fully escape the world's realities. But the fact that she's trying indicates that she'd like to figure out who she is when she's not bogged down by other responsibilities.



97. CHILDREN

Malachi races after the boy, and Emoni struggles to follow them both. Finally, she catches up when Malachi snatches the boy's jacket. She tells Malachi it's okay, but he angrily tells her to ask the boy why he stole. In careful Spanish, Emoni asks. The boy says he wouldn't have stolen had he known Emoni and Malachi were Black—Black people run fast. Almost laughing, Emoni says that's not true, and certainly not all "of you" steal. The boy explains that he and his sister beg because they're cute and hungry. Emoni and Malachi argue in English: she wants to let the boy go, but Malachi wants to see where he lives. The boy points to an alley, where a tiny face peeks out. Emoni gives the boy a few euros, and he runs away.

The boy is coded as Roma. In Europe, Roma people have often suffered the same kind of discrimination as nonwhite people in the U.S. do, such as assumptions that they're criminal and amoral. It's impossible to tell whether Emoni gets through to the boy, but she encourages him to see that making assumptions about an entire group of people isn't the best way to go through life—that will deprive him of connections he could otherwise make.



Emoni observes that the boy and girl are so young: the girl is only a bit older than Babygirl. She tries to joke Malachi out of his silence, but he says that he doesn't think it's true that the hardest thing to be is a parent. He's pretty sure it's harder to be an older brother and not be able to help get your sibling what they need. Emoni tries to lead him to go get **ice cream**, but he sadly says he doesn't want it anymore. She takes his face in her hands and he pulls her close.

Malachi was angry that the boy tried to steal Emoni's purse, but now, he seems more upset that he and the boy actually have a lot in common—they're both struggling with how difficult it is to be a child trying to help one's sibling. Kids, both Malachi and the boy find, have way fewer resources to help loved ones in need, being kids in need of care themselves.



98. SMOOCH

Emoni hasn't kissed anyone in a long time. A passing couple whistles at her and Malachi, so Malachi leads her back to the street where they started to kiss some more. Tyrone never kissed or touched Emoni like this, like he genuinely loved her body. When they pull apart, Malachi asks what they're supposed to do. Emoni says they should enjoy Europe and each other. She thinks of Babygirl and 'Buela, and the choices she'll have to make about her future when she gets home. She has so many responsibilities at home, but she loves how she feels now. Emoni says that they'll figure out what to do when they get home. Malachi asks where they're going next, so Emoni points to a bar across the street.

Finally, Emoni is willing to listen to herself and what she really wants, so she's willing and able to kiss Malachi and acknowledge her feelings for him. Their kiss exists in a bubble of sorts, since it takes place in Spain, a thousand miles away from Philadelphia and all of Emoni's responsibilities there. It's a huge thing for Emoni to feel so good and at peace about letting herself do what she wants for once. It reminds her that she can enjoy fun things—and that she deserves to do so.



99. COZY

The bartender is lighting a green drink on fire as Emoni and Malachi walk in. They see Richard and Amanda at the bar but take a small table together by the back. Touching Emoni's leg, Malachi says that he likes everything about her. Emoni apologizes for being mean at first, but she explains that when she was pregnant (and after), boys treated her like a "ho," like she'd obviously have sex with them. Emoni says she's not having sex with Malachi. Rather than huff or try to pressure Emoni, Malachi makes Emoni look at him and says that he'd happily beat up those guys. He just wants to talk to her, and he always has, because she makes his day better.

Finally, Emoni reveals one of the other unfortunate issues that cropped up since becoming a teen mom: guys think she's sexually promiscuous, when really, that's not at all the case. Because of this, Emoni feels even more pressure to protect herself and ward off unwanted (and possibly even wanted) sexual advances. Malachi makes it clear, though, that he's not like those guys who just want sex. He likes Emoni for who she is, and whether or not they have sex doesn't change that.



100. UGLY LESLIE

Before Emoni can respond to Malachi, Richard, Amanda, and Pretty Leslie wander over to join them. Pretty Leslie and Richard are both drinking, and Richard tells Malachi to get Emoni a drink. He adds that they're celebrating college admissions—but Leslie adds that she's mourning rejections. Malachi agrees that they should celebrate Richard's acceptance to Penn State, and Emoni asks him to get her some juice. She doesn't want to get in trouble for drinking abroad. Cursing heavily, Pretty Leslie tells Emoni to drink alcohol. When Emoni asks if Leslie is okay, Leslie insists she's fine. Amanda passes Emoni her glass; she whispers that it's just water because she has to start her bakery apprenticeship at four a.m.

Who Emoni's friends are comes to the forefront in this passage. Richard is trying to be nice, Amanda is actually being nice and listening to what Emoni wants, and Pretty Leslie seems to be having a hard time and is taking it out on Emoni. Emoni seems fully aware that Pretty Leslie's anger and rudeness isn't about Emoni, which is why Emoni asks Leslie if Leslie is okay. Even if Leslie is being mean, Emoni doesn't want to see one of her classmates suffer.



Malachi returns from the bar and hands Emoni a dark drink garnished with cherry and lime. It's clearly nonalcoholic. Amanda, who's oblivious to everything, asks Emoni and Malachi what they're doing here. After Emoni explains that they were just walking around, Pretty Leslie finishes her own drink and then snatches Emoni's away. She deems it nonalcoholic, accuses Emoni of being "so fucking good," and passes it to Richard to taste. He admits he's too drunk to be able to tell if it's alcoholic. Pretty Leslie asks Emoni if she doesn't want to get in trouble with Chef Ayden and promises not to tell Chef that Emoni and Malachi are having sex. Malachi tells Leslie to stop. She stands to leave—and vomits. The bartender shouts for the American students to get out, so Emoni grabs Pretty Leslie to help her.

Again, though Pretty Leslie is angry lashing out at Emoni, it seems likely she's doing this because she's hurting (and the alcohol has lowered her inhibitions, making her less able to police her own behavior). But the insults Pretty Leslie hurls at Emoni reveal how Leslie (and perhaps others) see Emoni: as an almost obnoxiously good person and student. This, of course, is pretty opposite how Emoni sees herself. Emoni thinks of herself as lost and struggling, and she's admitted most academic subjects aren't her strong suit. Her outward identity, in this case, doesn't match how she feels inside.



101. SETTLED

Emoni and Malachi help Pretty Leslie into Señorita Mariana's house and up the stairs. Pretty Leslie mumbles that she won't vomit again; she just wants to go to bed. Emoni removes Pretty Leslie's shoes. There's nowhere else to put them, so Emoni empties Leslie's makeup bag and puts the vomit-covered shoes in there. Looking back at Malachi, Emoni says she's a mom and couldn't leave Leslie. Malachi says she's too good. Laughing a bit at Leslie, Emoni walks Malachi to the door and asks why he chose her. He says Emoni is the only one he's ever thought of, and he assures Emoni he's not just saying that to get in her pants. He asks if they can hang out in the next two days, and Emoni agrees.

Emoni makes it clear that she could've left Pretty Leslie to fend for herself—but that doing so would've been even crueler than the mean things Pretty Leslie said. With this, the story highlights how loyal Emoni has grown to her culinary arts class and the team they've formed over the last few months. She no longer thinks of herself as better than the others because of her talent; rather, she wants to help these peers she's become close to. And while this may have dashed any great plans for Emoni's night with Malachi, it also makes her look like a better person in his eyes.



102. BOYS WILL BE

Part of Emoni is afraid to trust Malachi, because Tyrone was like this too. Tyrone complimented Emoni, walked her home, and took her on dates. But he didn't defend Emoni to his parents when they demanded a paternity test, and he didn't argue when she found out he was cheating. He insisted that she was "as big as a house," so what was he supposed to do? Tyrone refuses to use his words. Had he said he didn't want to be together, Emoni would've respected that. But instead, he accused Emoni of being irrational and had no reaction when she broke up with him. Still, he suggests they work it out every few months. So Emoni knows now that guys are different people when they're flirting than they are when things get rough or they find someone new. She's afraid of getting hurt again.

The fact that Emoni's inner monologue leaps to considering boy problems (rather than focusing on Leslie's drunken outburst) makes it clear that Emoni doesn't see helping Leslie as a big deal. Rather, her big issue now is figuring out how to move forward with Malachi when he upends all her expectations about what a boy is like when he's in a relationship. Tyrone, unlike Malachi, wasn't able to express himself well—when he wanted something, he insulted Emoni rather than stating his desires plainly. So, Emoni is navigating totally new territory with Malachi.



103. HEART-TO-HEART

When Pretty Leslie wakes Emoni up, Emoni thinks she's Babygirl at first. It's six a.m., and Leslie says she feels awful. Emoni says it serves Leslie right after her behavior last night, but she goes downstairs to get Leslie some water and Alka-Seltzer. When Emoni hands over the glass, she asks if Leslie's throat hurts from vomiting. Leslie is shocked to hear she vomited and remembers almost nothing from last night. Emoni says that Leslie said awful things and insulted Emoni. Leslie's eyes widen and she looks ready to cry as she asks how she got home.

Emoni says that she and Malachi brought Leslie back, but now, she has some things she wants to say. Emoni says she doesn't think she's better than other people. She's just private, and it's not her fault if Malachi didn't reciprocate Leslie's crush. Leslie sputters that she was just angry and jealous. Emoni seems to have the perfect life, and of course the cute new guy liked her. Shaking her head, Emoni reminds Leslie that she has a daughter and had to fight to stay in school and graduate on time. Leslie admits it doesn't make sense, but she acknowledges that she now admires how Emoni handled things. For the first time, Emoni feels like Leslie is being honest with her.

Emoni isn't going to let Pretty Leslie just get away with having said awful things to her last night. However, she still wants to make sure that Leslie is okay and isn't just left to fend for herself. This is somewhat shocking for Pretty Leslie, both because she doesn't remember what she did last night and because she seems not to expect this kind of kindness from Emoni.



Pretty Leslie confirms explicitly that Emoni comes off as a totally different person in school than she feels on the inside. Emoni feels like a struggling, unmoored teen mom—while Leslie sees her as put together and like someone who's going places. Even though Emoni and Leslie don't really come to any agreements during this conversation, it's still a turning point in their relationship. Finally, they have the space and the reason to be honest, and this helps them develop more respect for each other.



104. READY?

Emoni enters Malachi's host family's house; his host parents are professors and are at a school event. Noticing that Emoni looks nervous, Malachi suggests they go out. But Emoni asks to watch some TV and decide. As they watch a Harry Potter marathon, Malachi plays with Emoni's fingers. Finally, Emoni asks if he's a virgin. He says he fooled around with a girl at his old school, but his brother was shot and he moved before they went any further. Emoni and Malachi begin kissing slowly. Tyrone was fast and focused on himself the few times he and Emoni had sex, but this is totally different.

Malachi continues to go out of his way to not put pressure on Emoni, particularly when it comes to sex. Even just in this passage, as they chat about past sexual experiences and start kissing, it's clear that any physical contact between them is going to be different for Emoni than things were with Tyrone. Unlike Tyrone, who mostly thought about himself and insulted Emoni at times, Malachi seems interested in connecting openly and honestly with Emoni.



Emoni and Malachi tease each other about being inexperienced and nervous. Emoni is nervous: she doesn't know any tricks, and her body has stretch marks. She tries to say that she's only had sex a few times, but Malachi says this isn't about other people. It's about them. They continue kissing and removing clothing, and Malachi kisses Emoni's stretch marks. But when he begins to fiddle with her pants zipper, Emoni says she thinks they should wait. Malachi hugs Emoni close. Taking a deep breath, Emoni suggests they try other things. Malachi agrees goofily, and Emoni laughs. She's glad they can laugh.

Malachi makes a point that both he and Angelica have made to Emoni in the past: he and Emoni can make their relationship whatever they need and want it to be. And in this case, that can mean deciding to wait on sex, but finding other ways to have fun together. This takes the pressure off Emoni and allows her the opportunity to experiment and have fun with Malachi—and to have that be the goal.



105. LAST DAY

On Saturday, the students' last day in Spain, Chef Ayden still has them go to their apprenticeships. Emoni works on a marinade for a **pork shoulder**, which will take 24 hours. Emoni wishes she'd be here to try it, but she decides that maybe this is the point of traveling. Chef Amadí asks if Emoni added the lemon, and Emoni says she used sour oranges instead. Chef Amadí praises Emoni for her choice. After they discuss what Emoni has learned, Chef Amadí invites Emoni to come back as an apprentice after she's done with school. Emoni is so surprised that she cuts herself. She cries less from the pain and more because she knows she could never leave 'Buela, Babygirl, or Philadelphia.

Later, Chef Amadí thanks Emoni for her hard work, invites her to return, and hands over her academic evaluation. She also gives Emoni teabags that she put together from her own garden. Emoni can't identify one of the ingredients, and Chef Amadí says this is part of the magic—not everything in life can be deconstructed. Shooing Emoni out the door, Chef Amadí tells Emoni to trust herself and the world. As the door closes, Emoni feels naked, like she's suddenly a new person.

This passage highlights how different it is working for Chef Amadí than for Chef Ayden: where Chef Ayden scolded Emoni for changing the recipe, here, Emoni gets praise for subbing in oranges for lemons. But it's also worth keeping in mind that Chef Amadí and Chef Ayden have very different goals; Chef Ayden wants to instill basics, while Chef Amadí wants Emoni to learn to trust herself. Chef Amadí's invitation to return to Spain as an apprentice is bittersweet for Emoni. It shows Emoni she has what it takes, but Emoni also knows that for the time being, at least, her focus is on her family members in Philadelphia.



Through what she says about the teabag ingredients, Chef Amadí essentially encourages Emoni to not take things quite so seriously. It's okay, she implies, that Emoni not know everything—she can just accept that parts of cooking (and of the world) are mysterious and unknowable. But Emoni also has the skills to navigate that mysterious world. This is shocking for Emoni to hear, as it seems like the first time she believes an adult when they say she's truly capable.



106. DUENDE

Emoni and Pretty Leslie spend their last night with Mariana, who makes a traditional **meal** and even gives the girls sangria. When Leslie turns green, Emoni laughs. Emoni tries to savor her food rather than pick it apart, and she enjoys the Spanish songs playing from Mariana's boom box. One song makes Emoni perk up, so Mariana turns up the volume. Mariana explains that this is Mercedes Sosa, an Argentinian folk singer. Closing her eyes, Emoni listens to Mercedes sing about how everything changes—except her love for her home. Mariana says Mercedes was full of *duende*, or inspiration and passion. Having learned this new word, Emoni feels ready to return home.

*Emoni tries to take Chef Amadí's advice as she eats Mariana's dinner. As she does this, she learns to empathize more with the people who normally eat her food—she can think about whether the food brings up emotions or memories for her, rather than trying to figure out how the dish came together. Learning the word *duende* is meaningful for Emoni, as like Mercedes, Emoni is full of "inspiration and passion" for food. Having one word for this quality helps Emoni understand herself and her place in the world better.*



107. HOME

Emoni grabs her suitcase and blushes when Malachi kisses her deeply and their classmates whoop. As Emoni leaves the terminal, she hears Pretty Leslie cursing and offers her a ride. Leslie accepts. Mr. Jagoda is there to pick Emoni up, looking happy to see her. Emoni tries to patiently enjoy the songs on the radio, but she just wants to see Babygirl. They drop Leslie off and then pull up to Emoni's house. Emoni invites Mr. Jagoda in, but he says he's already seen Gloria this week. When Emoni opens the door, 'Buela bursts into tears. Emoni takes Babygirl out of 'Buela's arms and hugs them both.

Offering Pretty Leslie a ride shows how far Emoni and Leslie's relationship has come. Now, Leslie is another person in need of (and deserving of) kindness and help. Note that Mr. Jagoda calls 'Buela by her first name, suggesting that there's perhaps more to their relationship than Emoni realizes. Though Emoni enjoyed her time in Spain and did some much-needed soul searching there, her emotional homecoming reminds her where her heart really lies: with her daughter and grandmother.



108. ACCEPTANCE

It's now evening; Emoni fell asleep earlier during lunch and is cuddling with Babygirl in bed. 'Buela comes partway into Emoni's room and asks if Emoni has checked her college acceptances yet. Emoni notices that 'Buela isn't wearing her wedding band, and she just wants to snuggle into 'Buela. Shaking her head, Emoni logs onto her accounts at the various schools. Temple University, LaSalle, and Arcadia are all rejections. Emoni suggests they check Drexel tomorrow so it doesn't ruin their night. 'Buela urges Emoni on, so Emoni logs onto Drexel's site. The world slows, and Emoni holds her phone out to 'Buela. 'Buela sobs that her granddaughter is going to college and tells Emoni to call Julio.

Especially combined with the fact that Mr. Jagoda referred to 'Buela by her first name last night, it seems significant that 'Buela isn't wearing her wedding ring. Like Emoni, she may have taken the Spain trip as an opportunity to explore romantic options. Emoni still feels childish and in need of support as she checks her college acceptances, a feeling that intensifies with every rejection. But seeing Drexel's acceptance shows Emoni that she's capable of more than she thought—other people find her compelling and worthy of time and investment.



109. SURPRISES

Emoni didn't expect Drexel to accept her, since her GPA is a bit low. But Ms. Fuentes pushed her to apply, and it has a great **culinary arts** and restaurant management program. Emoni doesn't know how she can pay bills and go to school at the same time, so she approaches 'Buela the day after she gets her acceptance and asks if it makes more sense to get a job. She didn't get full financial aid, after all. 'Buela just smiles like she's waiting for the punchline. She tells Emoni she just has to work hard and then she'll have a degree. Emoni can't tell her that she *does* work hard, but she still does poorly in school. Last time, a guidance counselor held Emoni back. Will Emoni hold herself back this time?

Emoni feels stuck. She knows Drexel will prepare her well for a restaurant career, but can she afford that kind of education? She's trying to be practical and think of her family, but she also doesn't want to be solely responsible for holding herself back if that's indeed what getting a job instead of attending Drexel would be. For her part, 'Buela seems a lot like Ms. Fuentes as she makes college sound easy and logical—Emoni is pretty sure it's not so easy.



'Buela says she's waited for this moment, and she asks if Emoni wants to know where she goes when she's not at the doctor's. Emoni braces herself, waiting to hear that 'Buela is indeed sick. But 'Buela says that sometimes, she needs to remind herself that she's more than a mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. Further, she's been going on dates with Joseph Jagoda, and she loves spending time with him. He makes her feel like a woman, not just a mom. Noticing that 'Buela looks relaxed, Emoni says she's thrilled for 'Buela. 'Buela admits that he'd like her to move in and get married, but obviously she can't do that. Emoni tells 'Buela to set a good example for her and marry Mr. Jagoda. She and Babygirl will be fine.

As 'Buela talks about her dates and her need to explore who Gloria (rather than 'Buela) is, she's talking about herself—but she's also talking about Emoni. Her implication is that Emoni should attend college if only because it'll give Emoni the opportunity to explore her identity outside of motherhood; it'll be a bonus to get the education she's wanted her whole life. Emoni seems to finally grasp how huge of a sacrifice 'Buela has made by raising her and Babygirl, so she encourages 'Buela to follow her dreams—just like 'Buela encourages Emoni to follow hers.



110. JUST FINE

Emoni isn't sure she'll be fine, but she reminds herself that everything changes. She calls Julio before bed and tells him about her trip to Spain. Then she says she got into Drexel. For a minute she thinks the call dropped—and then Julio is crying. He never cries, even when Emoni stopped calling him Papi. He seems to pick up on Emoni's hesitation, because he asks if she doesn't want to go to college. Thinking before she speaks, Emoni considers how even though Julio believes in education, he'd also support Emoni if she just wanted to work. Thinking of his sniffles, she says she's just nervous about all the changes. Julio mentions that 'Buela has the new boyfriend, too, and Emoni is stunned. He says she'll figure it out.

Note how little Emoni seems to agonize over calling Julio this time. Something has shifted in her relationship with him; perhaps she sees him as more of an ally now than she did earlier in the novel. In any case, she seems far more interested in protecting his emotions as she doesn't say that she's considering turning down Drexel and working instead. His tears, his support, and his knowledge that 'Buela is dating helps Emoni see him as a supportive, if flawed, adult in her life.



111. NEXT STEPS

On Monday morning, Ms. Fuentes asks how Spain was and if Emoni checked her college admissions. Hoping that Ms. Fuentes can't tell she's been crying, Emoni says she got into Drexel. Noticing Emoni's lack of excitement, Ms. Fuentes asks what's wrong. Emoni lies that she's just tired, and she ignores Malachi's stares all of Advisory—they talked on the phone last night, and Emoni told him all about her fears and cried about 'Buela. But at lunch, Emoni can't hide that she's upset. Angelica demands to know what's wrong when everything in Emoni's life seems to be going well, so Emoni flicks applesauce at her. As they laugh, things feel momentarily okay.

On the brink of so much changing so fast, Emoni reverts to her earlier, independent self. She's confided in Malachi about her fears, but she's not willing to be vulnerable at school—with anyone. This reminds readers how huge of a change Emoni faces as she looks at college and at suddenly becoming independent from 'Buela. Still, Angelica reminds Emoni that some things won't change, such as their supportive friendship.



112. LOVE

Since Emoni misses Babygirl so much, she picks Babygirl up from daycare. Mamá Clara shows Emoni Babygirl's artwork and her dolls, and then Emoni and Babygirl board the bus. An older white woman says Babygirl is adorable and asks if she's Emoni's sister. Smiling, Emoni says Babygirl is her daughter. The woman frowns, but Emoni keeps smiling. Lots of people look down on Emoni for having a daughter, but they wouldn't if Emoni were white. These are the same people who think white kids with cornrows are creative, but who call Angelica "ghetto." Maybe Emoni is making assumptions about this woman, but she has lots of experience with white women who shake their heads at Black and brown girls and make them feel unwelcome.

Recall how earlier, Emoni made it clear that she feels no shame about being a parent. Here, she calmly refuses to let this white woman make her feel bad for having Babygirl. This is easier for Emoni, since she suspects that it's the fact that she's Black that raises the woman's hackles; it shows her that there's actually nothing wrong with her (since there's obviously nothing wrong with being Black). Emoni accepts that she and other Black and brown girls will regularly experience this kind of racist attitude, but she proposes that she won't allow women like this to make her feel lesser or undeserving of a place in the world.



113. EMONI'S "WHEN THE WORLD TRIES TO BREAK YOU, BREAK BEER BREAD WITH THOSE YOU LOVE" RECIPE

This **beer bread** recipe is supposed to serve "Your strength when you feel alone." It directs cooks to mix all the ingredients together, saving the herbs for last. The bread bakes for the length of a Bad Bunny album and is best eaten "with honey butter while listening to your own gut."

This recipe sets readers up to understand how alone and lost Emoni feels. It will, presumably, help her learn to "listen to [her] own gut" and make the best choice for her when it comes to Drexel, work, and Babygirl.



114. STUCK

Over the next few weeks, Emoni just shrugs when people ask where she's going to college. 'Buela is incensed; she wants to write the deposit check. Emoni knows what she wants to do, she just doesn't know how to tell people—even Angelica and 'Buela. At lunch, Angelica tries to convince Emoni to eat while she sneakily checks her email to see if Pratt has taken her off their waiting list yet.

Note that Emoni knows what she wants—she's just too afraid or nervous to voice her desires to other people. This suggests that she may want to do something she fears won't go over well. But if Emoni is truly listening to her gut, the novel has made it clear that whatever choice she makes will be the right one for her.



Suddenly, Malachi appears in front of Emoni. He says she looks sad and has been ignoring him, and he hoped he could get her to talk here. Emoni tries to get up and leave, but both Malachi and Angelica hug her. Malachi says it'll be okay; Angelica says it's time to stop being afraid. The day before the deposit must be postmarked, 'Buela leaves Emoni a blank check and a note telling her to follow her dreams. Emoni fills out the forms and mails her decision.

Malachi and Angelica make it clear that no matter what Emoni chooses, they'll still love and support her. 'Buela says much the same thing by leaving Emoni the blank check to do with what she likes. It's left ambiguous what, exactly, Emoni chooses, but Emoni does seem at peace with her decision. She's learning that it's okay to make the right choice for her, even if it's not one that other people will always understand.



115. ACCEPTED

Angelica screams into the phone that she got into Pratt and is coming over to celebrate. But when there's a knock on the door later, it's not Angelica. It's Tyrone, and he asks to speak to Emoni. Emoni says she doesn't have Babygirl ready for him yet, and she has things to talk about too. Emoni says she got into college and she's dating. Tyrone says he doesn't like it, but Emoni says she's not going to stop living her life just to keep people happy. That's not fair to Emma. Shaking his head, Tyrone says going to Spain was bad for Emoni—she's come back with "crazy ideas" and is "easily influenced," like Mrs. Palmer always said. Emoni finds this ironic: Mrs. Palmer said the opposite when Emoni refused to let her pay for Emoni's abortion.

As Tyrone fixes his expression, Emoni realizes that he's suddenly grown up and seems comfortable in his skin. He says he's here about Emma: he got a job and an apartment recently, and Mrs. Palmer has been bugging him about how expensive babies are and how he should be helping Emoni more. He'd like to help. Emoni is shocked that Mrs. Palmer has been advocating for her at all. But then, Tyrone says he'd like to have longer visitations with Emma: Friday night to Monday morning, and he'd like to take her on vacation with his family for a week in the summers. Emoni keeps her face stony and says she'll think about it. But she says she'll get Babygirl ready to go now.

Emoni's straightforward confidence as she tells Tyrone how things are going to be differs some from how she's handled things with him before. Now, she doesn't let him even try to tell her she's doing things wrong—she just inwardly rolls her eyes when he speaks so disparagingly about her trip to Spain. But really, what he's saying is that he doesn't like that he can't influence Emoni anymore, and that she's making her own decisions. Note too that telling Tyrone she got into college implies that Emoni has decided to attend—there'd be no reason to tell him otherwise.



Just like Emoni, Tyrone is growing up and his life is changing. As he steps into a more adult and independent lifestyle (with his own job and apartment), he feels compelled to also be more mature when it comes to his relationship with his daughter and Emoni. This is a shock for Emoni, but it also means that things might be easier for her going forward—extra money from Tyrone, and perhaps extra care for Babygirl, would help as she navigates college and a quickly growing toddler.



116. PROM

Emoni and Malachi have seen each other every day and they keep kissing, but there's no pressure for anything else—and they haven't talked about long-distance yet. 'Buela steps in front of the TV and asks if Emoni is going to be home today with Angelica and Babygirl, but Emoni says Angelica and Laura are busy getting prom outfits together. 'Buela asks Emoni when she's getting her outfit together and refuses to let Emoni change the subject. Emoni says Malachi asked her, but they don't have the money and she doesn't want to go. She'd rather stay home and watch Jennifer Lopez movies. This is what Emoni does. Malachi goes to prom and leaves early to see Emoni. They slow dance as Babygirl and 'Buela clap.

'Buela wants Emoni to have what she sees as a normal high school experience, which means attending the prom. But as Emoni has made clear time and again, she's not a normal high schooler—she's a parent, for one, and she's less interested in classic rites of passage like going to prom. Advocating for herself and getting exactly what she wants on prom night, though, shows Emoni that she can make her life look like how she wants—she just has to tell people what she wants.



117. THE RISING

It's midnight the night before graduation, and Emoni can't sleep. She turned 18 a week ago—she's officially an adult. But all she wants to do is snuggle in 'Buela's lap and let someone else make decisions for her. After touching Babygirl's cheek, Emoni heads downstairs to make **beer bread**. Emoni knows her mom used to love to bake, but Aunt Sarah has never sent any of her mom's recipes. Soon, Emoni needs to tell 'Buela about her decision. She also needs to tell Tyrone that she's okay with his proposed custody agreement.

With 20 minutes to go on the **bread**, there's a knock on the door. It's Julio. Emoni asks what he's doing, and he asks if Emoni really thought he'd miss her graduation. Emoni did, but she says nothing. Julio drags an unusually large suitcase into the living room, and Emoni invites him to sit and have some bread when it's done. He declines and says he never eats Emoni's cooking because it reminds him of Emoni's mom, and the memories are too painful. Emoni is shocked.

After collecting herself, Emoni says Julio has abandoned her many times. Why hasn't she ever been enough to make him stay? Julio insists that he tried, but 'Buela was doing great, and he missed Puerto Rico too much. He agrees that there would've been happy memories had he stayed, but he'd like to keep trying. In fact, he'd like to stay for a while to help with Emma and money as Emoni starts college. Emoni wonders if this will have to be enough as she cuts herself a slice of **bread** and eats it. Julio breaks off a corner and, to her surprise, puts it in his mouth.

118. PROMOTION CEREMONY

Emoni is outside the Temple University auditorium after graduation. Babygirl runs her fingers through Emoni's tassels as 'Buela and Julio take pictures of Emoni, her diploma, and Babygirl. Angelica steps into the frame and soon, 'Buela joins the girls. Malachi steps in behind Emoni and Mr. Jagoda waves Ms. Fuentes into the frame. Chef Ayden comes up behind Malachi and Angelica, and Pretty Leslie finally joins in. Emoni asks if Mr. Jagoda would take a picture so Julio can get in too, and he agrees.

Tipping over the ledge into adulthood, Emoni finds, doesn't feel particularly climactic. Instead, it makes her feel even more unmoored, even as parts of her life after high school are starting to fall into place. Deciding to accept Tyrone's new custody agreement shows that Emoni is choosing to see him as an ally. His money and time will help her care for Babygirl, but they'll also help her attend college and focus on herself.



Though it hasn't come up before, it seems like it's been a point of contention that Julio doesn't eat Emoni's cooking. It seems likely this has contributed to their fraught relationship. But now, he's willing to be open with her and level with her like an adult—and this turns him into a more sympathetic figure. Her cooking has the exact same effect on him as it does on everyone else, but in his case, this is just painful and something he'd like to avoid.



Suddenly, it seems like everyone in Emoni's life is stepping up to help her as she starts college—and this will also give 'Buela a much-needed break from caregiving duties. When Julio samples a corner of Emoni's bread, it's a huge peace offering. Through this action, he's saying that he's ready to connect honestly with her and to try to support her like he hasn't been able to before.



The series of pictures in this passage symbolize Emoni's journey to accepting help and integrating herself into her community. Everyone who jumps in (and even Mr. Jagoda behind the camera) have, over the course of the novel, come together to support Emoni and push her to be the best she can be. Inviting Julio into the frame, meanwhile, is Emoni's peace offering to her dad—she's willing to accept him into her life.



After everyone is done taking pictures, they all come to Emoni's house for a feast. Emoni has been putting this meal together for a while now, unsure of why she's pairing certain flavors. Her **food** doesn't call up any memories for her, but she also knows her food is about looking back and honoring her roots. It's also about looking forward and growing. Now, Emoni knows that she's ready for the journey ahead, even if she doesn't know exactly what comes next.

It's not entirely true that Emoni's food doesn't call up memories for her; remember that fried plantains dredge up memories of her first sexual experience. But here, she suggests that in general, food for her helps her conceptualize where she fits into her family and her community. Feeding loved ones is also how Emoni thanks them for their help and support.



119. MOVING FORWARD

A few days ago, Emoni, 'Buela, and Julio sat down to hash out Emoni's plan. Now, Emoni is walking alone to Café Sorrel; she's kept the card from Chef Ayden's friend for months. Entering the restaurant, Emoni asks to speak to the chef. After an anxious 10 minutes, Chef Williams finally barges out of the kitchen. Emoni introduces herself, and Chef Williams recognizes Emoni. Emoni says she'd like a job, and she has her family's help so she can commit to long hours. She'll be attending Drexel's Culinary Arts program part-time, so she could be here to work the **lunch** rush. Shrugging, Emoni adds that she wants to work and learn in Philly so she can give back to her hometown. Chef Williams asks when Emoni can start, and Emoni says she can start today.

As Emoni approaches Café Sorrel, she does so with her family's full support. They want to see her succeed—and presumably, they accept her desire to both receive a formal education in culinary arts, as well as to learn on the job at Café Sorrel. Emoni also now recognizes the importance of something Julio taught her, which is to stay connected to her roots and her wider Philly community. This community is the one that raised Emoni, and so it's the one she feels compelled to one day, hopefully, give back to.



120.

In an email to Aunt Sarah, Emoni thanks her for her mom's **pound cake** recipe—Julio cried, but he ate the entire thing. He seems to be preparing to stay for a while, though Emoni knows he won't stay forever. Emoni says that Tyrone is taking Emma on vacation in two weeks, so Emoni would love to come and visit then. Finally, Emoni says she completed the assignment Aunt Sarah sent her to create a recipe inspired by her name. She says she only understood this year why her mom wanted to give her a name that meant "faith," so her recipe is flambé shrimp—you have to trust that lighting it on fire will work and be delicious.

Finally, Emoni has the opportunity to make a recipe her mom developed, thereby connecting more with her past and her family history. In the present, though, this also allows Emoni to take her relationship with Julio a step further—he seems more willing now to trust her and begin working through his difficult emotions. Tyrone's support allows Emoni to finally connect in person with Aunt Sarah, something Emoni has felt unable to do for years now. Finally, Emoni's flambé shrimp recipe crystallizes one of the biggest things she's learned throughout the novel: to trust herself and her instincts, and even if things are scary (as when one lights something on fire), things will probably work out just fine.





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