

# Like Water for Chocolate



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LAURA ESQUIVEL

Laura Alicia Palomares Esquivel was born in Mexico City, Mexico, the daughter of César Esquivel and Josefa Valdés. Esquivel first worked as a kindergarten teacher. She started her writing career by writing stories and plays for her students to perform. She married director Alfonso Arau in 1975. She began writing for television, and in 1989 she wrote her first and best-known novel, *Like Water for Chocolate*. The novel became popular internationally, and was adapted to film in 1992. She has written and published continually since then. Her works include her memoir, *Between Two Fires* (1995), as well as *The Law of Love* (1996), *Intimas Suculencias* (1998), *Estrellita Marinera* (1999) *Libro de las Emociones* (2000), *Swift as Desire* (2001), *Malinche* (2006), *Pierced by the Sun* (2016) and *El Diario de Tita* (2016). Esquivel has also worked as a politician since 2008. In 2012, Esquivel ran and was elected as the Morena party's Federal Representative to the Mexican government. She is currently divorced and continues to live in Mexico City.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Most of the novel is set during the Mexican Revolution, a revolution against established rule which went on from about 1910-1920 and also took on aspects of a civil war. At the beginning of the novel, the war has a minimal impact on the character's lives. It makes trade and imports difficult, and stories of violence are told as if they were happening far away. As the novel progresses, the war begins to affect their lives in intimate ways. Tita's sister Gertrudis runs away with a captain of the rebel army. Later, the federals lay siege to Piedras Negras and briefly capture Pedro. The war soon brings famine and threats of violence directly to the De la Garza ranch. The novel doesn't describe the end of the war. However, the final chapter fast-forwards to the 1930s, when Model T cars with multiple gears become available in Mexico. Thematically, the novel focuses on the conflict between traditional values and modern moral relativism. Through the life experience of Tita, Esquivel depicts the early twentieth century as a critical era of social and political revolution in Northern Mexico. Through the histories of other characters, the novel also references North American colonialism and slavery in the United States. Tita's mother, Mama Elena, was forbidden from marrying her childhood sweetheart Jose Treviño because he was mixed-race or *mulatto*. His father was Mexican, but his mother was the child of slaves from the United States. Before the civil war, they escaped slavery in the American South and fled to Mexico. Their descendants continued to experience racism and prejudice in

Mexico. Through the story of Morning Light, the grandmother of Dr. John Brown, Esquivel references colonizers from the United States and Europe settling into Northern Mexico during the early to mid nineteenth century.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

A genre called Magical Realism originated in Latin America in the mid-twentieth century, with roots stretching back to indigenous pre-Colombian mythologies as well as to the European literary movements of Modernism and Surrealism. The beginning of Magical Realism is usually associated with the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, who began blurring the lines between fantasy and reality in his short story collections. In the 1960s and 80s, Colombian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez further developed the tenets of the genre, bringing popular international attention to Magical Realism with his novellas and novels. His most famous work, [One Hundred Years of Solitude](#) (1967), tells the multi-generational drama of the Buendía family. Through *One Hundred Years* and later works, Marquez established one of the defining characteristics of Magical Realism, which is that the characters accept paranormal events and allows these to fold into the logic of their everyday reality. The magical realism of his novels reflects the instability of colonialism (European domination of South and Latin America) as well as the flexibility of individuals and families to survive constant change from exterior forces. Beginning with writers like the Chilean Isabel Allende, female authors began to access and change the genre. Allende, who published [The House of the Spirits](#) in 1982, is commonly compared to Marquez in terms of her style and form. Yet, Allende differed through her emphasis on the female experience and her focus on the persistence of hope despite experiences of violence and suffering. [The House of the Spirits](#) tells the story of the Trueba family, whose patriarch Esteban is a hard-working, violent man who opposes the rising Socialist party. Esquivel's work, in contrast with Allende, is more inspired by the genres of romance, allowing characters to be rewarded for their love and goodness. Yet, Esquivel parallels Allende's themes of male sexual violence, female resilience, and the female connection to nurturing and mysticism. Esquivel's own novels also share similarities with *Like Water for Chocolate*. In particular, in her memoir *Between Two Fires* (1995) Esquivel blends equal parts cookbook, biography and autobiography to tell the story of how she herself learned the magic of food and cooking through the most influential women in her own life. In her novel, *the Law of Love* (1996), Esquivel tells the story of Azucena Martinez, a woman living in the year 2200 who has finally balanced out her karma from thousands of previous lives and therefore earned her right to meet her twin soul, Rodrigo

Sanchez. In *Swift as Desire*, Esquivel tells the story of Don Jubilo, a man who can read people's innermost feelings and translate them to others. Yet, he suffers mysterious tragedy and personal loss, including a rift that grows between him and his wife, Lucha. Esquivel's work is broadly varied, ranging in setting and style.

## KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Like Water for Chocolate* (Original Spanish: *Como Agua Para Chocolate*)
- **When Written:** 1989
- **Where Written:** Mexico City, Mexico
- **When Published:** 1989 (Mexico) 1995 (United States)
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Fiction; Magical Realism
- **Genre:** Magical Realism
- **Setting:** Near Piedras Negras, Northern Mexico. 1895-1920.
- **Climax:** The climax of the novel occurs in Chapter 11, when Tita confesses to her fiancée, John the truth of her affair with her brother-in-law, Pedro. John reacts by telling her he will still marry her, but that she must first decide for herself what life will make her happiest. Tita has never had so much control over her own destiny. Now, she must choose whether to marry John and start a new life with him or break off their engagement and remain as Pedro's mistress.
- **Antagonist:** Mama Elena
- **Point of View:** The novel begins and ends in first person, but most of the story is in close third person.

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Like Water's Inspiration:** The stories in *Like Water for Chocolate* were inspired by Esquivel's experience growing up and her close relationship with the grandmother who taught her to cook. Many of the female character's stories were inspired by stories passed down from her mother and other women in her life. In her memoir *Between Two Fires*, Esquivel discusses her own thoughts on the magical relationship between food and emotion through the lens of her own experiences.

**International Acclaim:** *Like Water for Chocolate* was Mexico's bestselling novel in 1990.

**Film:** The novel was adapted to a Spanish-language film released in Mexico in 1992.



## PLOT SUMMARY

*Like Water for Chocolate* is set in Northern Mexico during the Mexican Revolution, from about 1910-1920. Each chapter begins with a recipe in Tita's cookbook, which has been inherited by the story's narrator, Tita's great-niece.

Before Tita's birth, she **cries** in the womb while her mother, Elena de la Garza, is chopping onions. Her tears send "Mama Elena" into labor, and Tita is born on the kitchen table. Two days after her birth, her father, Juan de la Garza, dies of a heart attack. Mama Elena must manage the ranch, so she leaves Tita's care to Nacha, the cook, whom Tita comes to see as her "real mother." Unlike her older sisters, Gertrudis and Rosaura, Tita develops a deep love of cooking.

One holiday season when Tita is fifteen years old, she tells Mama Elena that a suitor, Pedro Musquiz, wants to come speak to her. Mama Elena angrily reminds Tita of the family tradition demanding the youngest daughter stay at home and care for her mother (until the mother's death) instead of getting married. When Pedro comes to ask for Tita's hand, Mama Elena offers to let him marry her older daughter Rosaura instead, and Pedro agrees. That night, feeling **chilled** and devastated, Tita continues to crochet the **wedding bedspread** she had secretly been making for her potential wedding with Pedro. She remembers when she first met Pedro the year before at a holiday party, where he declared that he would love her forever.

On the night before the wedding, Tita's tears fall into the cake batter and icing. In the receiving line after the ceremony, Pedro whispers to Tita that he is only marrying Rosaura to be closer to Tita. During the reception, everyone who eats the cake is overcome with heartbreak and sick stomachs, except for Tita. Tita, unbeknownst to herself, **magically** infused the cake with her repressed sadness. That night, Tita comes home to find Nacha dead, clutching a photo of her late fiancée, whom Mama Elena's mother had sent away. Mama Elena thinks Tita poisoned the cake, and beats her so badly she is left bedridden.

A year later, Pedro and Rosaura are living at the ranch, and Rosaura is pregnant. Pedro and Tita communicate their feelings only through Tita's cooking and Pedro's compliments her meals. One day, Pedro brings Tita roses, and she puts them into a recipe for Quail in Rose Petal sauce. That night at the dinner table, Gertrudis is overwhelmed with sexual arousal while eating the dish. After dinner, she runs outside to shower. The **heat** from her body catches the shower on fire, and she runs naked into a field. In a nearby battleground, rebel captain Juan Alejandrez sees a rose-colored cloud and deserts his troop to gallop after it. He meets Gertrudis in the field and scoops her onto his horse, where they begin to make love. A week later Mama Elena learns that Gertrudis is working in a brothel outside town, and she burns Gertrudis' birth certificate.

A few months later, the nearby town of Piedras Negras falls under siege by federal troops. Mama Elena and Chenchu are in town when fighting breaks out, and they have to hide. At the ranch, Rosaura goes into labor, and Pedro leaves to get Dr. John Brown. Pedro is kidnapped by the federals, leaving only Tita with Rosaura. With no knowledge of babies, Tita prays to Nacha for help, and successfully delivers her nephew. Tita fills

with unexpected love for baby Roberto. When the fighting abates, everyone returns home. Dr. Brown examines Rosaura, and is stunned by Tita's beauty and natural skill. Rosaura is too sick to nurse, but Tita discovers she has the supernatural ability to lactate, a secret she shares only with Pedro. At Roberto's baptism, Tita and all the guests who eat her food feel genuinely hopeful and contented, despite the chaotic state of national affairs.

One night a few weeks later, Pedro sneaks up on Tita and they passionately kiss until they hear Mama Elena call for Tita. A few days later, Mama Elena sends Rosaura, Pedro and Roberto to live in San Antonio. Tita becomes deeply depressed.

A month later, the fighting in Piedras Negras has intensified, and food supplies are short. Rebel troops arrive at the ranch, asking for food. The captain, unbeknownst to Mama Elena, is the same Juan Alejandrez who carried Gertrudis away. Unsatisfied with the live chickens Mama Elena offers them, one of the men suggests they invade the cellar. Mama Elena responds by shooting the chickens dead out of the soldier's hand and threatening to kill the captain. Juan declares his admiration for Mama Elena. His men hunt all of the pigeons on the dovecote and depart.

A few days later, Chenchu brings news from San Antonio that baby Roberto has died. Tita accuses Mama Elena of killing Roberto by sending him away. Mama Elena punches Tita, breaking her nose. Tita climbs onto the dovecote and stays the night there, feeding worms to an orphaned baby pigeon until it dies. The next day, Mama Elena orders Dr. John Brown to take Tita to an insane asylum. Instead, he takes her to his home, where he lives with his young son Alex.

At his home, the widowed Dr. Brown takes care of Tita and nurses her back to health. Refusing to speak, she spends all day crocheting her bedspread. In John's laboratory, she has visions of his grandmother, Morning Light, a Kikapu doctor who cured diseases with botanical remedies. John tells Tita about Morning Light's philosophy that everyone is born with a box of matches inside them. To light their inner matches on fire, each person must find the right person to love and the right kinds of experiences to kindle strong emotion. If the matches are all lit at once, a bright tunnel appears and the soul leaves the body. Over the next several months, Tita's health and spirits improve, and she begins to speak again.

A few months later, Chenchu appears at John's house with Ox-Tail soup for Tita. She brings a letter from Gertrudis, in which she explains that she is working at a brothel to "quench the fire inside" her. Tita tells Chenchu she will never return to the ranch. That night, John tells Tita that he plans to propose to marry her.

After Chenchu returns home, a group of bandits attack the ranch and rape her. Mama Elena tries to protect her, but the bandits knock her out. Tita returns to the ranch to care for

Mama Elena, who was left paralyzed by the incident. Tita sends Chenchu away to live in town so she can recover away from Mama Elena. All of Tita's cooking tastes bitter to Mama Elena, who is convinced that Tita is poisoning her. To wash away Tita's "poison," Mama Elena begins secretly taking Ipecac syrup to induce vomiting. A few weeks later, she dies from overuse of the syrup.

While dressing Mama Elena for her wake, Tita discovers a secret box of letters from a man named Jose Treviño. She learns that he was Mama Elena's childhood sweetheart and that Mama Elena's parents separated the two because Jose was a *mulatto* (a child of both Spanish and African descent). Even after marrying Tita's father, Mama Elena continued the affair, which resulted in Gertrudis' birth.

Pedro and Rosaura attend the funeral, and thereafter return to live at the ranch. Rosaura gives birth to another child, Esperanza. After the delivery, John performs a surgery to save Rosaura's life that involves removing her uterus. Chenchu returns, along with Jesús, her former childhood sweetheart and now husband. Following the mourning period for Mama Elena, John officially proposes to Tita and she accepts, determined to learn to love him as she loves Pedro.

John travels to the United States to retrieve his Aunt Mary for the wedding. One night while he is away, Pedro catches Tita alone, and the two have sex for the first time, creating magical fireworks. Tita becomes wracked with guilt, and soon realizes she is pregnant.

A month later, Gertrudis returns home along with an entire rebel troop over whom she is now general. At her side is Juan Alejandrez, who she reunited with after joining the army. The ghost of Mama Elena appears to Tita and hurls curses at her. During Gertrudis' weeklong celebratory stay, she comforts Tita and soothes her guilt. She makes Tita tell Pedro about her pregnancy, and Pedro suggests they run away together. When Mama Elena's ghost returns, Tita demands that she leave her in peace. Tita's belly deflates, and it turns out she isn't pregnant after all. The ghost turns into a firecracker that catches Pedro on fire in the middle of a party. Seeing Pedro reach for Tita in front of all the guests, Rosaura shuts herself in her room. The next day, Gertrudis and her troop leave for battle. Rosaura warns Tita never to humiliate her in public again, and threatens to keep Esperanza away from her. Chenchu has a baby.

When John returns, Tita tells him that she has lost her virginity to another man and can't marry him. John tells Tita that he doesn't care, and asks only that she decide which man will make her happy. Tita decides to stay with Pedro. Rosaura refuses to let Pedro divorce her, however. The three create an agreement to live together peacefully and share Esperanza's upbringing, so long as Pedro and Tita keep their relationship a secret.

As Esperanza grows up, Tita spends many hours with her in the kitchen, teaching her about life, love, and cooking. Many years

later, Esperanza is reunited with John's son Alex at a party. They fall in love, and Alex asks for Esperanza's hand. Rosaura refuses, determined to continue the tradition of demanding that the youngest daughter devote her life to her mother. Pedro and Tita oppose Rosaura, and the three enter into a bitter fight. Rosaura dies a few weeks later of acute indigestion.

A year later, Esperanza and Alex marry. At the wedding, everyone gets suddenly aroused after eating Tita's chiles in walnut sauce. Everyone rushes off to find a place to make love. Left alone, Tita and Pedro have the most passionate sex of their lives. A bright tunnel appears before each of them. Pedro enters it, but Tita resists. Realizing that Pedro is dead, Tita begins eating candles and recalling every moment with Pedro. The tunnel reappears. Pedro awaits her at the end. Their bodies catch fire, creating a huge volcanic explosion that leaves the soil fertile forever after. Tita's cookbook is all that remains, an heirloom Esperanza later passes onto her daughter, the novel's narrator.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Tita de la Garza** – Tita is the novel's protagonist. She is the youngest daughter of Juan and Elena de la Garza. As the youngest daughter, she is forbidden from marrying because she must devote her life to taking care of her mother. Tita experiences emotion with great intensity and tends to connect easily to people. She loves cooking and has a **magical** ability to infuse her feelings into her cuisine, causing all those who eat her meals to feel her emotions as their own. Tita is nurturing and self-sacrificing, but desperately seeks freedom from her abusive mother. She is deeply in love with Pedro and struggles with the conflict and suffering that comes with forbidden love.

**Mama Elena (Elena de la Garza)** – “Mama Elena” is the matriarch of the De la Garza family and the novel's antagonist. She is the wife of Juan De la Garza and the mother of Tita, Rosaura, and Gertrudis. Widowed after Tita's birth, Mama Elena runs the family's ranch with a firm and efficient hand. As a young woman, she was forbidden from being with her sweetheart, Jose Treviño, because he was black. Even after she marries Juan de la Garza, she continues a secret affair with Jose until his death. To her children and those who work for her, she is unfeeling and harsh. She is especially insufferable to Tita, whom she abuses both emotionally and physically. Her ferocious nature makes her a powerful protector of those under her care, despite her often turning that ferocity on the very ones she is supposed to protect.

**Rosaura** – Rosaura is Tita's older sister. She is Pedro's wife, and the mother of Roberto and Esperanza. As a child, she is a “picky eater” who is afraid of the kitchen. She agrees to marry Pedro, Tita's sweetheart, even though she knows he doesn't love her

and that it will hurt Tita. Rosaura is deeply attached to traditional family values and obsessed with social status, and will do anything to “keep up appearances.” She has moments of genuinely loving her children and her sisters, but she struggles to authentically connect with them. She dies towards the end of the novel from acute indigestion.

**Gertrudis** – Gertrudis is Rosaura and Tita's sister. She is born to Mama Elena through her illicit affair with Jose Treviño. As a child, Gertrudis loves music and dance. As a young woman, she is suddenly inspired by passion and runs away to make love with captain Juan Alejandrez. Because he alone can't “quench the **fire**” inside her, she then goes to work at a brothel. She eventually joins the rebel army, and works her way through the ranks, becoming a general. Gertrudis eventually reunites with and marries Juan Alejandrez and has children with him. Gertrudis is affectionate, joyful and independent-minded, and a representative of all the positive aspects of ferocity and passion in femininity.

**Pedro Musquiz** – Pedro is the son of don Pascual Musquiz. He is Tita's childhood sweetheart and remains in love with her throughout his life. He is also the husband of her sister, Rosaura, and the father of two children, Roberto and Esperanza. As a young man, Pedro is afraid of showing disrespect, and instead seeks discreet opportunities to be with Tita. As he gets older, he becomes more jealous and possessive of Tita, as well as more fearless in his expressions of love. He is a complex character, who at times acts with self-restraint and consideration, and at other times acts rashly, aggressively, and selfishly.

**Esperanza** – Esperanza is the youngest child of Rosaura and Pedro, and the wife of Alex Brown. Her name, chosen by her aunt Tita, means, “hope.” She grows up spending hours in the kitchen with Tita, who becomes her best friend. As her youngest and only daughter, Rosaura plans to make Esperanza follow the family tradition of devoting her life to her mother. Pedro and Tita are Esperanza's advocates. After Rosaura's death, Esperanza marries Alex. She is romantic and loves cooking, like Tita. She becomes the mother to the novel's unnamed narrator.

**Nacha** – Nacha is the elderly cook at the De la Garza ranch. She begins working there as a young woman, when Mama Elena is still a child. She becomes engaged, but the mother of Mama Elena sends her fiancée away for unknown reasons. Nacha never marries or has her own children. She feeds and raises Tita, and Tita comes to see her as her “real mother.” Nacha dies early in the novel, just after Rosaura and Pedro's wedding. After her death, however, her spirit continues to mentor Tita, whispering recipes and remedies in her ear. Nacha is empathetic, wise, and quietly subversive.

**Chencha** – Chencha is the De la Garza's maid and Tita's friend. She begins working at the ranch at a young age. She skillfully

uses hard work and imaginative lies to manage Mama Elena's cruel dominion. With the other women in the household, she likes to tell fantastical, astonishing stories. As a young woman, her parents separate her from her sweetheart, Jesús. While working at the ranch, she is raped by a rebel troop and suffers a terrible depression. Later, she reunites with Jesús and the two marry and have a baby. Chenchá and Tita have a deep, loyal friendship that lasts through the years.

**Dr. John Brown** – John is the De la Garza's family doctor and Tita's fiancée. John is a widower and the father of Alex Brown. He is of mixed heritage, as the grandson of North-American immigrants and of Morning Light, a Kikapu woman. He rescues Tita from Mama Elena's abuse, and brings her to live with him. He falls in love with her and they become engaged. Tita leaves him to be with Pedro, but John remains in love with her. He is gracious, open-minded, and generous.

**Morning Light/ "The Old Indian Woman"/ "The Kikapu"** – Morning Light is the grandmother of Dr. John Brown. She comes from an indigenous tribe called the Kikapu. As a young woman, she is taken captive by John's grandfather, who brings her home as his wife. She faces prejudice from her husband's family, who call her "The Kikapu." Morning Light studies and uses plant-based medicine and passes her knowledge onto her grandson. She is wise and has many well-developed philosophies about the soul. She appears only as a ghost to Tita and in John's stories from the past.

**Juan de la Garza** – Juan de la Garza is Mama Elena's husband. He is the biological father of Tita and Rosaura. Little is said about Juan's character. He dies from a heart attack two days after Tita's birth when he finds out through tavern gossip that his wife was unfaithful and that Gertrudis isn't his child.

**Juan Alejandre** – Juan is a captain in the rebel army. He is the lover and later husband of Gertrudis. He first appears on horseback when he carries Gertrudis away to make love. He then leaves Gertrudis, unable to satisfy her endless sexual desire. The two are later reunited, and they quickly fall back in love and get married. Juan is the father of a few unnamed children with Gertrudis. He is musically gifted, openhearted, and occasionally jealous.

**Jose Treviño** – Jose Treviño is Mama Elena's secret lover and childhood sweetheart. He is described as "*mulatto*" because his father was Mexican and his mother was black, the child of escaped slaves from the United States. He is the biological father of Gertrudis. By the time Tita discovers their affair, Treviño is already dead.

**Jesús** – Jesús is Chenchá's childhood sweetheart and later husband, and the father of their baby. As a young man, Chenchá's parents send him away. After years apart, he meets her again and proposes marriage. Contrary to Chenchá's fears, he doesn't judge her when he learns she isn't a virgin. After their wedding, he comes to work with her on the ranch. He is

very quiet and compliant.

**Mama Elena's mother** – From what little is said about the mother of Mama Elena, it can be inferred that she was tyrannical like her daughter. As the matriarch of the family when Nacha was a young servant, Mama Elena's mother separated Nacha from her fiancée by sending him away for no reason. She also prevented Mama Elena from being with her true love, Jose Treviño, and instead pressured her to marry Juan de la Garza instead.

**Jovita** – Jovita is Tita's childhood schoolteacher. She is widowed at a young age and left to raise a child as a single mother. She never has any suitors or love interests again. Jovita goes half mad, staying up all night to clean the streets each night before coming to work at school the next morning. Tita believes it is Jovita's loneliness that drives her to madness.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Don Pascual Musquiz** – Don Pascual Musquiz is Pedro's father. He supports his son's decision to ask for Tita's hand in marriage, and he later questions his son's choice to marry Rosaura even though he doesn't love her.

**Roberto** – Roberto is the first child of Rosaura and Pedro. Tita delivers and nurses him, and loves him as her own son. He dies as a baby after Mama Elena sends Pedro and Rosaura away to live in San Antonio.

**Alex Brown** – Alex is Dr. John Brown's son, the husband of Esperanza, and the father of the novel's narrator. His mother dies when he is very young. Like his father, he becomes a doctor. When they meet as young adults, he and Esperanza fall in love at first sight.

**The Narrator** – The unnamed narrator of the novel is the daughter of Esperanza and Alex Brown. She seems to have a special connection to her great-aunt Tita, though the two never met, and she also loves to cook.

**Aunt Mary** – Aunt Mary is Dr. John Brown's elderly aunt from the United States. She is deaf and reads lips. She is gracious and kind to Tita.

**John's grandfather** – The grandfather of Dr. John Brown was a white man who came to Mexico along with his parents from North America. He kidnapped Morning Light and brought her home as his wife.

**Mary (John's great-grandmother)** – Mary was Dr. John Brown's great-grandmother. She was from North America and opposed to her son marrying an indigenous woman, Morning Light.

**Sergeant Treviño** – Sergeant Treviño is one of the soldiers in Gertrudis' troop. He is fiercely loyal to Gertrudis because he is secretly in love with her. (There is no stated relationship between Jose Treviño and Sergeant Treviño.)

**The Loboses** – The Loboses are the nearest neighbors to the De la Garza family.

**Paquita Lobos** – Paquita Lobos is an older member of the Lobos family, the De la Garza's neighbors. She is fond of Tita, though she tends to make quick moral judgments about her behavior.

**Nicolas** – Nicolas is the longtime ranch manager for the De La Garza family.

**Rosalio and Guadalupe** – Rosalio and Guadalupe are the ranch hands for the De la Garza family.

**Father Ignacio** – Father Ignacio is the priest at the church that the De la Garza family attends near Piedras Negras.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### TRADITION VS. REVOLUTION

*Like Water for Chocolate* takes place during the Mexican Revolution, which challenged social and political systems and provided a context for

individuals to question existing values and structures. It is against this national scene that the protagonist, Tita, and her sisters face their mother's authority and their society's expectations of women. The individual struggle to rebel, like the national struggle for liberation from the oligarchy (a government run by a few powerful people only), can be painful and tumultuous for the self and others.

The family unit is central to the traditional social order. Within the old system, children are accountable to their parents as their closest authority well into adulthood. From an early age, Tita and her sisters are taught to be obedient to their mother, Mama Elena, and to social rules concerning proper female behavior. Tita's mother teaches her children that self-sacrifice and duty are expressions of love.

Tita's mother tells her from a young age that she will never be allowed to marry or have her own family, due to a family tradition requiring that the youngest daughter dedicate her life to taking care of her mother until the mother dies. Believing she has no other choice, Tita resigns to a life of servitude to her mother, even when Pedro proposes to her in the beginning of the novel. Tita is often reprimanded by her mother for even the smallest forms of rebellion, including not performing household chores exactly as her mother likes or not addressing her as "Mami" in the right tone of voice.

The Revolution creates the catalyst for disorder and violence,

which inevitably lead to suffering. The chaos brought by the fighting threatens the safety and wellbeing of communities, creating famine and making everyday life dangerous. Early on the novel, Roberto's wet nurse dies by gunshot when she accidentally enters the crossfire. The disorder of the Revolution also inordinately affects the novel's female characters. Early on a group of rebels invade Tita's home, destroying her family's food supplies. Later, a group of bandits take advantage of the chaos to attack the ranch. They beat Mama Elena and rape Chenchu, the maid.

At the same time, the Revolution brings the promise of positive social change and liberation from unfair oligarchs and systems. Tita, who hates tyranny in all forms, supports the rebels. She hates the federal troops, who seize cities and cause entire towns to suffer while they fight to re-establish dominance. The Revolution provides the context for Tita's sister Gertrudis to break through gender roles and reach powerful social status as a general. By achieving such a high rank in the rebel army, Gertrudis defies Mama Elena's and society's rules for women and builds a life outside of the patriarchy.

Like the political rebellion, individual rebellion can also create suffering and uncertainty, while still holding the promise of future liberation. Tita's little rebellions against her mother as she grows up cause her pain, as she must face her mother's harsh physical and emotional punishments for each expression of agency. When Tita asks her mother to reconsider her stance of continuing the family tradition, Mama Elena tells Tita that she isn't allowed to have opinions, and gives Tita the silent treatment for a week. Mama Elena soon after offers Rosaura to Pedro, a move so cruel that it can only be seen as punishment for Tita's attempt to challenge authority and tradition.

Tita's eventual choice to start a sexual relationship with Pedro, whom she has always believed to be her true love, brings her great joy and ecstasy. By society's definition, however, Tita's relationship with Pedro is an illicit affair. After they begin their affair, Tita is so plagued with guilt that she becomes physically and emotionally distraught. In keeping with the novel's **magical** realism, Tita's shame manifests as a phantom pregnancy. It isn't until after Tita faces Mama Elena's ghost and declares that she "knows who she is" that Tita is relieved of her phantom pregnancy and her incessant guilt.

Ultimately, Tita's actions show that for her, liberation is worth the price she must pay for it. She breaks off her engagement with Dr. John Brown, a kindhearted man who could offer her status and legitimacy as his wife. Instead, she chooses to stay with Pedro, even though that means keeping their relationship a secret and navigating Rosaura's feelings and demands as his lawful wife. To her, being true to herself and following her heart is more important than social legitimacy, propriety, or society's moral codes.

The novel doesn't state whether the success of the Mexican Revolution absolves it of its violence. It does, however, make

clear through the example of Tita that freedom should be fought for even if it comes at a cost. The suffering brought on from the struggle for liberation pales in comparison to the pain of remaining compliant to oppressive customs or traditional values.



## FEMININITY AND WOMEN'S ROLES

Within the historical context of greater social change, the novel allows femininity to be defined differently between characters and within each character's development. Challenging the classic dichotomy between the "virgin/mother" and the "whore" (traditional stereotypes of femininity), the novel allows each female character to struggle with her needs for belonging and security, as well as her desires for adventure, sex, and liberation.

On the surface, Tita fulfills many characteristics of the pure virginal archetype, such as chastity and obedience. Following the family tradition forbidding her from marrying, Tita at first resigns herself to a virginal life. She is prepared to deny her own desires for love and freedom and ignore her loneliness. At the same time, Tita also embodies the ideals of the perfect wife and mother. Though forbidden from having her own family, Tita is the primary caregiver for her mother, sister Rosaura, Pedro, and their children. Her role as the mother figure is emphasized by her miraculous ability to nurse Roberto, Rosaura's first child. As a self-sacrificing virgin-mother figure, the character of Tita evokes ideas of the Virgin Mary.

However, Tita shatters the Virgin Mary image through her defiant thoughts and desires, and through her eventual rebellion. Though Mama Elena forbids her from expressing her feelings, Tita's magical ability to infuse her cooking with her desires and emotions allows her an outlet for rebellion. Through her food, she intimately affects people around her even when she feels powerless. In time, Tita must decide whether to remain obedient and become a shell of herself, or to stand up to Mama Elena. Eventually, after a complete nervous breakdown brings her to the home of Dr. Brown, Tita defies Mama Elena and refuses to come home. Tita gradually musters the courage to pursue Pedro's love, even when he is still married to Rosaura. She gives up the possibility of a proper marriage with John in order to live the rest of her life as Pedro's mistress.

Rosaura, meanwhile, represents a fractured, hollow version of the wife/mother figure. Determined to maintain the image of a perfect life, she never challenges tradition or society's values. Rosaura accepts without question when her mother offers to marry her off to Pedro. Rather than searching for her own path, Rosaura begins her adult life accepting choices others make for her. Rosaura loses her relationship with Tita by marrying Pedro, just as she later loses her relationship with Esperanza by continuing the family tradition of forbidding the youngest daughter from marrying. After Tita and Pedro decide to

continue their affair, Rosaura resigns herself to a loveless marriage by refusing to allow Pedro a divorce. Throughout her life, Rosaura becomes increasingly miserable and ultimately dies of chronic indigestion – a symbol for her failure to nourish or be nourished in life.

Like Rosaura, Mama Elena represents another warped version of the mother figure. But unlike Rosaura, Mama Elena is powerful and devoid of feeling. She shows no warmth of affection, and instead uses her maternal role to violently abuse and control her children and servants. If Tita is the embodiment of the perfect mother, Mama Elena is its heartless opposite. Even though Mama Elena demands her daughters remain chaste and obedient, she personally defies traditional female ideals of chastity and submission. She is the novel's most powerful character, capable of inspiring fear in every man or woman who crosses her. Though she denies her daughters the pursuit of true love, Mama Elena hides her own history of forbidden love and infidelities. She is a complex character, who both embodies tradition and authority and defies the patriarchy through her own rebellion.

Gertrudis, like Mama Elena, is another anti-feminine female character. Unlike Mama Elena, however, Gertrudis embraces her rebellion and encourages other women to do the same. Driven to a mystical, passionate frenzy when she eats Tita's cooking, Gertrudis runs away to make love with Juan Alejandro, a captain in the rebel army. She later goes to work in a brothel because he couldn't "quench the **fire** inside" her. Gertrudis never attempts to hide her sexual adventures, but openly talks about them without shame. Later, by achieving status as a general in the Revolution, Gertrudis defies the social norm that men fight and women stay at home. Gertrudis not only lives and fights alongside men, but also dominates them. At the same time, Gertrudis is considerate of her soldiers. She takes care not to insult Sergeant Treviño when he struggles to follow a recipe for her favorite dessert. She warmly encourages Tita to accept herself and her desires, and to fight against the tyranny of tradition. Unlike her mother, Gertrudis represents female liberation and power that threatens to shake the system through empowerment of others.

In *Like Water for Chocolate*, there is no such thing as a "good" or a "bad" woman. Women are capable of an array of complex and often contradictory emotions and characteristics. While the novel overall favors revolution over tradition, it takes a nuanced view of traditional female ideals. Warmth and affection are positive female ideals, while chastity and obedience are negative. Tita and Gertrudis are both cast in a positive, heroic light, while Mama Elena and Rosaura are portrayed as unhappy and often villainous. The key distinctions are that despite their different paths, Tita and Gertrudis are both warm and loving, and they seek autonomy for themselves and for other women. Esquivel doesn't value Tita's domesticity over Gertrudis' life as a soldier, but rather emphasizes the value of a woman's right to

choose her path and support others' paths.



## LOVE

The novel portrays love as a **magical** force capable of defying reality. It is genuine love, not social or biological structures, that creates familial and romantic bonds. True love is a unique event, capable of incredible resilience. Furthermore, true love doesn't always answer to social codes of morality.

In the novel romantic love forms a spiritual bond that matters more than the formal structure of marriage. Central to the book is the notion that Pedro and Tita are each other's true loves. Tita and Pedro swear their undying love when they first meet each other, and though forbidden by Mama Elena and later by Pedro's marriage to Rosaura, the lovers struggle with their prevailing desire to be together. They remain loyal to each other, even though Rosaura has the official title of Pedro's wife. Tita is unable to recreate the same kind of love with anyone else, including the kind Dr. John Brown, who loves and supports her unconditionally. After Tita and Pedro begin a secret affair, Gertrudis eases Tita's guilt by reasoning that true love is more sacred than the roles of husband and wife.

Just as romantic love often exists outside of marriage, Esquivel also shows that maternal love can exist outside of biological mother-child relationships. Tita considers Nacha, who loves her and whom she loves, to be her real mother. Tita's love for Rosaura's children is immense, allowing her to love and care for them as if they were her own children.

Love defies the borders of reality, creating the magical realism that permeates the novel. The pain of Tita's forbidden love causes her to develop the magical power to convey her emotions through her cooking. When she feels heartbroken, those who eat her food feel heartbroken as if her pain were their own. When Pedro and Tita finally make love, their bedroom explodes with firework-like magical colors and musical sounds, which can be seen and heard from outside the door. When they die, their "inner matches" are all lit, creating a **fire** that consumes them. In a spectacular scene, the fire creates a volcano that shoots firecrackers into the sky and leaves the land covered in fertile ash.

Even outside of romance, maternal love creates magic. Tita's breast magically fills with milk, even though she is a virgin, purely out of her love for baby Roberto. The mother-child love between Tita and Nacha allows them to communicate even after Nacha's death. Nacha's ghost whispers recipes into Tita's ears, and guides Tita through delivering Rosaura's baby.

The pursuit of romantic love, though noble, can bring arduous moral dilemmas, however, which can have painful consequences both to the lovers and to others involved. Tita and Pedro's adulterous relationship brings suffering to Rosaura and difficult complications to Tita's life. Tita breaks Dr. Brown's

heart by breaking her engagement to him, despite his immense kindness and love for her. Because Tita loves Pedro, she would rather remain his mistress and miss the opportunity to be with a man who would give her a legitimate social standing as his wife. The novel validates the concept of true love in the end by showing the two lovers as lighting all of each other's "inner matches" in the end. As Morning Light taught John, that event results only from the complete happiness that occurs when someone finds the perfect expression of true love.

The novel also justifies the pursuit of true love by depicting the unhappiest characters as those who have given up on true love. In contrast, the most joyful and loving characters are those who have found and fought for true love. Mama Elena, who lost her lover Jose Treviño, rejects love by denying her daughters the chance to pursue it for themselves. She becomes bitter, unhappy, and cruel. Likewise, Rosaura accepts a loveless marriage to Pedro over the possibility of finding her own love. She loses her relationships with her sisters, and becomes consumed with jealousy and insecurity. In contrast, Gertrudis and Tita don't give up on their true loves. They both nurture a spirit of love and honesty, bringing people together around them and maintaining their relationship with each other despite years of separation. The novel ultimately portrays true love as a life-giving force that nurtures the spirit and creates more happiness than it does pain. The pursuit of true love is key to being true to oneself, which leads to freedom.



## EMOTION AND REPRESSION

Within the novel, characters with intense emotions are portrayed as more fully alive. The possession of a wide range of emotions represents a healthy, liberated spirit—but social norms and family dynamics, if left unbalanced by values of individual freedom, can lead to repression of normal emotions. Abusive relationships, in particular, punish normal experiences of emotion and can lead to physical and emotional sickness. Repression is linked to self-sacrifice and duty, while emotion is linked to rebellion and freedom. The female experience, layered with expectations of self-sacrifice and duty to family, is notably rife with repression. Repressed by her abusive mother, Tita is expected to suffer quietly. She must hide her desires and emotions as a sacrifice for the unity and harmony of her family. When fifteen-year-old Tita first falls in love with Pedro, she tries to approach her mother to ask her to reconsider the family tradition prohibiting the youngest daughter from marrying. Her mother responds by ending the conversation, and punishing Tita for daring to speak about her own desires. When Tita's mother then offers to let Pedro marry Tita's sister, Rosaura, Tita is expected to accept this arrangement without any **tears** or sad facial expressions. When she tries to excuse herself to feel her sadness privately, her mother reprimands and punishes her. Mama Elena leaves Tita no choice but to push through and deny her feelings



entirely.

Tita's repressed desire for Pedro and her inability to express herself drive her into depression after Pedro and Rosaura's wedding. As Tita continues to obey and make sacrifices for her mother, she gradually loses every bit of autonomy and begins to feel dead inside. The final straw is when Mama Elena orders Tita to repress her sadness over the death of baby Roberto, and Tita suffers a nervous breakdown.

Tita isn't the only character whose repressed emotions lead her to illness. By accepting a loveless marriage, Rosaura forces herself to live in a false reality. She pretends Pedro isn't still in love with Tita and nurtures the belief that he will eventually love her. Rosaura's unmet need for love drives her into physical sickness, which begins after the birth of her first child, and then worsens toward the end of her life. Rosaura's immense need for outward perfection reflects her inability to acknowledge her own human needs.

Emotion, along with love, drives the forces which create **magic** and which give characters the strength to fight. Tita, forbidden from ever expressing her sadness, love, or anger with words or actions, develops the ability to convey her emotions through her cooking. Although she is forbidden from expressing her own feelings and desires, she unwittingly finds an outlet for rebelling against this repression. Tita's longing and love for **Nacha**, who was like a mother to her, allows her to connect with the spirit world in order to hear or feel Nacha's presence when she most needs it. Her desire to break through the reality she has been assigned to and her insistence on believing in impossible things later allow her to connect with Dr. Brown's late grandmother, Morning Light.

Meeting desires and expressing emotions are essential to developing a sense of self, which leads to fulfillment and happiness. When Tita finally runs away from her mother to live with Dr. Brown, she begins to feel whole and independent, and develops a sense of wellbeing. Later, when her mother dies and she begins an affair with Pedro, she feels content with her life and in control, even though she is disobeying society by sleeping with her sister's husband. Similarly, Gertrudis is happy to freely choose her path as a prostitute and later as a soldier, despite being disowned by her mother and shunned by the rest of polite society. The novel's view of emotions is clear – expressing emotion is crucial to being true to one's self, and opens the way to true love and happiness. In contrast, repressing emotion leads to sickness and darkness.



## FOOD AND COOKING

The theme of food is central to the novel's structure and meaning. Each chapter begins with a recipe for a dish that Tita cooks during that chapter.

Often interspersing her narration with detailed cooking instructions, Esquivel uses food as a constant in the changing

lives of her characters and as a medium to express many different truths.

Within the confines of her abusive relationship with her mother and within traditional female domestic roles, Tita finds freedom and expression through her relationship with food. The kitchen is the only thing that belongs to Tita; there she feels the most powerful and free to exist without the threat of Mama Elena's cruelty. Tita is born in the kitchen, and she spends much of her childhood there with Nacha, the cook. Tita loves exploring the mysteries of cooking and she creates her own imaginative world with Nacha. When Nacha dies after Pedro and Rosaura's wedding, Tita becomes the head cook—but she doesn't resent that she is given a servant's post. Rather, she is happy to have a domain that belongs to her, where “flavors, smells, textures, and the effects they could have were beyond Mama Elena's iron command.”

In the novel, food helps people to forge and maintain all forms of relationships. Most notably, Tita sees Nacha as her “real mother.” Tita feels and accepts Nacha's love through the sustenance she provides in her meals, and they build their relationship around their shared love of the kitchen. In contrast, Nacha never develops a relationship with Rosaura, who rejects Nacha's food from an early age. Before weddings, baptisms and funerals, the women in the novel gather together around food preparation. The ritual of cooking brings mothers, daughters, and sisters together even when their relationships are troubled, and is central to marking the importance of life events. Cooking is an act of love, as is eating food that has been lovingly prepared.

In the novel the ability to create, enjoy, and digest food is a sign of a full heart and spirit, whereas a lack of interest in food, cooking, or an inability to digest, are often associated with being less fully alive or capable of love. The two characters whose relationship to food is most thoroughly explored are Rosaura and Tita, but some connection is also made with Mama Elena, Nacha, Gertrudis and Pedro. At a young age, Tita is willing to try all of the strangest and most exotic recipes Nacha can cook up – a symbol for her desire and willingness to let herself feel and experience life fully. In contrast, Rosaura is described as a “picky” eater, who shows little interest in the kitchen and fails on the one occasion that she tries to cook for Pedro. Rosaura is often described as nauseous; later in life she develops persistent gas and ultimately dies of chronic indigestion. When Tita cooks food infused with her emotions of lust and desire, both Rosaura and Mama Elena describe the food as “too salty,” while Pedro and Gertrudis both feel Tita's love and passion affecting their own state of being. In contrast with Gertrudis and Pedro, whose hearts are open to receiving love, Mama Elena and Rosaura are both unwilling to allow others to be close to them.

Furthermore, the ability to feed others is an important part of what makes a mother in the world of the novel. Tita, who is

portrayed as deeply loving and generous, devotes much of her life to cooking for and feeding her family. Even when food supplies run short during the war, and even in hard emotional times, Tita consistently makes sure that everyone is fed. Tita so embodies the nurturing side of femininity that she **magically** begins lactating simply out of love for her nephew, Roberto. In contrast, Rosaura, who is passionless and motivated by outward appearances, finds her breasts are dry when both of her children are born. Mama Elena, whose violence and cruelty frame her as the anti-feminine maternal figure, was also unable to nurse Tita.

While cooking is a traditionally appropriate way for women to occupy themselves, it can also be used as an opportunity for subversion. Tita's magical cooking allows her to share all of the emotions she is expected to repress, impacting others with extreme consequences. By letting her tears for Pedro fall into the wedding cake batter, Tita spreads her sadness to all the guests. The wedding ends with everyone crying over lost love and vomiting all over the floor. Though Tita doesn't ruin Rosaura's wedding intentionally, her sadness effectively "poisons" the bride, groom, and everyone else complicit in Tita's suffering – giving Tita an unintended vengeance. Later, after Mama Elena forbids Pedro and Tita from talking to each other or being alone in their house, Tita starts to see her cooking as a way of conveying her love to Pedro. Tita makes delicious meals with Pedro's enjoyment in mind, and Pedro compliments Tita's cooking as a way of returning her love. Through her ownership of the kitchen, Tita can explore the boundaries of creativity and impact others in an intimate way. Even while she appears to be obeying Mama Elena and conforming to her gender role, Tita is rebelling and finding agency.



## VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

As the novel is set during the Mexican Revolution, violence is inextricably linked to the time period and to the theme of liberation. In order to liberate

themselves of the violent rule of the oligarchy, the rebels respond with organized political violence. Both the old oligarchy and the leaders of the rebellion are predominantly men, creating a sense that violence is a necessary part of maleness and male-dominated culture (or *machismo*). The novel, however, primarily focuses on the lives of women during that time. Rather than pitting male violence against female submissiveness, Esquivel instead creates a story which asks the question: in order to survive amidst both the old order and against the violence of the Revolution, must women either choose submissiveness or violence in kind? The novel further explores the insidious nature of abusive relationships, and shows the process by which abuse threatens to destroy the victim's sense of self.

On a political level, the violence of the Revolution at first happens only in the background—but it gradually begins to

interfere more with the characters' lives. When federal troops lay siege to Piedras Negras, they kidnap Pedro and force Mama Elena and Chenchá into hiding in the town center. Rosaura goes into labor, and Tita faces the dangerous task of delivering baby Roberto on her own. Even as the fighting escalates, the characters are forced to acclimate to a certain level of violence so that they can continue to go on with their own lives.

Both before and during the Revolution, male violence against women is a constant threat. After Rosaura and Pedro move away, rebels come through and decimate the local ranches in search of supplies, though Mama Elena runs them off. Later, the chaos of the war makes the ranch vulnerable, and bandits come and raid it, raping Chenchá and leaving Mama Elena paralyzed. There are also other stories of rape in the novel: Dr. John Brown tells Tita about his grandmother, Morning Light, who was kidnapped and forced to marry John's white grandfather. Sergeant Treviño, a soldier in Gertrudis' troop, avenges the brutal rape of his mother and sister by killing their assailant.

But women aren't merely depicted as victims of male violence in the novel. Female characters interact with violence in very different ways, often defying gender norms by becoming the aggressor. Mama Elena embraces violence through her physical abuse of Tita and her mastery of slaughtering animals for food. The brutality Mama Elena uses to control her household, however brutal, may be seen as her answer to the male violence that already pervades her culture. Mama Elena doesn't question the patriarchy or its inherent violence, but instead patterns patriarchal oppression by using violence against those with less power than her.

While there are numerous examples of male violence in the novel, the principle violent relationship is between Mama Elena and Tita. Mama Elena's role as abuser is evident because she not only forces Tita to submit, but also punishes Tita for expressing any emotion which would show the extent of her suffering. When Tita tries to ask Mama Elena's permission to marry Pedro, Mama Elena not only refuses, but tells Tita that she is forbidden from expressing her disagreement. When Tita's tears fall into Rosaura's wedding cake, making everyone at the wedding cry and vomit, Mama Elena thinks Tita poisoned the cake. She beats Tita so badly that Tita is unable to get out of bed for weeks. Just as in many abusive romantic relationships, Tita is expected to take care of and love the person who beats her.

While Gertrudis is just as comfortable with violence as Mama Elena, her relationship with it is very different. Gertrudis chooses to freely join the Revolution as a fighter and works her way through the ranks to become a general. For Gertrudis, the answer to male violence isn't to imitate it. Instead, she uses violence to challenge existing social structures. Rather than using violence on those weaker than her, like Mama Elena, Gertrudis fights those more powerful than her.

Esquivel makes a point to highlight the pervasiveness of

violence in women's lives, both in their societies and in their personal relationships. In the case of Gertrudis, the novel treats political violence as a sometimes necessary means to a worthy end. However, the novel rejects all other forms of violence, particularly those forms that have a lasting emotional impact on the victims.



## SYMBOLS

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



### THE SUPERNATURAL/ MAGIC/ STRANGE EVENTS

As is characteristic for the genre of magical realism, Like *Water For Chocolate* blurs the line between reality and the **supernatural**. In the novel, when emotions are repressed or escalated, everyday actions and events transform into supernatural occurrences. The most central example is Tita's magical ability to infuse her cooking with her current emotional state. Mama Elena punishes Tita for expressing emotion, so Tita's supernatural power gives her feelings a space to exist and impact others. Key to the norms of the genre, the characters aren't surprised by the supernatural occurrences and, in fact, may not even acknowledge them at all. The supernatural in the novel, in fact, often acts subversively yet without the characters' intent. Tita's magical ability occurs without any intention and it is unclear whether or not she is even aware of it. The supernatural also allows the mind and soul to impact the body in ways that are scientifically inexplicable. For example, Tita develops a phantom pregnancy while experiencing incredible shame and guilt about her affair with Pedro. Because of this, the supernatural in the novel comes to be intertwined with the character's own subconscious, expressing that which the characters themselves not only cannot but cannot always even recognize.



### HEAT AND FIRE

**Fire** in the novel represents the effects of love and passion on the human spirit. According to the philosophy of *Morning Light*, each person is born with a box of matches inside their body. To light the flame, they need the "oxygen" that is the breath of a loved one, and the "candle" that is the right combination of music, words, food or other medium that allows emotions to rise and burn with life. At the same time, if too many matches are lit at once, the soul has to leave the body. When this happens to Tita and Pedro as they make love at the end of the novel, their inner flames are so intense that their bodies catch fire and form a volcano. The significance of heat is reinforced in the scene when Gertrudis' body

becomes so hot with her arousal that she catches the shower on fire.



### COLDNESS/ CHILLS

**Coldness**, in contrast with **fire**, represents the condition of the spirit without love. When Tita feels cold, it is always because she is feeling desolate and hopeless. Often, she feels cold when she has lost the opportunity to pursue her feelings for Pedro. When Mama Elena first offers Rosaura to Pedro, Tita is overcome with an unshakeable inner chill that no quantity of woolen blankets can warm. When Pedro dies after all of his inner matches are lit with fire, Tita knows she will never find another love to light her own inner matches, and she begins to feel cold overtake her.



### TITA'S BEDSPREAD

**Tita's bedspread** represents her resilient sense of survival and hope. Tita begins making the blanket after Pedro first expresses his plans to propose marriage, intending to have it ready for their matrimonial bed. After Pedro becomes engaged to Rosaura, Tita stays awake all night crocheting the blanket. Even after the marriage, she continues to crochet the blanket each night, adding different colors of yarn. The different colors represent the changes that happen in Tita's life, all of which she survives and incorporates into her being. After her nervous breakdown when she hears of Roberto's death, Tita leaves the ranch with nothing but her bedspread, which Chenchu runs out to give to her before she leaves.



### CRYING/ TEARS

Abundant **crying** is an expression of a full heart, and is associated with the power and richness of female emotions. Tita's tears have supernatural power, even before she is born. From the womb, she cries while her mother chops onions and causes her to go into labor. Her tears continue until the floor is flooded. As she grows up in the kitchen, she frequently cries, especially while chopping onions. This makes her and Nacha laugh, causing Tita to see tears and laughter as one and the same. Mama Elena, the novel's cold-hearted antagonist, forbids crying. Tita doesn't cry often as an adult, as Mama Elena forbids it. This may explain why Tita's joyous tears run down the stairs of John's house when Chenchu comes to visit her.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Anchor Books edition of *Like Water for Chocolate* published in


1995.

## Chapter 1: January Quotes

☹️ Sometimes she would cry for no reason at all, like when Nacha chopped onions, but since they both knew the cause of those tears, they didn't pay them much mind. They made them a source of entertainment, so that during her childhood Tita didn't distinguish between tears of laughter and tears of sorrow. For her laughter was a form of crying. Likewise for Tita the joy of living was wrapped up in the delights of food.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Nacha, Tita de la Garza

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 7

### Explanation and Analysis

The narrator emphasizes Tita's wide range of emotions, which she naturally embraces before she learns to repress them. Tita is a sensitive and passionate person, who loves the different textures and experiences that human emotion brings. Within the novel, crying is a often symbol of the depth and power of female emotion.

The narrator immediately connects Tita's emotional depth to her intense relationship with food, which provides Tita a means for rich sensory experiences, creativity and self-expression. The narrator makes this observation about Tita after describing Tita's childhood. Born on the kitchen table and left to the care of Nacha, the cook, Tita developed a love of cooking as a child. She played in the kitchen, and loved trying new and strange foods.

By connecting Tita's emotional depth to her relationship with food, the narrator foreshadows the magical ability Tita later develops of infusing her repressed emotions into her cooking.

☹️ You don't have an opinion, and that's all I want to hear about it. For generations, not a single person in my family has ever questioned this tradition, and no daughter of mine is going to be the one to start.

**Related Characters:** Mama Elena (Elena de la Garza) (speaker), Tita de la Garza

**Related Themes:**     

**Page Number:** 11



### Explanation and Analysis

Tita has come to Mama Elena to discuss the possibility of marrying Pedro. Mama Elena immediately shuts her daughter down, reminding her about the family tradition forbidding the youngest daughter from marrying and obliging her to devote her life to her mother. For the first time in her life, Tita tries to argue with her mother.

By denying Tita's request, Mama Elena rejects the importance of true love and shows her unquestioning belief in tradition and authority. Mama Elena's language highlights her need to control Tita. By telling Tita that she "doesn't have an opinion," she denies Tita not only the right to her own actions, but also the right to her own thoughts. Mama Elena's insistence on controlling Tita's thoughts and expressions shows the extent of her emotional abuse.

☹️ Not that night, nor many others, for as long as she lived, could she free herself from that cold.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Tita de la Garza

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 19

### Explanation and Analysis

The narrator describes Tita's emotional state on the night Pedro accepts Mama Elena's offer to marry Rosaura. Shocked and devastated, Tita stays awake in her bed, sadly remembering when she first met Pedro. Chilled, she covers herself with the bedspread that she began crocheting the night that Pedro first declared his intention of marrying her. As she works on her bedspread, she is unable to warm up. She also feels a painful hunger that no amount of Christmas rolls can fill.

Tita's state of cold reoccurs throughout the novel, always when she feels alone and unloved. In contrast, she and other characters (such as Gertrudis) feel warm and hot during moments of lust and passion. Tita's continued work on the bedspread represents her persistent hope that she will feel love again, even when her prospects seem bleak.

## Chapter 2: February Quotes

☝☝ She felt like screaming. Yes, she was having problems, when they had chosen something to be neutered, they'd made a mistake, they should have chosen her. At least then there would be some justification for not allowing her to marry and giving Rosaura her place beside the man she loved.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Pedro Musquiz, Mama Elena (Elena de la Garza), Tita de la Garza

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 27

### Explanation and Analysis

Tita is castrating roosters, which are then called capons, to be served at Pedro and Rosaura's wedding. Mama Elena has put Tita in charge of all of the food preparation as punishment after Tita tried to get out of going to Rosaura's engagement party. She has threatened Tita not to cry or show any sadness, though Tita hates castrating and killing the roosters. When Mama Elena catches Tita trembling and sweating as she castrates the first chicken, she asks Tita whether or not they are "having problems," by which she means to threaten Tita for showing distress.

Tita's distress comes from her self-identification with the roosters. Like the roosters, Tita feels "castrated" by Mama Elena. She is perfectly able to fall in love, marry and have a family, but Mama Elena cuts off Tita's future by severing her relationship with Pedro and making it clear that Tita isn't allowed love or a family. The roosters are sacrificed to feed the wedding guests. Similarly, Tita must sacrifice herself and her normal human responses in order to focus on preparing the food for the wedding.

## Chapter 3: March Quotes

☝☝ Mama Elena's eyes were as sharp as ever and she knew what would happen if Pedro and Tita ever got the chance to be alone [...] She had let one little thing slip past her: With Nacha dead, Tita was the best qualified of all the women in the house to fill the vacant post in the kitchen, and in there flavors, smells, textures and the effects they could have were beyond Mama Elena's iron command.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Pedro Musquiz, Mama Elena (Elena de la Garza), Tita de la Garza

**Related Themes:**     

**Page Number:** 48

### Explanation and Analysis

Pedro and Rosaura have now been married for about a year, living on the ranch the whole time. Mama Elena is unable to stop Pedro and Tita's love, so she does everything she can to prevent them from having the chance to act on or express their feelings. In this chapter, Pedro upsets Mama Elena and Rosaura by bringing Tita roses, which Tita promptly gets rid of by making quail in rose petal sauce. It is this same dish that, infused with Tita's passion, communicates her feelings fully to Pedro and stimulates Gertrudis' passionate frenzy.

Tita's emotional relationship with food represents the depth and power of her feelings. No matter how hard Mama Elena tries to repress Tita's passion and deny her autonomy, Tita always has the kitchen as her outlet for creativity, rebellion, and communication. Mama Elena, dispassionate about food and in denial about the power of emotion and love, fails to see how Tita continues to subtly assert her agency and express her love for Pedro.

☝☝ It occurred to her that she could use her mother's strength right now. Mama Elena was merciless, killing with single blow. But then again not always. For Tita she had made an exception; she had been killing her a little at a time since she was a child, and she still hadn't quite finished her off. Pedro and Rosaura's marriage had left Tita broken in both heart and in mind, like the quail.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Mama Elena (Elena de la Garza), Tita de la Garza

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 49

### Explanation and Analysis

Tita is killing quail to prepare the quail in rose petal sauce. When she first tried to catch and kill one of the quail, she twists its neck too hesitantly, and the maimed quail runs around with its head hanging off. She has raised and fed the quail, and her affection for it makes it hard to kill. She discovers that it is better to kill quickly and without letting emotions interfere, so as not to make the animal suffer more.


Tita often thinks of Mama Elena as efficient or skilled at violent acts, such as slaughtering animals for food. Tita, abused physically and emotionally by Mama Elena, identifies

with the suffering of the quail. This passage also builds the image of Mama Elena as a sadistic abuser, who enjoys the power she derives from making Tita suffer. She might be “merciful” in killing animals quickly, but Mama Elena is totally merciless in drawing out Tita’s pain.

☞ It was as if a strange alchemical process had dissolved her entire being in the rose petal sauce, in the tender flesh of the quails, in the wine, in every one of the meal’s aromas. That was the way she entered Pedro’s body, hot, voluptuous, perfumed, totally sensuous.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Pedro Musquiz, Tita de la Garza, Gertrudis

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 52

### Explanation and Analysis

The De la Garza family is at the dinner table eating Tita’s quail in rose petal sauce. This is the meal that awakens in Gertrudis such an insatiable physical lust that the heat from her body causes the shower to catch fire and provides the catalyst for her to run away with captain Juan Alejandrez.


Tita’s cooking, infused with her own lustful thoughts about Pedro, makes Pedro feel as if he were devouring Tita herself—or as if Tita were “entering” him, in a reversal of the archetypal masculine/feminine sexual roles. Tita’s passion and creativity creates texture and life in her food, speaking to the power of food as an intimate, sensory experience. Pedro and Tita’s repressed desire then creates such energy that it transforms eating into an act of sexual intimacy. The metaphor of devouring Tita’s flesh through her food alludes to the Catholic concept of the communion bread transforming into Christ’s body. Tita and Pedro’s love, however sinful by religious standards, holds such devotion and sacrifice that it evokes religious imagery. Their love, not their belief systems, is the thing most sacred to them.

## Chapter 4: April Quotes

☞ She stopped grinding, straightened up, and proudly lifted her chest so Pedro could see it better. His scrutiny changed their relationship forever. After that penetrating look that saw through clothes, nothing would ever be the same. Tita saw through her own flesh how fire transformed the elements, how a lump of corn flour is changed into a tortilla, how a soul that hasn’t been warmed by the fire of love is lifeless, like a useless ball of corn flour. In a few moment’s time, Pedro had transformed Tita’s breasts from chaste to experienced flesh, without even touching them.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Pedro Musquiz, Tita de la Garza

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 67

### Explanation and Analysis


Rosaura has just given birth to her first child, Roberto, and Tita is preparing food for his baptism. Pedro walks into the kitchen to find Tita alone, kneeling on the floor over a bowl, rhythmically grinding the nuts for the turkey mole.

Since Pedro’s marriage to Rosaura, he and Tita have not yet kissed or been intimate in any physical way. Tita’s virginity still feels like a burden to her, a reminder of her lost love and her lack of control over her future. Her virginity is strongly connected to her hopelessness and loneliness. The sexual gaze of the man she loves, then, is enough to make Tita feel unchaste and “experienced,” making her feel alive again. The symbol of fire is especially significant, as fire represents the effect of love and passion on the human spirit. The fire of Pedro’s gaze “transforms” Tita in the way that fire transforms corn flour into tortillas. Tita often identifies with food, reflecting how she sees cooking as an ongoing point of reference for understanding the world.

☞ The baby’s cries filled all the empty space in Tita’s heart. She realized that she was feeling a new love; for life, for this child, for Pedro, even for the sister she had despised for so long. She took the child in her hands, carried him to Rosaura, and they wept together for a long while, holding the child.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Rosaura, Roberto, Tita de la Garza

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 73

### Explanation and Analysis

Tita has just delivered Rosaura's first child, Roberto. Before his birth, Tita had no interest in the child. Now, Tita's emotions surprise her. Her instant affection for her nephew, whom she could easily have hated as the product of Rosaura and Pedro's marriage, provides a testimony to Tita's deeply loving and nurturing character.

It also reveals the novel's emphasis on birth, babies, and fertility as symbols of new beginnings and hope. For a long time, Rosaura and Tita have both been insecure and miserable, each nurturing a sense of resentment. Now, even Rosaura, who is usually so focused on outward appearances, can't help but feel genuine emotion and connection. Tita, whose emotions and desire for connection are always so powerful, allows Roberto to penetrate her heart and prevent her from drowning in her loneliness. Even if for just a moment, their shared love of Roberto washes the slate clean for them both and provides them hope for the future.

## Chapter 5: May Quotes

☞☞ I have a very good aim and a very bad temper, Captain. The next shot is for you, and I assure you that I can shoot you before they can kill me, so it would be best for us to respect each other. If we die, no one will miss me very much, but won't the nation mourn your loss?

**Related Characters:** Mama Elena (Elena de la Garza) (speaker), Juan Alejandrez

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 90

### Explanation and Analysis


When a rebel troop arrives at the ranch demanding food and supplies, Mama Elena refuses to allow them to take control of the situation. She allows them only to look for food outside the house, and denies them entry into her cellar where she is hiding Tita, Chenchá, and her food reserves. When one of the soldiers suggests they enter with force, Mama Elena shoots live chickens dead out of their hands, and delivers this speech. Mama Elena inspires fear

and respect in the men, including Captain Juan Alejandrez, who unbeknownst to Mama Elena is Gertrudis' lover.

Mama Elena's speech reflects the authority and power of her character. She surprises the troop because they expect a woman to be fearful and compliant, especially without a "man of the house" to protect her. Mama Elena's capacity for violence competes with displays of male violence in the novel, which are likewise aggressive and unapologetic. Her sharp tongue also reveals her calculating nature. She is both feminist in how she stands up to male aggressors, and anti-feminist in how she treats other women less powerful than herself.

☞☞ [...] She placed the pigeon between her breasts to free her hands for the dangerous ladder, and climbed down from the dovecote. From then on, her main interest lay in feeding that pathetic baby pigeon. Only then did life seem to make sense. It didn't compare with the satisfaction derived from nursing a human being, but in some way it was similar.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Roberto, Tita de la Garza

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 93

### Explanation and Analysis

When the rebel troop comes to the ranch to demand donations of food, Mama Elena allows them to kill and take all of the pigeons on the dovecote. After they leave, Tita emerges from the cellar and climbs onto the dovecote. She finds one surviving baby pigeon.

At this time, it has been a month since Mama Elena sent Rosaura, Pedro, and baby Roberto to live in San Antonio. Tita is motivated to adopt and feed the baby pigeon because without Roberto to nurse, she has an empty place in her heart. She derives great joy from nurturing and caring for others, as this is what gives life meaning for her. Her need to fulfill the caregiver/mother role is essential to her character and her sense of self. Tita's fixation on the baby pigeon also shows her survivor instinct, which constantly pushes her to find a reason to keep going.

## Chapter 6: June Quotes

☝ Instead of eating, she would stare at her hands for hours on end. She would regard them like a baby, marveling that they belonged to her. She could move them however she pleased, yet she didn't know what to do with them, other than knitting. She had never taken time to stop and think about these things.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Mama Elena (Elena de la Garza), Tita de la Garza

**Related Themes:**    



**Page Number:** 109


### Explanation and Analysis

Tita is now staying at John's house. For the first time in her life, she doesn't have to wait for Mama Elena's orders or fear what will happen if she deviates from her assigned tasks. Tita has no job at John's house, other than to regain her strength. The time and space she finds there allow her to process and think about her life with little interference. Tita's hands represent her sense of agency. By focusing on her hands, Tita allows herself to process the concept of her individuality. After years of abuse and control, the idea of belonging only to herself brings overwhelming possibilities. For Tita, this is a moment of total physical liberation—and for now glimpses of such freedom seem as paralyzing as they do exciting.

☝ You must of course take care to light the matches one at a time. If a powerful emotion should ignite them all at once, they would produce a splendor so dazzling that it would illuminate far beyond what we can normally see; and then a brilliant tunnel would appear before our eyes, revealing the path we forgot the moment we were born, and summoning us to regain the divine origin we had lost. The soul ever longs to return to the place from which it came, leaving the body lifeless.

**Related Characters:** Dr. John Brown (speaker), Morning Light/ "The Old Indian Woman"/ "The Kikapu", Tita de la Garza

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 117

### Explanation and Analysis

While sitting in his laboratory with Tita, John teaches her how to make matches from phosphorous. He also explains to her the philosophy of love he learned from his grandmother, Morning Light. According to her, each human carries a box matches inside them. A loved one's breath is the oxygen, and any kind of music, food, or other sensory experience that moves human emotions is the candle. When a loved one's breath is combined with such a sensory experience, one of the matches is lit.

Here, John explains what will happen if "all of the matches are lit at once." This situation represents the consummation of the right love under perfect circumstances. According to Morning Light, the human need for love is associated with the human desire for the soul to "return to the place from which it came." In her theory, love is a spiritual relationship that is essential to the journey of the soul through life. Experiences of love aren't unique events, but regular occurrences that keep the soul warmed and drive humans forward. True love also isn't peaceful in its nature, but thrives on fire – a volatile and dangerous element. If all of one's inner flames are lit at once – if a person feels and expresses love at its fullest capacity – the soul reaches a state that resembles enlightenment or heaven, and leaves the body "lifeless."

## Chapter 7: July Quotes

☝ He left because I had exhausted his strength, though he hadn't managed to quench the fire inside me. Now at last, after so many men have been with me, I feel a great relief. Perhaps someday I will return home and explain it to you.

**Related Characters:** Gertrudis (speaker), Tita de la Garza, Juan Alejandrez

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 126

### Explanation and Analysis

While Tita is staying at Dr. John Brown's house, Chenchu brings her a letter from Gertrudis. Gertrudis describes her life since she ran away to make love with Juan Alejandrez. After some time with him, he left her and she began working at a brothel.



The tone of Gertrudis' letter is shameless and triumphant. To Gertrudis, her lust and her sexual adventures are no



cause for embarrassment or ridicule. She doesn't see herself as the object of male lust, but rather as the instigator of sexual passion. Gertrudis' character provides a foil to traditional sexual dynamics, which frame the male as more dominant/active and the female as more passive. She also contrasts with Tita herself, who is passionate but who often waits for Pedro's advances. Gertrudis' attitude allows her to characterize a new kind of modern and empowered female sexuality.

☝ Tita was beginning to wonder if the feeling of peace and security that John gave her wasn't true love, and not the agitation and anxiety she felt when she was with Pedro.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Pedro Musquiz, Dr. John Brown, Tita de la Garza

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 131

### Explanation and Analysis

After the bandits leave Mama Elena paralyzed, Tita returns home to the ranch to care for her. While enduring her mother's cruelty once again, Tita finds immense support and comfort in John's companionship. John brings Tita a sense of balance and calm, which she needs during difficult times. In contrast, Pedro's love always excites Tita, both sexually and emotionally. The excitement and anxiety she feels around Pedro is amplified even more by the consequences she faces if she acts on that forbidden love.

John represents a different kind of love and masculinity than Pedro. John offers security, whereas Pedro represents danger. John's supportive nature makes him appear more as a friend/caregiver, like Chenchu or Nacha, and thereby imbues him with more traditionally feminine characteristics. Pedro relates to Tita on a more deeply sexual level, and he is rarely depicted as soothing or supportive. In Pedro, Tita finds "agitation" – a feeling of stimulation so strong that it can be upsetting.

☝ You know how men are. They all say they won't eat off a plate that isn't clean.

**Related Characters:** Chenchu (speaker), Tita de la Garza

**Related Themes:**     

**Page Number:** 134

### Explanation and Analysis

After the bandits rape Chenchu, she enters a dark and enduring depression. She explains to Tita that what upsets her most is her fear that no man will want her now that she is no longer a virgin. It is noteworthy that Chenchu doesn't talk about the trauma of her experience or her own sense of anger or loss. What she focuses on is how this experience will affect her future prospects at love and marriage, in a society where men value virginity. The social consequences of rape fill Chenchu with anxiety, robbing her of the mental space to process her deeper emotions about the traumatic event.

Chenchu's choice of words in this passage draws attention to the male views of women that Chenchu has encountered in her life experience. In the expression she references, women are pictured as the "plate" from which men "eat." In this metaphor, sexual experiences are the food, men the consumers, and women the medium or vessel from which men consume—a kind of perverse twisting of the (usually positive) food and cooking imagery of the novel. To Chenchu, this degree of male objectification of women is not reprehensible but to be expected. Though her society does not condemn men for these views, it is clear that the novel does. Furthermore, the novel offers several positive portrayals of male characters who value women regardless of their virginity or sexual histories, such as Chenchu's future husband Jesús, Gertrudis' husband Juan Alejandro, and Dr. John Brown.

☝ Now she finally understood the meaning of the expression "fresh as a head of lettuce" – that's the odd, detached way a lettuce should feel at being separated abruptly from another lettuce with which it had grown up. It would be illogical to expect it to feel pain at this separation from another lettuce with which it had never spoken, nor established any type of communication, and which it only knew from its outer leaves, unaware that there were many others hidden inside it.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Mama Elena (Elena de la Garza), Tita de la Garza

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 136

### Explanation and Analysis

When Mama Elena dies, Tita doesn't feel the kind of grief a child might be expected to feel over the death of their mother. For Tita, true human connection develops through knowing and communication with others. Her deepest friendships are with Nacha, Chenchá, and Gertrudis – women who share their own pain and their secrets, and who listen to Tita's. The structure of family relationships means very little to Tita, who focuses on human connection over family roles.

Through this metaphor, Tita puts her relationship with her mother into purely biological and circumstantial terms. Like the lettuces, Tita is related to her mother and has grown up beside her. Yet, she only knows her "outer leaves" because Mama Elena has avoided sharing her inner self. Mama Elena never allowed Tita to know about her own past, secrets, dreams, or capacity for tenderness. Further, she refused to listen to Tita's thoughts or feelings, thereby denying Tita's humanity. Mama Elena ensured that on both sides of their relationship, they would not have the chance to truly know each other.

☝ During the funeral Tita really wept for her mother. Not for the castrating mother who had repressed Tita her entire life, but for the person who had lived a frustrated love. And she swore in front of Mama Elena's tomb that come what may, she would never renounce love.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Mama Elena (Elena de la Garza), Tita de la Garza

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 138

### Explanation and Analysis

After dressing Mama Elena for her wake, Tita finds a box of love letters from a man named Jose Treviño. Tita discovers that Jose was Mama Elena's childhood sweetheart, secret lover, and the biological father of Gertrudis. After learning of her mother's forbidden love affair, Tita's feelings toward her change from ambivalence to true sadness. Tita identifies and empathizes with Mama Elena's secret, given her own heartbreak through her separation from Pedro. This motivates Tita to fortify her own commitment to holding onto love. At this time, however, she thinks her true love is John.

Further, knowing her mother had the capacity for such passionate love and tenderness humanizes Mama Elena. For all of Tita's life, Mama Elena was cold, calculating, and

focused entirely on rules and traditions. And yet, this same woman was once so in love that she broke the rules of decency to continue her love affair. Mama Elena's secret makes her both more hypocritical in her treatment of Tita and more of a real person, with a fuller depth of emotions and contradictions—and thus a person capable of being mourned.

## Chapter 8: August Quotes

☝ Tita was literally "like water for chocolate" – she was on the verge of boiling over. How irritable she was!

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Rosaura, Pedro Musquiz, Tita de la Garza

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 151

### Explanation and Analysis


At this point in the novel, Tita is living alone with Pedro, Rosaura, and Esperanza after the death of Mama Elena. Tita is preparing dinner for John, who is coming over to officially propose marriage. Rosaura has recently made it clear that with Esperanza, she plans to continue the family tradition of forcing the youngest daughter to stay at home forever with her mother. Filled with jealousy over John, Pedro has been annoying Tita with his pleas for her not to marry and his frequent fits of anger. Tita is angry with Pedro for his sense of entitlement and unwillingness to see how he could have prevented this by not marrying Rosaura. Further, she is furious with Rosaura for continuing the very same tradition that has been the source of so much of Tita's suffering.

The expression "like water for chocolate" means to be at the height of anger. It refers to water when it reaches the boiling stage. In Mexican recipes for hot chocolate, sometimes water is used in place of milk to create a different flavor and texture. With this titular phrase, then, Tita's emotions are once again linked to food and cooking, as well as to a sense of extreme heat or coldness.

☝ Pedro! What are you doing here?  
Without answering, Pedro went to her, extinguished the lamp, pulled her to a brass bed that had once belonged to her sister, Gertrudis, and throwing himself upon her, caused her to lose her virginity and learn of true love.

**Related Characters:** Tita de la Garza, The Narrator

(speaker), Gertrudis, Pedro Musquiz

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 158

### Explanation and Analysis

Tita has just accepted John's marriage proposal, and he has just left to travel to the United States before their wedding. In so few words, then, Esquivel describes the pivotal moment when Pedro and Tita finally have sex. Even though many things have occurred, they have actually only waited about four years since they first met until now. This moment changes everything for Tita, who can no longer deny her enduring feelings for Pedro and pretend to herself that she is falling in love with John. She has crossed an emotional and moral boundary, and will have to deal with the consequences and self-reflection that must ensue.

The language Esquivel uses to describe Pedro and Tita's first sexual encounter also draws attention to Pedro as the dominant party. It is he who enters her room. He ignores her use of words, and instead responds with actions. The words "throws himself upon her" and "caused her to lose her virginity" heavily convey sexual dominance. Even with regard to the emotional transfer they share, it is Pedro who is "causing" Tita to learn about love. Throughout their exchange, Tita is the receiver, and Pedro the initiator. It is important to note, however, that this traditional gender dynamic, although typical of Pedro and Tita's relationship, isn't the only sexual dynamic depicted in the novel. It is in contrast with other gender dynamics, in particular the one between Gertrudis and Juan Alejandrez, in which it is Gertrudis' desire and sexual power that is the driving force.

## Chapter 9: September Quotes

☝☝ Life had taught her that it was not that easy; there are few prepared to fulfill their desires whatever the cost, and the right to determine the course of one's own life would take more effort than she had imagined. That battle she had to fight alone, and it weighed on her.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Tita de la Garza

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 168

### Explanation and Analysis

At this point in the novel, Tita believes that she is pregnant

with Pedro's baby. John is still away in the United States, and Tita hasn't yet told anyone about the pregnancy. She is preparing the Three Kings' Day bread and chocolate, remembering all of the times she and her household made that traditional meal throughout her childhood. An essential part of the holiday bread is the porcelain doll that is baked inside—and the person who finds it must then make a wish. Tita sadly reflects over how much simpler making wishes was when she was a child, when problems were small and the world seemed full of possibility. She wishes she still had the friendship of Nacha, Chenchá, Gertrudis, and even Rosaura before their enmity over Pedro destroyed their relationship.

Tita realizes that happiness can't just be wished for, that it comes with a "cost." To be happy, one must fulfill one's desires. Without Mama Elena controlling her, Tita now has the freedom to "determine the course" of her life. But she realizes that agency comes with its own struggles—she is now responsible for dealing with the consequences of her choices. Further, she is also responsible for making choices that will lead to her own happiness. With right and wrong no longer defined for her, she must also create and live by her own moral compass. She imagines this to be a lonely fight because she doesn't yet know the role that others, such as Gertrudis and John, will have in shaping her views on morality and supporting her in her choices.

## Chapter 10: October Quotes

☝☝ The truth! The truth! Look, Tita, the simple truth is that the truth does not exist; it all depends on a person's point of view. For example, in your case, the truth could be that Rosaura married Pedro, showing no loyalty, not caring a damn that you really loved him, that's the truth, isn't it?

**Related Characters:** Gertrudis (speaker), Pedro Musquiz, Rosaura, Tita de la Garza

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 190

### Explanation and Analysis

Gertrudis is nearing the end of her visit to the ranch. During their week of catching up, Tita has hesitated to tell her sister about her pregnancy because she fears her judgment. Now, she breaks the news to Gertrudis and explains her intense fear about how Rosaura might react if she learns "the truth."

Gertrudis' response is contrary to Tita's expectations. Rather than judging or blaming her, Gertrudis encourages Tita to reconsider the sources of her guilt. By questioning Tita's concept of "the truth," Gertrudis asks Tita to reconsider her narrative of reality. Until now, Tita hasn't questioned the standards of moral propriety, responsibility, and sacrifice that Mama Elena taught her and that polite society reinforced. Gertrudis, who has lived outside the boundaries of that same polite society, doesn't buy into its moral standards anymore. For Gertrudis, the only way Tita can clear her conscience and move forward is by shedding the entire system of traditional moral views in order to find her own definition of truth.

By suggesting that truth "depends on a person's point of view," Gertrudis asks Tita to step outside traditional views of morality to consider a morally relativist point of view. The morally relativist view that she presents is then mirrored in the novel's own fundamental position on right and wrong—a worldview in which true love is a much stronger and more sacred bond than more socially constructed roles like marriage.

☝ I know who I am! A person who has a perfect right to live her life as she pleases. Once and for all, leave me alone; I won't put up with you! I hate you, I've always hated you! Tita had said the magic words that would make Mama Elena disappear forever.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator, Tita de la Garza (speaker), Mama Elena (Elena de la Garza)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 199

### Explanation and Analysis

While Gertrudis and her troop are visiting, Tita is plagued by unwanted visits by the ghost of Mama Elena. The ghost taunts Tita, cursing her "unborn baby" and shaming her for having sex with Pedro. After Tita utters these words, however, the ghost leaves her, dwindling into a tiny, angry light. Tita's menstrual period then releases below her, revealing that she wasn't pregnant after all.

The "magic words" that can send Mama Elena away are the words that best describe Tita's self-knowledge and agency: "I know who I am!" refers to Tita's journey of self-discovery. She is a full person, and she is not the person Mama Elena wanted her to be. To know herself, Tita has had to accept her own emotions and desires. She has had to learn that she

has a "right to live her life as she pleases." Living her life as she pleases means determining for herself what moral standards she wants to live by and refusing to accept those imposed on her by others.

These words send Mama Elena away because the thing most threatening to her was Tita's ability to fight back. As the abuser, Mama Elena needed to have control over Tita. For her to gain power, she had to make Tita buy into her judgments and care about her anger. If Tita rejects Mama Elena's rules and traditions, then Mama Elena's judgments mean nothing. If she knows herself and feels entitled to determine her own future, then Mama Elena has nothing she can take away from Tita. In this scene, Tita finally sheds the emotional grasp her mother's abuse left on her.

## Chapter 11: November Quotes

☝ I, I have some self-respect left! Let him go to a loose woman like you for his filthy needs, but here's the thing; in this house, I intend to go on being his wife. And in the eyes of everybody else too. Because the day someone sees you two, and I end up looking ridiculous again, I swear that you're going to be very sorry.

**Related Characters:** Rosaura (speaker), Pedro Musquiz, Tita de la Garza

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 214

### Explanation and Analysis

Gertrudis is furious at Tita and Pedro for publically showing their affection when Tita ran to Pedro after he was caught on fire. Until this point, Gertrudis has been in denial about the continued relationship between Tita and Pedro. As long as she saw no clear signs, and as long as Tita was clearly going to marry John, Rosaura could choose to ignore subtle signs of romance between her husband and sister. Now, after they have revealed their true feelings in front of several party guests, Rosaura feels the shock of facing the truth. Even more, however, her anger stems from her deep desire to maintain the social appearances of a perfect marriage and perfect family.

Rosaura punishes Pedro by refusing to sleep with him any more, out of "self-respect." By calling Tita a "loose woman," she also emphasizes the social shame of Tita's actions rather than the personal hurt they have caused her. Rosaura makes herself invulnerable, focusing on her anger about losing

social status rather than her sense of emotional betrayal. Her words also reinforce the importance that outward appearances hold to her. She plans to stay Pedro's wife, refusing to give up a title that she feels gives importance and therefore meaning to her life.

☞ Tita, it doesn't matter to me what you did, there are some things in life that shouldn't be given so much importance, if they don't change what is essential. What you've told me hasn't changed the way I think; I'll say again, I would be delighted to be your companion for the rest of your life – but you must think over very carefully whether I am the man for you or not. If your answer is yes, we will celebrate our wedding in a few days. If it's no, I will be the first to congratulate Pedro and ask him to give you the respect you deserve.

**Related Characters:** Dr. John Brown (speaker), Pedro Musquiz, Tita de la Garza

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 223

### Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Tita reveals to John that she has lost her virginity to another man (Pedro). With great emotion, she explains her actions as the reason why she can no longer marry John. She expects that knowing the truth, he will make the difficult decision to end their engagement for her. John refuses to accept Tita's reasoning, however, which is based off of society's expectations of female chastity. It "doesn't matter" to John whether or not Tita is a virgin, and even more, it doesn't matter to him that she has been unfaithful. He acknowledges Tita's agency and gives her back the power to choose between lovers, putting her future entirely in her hands.

In contrast with Pedro, who is jealous and possessive of Tita, John doesn't allow his personal feeling of hurt to give him a sense of ownership over Tita. Any human would be hurt, but John doesn't want Tita to act out of a sense of shame, guilt, or obligation. His sustained desire to be with her reflects his feminist thinking, further casting him as a character with a progressive and individualistic moral sense.

## Chapter 12: December Quotes

☞ Esperanza went to the best school, with the object of improving her mind. Tita, for her part, taught her something just as valuable: the secrets of love and life as revealed by the kitchen.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Tita de la Garza, Esperanza

**Related Themes:**     

**Page Number:** 239

### Explanation and Analysis


While raising Esperanza together, Pedro and Tita convince Rosaura to let the child attend school to gain a more well-rounded education than she could at home. This is a struggle because Rosaura believes that, according to their agreement, she is the only one in charge of Esperanza's "education." Meanwhile, she agrees to let Tita teach Esperanza how to cook and take care of feeding her. Rosaura thus believes that she (Rosaura herself) will be the only one influencing her daughter's thinking. Tita subversively influences Esperanza, however, not only by convincing Rosaura that Esperanza should go to school, but by sneaking her own worldview into Esperanza's culinary lessons.

The phrase "the secrets of love and life as revealed by the kitchen" captures one of the essential philosophies of the novel. Food and cooking offer a lens for understanding and experimenting with love, the self, and the world. Tita knows this, and it gives her power over other characters who try to oppress her, particularly Mama Elena and Rosaura.

☞ Little by little her vision began to brighten until the tunnel again appeared before her eyes. There at its entrance was the luminous figure of Pedro waiting for her. Tita did not hesitate. She let herself go to the encounter, and they wrapped each other in a long embrace; again experiencing an amorous climax, they left together for the lost Eden. Never again would they be apart.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Pedro Musquiz, Tita de la Garza, Esperanza, Rosaura

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 245

### Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Tita and Pedro make love after Esperanza and Alex's wedding. For years, they have continued their affair in secret, busy with managing Rosaura's feelings and demands, as well as navigating the task of raising Esperanza. Until now, they have never been able to fully express their love without other anxieties or concerns. Now, they have the opportunity to pursue a life together without shame.

This scene validates the theory of Morning Light, which held that when love finds its perfect expression, all of one's "inner flames" will be lit. Earlier in the passage, Tita resisted the tunnel's first appearance, feeling she wasn't ready to die yet. Now, however, she doesn't "hesitate" when she sees Pedro

waiting for her. They climax again together, meaning that they continue sexual intimacy even after death.

What awaits them is described as the "lost Eden," which is a symbolic choice for numerous reasons. It is the Biblical first home of humankind, and therefore the place of creation. Pedro and Tita's death is not the end, but the return to the beginning. Further, Eden was the home of Adam and Eve during a time of innocence before the fall of mankind. Through death, Pedro and Tita seem to achieve a clean slate. Even as they continue to have sex in the afterlife, they are without sin because they return to a state of being that predates the Christian concept of sin.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## CHAPTER 1: JANUARY – “CHRISTMAS ROLLS.”

Beginning with a recipe for Christmas sausage rolls, the unnamed narrator describes how she **cries** whenever she chops the onion, just like her great-aunt Tita used to. She then tells the story of Tita’s life, beginning with her birth. Even in her mother’s womb, Tita cried so fiercely when her mother chopped onion that she **magically** sent her mother into early labor. Born on the kitchen table, Tita’s tears continued, flooding the kitchen floor. Unable to nurse and busy managing her ranch after her husband died, Mama Elena (Tita’s mother) let Nacha, the childless cook, feed and care for Tita. The narrator explains that Tita loved cooking from early on because of her relationship with Nacha, and because of all the smells, tastes, and possibilities that food offers. For Nacha and Tita, Tita’s frequent tears while cooking are a “source of entertainment, so that Tita didn’t distinguish between tears of laughter and tears of sorrow.”

Though Tita sees the kitchen as “her world,” her sisters, Gertrudis and Rosaura, see cooking as dangerous. Once when they are kids, Tita convinces them to play a game of flinging water onto a sizzling griddle. Gertrudis makes a dance out of it, but Rosaura accidentally burns her hands on the griddle. Mama Elena spansks Tita badly, and thereafter her sisters aren’t allowed to play with her in the kitchen. While Tita loves cooking with Nacha, she cherishes special occasions when her mother and sisters join them in preparing the meals. Each Christmas, all of the women in the household work together over days to make Christmas rolls, talking and laughing as they prepare the filling, spices and dough. Tita cherishes this tradition, as the aroma and taste of the Christmas rolls brings back memories of all the years before.

*The novel begins by establishing the kitchen as both Tita’s birthplace and the place where she grows up, foreshadowing the importance that cooking and food will have in her life. From the beginning, Nacha replaces Mama Elena as the true mother figure in Tita’s life, showing the importance of nourishing (rather than child-bearing) as the essential act of maternal love. From even before birth, Tita’s emotions are supernaturally powerful, capable of impacting others and altering events in magical ways. Tita embraces her wide range of colorful emotions, just as she embraces the richness and variety of the food that Nacha teaches her to cook.*



*For Tita, the smells and tastes of cooking are deeply connected to memory and emotion. Cooking is also a means for entertainment and creating community. Tita tries to share the secrets of the kitchen with her sisters, but her mother uses Rosaura’s griddle accident as an excuse to further isolate Tita. While Mama Tita approves of Tita working in the kitchen, she is threatened by Tita’s liveliness and looks for opportunities to punish her for it. The ritual of preparing the Christmas rolls provides Tita and her sisters a chance to play in “Tita’s world” without risking punishment from Mama Elena.*



Before Christmas, when Tita is sixteen, she tells her mother that a young man, Pedro, wants to come speak with her. Mama Elena assumes he wants to ask for Tita's hand in marriage, and she refuses to see him, reminding Tita of their family tradition requiring the youngest daughter to stay unmarried and dedicate her life to caring for her mother. When Tita starts to argue, her mother tells her she isn't allowed to have opinions. Tita silently continues to question the tradition in her thoughts. Mama Elena, angry that Tita tried to argue, refuses to speak to Tita for days. Her only words are to chastise Tita for her "rebellious" creativity in sewing, softening only when Tita apologizes, calling her *Mami* in the deferential tone Mama Elena has taught her. The narrator remarks that unlike her sisters, Tita has often been slapped for saying *Mami* in the wrong tone.

Pedro surprises Tita and Mama Elena by showing up at their ranch with his father, Don Pascual. He asks Mama Elena for her permission to marry Tita, but Mama Elena says Tita isn't available. She offers to let him marry her oldest daughter, Rosaura instead. Chenchu, the maid, goes into the kitchen and angrily tells Tita and Nacha about Pedro's proposal and Mama Elena's offer. A little while later, Mama Elena comes to announce that Pedro has agreed to marry Rosaura. Tita feels a **cold chill** fill her body. Nacha tells Tita that she overheard Don Pascual questioning Pedro's choice, and that Pedro replied that he agreed to marry Rosaura to be closer to Tita.

That night Tita lies awake, devastated. She remembers when she first met Pedro during a party at her home the Christmas before. When he looked at her from across the room, her pulse rose and she felt **hot**, her body burning like "dough when it is plunged into boiling oil." Pedro later followed Tita to the kitchen and declared his love for her, promising that his "word is his pledge." The narrator says, "from that night on, she would love him forever." This memory fills Tita with despair, as she realizes she must give Pedro up forever, because to love him now would be indecent. She tries to eat a Christmas roll – which always brings her comfort – and curl up with cloaks and robes, but her hunger and **cold** are insatiable. She stays awake weeping and crocheting the **wedding bedspread** she had begun when Pedro first declared his love, unwilling to "let it go to waste."

*Here, the narrator reveals the central conflict of the novel: the family tradition requiring the youngest daughter to dedicate her life to her mother instead of marrying or even going to school. For Mama Elena, tradition trumps individual happiness and romantic love. This tradition also helps to explain why Mama Elena frequently isolates and punishes Tita. Tita isn't supposed to have her own life, so any sign of autonomy becomes a sign of defiance. Mama Elena is both physically and emotionally abusive, as she punishes Tita for any act of self-expression. Tita continues to find freedom in her private thoughts.*



*Rather than just denying Pedro his request, Mama Elena cements Tita's torment by offering to let him marry her sister. She sees marriage as a business deal, and she may also see this as a chance to further punish Tita for her desires. Pedro desires Tita so strongly that he settles for a loveless marriage just so he can be near her. However, he doesn't stop to consider how his choice will affect Tita, or Rosaura, who is treated as a mere pawn in the exchange.*



*Tita experiences physical reactions to finding and losing love, highlighting the connection the novel makes between mind and body through magical realism. When Tita first felt Pedro's love, her body responded with heat. When she loses Pedro, her body responds with cold and hunger. The gravity of losing Pedro is emphasized by Tita's inability to be nourished by the food that otherwise always remedies her suffering. Her choice to continue making her wedding bedspread even though Pedro is marrying Rosaura shows that on some level, she hasn't fully lost hope. Like the bedspread, she isn't truly resigned to letting herself "go to waste" either.*





## CHAPTER 2: FEBRUARY – “CHABELA WEDDING CAKE.”

The chapter begins with a recipe for the Chabela wedding cake, which Tita and Nacha are baking in preparation for Rosaura and Pedro's wedding. Tita shakes with nausea, as each of the 170 eggs she breaks and beats looks like the testicles she had to cut off the roosters they ordered to serve as capons. Mama Elena put Tita in charge of the castrations, and all other wedding preparations, as punishment for skipping Rosaura's engagement party. Tita remembers her horror at castrating the first rooster, thinking to herself that her mother should have castrated *her* instead. Mama Elena had seen Tita's face, and slapped her. Now, making the cakes, Tita beats the last eggs, ready to “complete her martyrdom once and for all.” Tita believes she hears a baby chick inside one of them, and panics. When they find no baby chick, Mama Elena yells that she won't tolerate hysteria.

After days of preparations, Nacha and Tita are exhausted. On the final night before the wedding, Nacha and Tita are finishing the last of the cakes. After Mama Elena goes to bed, Nacha can sense that Tita is in a terrible state. She embraces Tita, telling her to let out her **tears**, because she won't be able to cry at the wedding the next day. Nacha is sad for Tita because, as the narrator remarks, she is “on her side.” Nacha doesn't get along with Rosaura, a “picky eater” who has often secretly fed Nacha's cooking to the dog. In contrast, Tita has always been willing to try anything. Holding each other, Nacha and Tita cry into the cake batter until Tita's tears are dry.

After finishing the cakes, Tita and Nacha add the marmalade filling they made the month before. Tita remembers the day she carried the apricots in her skirt from the garden. She ran into Pedro, who stared at her exposed legs, and she dropped the fruits. He tried to explain why he was marrying Rosaura, but she refused to listen. She ran away, into the room where Gertrudis and Chenchu were embroidering imported wedding sheets with a chastity opening so that the couple could have sex without seeing each other naked. Imports were hard to get during the war, but Mama Elena had bought the sheets from a smuggler. Tita is horrified by the sheets' whiteness, and is overcome with memories of little girls in white virginal “may-day” dresses, of wedding dresses and white churches where she had dreamed she would one day get married. For several days, everything she sees appears white.

*Mama Elena's choice to force Tita to perform the castrations and Tita's sickness at doing so serve as a metaphor for Mama Elena's abuse. By forcing Tita to make all the wedding preparations, Mama Elena is sadistically making Tita participate in her own metaphorical “castration.” Mama Elena forbids Tita even from showing sadness and excusing herself to feel it privately, leaving her no alternative but to repress her emotions completely. Even the kitchen, which is normally Tita's refuge, thus becomes a place of torture. Tita searches for any sign of life that could be rescued in the eggs, just as she holds out hope that she may rescue some part of herself.*



*Nacha can't change the course of events for Tita, but she can save Tita from feeling dead inside by giving her a space to feel her sadness. For Nacha, cooking and eating are ways of communicating and accepting love. By refusing to accept Nacha's food, Rosaura symbolically rejects Nacha's offer of love. Tita, on the other hand, is open to the love Nacha gives her. Though Tita is forbidden from experiencing many of life's adventures, her eclectic taste in food reflects her openness to new feelings and experiences.*



*The image of Tita carrying fruit from the garden and inspiring Pedro's lust evokes the Biblical scene of “original sin” in the Garden of Eden. This passage marks the transition of Pedro and Tita's story from one of first love to one of forbidden love, or sin. Tita's future of unmet desire contrasts with Rosaura's future of sex without love, represented by the rather absurd “chastity opening” in the sheets. Tita is plagued not by images of sin, but by purity and whiteness. Her virginity is a burden she can't escape. This passage also mentions the war (the Mexican Revolution) for the first time, introducing it initially as an inconvenience the characters must work around, rather than a central focus of their lives.*



Remembering the day she saw Rosaura's sheets, Tita begins to see white everywhere again and her **tears** return. She is crying into the fondant cake icing when Nacha sends her to bed. Nacha finishes the icing and at the end licks some of it from her finger. She is overcome with a wave of longing, remembering all of the family's weddings she has helped prepare, each time wishing the next wedding would be hers. She remembers her own fiancé, who Mama Elena's mother had forced away. Nacha spends all night crying, and the next day she is too ill to go to the wedding.

At the wedding, Tita hears the guests gossiping about her terrible situation. Determined not to let herself be a spectacle, she focuses on controlling her expression by remembering times in her life when she felt smug. She remembers when she disobeyed her mother as a kid and swam across the Rio Grande with a group of boys, beating them all to the finish. When she was fourteen, she rounded up her family's horses after a group of boys had scared them loose. The carriage driver and the village men were amazed that she did what they failed to do. In the reception line at the wedding, Tita congratulates Rosaura and Pedro. Pedro pulls her near, telling her he has only married Rosaura so that he could remain close to Tita. Hearing this, Tita's joy and hope return, and she no longer sees the wedding as a loss.

After the guests eat the wedding cake, they all begin to feel a sense of desperate longing and to cry over lost love. Some become nauseous, and vomit all over the floor. Tita, unaware that her tears from the night before are the **supernatural** cause of the mayhem, continues eating the cake without experiencing any of its effects. Vomit and tears fill the wedding hall floor, covering Rosaura's wedding dress. Even Rosaura get sick, and that night, she and Pedro agree not to have relations until they both recover. When Tita returns home, she finds Nacha dead in her bed, clutching a photo of her old fiancé. Mama Elena blames Tita for poisoning the cake to ruin Rosaura's wedding, and beats her so badly that she isn't able to get out of bed for weeks.

*Here Esquivel introduces Tita's unintentional magic power to make others feel her emotions through her cooking. Full of longing and sadness, and forced to contain all of her emotion inside herself, Tita has unconsciously found a way to communicate her suffering to others. Nacha's own tragic love story reveals her own well of repressed desire as well as the history of cruel matriarchs who have run Tita's family.*



*Though Tita embodies many qualities traditionally valued in women, she also secretly defies many of the limits placed on women's roles. Tita seems to embody the feminine ideals of warmth and domesticity, but her sense of self-worth actually comes from remembering times when she rivaled men with her bravery and strength. When Tita learns that she still has Pedro's heart, she retrieves her joy. Rather than serving only as a symbol of her loss, then, the wedding is also a sacrifice on behalf of Pedro's love for Tita. Tita finds comfort in this realization, even though it means that Rosaura's future is also part of the sacrifice.*



*Tita's power allows her to share all of the emotions she is expected to repress, impacting others with extreme consequences. Though Tita doesn't ruin Rosaura's wedding intentionally, her sadness effectively poisons the bride, groom, and everyone else complicit in Tita's suffering – giving Tita an unintended vengeance. But Tita can't control her power, and while it grants her retribution, it also comes with a price, taking Nacha's life and bringing great suffering at the abusive hands of Mama Elena.*



## CHAPTER 3: MARCH – “QUAIL IN ROSE PETAL SAUCE”

After Nacha's death, Tita takes over as official ranch cook. Without Nacha, she feels as if she is alone with her “real mother” gone. In the kitchen, however, Tita finds some refuge, where “flavors, smells, textures and the effects they could have were beyond Mama Elena's iron command.” A year after the wedding, Pedro brings Tita roses. Rosaura, pregnant with their first child, cries when she realizes the roses are for Tita. At Mama Elena's orders to get rid of the roses, Tita decides to make quail in rose petal sauce. As she cooks, she begins to hear Nacha's voice in her head, telling her how to prepare the meal. She learns that it is most merciful to kill the quail without hesitation. Tita reflects that her mother is talented at killing quickly, except in the case of Tita herself, who Mama Elena has been killing slowly throughout her life.

The novel flashes back to the one occasion when Rosaura tried cooking to compete with Tita, resulting in sick stomachs for the whole family. Now, when the family sits down to eat the quail in rose petals, Pedro compliments the “exquisite” taste of Tita's food, despite Mama Elena's disapproval. Rosaura, stricken with morning sickness, barely eats. Gertrudis, however, feels very **hot**, affected **supernaturally** by Tita's food. Feeling a rush of sexual desire, she begins to imagine herself naked with the captain of a rebel troop who caught her eye in the village the week before. Gertrudis looks to Tita, but Tita is staring at Pedro. The narrator explains that it is as if Tita herself had been “dissolved” into the food. With each bite, Pedro feels as if she were “penetrating” him through the flavors and textures of her food.

While washing the utensils, Gertrudis continues to sweat profusely, a pink, rose-scented cloud emanating from her body. When she tries to use the outside shower that Mama Elena has rigged up, her body is so hot that the water evaporates in the air before it can reach her. Pedro and Tita stand on the patio, speechlessly watching the scene. The rose-scented cloud then **magically** travels far away to a battleground where federal and rebel troops are fighting. Juan Alejandrez, the captain Gertrudis saw in the village, abandons his troop to run after the cloud on horseback. Back on the ranch, **the heat** from Gertrudis' body causes the wooden shower boards to catch flame. Gertrudis runs out of the shower naked, right into the field, where she meets Juan, who is galloping toward her. He lifts her onto his horse, and they begin to make love as the horse gallops away.

*After years of abuse and with the loss of Pedro and Nacha, Tita is aware that she is slowly losing parts of herself at the hands of Mama Elena. Yet, true to her resilient spirit, she continues to cling to whatever autonomy she can, particularly through her role as cook. Mama Elena may take away her freedom, but she can't control the sensuous nature or possibilities inherent in food. Tita can also open her mind to hear Nacha's voice when she needs her, keeping Nacha alive through Tita's love. Pedro's loyalty to Tita causes great suffering for Rosaura, who doesn't earn Pedro's love even when she carries his child.*



*The novel's magical realism allows the sensuous nature of food to be dramatized: food becomes a powerful medium for sending and receiving love and passion. Though Tita and Pedro are forbidden from touching or even speaking, they discover food as a means for transmitting their forbidden feelings and desires. Rosaura, who never cooks and doesn't have a talent for it, is unable to reach Pedro's stomach just as she is unable to reach his heart. Gertrudis is open to the possibility of love, and her body receives and responds to the sexual energy Tita and Pedro share.*



*True love and sexual desire appear as powerful, baffling magical forces that can call to people and control their actions even from far away. Gertrudis is transformed into an ethereal, god-like being, so full of romantic and sexual energy that her only remedy is to summon the man she longs for to satiate her desire. Tellingly, the desire in this scene is female-driven, allowing Gertrudis to defy the traditional female role as passive recipient of male desire. Juan, a fighter in the larger political battle for peasant liberation, becomes an aid in Gertrudis' path toward her own liberation.*



Pedro and Tita linger on the porch. Tita wants to tell Pedro to run away with her, but the words don't come. She feels like the last "chile in walnut sauce" at a dinner, which is always left on the platter, all of its sweet, juicy spiciness wasted because nobody wants to look greedy. "Damn good manners!" she thinks, and "Damn Pedro, so decent, so proper, so manly, so ... wonderful!" Pedro is thinking about Gertrudis' naked body, as he has never even seen Rosaura naked. He imagines Tita might look similar when naked. Pedro thinks of asking Tita to run away with him. He begins to, but then Mama Elena calls them both inside.

Tita makes up a story, telling Mama Elena that federal troops (whom Tita hates) came and kidnapped Gertrudis. Mama Elena is overcome with sadness, but when she finds out a week later that Gertrudis has been seen working at a nearby brothel, she burns every reminder of Gertrudis and forbids any mention of her name. Tita celebrates Gertrudis' "liberation" each year by making the quail in rose sauce. That night, Tita works on her **bedspread**. Looking up at the night sky, she hopes that some of the **heat** from Gertrudis' love will travel back through the stars to warm her, but she is left only with **chills**.

*Tita and Pedro don't seek the liberation they have watched Gertrudis find. Tita's reasons have to do with her sense of propriety, and she imagines Pedro's reasons to be the same. It is ironic that even as Tita is damning Pedro's decency, he is thinking about her sister's naked body. Mama Elena halts Pedro and Tita's moment of opportunity. This implies that it isn't just social "decency" but also the tyranny of Mama Elena that keeps them from acting on their impulses.*



*Tita's hatred for the federals reflects her resentment of Mama Elena's tyranny. By making the quail in rose sauce each year, Tita silently shows her rebellion against chastity and her solidarity with Gertrudis. Mama Elena is so offended by her daughter's impropriety and independence that she pretends she doesn't even exist. Tita's persistent chills represent her lack of love, which contrasts with Gertrudis' heat.*



## CHAPTER 4: APRIL - "TURKEY MOLE WITH ALMONDS AND SESAME SEEDS"

The chapter begins with a recipe for turkey molé with almonds and sesame seeds, which Tita is preparing to celebrate the baptism of her new nephew, Roberto. Tita's immense love for Pedro and Rosaura's baby surprises her. When Pedro hears the sounds and smells the aroma of Tita's cooking from the other room, he feels an anticipation resembling sexual arousal. The narrator explains that for Pedro, eating Tita's food has become a ritual act of intimacy with her. Pedro comes into the kitchen and finds Tita grinding almonds, the **heat** causing sweat to drip down her shirt between her breasts. They share a sexually charged gaze so powerful that Tita feels as if her untouched breasts have become "experienced" by his gaze.

Tita barely listens when Chenchá comes in from town with a vivid story about a bloody battle between the federal and rebel troops in the village. Tita usually listens eagerly to Chenchá's stories, which often exaggerate the brutality of both sides. One story Tita had particularly enjoyed involved Pancho Villa (a revolutionary general) ripping out his enemy's hearts to eat them. Now, however, Tita's mind is fully occupied with her thoughts of Pedro. Unaware that Mama Elena had forbidden Pedro from complimenting her cooking, Tita had begun to worry that he'd stopped loving her during Rosaura's pregnancy. Without Nacha or Gertrudis, Tita had become very lonely. Pedro's pleasure at her food was her only source of joy, until her nephew Roberto had been born and her heart reopened.

*Tita consistently awakens sexual feelings in Pedro through her cooking, creating a ritual that acts as a metaphor for making love. This provides a testimony to the strength of female desire and to the idea that sexuality only grows more powerful (and dangerous) the more it is repressed. Because it is repressed, female sexuality must be subversive. Even cooking, a part of traditional women's roles, can become an act of erotic rebellion. This passage speaks to the novel's focus on true love, which is so powerful it can make even a gaze into a physical, sexual act.*



*As women who must stay at home, the characters acknowledge the violence of the Revolution, but their lives still go on as if everything were normal. This survival despite instability parallels Tita's own survival despite her mother's violence, as well as the premise of magical realism. Magical events in Tita's life absorb into the fabric of her reality, indistinguishable from normal life. By exaggerating the violence, Chenchá tries to control the narrative of something beyond her control, and to create distance from the actual threats of war.*



The novel goes back in time to the birth of Roberto. It is early one morning in March, and Tita is packing a suitcase of Gertrudis' clothes and things to be sent to her through Nicolas, the ranch manager, without Mama Elena's knowledge. Tita packs the objects that carry their memories together, but sadly laments that she is unable to send Gertrudis the smells, tastes and laughter of their childhood.

Rosaura goes into labor, and Pedro goes to get Dr. Brown. Mama Elena and Chenchá travel to get supplies they will need for the baby, which they haven't been able to do yet because federal troops have been holding a violent siege over the town. On his way to get the doctor, federal troops capture Pedro. A shootout in the town forces Mama Elena and Chenchá to hide with their neighbors. Throughout Rosaura's pregnancy, Tita has had no interest in the child, but now she must deliver it. With no education about delivering babies, Tita asks for help from Nacha's spirit. Rosaura pushes the baby out, and Tita catches him. They hold Roberto and **cry** together, and Tita is overcome with love for him and even for Rosaura. Tita hears Nacha's ghost giving her instructions for cleaning and wrapping the baby. Everyone returns, amazed that Tita delivered Roberto.

Dr. John Brown arrives the next day and examines Rosaura, revealing that Roberto's birth was very high risk and Rosaura and Roberto could have died. Stunned by Tita's beauty and skill, Dr. Brown agrees to return daily to check on Rosaura. Rosaura produces no milk, so the family finds a wet nurse. The wet nurse is accidentally killed in crossfire between the troops, however, and the job of feeding Roberto falls to Tita. Refusing to eat anything, Roberto reaches for Tita's breast—and to her surprise, she begins to produce milk. Pedro walks in and sees her. He isn't surprised at all, but is filled with tenderness, desire, and shame. Tita continues to nurse Roberto in secret, in conspiracy with Pedro. The secret intensifies their love, making them both feel like Tita is the baby's true mother. Rosaura is still sickly, and mostly stays in bed.

At Roberto's baptism, Dr. Brown compliments Tita on how beautiful she looks holding the baby. Tita is unbothered by his pity when he finds out she isn't allowed to marry or have her own children, as she feels like she already has her own family in Pedro and Roberto. Everyone at the baptism feels strangely hopeful and cheerful after eating Tita's turkey molé, despite the impending threat of famine and death from the war. Mama Elena catches Pedro and Tita's fiery glances, and determines to interfere. Tita hears Mama Elena tell the priest, Father Ignacio, that after Rosaura recovers, she will send her and Pedro to live with a cousin in San Antonio. Tita is devastated by the threat of losing Pedro and the baby, and determined not to let Mama Elena succeed.

*Tita's strong attachment to the past contrasts with how her future has been paused by Mama Elena. Unlike Mama Elena, who buries the past, Tita tries to keep it alive. Tita's frustration that she can't send tastes and smells to Gertrudis highlights the power Tita attributes to these senses and to cooking.*



*The Revolution intensifies, reaching a critical impact on the character's lives. A baby's birth – the sign of life continuing and the creation of something new – is threatened by the federal troops' increasingly violent control. Only Tita can deliver the baby, just as only Tita can deliver herself from her family's cruel tradition and Mama Elena's rule. Roberto's birth offers the chance of new love despite old rivalries and conflict. Tita's love for Roberto creates a sense of redemption and hope for their futures. Nacha's ghost continues to aid Tita in dire moments, showing how love is strong enough to survive death and defy reality.*



*Tita's love for Roberto gives her the magical ability to nurse Roberto and transforms her into a more mother-like figure (or even a Virgin-Mary-like figure) than Rosaura. It may be that love and nourishment is what makes a mother, the novel suggests. Tita's abundance of love allows her to mother Roberto, just as Nacha's love for Tita allowed her to fill the maternal role in place of Mama Elena. Another interpretation is that the true love that exists between Pedro and Tita transforms Tita into the "real" mother of his children. Unloved by Pedro, Rosaura's lack of love reflects in her sickly state and in her inability to nourish her child.*



*Tita's longing is satisfied with having the mother/wife place in Pedro and Roberto's hearts, usurping Rosaura in their love. In this passage, it is clear that both sisters have been shortchanged. Rosaura's life appears perfect but has no substance, and Tita's happiness rests in her illusion that what she has is enough and that she can hold on to it. What they forget is that Mama Elena maintains control over both of their futures. Tita's molé magically infuses her hope into the guests, as she had her romantic gaze with Pedro while preparing it.*



## CHAPTER 5: MAY – “NORTHERN STYLE CHORIZO”

Chencha is making pork sausage, or *chorizo*, while trying to fill a bath for Mama Elena. She covers the fact that Tita isn't helping, as Tita has been deeply depressed and occupied only with feeding worms to a baby pigeon ever since Mama Elena sent Pedro, Rosaura, and Roberto to San Antonio. They must use every part of the pig, as supplies were already low due to the war and because a band of rebels took much of what they had left the week before. The novel then returns to a few days before, when the rebels arrived. Mama Elena sees the rebels coming from far away, and prepares by killing most of her chickens and hiding them, Chencha, Tita, and the pig in the cellar. Mama Elena hates the “greed and gluttony” of rebels, as she has heard terrible things about their savagery from Father Ignacio and the mayor.

When the rebels arrive, Mama Elena stands by her ranch hands, Rosalio and Guadalupe, as her ranch manager Nicolas is in town buying cattle. Mama Elena declares that the rebels may look outside but not enter her house. Outside, the rebels find corn and the rest of the chickens. When one man suggests raiding the house, Mama Elena stuns them by shooting the chickens dead, right out of their hands. She then aims her gun at the captain and challenges them to test her temper. The men back down, feeling “prisoner to a childlike fear of maternal authority.” Declaring his respect, the captain asks what happened to Mama Elena's daughters. She says two went to San Antonio and the other died. He replies with sincere sadness. Unbeknownst to Mama Elena, the captain is Juan Alejandrez, the man who ran away with Gertrudis. The men kill and take all the pigeons from the dovecote above the house, and then leave.

When she emerges, Tita is surprised to find Mama Elena alive. Though she prayed she would survive, Tita had “unconsciously” wished that she would find her dead. Tita climbs up onto the decimated dovecote and rescues an orphaned baby pigeon. Without Roberto to feed, she fills her need to love and nurture by dedicating her attention to the baby bird. For the month that Roberto has been gone, Tita has been worried sick that he is starving without her milk. After the rebels leave, Mama Elena's opinion of them softens.

Returning to the night of the chorizos, Tita is called to bathe Mama Elena, as she is every week. Unable to concentrate, she heats the water too much and ruins the clothes she must wash and heat up for Mama Elena. Furious, Mama Elena sends Tita away. Tita tries to fix the clothes, angry with herself that no matter what she does, she can never get everything right in order to please Mama Elena.

*The novel continues to weave recipes into the characters' lives during the darkest times, making the ritual of cooking a constant even in times of great instability. Though Tita's sisters are gone, Chencha's loyalty to Tita motivates her to work hard to protect Tita from Mama Elena, taking on a sisterly form of self-sacrifice and conspiracy. The reader learns here that Mama Elena succeeded in sending Pedro and Roberto away. Mama Elena's opinions of the rebels are based on her trust in the priests and the mayor – men who represent tradition and the establishment.*



*Mama Elena defies the bandits' expectations of women with her display of violent authority. While she trusts in tradition and sides with the authorities over the rebels, Mama Elena also represents a spirit of female liberation and rebellion. By responding to male violence through dominating it, she becomes a rebel against the patriarchy in this instance. The power of mothers over children allows them to occupy the primal place of authority, even in the minds of grown men. This shows that the role of wife/mother, while a part of traditional values, isn't necessarily oppressive or disempowering (even though Mama Elena herself makes it so).*



*The Revolution has nearly taken all the supplies the family had left, just as Mama Elena has taken what little Tita had left when she sent Roberto and Pedro away. Tita's need to feed others is essential to her identity, just as Mama Elena's need to dominate is essential to hers. If Mama Elena represents the authoritative side of the mother figure, then Tita represents the nurturing side.*



*Mama Elena's abuse has affected Tita's psychology and altered Tita's view of herself. Even though Tita knows her mother is cruel and unfair, she still blames herself for her mother's abuse, displaying a classic symptom of an abuse victim. Mama Elena has created a version of reality in which Tita can do nothing right.*



While finishing the sausage casings, Tita remembers a **hot** night not long before. Tita had awoken in the middle of the night to use the bathroom. Pedro approached her in the dark and pulled her close, covering her mouth. At first afraid, she quickly realized it was Pedro. She returns his kisses and caresses, which quickly become sexual. They stop when they hear Mama Elena call for Tita. The next day, Mama Elena speeds up her plans for Pedro, Rosaura, and Roberto to go to San Antonio, and they leave a few days later.

Mama Elena enters the room with Chenchá, who has just returned from San Antonio. Chenchá **tearfully** tells Mama Elena the news that baby Roberto is dead because of something he ate. Mama Elena says that she hopes the child is safe with the Lord, and then she commands Chenchá and Tita to stop crying and to continue with their work. Flying into a rage, Tita refuses to obey, telling Mama Elena it is her fault that Roberto died. Mama Elena slaps Tita with a wooden spoon, breaking her nose. Tita runs away, up to the dovecote. Mama Elena orders the ladder be removed. She forces Chenchá to help her finish the sausages, which are later found to be full of worms.

The next day, Chenchá finds Tita naked, vacantly staring into space, trying to feed worms to her dead baby pigeon. Mama Elena calls Dr. Brown to take Tita to an insane asylum. He arrives and takes Tita with him. **Crying**, Chenchá runs after the carriage to give Tita her **bedspread**. Tita has spent years crocheting mismatched yarns together, and now the bedspread is so long and colorful that it flies like a “wedding gown” in a swirl of colors for a kilometer behind Dr. Brown’s carriage.

## CHAPTER 6: JUNE – “A RECIPE FOR MAKING MATCHES”

Tita is with Dr. Brown in his laboratory, watching as he makes matches from wood strips and phosphorous. Instead of obeying Mama Elena, John Brown brought Tita to live with him and his small child, Alex. John had been married before, but his wife died. Tita feels grateful to John for rescuing and caring for her, but she has chosen to remain silent so that she can think about everything that has happened. When she first arrived, she spent hours staring at her hands, stunned to realize that they belonged to her and not Mama Elena. After a life of endless work, Tita doesn’t know what to do with them now. Each day, she would crochet the **bedspread** with the yarns John bought her. One day, she wandered into a room outside, where an old Indian woman was making tea. She went each day to sit with the old woman, who reminded her of Nacha.

*While Pedro and Tita’s interaction turns out to be consensual, Pedro approaches Tita in an aggressive way that mimics a scene of sexual violence. This scene portrays the first instance of physical intimacy between Pedro and Tita since his wedding to Rosaura. As always, Mama Elena senses that their connection is escalating and manages to intervene in their intimacy.*



*After years of abuse, Tita has no more emotional reserves to cope with losing her nephew. Mama Elena’s insistence that Tita and Chenchá keep working after the news is the final straw for Tita. Tita has always adapted despite her losses, just as the family keeps surviving amidst political chaos. By offering a cursory platitude and asking Tita to keep working, Mama Elena essentially denies the reality of Roberto’s death. For once, then, Tita refuses to pretend that everything is normal, forcibly taking the space in which to grieve.*



*Typical to her role of abuser, Mama Elena discards Tita after she has broken her spirit. The endless mismatched colors of Tita’s bedspread represent all of the emotions and experiences that Tita has incorporated into her story, and which she holds within herself. By sending the bedspread with her, Chenchá is trying to help Tita hold on to her sense of self.*



*After a long life of repressing her feelings and working hard to survive, Tita is no longer in survival mode. She uses the calm, safe place provided by Dr. Brown to process all of the traumas she has experienced and to regain her strength and sense of self. Her choice to remain silent for a while allows her to look inward. Tita’s hands represent her sense of agency, which Mama Elena took from her by trying to control her every word and action. Tita’s newfound sense of agency thus brings endless possibilities, which baffle Tita because she has no point of reference for what freedom looks or feels like.*



Slowly as Tita regains her lucidity, the room where Tita watched the old woman cook transforms into the laboratory where she watches John perform his experiments. Tita doesn't question this transformation in her perception of reality. John tells Tita that his interest in science came from his grandmother, Morning Light, a Kikapu Indian who loved to study the medicinal properties of plants. During battle, his grandfather had kidnapped Morning Light and made her his wife. His North-American family despised Morning Light and took no interest in her culture. This changed when John's great-grandfather got sick with lung disease. After his great-grandmother Mary worsened his condition by applying leeches, Morning Light saved him with her healing powers and herbal remedies. She earned the respect of the family, who treated her thereafter as their "family doctor."

While teaching Tita to make matches using phosphorous, John explains the philosophy of Morning Light. Everyone has a box of matches inside their soul. A loved one's breath is the "oxygen." Music, food, or any sensory experience that kindles emotion is the candle. When a loved one's nearness is combined with one of these experiences, an inner match is lit. Left unlit, the matches will dampen, and the soul will leave. If lit all at once, the explosion creates a bright tunnel that carries the soul away. People with **cold** breath can kill the flame. Tita **cries**, and John wipes her tears. Tita then realizes that the old woman from before is Morning Light's ghost. John asks Tita to write the cause for her silence on the wall with her fingers, claiming he will later divine her words. In reality, phosphorous (which John has just been working with to make matches) leaves behind a powder that glows in the dark. That night, John smiles when he sneaks into the lab to read her words: "Because I don't want to." Tita wonders if her matches will ever be lit again.

## CHAPTER 7: JULY – "OX-TAIL SOUP"

Chencha prepares Nacha's recipe for ox-tail soup, and makes the dangerous journey across occupied territories to bring it to Tita. The two women **cry** in each other's arms, creating a stream that flows through John's house. They eat, laughing and reliving old memories, and Tita feels Nacha's presence. John notices that the soup revives Tita fully, more than any of his American cook's food or his own remedies. Chencha brings Tita a letter from Gertrudis, who writes that although her captain revived her spirit, she is now working in a brothel because he alone couldn't "quench the **fire**" inside her. Chencha explains that Mama Elena has forbidden any mention of Tita's name, and Tita asks Chencha to relay to Mama Elena that she will never return.

*This passage highlights the history of conflict in Mexico that predates the Revolution. John's history serves as a reminder that colonial powers (which became the federal government) took the land from the indigenous people, who now comprise the majority of the rebel movement. The cultural war in this passage is represented as colonizer/male against indigenous/female. Morning Light's remedies represent the wisdom of the feminine powers, which include a deeper connection to magic and body. Typical to magical realism, Tita doesn't question the appearance or disappearance of the old women, but accepts it.*



*Tita's words serve as her first act of agency after leaving Mama Elena. John's joy at seeing her defiant words show that he is motivated to help her establish autonomy. By helping Tita instead of taking advantage of her vulnerability, John breaks the pattern of male violence established by his predecessors in both the novel and in history. The metaphor of the candle, which becomes literal later in the book, explains Tita's dwindling spirit after losing almost all hope of love. Tita now has a philosophy that helps her to understand her experiences. Tita's ability to see Morning Light highlights the magical world that connects women, particularly in times of suffering.*



*The food John gives Tita is prepared by a stranger, and this can't rival the magic of food prepared by a loved one or connected to one's own memories and emotions. The soup holds all the emotions of Chencha's friendship and Nacha's love, so powerfully that the experience of eating the soup brings back Nacha's ghost. Gertrudis' letter implies that she is on a journey to fill something inside herself that goes beyond the love of one man. Gertrudis doesn't associate her prostitution with desperation or objectification, but sees it as an act of agency.*





After Chenchu leaves, John takes Tita to an elegant party, where he unofficially proposes marriage to her. Tita thinks that John has rekindled her inner **fire**, and she hopes that the pleasure she takes from his company will eventually grow into love. Still, she waits to accept. Meanwhile on her journey home, Chenchu tries to think of a lie to explain to Mama Elena why she visited Tita, so she can pass along Tita's message without incurring her anger. Chenchu crafts the lie that Tita escaped the asylum and now wanders the streets as a beggar repenting of her disrespect to Mama Elena, sure that this story will please her. But Chenchu never gets to tell the lie.

When Chenchu arrives home, a group of bandits attack the ranch. They violently rape Chenchu and when Mama Elena tries to stop them, they knock her unconscious. Mama Elena becomes paralyzed from the waist down. Afterwards Tita's conscience moves her to come home and take care of Mama Elena, with plans to leave once she gets better. Mama Elena suspects that Dr. Brown and Tita are in a relationship. Tita's cooking tastes bitter to Mama Elena, who believes Tita is poisoning her. Tita feels the effects of Mama Elena's continued cruelty, and wonders how anyone could be so wicked even when cared for so lovingly. Tita plans to marry John, on whom she relies to continue to "rekindle her spirit."

Following the rape, Chenchu goes into a deep depression, believing that no man will marry her now. Tita tries to comfort her, but she knows that Mama Elena's cruelty is worsening Chenchu's condition. To give Chenchu a new start, Tita lets Chenchu find work elsewhere. John provides Tita immense comfort during this time, and she begins to wonder if what she feels for him is true love. Since Mama Elena refuses to eat food served by Tita, Tita hires a series of cooks to do the job. They all leave, though, driven away by Mama Elena's cruelty. Mama Elena settles on a ritual of milk and ipecac (a drug used to induce vomiting), which she keeps hidden, to rid her body of the poison she is convinced Tita is feeding her. Mama Elena dies suddenly from overdosing on the ipecac.

*John has started to light Tita's inner "matchbox," but on some level Tita knows she doesn't love him fully. The instant love she felt for Pedro must serve as her reference point, forcing her to ask herself whether love can also be cultivated. The lie Chenchu prepares highlights the sad truth that Mama Elena would rather hear that her daughter is in danger and suffering than to know that her daughter is happier without her.*



*The sudden, brutal events in this scene reflect the instability of the time. During the war, violence occurs without warning, forever altering the course of individual's lives. Mama Elena's protectiveness again allows her a rare moment of self-sacrifice. Powers shift, and Mama Elena is now at the mercy of Tita. Mama Elena may suspect Tita of poisoning because she knows she has earned Tita's anger—or it may be that Tita's ability to infuse her cooking with her emotions causes her resentment to affect the flavor of her food.*



*Conservative views picture women as commodities that are damaged when "used" by other men. Tita can't free Chenchu from misogynistic views toward women's sexuality, but she can give her a space to process her trauma away from Mama Elena. In a gesture of poetic irony, Mama Elena dies of her own self-administered poison while trying to escape imagined poison from Tita. Mama Elena's death is literally caused by her refusal to believe in other people and her refusal to see the danger of her own actions.*



While dressing Mama Elena for her wake, Tita feels no sadness, having never known her mother beyond her “outer leaves” or had any meaningful communication with her. Using the keys her mother wore all her life, Tita unlocks a box she knows her mother kept hidden away in one of the closets. There, she finds letters from a man named José Treviño. She discovers that Treviño was the illicit son of a local man and a black woman whose family had escaped slavery in the United States. Mama Elena was in love with him, but her parents forbade her union with a “mulatto” and instead married her off to Juan de La Garza. They continued their affair in secret through the years, and Treviño was the true father of Gertrudis. Juan de La Garza’s heart attack after Tita’s birth was in fact caused by his discovery of Mama Elena’s affair.

At Mama Elena’s funeral, Tita finally cries, “not for the castrating mother who had repressed Tita her entire life, but for the person who had lived a frustrated love.” Tita vows on her mother’s grave never to forsake true love, which she believes she feels for John Brown. At that moment, Tita is surprised to see Pedro and a fully pregnant Rosaura approaching from a distance. Rosaura hugs Tita, **crying** profusely. Pedro hugs her too, and his body shakes. Tita feels angry with him for abandoning her, and feels that he doesn’t merit her love. She walks away arm in arm with John, hoping Pedro feels stung. Pedro watches in disbelief, determined to win Tita back, particularly now that Mama Elena isn’t there to stop them.

## CHAPTER 8: AUGUST – “CHAMPANDONGO”

The chapter begins with a recipe for Champandongo, a layered meat dish in molé. Tita prepares it in a hurry because she spilled her first batch while bringing it upstairs for her baby niece to smell. Esperanza was born three months before, premature from Rosaura’s grief. John performed the dangerous delivery, which required an operation removing Rosaura’s uterus. Pedro wanted to name the baby after Tita, but Tita feared the baby would inherit her fate as the youngest daughter, and insisted they name her Esperanza. With Rosaura sick, Tita feeds Esperanza. She gives her gruels instead of nursing her, afraid of getting attached again after losing Roberto. Rosaura is insecure and makes Tita bring Esperanza to her room after she feeds her. Esperanza cries when taken away from Tita, so Tita brings her cooking to Rosaura’s room to make the baby think she is still in the kitchen.

*The title of “mother” doesn’t mean much to Tita, who connects with people through shared emotional experiences, and not necessarily through blood. Tita’s lack of grief isn’t just because of her resentment, but also because she sees Mama Elena as a stranger. By unlocking the secret box, Tita betrays her desire to know her mother more deeply as a human being. The story of Treviño adds to the novel’s depiction of racial oppression and prejudice in Mexico. Mama Elena’s conservative values contrast completely with her love affair, which defied both the sanctity of her marriage and the racial hierarchy of her time.*



*To know someone’s inner self is to know their secrets and sins, and more than anything, to know about what and who they loved. Rather than judging her mother as a hypocrite for hiding her own adulterous relationship, Tita now empathizes with her mother’s experience of lost love. Through Tita’s eyes, Mama Elena’s character becomes a little more human and finds a tiny token of redemption. The timing of Tita’s discovery about Mama Elena and Pedro’s return forces Tita to seriously question whether her love for John is “true.”*



*Mama Elena’s death has very different meanings for Tita and Rosaura. For Tita, it liberates her from Mama Elena’s abuse and the obligations she imposed on Tita. Rosaura’s grief, however, implies a true emotional attachment to Mama Elena. This highlights the difference in Mama Elena’s treatment of her two daughters, as well as Rosaura’s attachment to the structure of family relationships. Tita believes that names have the power to divine one’s destiny. The name “Esperanza” means “hope,” which represents Tita’s desire to put tradition and the past behind them and focus on the future and on creating a better life for Esperanza.*



The narrator explains that Tita is in a bad mood, even though she should feel happy because John is coming over to officially propose marriage. Tita has been fighting with Pedro, who has been storming around, begging her not to marry John. Tita is annoyed at Pedro's audacity, calling him a coward for having agreed to marry Rosaura in the first place. She is also angry because on a recent visit from John, his young son Alex declared that when he grew up, he would marry baby Esperanza. Rosaura replied by revealing to everyone that she planned to continue the family tradition and that as the youngest child, Esperanza would be forbidden to marry. Tita's fury makes her feel "like water for chocolate," meaning she is at the final boiling point when it is ready to be mixed to make hot chocolate.

Chencha arrives at the ranch with her quiet, gentle new husband, Jesús. Tita is overjoyed to see Chencha, who "as usual, had dropped out of the sky just when she needed her most." Looking healthy and cheerful, Chencha tells Tita that Jesús was her first love when she was young. Separated by Chencha's parents, they didn't know how to find each other until meeting again in the village. Jesús didn't care that Chencha wasn't a virgin, and they married right away. Tita says they should return to work at the ranch together. Chencha sends Tita away to bathe, offering to finish the Champandango.

While taking a shower, Tita feels the water get **magically hot**, and realizes that Pedro is watching her between the shower boards. She runs to her room. While getting dressed, she hears John arrive, and then hears him and Pedro arguing about politics (though no details are given). When Tita emerges, John asks for her hand in marriage. As her nearest male relative, Pedro agrees. The glimmer from the engagement ring reminds Tita of Pedro's eyes, and she **cries**. Rosaura mistakes Tita's tears for joy, and she feels happy, the burden of her own guilt toward Tita lifted. They raise a toast, but Pedro clinks his glass with so much aggression that it shatters. Chencha diffuses the ensuing confusion by calling everyone into dinner. John explains he must travel to the U.S. to bring back his elderly aunt for the ceremony, upsetting Tita, who is secretly eager to get things going and to get away from Pedro.

Tita is awake putting away pots and pans, stewing in her mixed emotions. In the storage room that used to be Mama Elena's bathing room, she feels Pedro sneak up on her. Locking the door, he pushes her on the bed, "causing her to lose her virginity and learn of true love." Rosaura, in her room trying to put Esperanza to sleep, sees an explosion of colors coming from the storage room. She calls for Tita, but Chencha comes instead. They mistake the phenomenon for Mama Elena's ghost, and Chencha prays for Mama Elena's soul.

*Tita has often struggled with the conflict between the way she is supposed to feel and the way she actually feels. Tita knows she should feel excited in response to John's proposal, but she can't create positive feelings any more than she can stop her negative ones. Rosaura's choice to continue her family tradition shows that she hasn't learned anything from Tita's suffering. Rosaura's grief over her mother and continued adherence to tradition contrasts with Tita's focus on the future and on change. Suffering propels Tita to question and deviate, whereas Rosaura seeks the security of the familiar.*



*Chencha's love replaces the sisterly love that Tita misses without Rosaura and Gertrudis. Chencha, like Tita, has suffered greatly and believed she had no chance at love. The reversal of Chencha's fate reinforces the novel's tone of hope. Jesús accepts Chencha without hesitation, providing a counter narrative to the predominant view that men always reject women who have lost their virginity.*



*Because Pedro's love is illicit and John doesn't seem to know about it, there is no space for their rivalry to play out directly. Their argument about politics thus serves as a ruse for them to express the aggression and potential suspicion that are boiling under the surface. The reason for Pedro's aggression should be obvious to Rosaura, but she chooses to ignore it. She lets herself believe that Tita is happy and that their rivalry is ending, providing a testimony to the strength of her delusions. This is the first instance in which the novel reveals that Rosaura has felt guilty toward Tita for marrying Pedro, a fact that partly redeems her otherwise selfish character.*



*While their interactions are always consensual, the intimate scenes between Pedro and Tita continue to portray Pedro as aggressive and forceful. Just as when he agreed to marry Rosaura to be closer to Tita, Pedro's desire for Tita causes him to act without a fear of consequences. The more repressed his desire for her, the greater risks he takes in pursuing her, and seemingly the more "magical" the times when the two lovers give in to their desires for each other.*



## CHAPTER 9: SEPTEMBER – “CHOCOLATE AND THREE KINGS’ DAY BREAD”

Tita is preparing hot chocolate and three kings’ day bread with candied fruit and a porcelain doll hidden inside. She is miserable, believing she is pregnant with Pedro’s baby. She remembers making the chocolate and bread during holiday seasons past. She mourns the simplicity of childhood, missing Nacha, Gertrudis, and her good relationship with Rosaura. Lately, she has been making a special diet for Rosaura, who has suffered with extra weight, inexplicable flatulence, and bad breath. Rosaura believes their rivalry is over, and she seeks Tita’s help to fix her health, win back Pedro, and prevent social disgrace. She explains that Pedro never been “disposed to sexual excess,” but has taken especially little interest in Rosaura since the night she “saw Mama Elena’s ghost.” Tita is overcome with guilt seeing her sister’s desperate situation. Her guilt is complicated, however, by her anger that Rosaura still plans to make Esperanza follow the family tradition.

As she prepares the hot chocolate and bread, Tita feels a **cold** wind, and Mama Elena’s ghost appears before her. She says that Tita has “forgotten all morality, respect and good behavior,” and calls her a “good-for-nothing.” She curses Tita’s unborn baby, and Tita feels terrible. She feels her life is ruined, and she plans to call off her wedding to John and find a place far away where she can have the baby without Rosaura’s knowledge.

Tita folds the bread dough over the doll. As kids, she remembers, Tita and her sisters would compete to find the porcelain doll, which they saw as an omen of good luck that could grant the finder a wish. As she places the dough to rise, she reflects on how much easier it was to make wishes as a child. She makes the wish that she had never met Pedro, that Mama Elena’s ghost would go away, and that Gertrudis would come back to help her. Tita tries tell Pedro about her pregnancy, but Chenchu interrupts to explain that their neighbors, the Loboses, have arrived. Mama Elena’s ghost glares at Tita, and Pulque the dog barks wildly. Tita begins to faint, and Paquita Lobos makes her sit and smell salts. She says that if she didn’t know better, she might think Tita were pregnant.

*Rosaura is in denial that Pedro and Tita still love each other, choosing to believe that Tita’s relationship with John means that everything is resolved. Her delusions are illustrated by her mistaken belief that she saw Mama Elena’s ghost the night she saw the colors shooting from the dark room, as well as her failure to associate Pedro’s lack of sexual interest throughout their relationship with his feelings for Tita. Tita continues her family’s traditions, such as the chocolate and bread, but they have no meaning without the people who helped her create the memories. Tita’s misery isolates her because she can’t share her predicament, and must perpetuate the illusion that everything is normal.*



*Tita’s connection to the spirit world highlights the intensity of her emotions, both good and bad. Just as the ghosts of Nacha and Morning Light appeared to Tita when she was sad or lonely, so too does she conjure the ghost of Mama Elena seemingly through the magnitude of her guilt and anxiety.*



*The holiday comes at a perfect time, when Tita is in a helpless situation and badly needs a wish. Throughout her life, she has suffered under the cruelty and injustice of others. Now, however, Tita’s suffering has been brought on by her own actions. Gertrudis is the perfect person to wish for, as Tita knows that her sister has pursued her own desires and passions without shame. Even though Pedro shares equally in the responsibility, it is Tita who bears the greatest weight of her own and society’s judgment, and she who must decide how to resolve things.*



Unexpectedly, a rebel troop arrives. They are led by Gertrudis, who has become a general, and her husband Juan Alejandro. Gertrudis says she knows that today is the day Tita makes the chocolate and bread, and she has come home to enjoy the special family recipe. Tita's heart fills with joy. The troop joins Tita's family and their neighbors as they celebrate the bread and chocolate, with Chenchu working to feed everyone. Gertrudis relishes the chocolate, which brings back memories and fills her with a sense of home. She makes a wish for Tita to live a long life, so that the secrets of their family recipes will live on.

Gertrudis explains that after leaving the brothel, she joined the army and fought her way through the ranks to become a general. She reunited with Juan, and they married. Gertrudis is sad to hear of Mama Elena's death, as she was eager for her mother to see her success. Later Juan plays music while Gertrudis dances. Rosaura remarks that Gertrudis' rhythm has always baffled her, as nobody else in her family shares it. Tita believes Gertrudis' rhythm came from her "mulatto" father, a secret she thinks she will guard forever. The narrator then momentarily jumps to the future, saying that Tita ends up telling Gertrudis the truth a year later, in order to defend Gertrudis' honor when she gives birth to a dark-skinned baby. Back at the party, Tita hopes Gertrudis will stay and help her figure out what to do about her pregnancy and the "love triangle."

## CHAPTER 10: OCTOBER – "CREAM FRITTERS"

Gertrudis and Tita are catching up while making cream fritters, which are Gertrudis' favorite desert from childhood. Seeing that Tita is distracted, Gertrudis asks her what's wrong. Tita breaks down **crying**, revealing that she is pregnant and that she is afraid that "the truth" will destroy Rosaura. Gertrudis is unfazed, and replies that "The simple truth is that the truth does not exist; it all depends on a person's point of view." She explains that Tita can view herself as the sinner challenging Rosaura's union, or that she can see Rosaura as the long-running interceptor between Tita's true love with Pedro. Gertrudis mentions Tita's pregnancy when she sees Pedro approaching, forcing Tita to go outside and tell Pedro of her pregnancy.

At hearing the news, Pedro happily suggests they run away together. Tita tells Pedro they must think about Rosaura and Esperanza, whom Pedro had momentarily forgotten about. They decide to think it over and talk again after the troops leave. Pedro feels relieved that whatever they decide, Tita won't be marrying John after all.

*Tita unknowingly invoked the magical powers of her cooking by wishing "into" the bread for Gertrudis to return. Gertrudis, though has built such an astonishing life for herself so far from home, still feels affected by the deep spiritual connection between food and memories. Gertrudis' desire to show her mother her success, even after so many years of distance and bad relations, illustrates the resilience of the childlike desire to please one's parents.*



*Until now, the battleground has been depicted as a wholly masculine arena. By achieving status as a general, Gertrudis defies the social norm that men fight and women stay at home. Rather than using violence on those weaker than her, which would follow the pattern of Mama Elena's violence, Gertrudis instead uses violence to further her cause. As a woman, Gertrudis is fighting back not only against the federal powers but also against the structure of the patriarchy itself. Juan accepts Gertrudis back, even after her work in the brothel. His attitude again runs counter to the sexist male culture that prefers women to be chaste and virginal.*



*Here Gertrudis clearly describes the moral relativism that runs throughout the novel and that is crucial to understanding both Rosaura and Tita's plights. For Gertrudis, the definition of sin is relative to the values and interests of the beholder. Society gives Rosaura the right to claim Pedro as her legal husband—but Gertrudis contends that as his true love, Tita's relationship with Pedro is more sacred. Her nuanced view doesn't dismiss Rosaura's suffering entirely, but also reminds Tita of Rosaura's agency in creating the sisters' unfortunate situation.*



*Pedro's ability to temporarily forget about his existing wife and child contrasts with Tita's deep sense of moral responsibility. Unlike Tita, who empathizes even with Rosaura, Pedro doesn't seem to feel any remorse at having ruined Tita's prospective marriage.*



While Tita rests upstairs, Gertrudis tries to finish the syrup for the fritters. Unfamiliar with cooking, she can't read the recipe and commands her sergeant Treviño to help her. The novel then flashes back to the story of Treviño's loyalty, which is rooted in his love for Gertrudis. Once, she ordered him to find a traitor she knew was hiding amongst her troop. Her only knowledge was that the traitor had a red mole on his inner buttocks. Treviño befriended several prostitutes to help him identify the man, who he eventually caught. Normally a gentleman, Treviño brutally killed the man, who it turned out Treviño had been hunting for years for raping his mother and sister. Treviño remained dedicated to Gertrudis, even after her marriage to Juan Alejandrez. Terrified of disappointing her, he struggles to make the syrup, which they proudly bring to Tita for her approval.

Tita hears Pedro drunkenly singing to her from outside, accompanied by Juan on the guitar. Tita panics, worried Rosaura will hear. The ghost of Mama Elena appears, shaming Tita and telling her to run away. Tita demands that she leave her in peace, rebuking Mama Elena's hypocrisy. Mama Elena reprimands her, saying, "Who do you think you are?" Tita replies, "I know who I am! A person who has a perfect right to live her life as she pleases." Mama Elena's ghost dwindles into a tiny light and shoots out of Tita's window. Tita's belly then **magically** deflates, releasing her menstrual flow. Tita realizes that she wasn't pregnant after all. Outside Tita's window, the tiny light turns into a firecracker, which crashes into an oil lamp and catches Pedro on **fire**. Gertrudis stomps out the fire and the men carry Pedro upstairs. Rosaura runs to him, but he calls for Tita. Rosaura runs to her room. Tita stays with Pedro all night as Nacha's voice tells her how to remedy his burns.

The next day, Gertrudis, Tita, and Juan share a warm goodbye as the troop leaves to attack Zacatecas. Gertrudis gives Tita advice for preventing future pregnancies. Moments after they leave, another carriage pulls up. John Brown has returned, with flowers for Tita. He embraces her, but he can tell that she something "inside" her has changed.

*Gertrudis' domination of men on the battlefield extends into other areas of life. Rather than being repelled by Gertrudis' authority or her brashness, Treviño responds to her with a mix of fear and love. In most instances of male/female dynamics within the novel, the men have more physical and social power than the women. Many of the stories about Gertrudis, however, provide a completely different narrative about male-female dynamics. Even though Treviño is clever and powerful, he willingly submits to Gertrudis. By ordering him to cook and through his compliance, they complete a moment of traditional gender role reversal.*



*Tita's guilt conjures for her the most punishing figure from her childhood. Because Tita accepts the guilt Mama Elena instilled in her, she is unable to shake the "ghost" left by her trauma. Tita's guilt is so powerful that her body creates a phantom pregnancy as punishment. By saying that she knows "who she is," however, Tita experiences a critical moment of self-realization. To know herself is to recognize her agency and personhood apart from Mama Elena. When Tita stops believing Mama Elena, she escapes the mental grasp that Mama Elena left on her, and the pregnancy disappears. Fire, a symbol of love and passion, backfires on Pedro in a last act of revenge from Mama Elena.*



*John may sense Tita's loss of virginity, which has changed something "inside" her. Just as Tita can no longer hide her true self from herself, she can no longer hide her feelings for Pedro. Whether she stays with John or not, she cannot hide her newfound sense of agency.*



## CHAPTER 11: NOVEMBER – “BEANS WITH CHILE TEZCUCANA STYLE”

The chapter begins with a recipe for beans with chile Tezcucana style, which Tita is preparing for her dinner with John and his Aunt Mary. Tita is planning to break off her engagement with John, and she feels empty. Chenchu has just had a baby, so Tita is alone. She has nursed Pedro for a week while putting off John's visit. Tita believes Pedro is acting “contrary to the principle that has always governed his treatment of others – his sense of decency.” Pedro demands that she leave John abruptly. Tita explains that John has been very kind, and deserves her delicacy in breaking things off. Upon learning that Tita isn't pregnant after all, Pedro is convinced that Tita will return to John. Pedro imagines that his burns and infirmity repulse Tita, but she is actually put off by his “selfishness and suspicion.”

After Tita sits to eat breakfast, Rosaura comes downstairs. Following a week in her room without eating, Rosaura has lost all her excess weight. Rosaura says they need to talk. Tita says they should begin with discussing how Rosaura stole Tita's boyfriend. Rosaura tells Tita that given the family tradition, Tita had no right to have a boyfriend. Tita accuses Rosaura of standing in the way of true love. They delve into a bitter fight over who has a right to Pedro. Rosaura swears that she won't sleep with Pedro again because of his depravity, but that she also won't abdicate her public role as his wife. She is furious that Tita and Pedro have been openly showing their closeness after Pedro's burning incident, and threatens Tita never to humiliate her publicly again. Rosaura also forbids Tita from interacting with Esperanza, saying the daughter of a good family shouldn't be influenced by a “streetwalker.”

Tita is furious about Rosaura's threats to keep her away from Esperanza. She wishes the earth would swallow Rosaura up. She then realizes that she has ripped up all of the tortilla edges from breakfast. She feeds them to the chickens and they begin to peck angrily at each other. Their fury creates a whirlwind. Tita tries to rescue Esperanza's diapers, but the whirlwind throws her down. The tornado creates a hole in the earth, which swallows most of the chickens. Tita returns inside to stir the beans, which won't cook. She remembers Nacha saying that tamales made with anger will refuse to cook, and to make them happy you should sing. Tita wonders whether she should abandon Pedro to start a family with John. As she sings a love song, her memories of Pedro come to mind, and the beans open. Happier, she goes to prepare for John's visit.

*Tita is surprised by Pedro's selfishness because she sees him as normally “decent” to others. Tita's view, however, may serve as a point of controversy when considering the whole of Pedro's actions. Pedro's marriage allowed him to be near Tita, but caused pain to Tita and a lifetime of insecurity for Rosaura. Furthermore, he easily forgot about his wife and daughter when he suggested he and Tita run away in the previous chapter. However, it may also be that Tita is merely referring to Pedro's manners as decent, rather than to his overall consideration of how his choices affect others.*



*The tipping point for Rosaura was the lovers' public display of intimacy after Pedro was burned, when he rejected Rosaura and called to Tita. For Rosaura, the only thing worse than Pedro and Tita's affair is the risk of it becoming public, showing how deeply Rosaura values the respect and approval of society. Rosaura and Tita rehash their past, each contending for the role of victim. Through their opposing views, each character comes to represent an opposing set of values. Rosaura values tradition, propriety, and fidelity to the marriage contract. Tita's perspective, in complete contrast, values individual freedom and true love over the marriage contract.*



*Tita and Rosaura magically infuse their rivalry into the breakfast tortillas that become the chickens' food. Tita's wish that the earth would swallow Rosaura is also transferred, causing the ground to swallow the chickens up instead. A spectacle of magical realism, this scene creates an apt metaphor for Tita and Rosaura's fight over Pedro. Though the chickens' gender isn't stated, it is common to have many hens and only one rooster, adding to the symbolism of this scene. The messy struggle of loving Pedro causes Tita to consider marrying John. The fact that she chooses to sing a love song that makes her think only of Pedro, though, proves that he still has her heart.*



As Tita brushes her teeth to remove the dirt from the whirlwind, she remembers Jovita, the schoolteacher who had taught her how to make tooth powder. Jovita's husband died young, leaving her a young widow with a baby. No potential suitors wanted to raise another man's child, so she stayed unmarried. She was possessed by an ongoing restlessness, which drove her to stay awake all night sweeping the streets. Sometimes trash would stick to her, and people made fun of her. Tita sees the chicken feathers still clinging to her from the hen fight. Tita imagines that she looks like Jovita, and the thought horrifies her. She brushes her hair and cleans herself up, afraid of "becoming another Jovita."

John and his Aunt Mary arrive. In English, Aunt Mary praises Tita and her cooking. John asks Tita if something is wrong, but she replies that she doesn't want to say in front of his aunt. He explains that his aunt is deaf and reads lips, but can't read them in Spanish. Tita tearfully confesses that she has lost her virginity to another man and therefore can't marry John. John asks whether Tita still loves him. Tita replies that when he is gone, she thinks she is in love with the "other man," but when he returns she feels "calm, settled, and at peace." Aunt Mary mistakes Tita's **tears** for happiness. John delivers a speech telling Tita that he doesn't care about her virginity or infidelity, but that what matters to him is that she choose the man who will make her happiest, whether it is him or Pedro.

Tita is touched by John's response, which she sees as a reflection of his character, and is also surprised that he has deduced the other man to be Pedro. Overwhelmed, she excuses herself to **cry** outside. Throughout the rest of the dinner with Aunt Mary, John treats Tita just as kindly and lovingly as usual. Before he goes, he tells her that he thinks she would be happy with him, and she replies that she knows this. She is prepared to think carefully, knowing her choice will affect the rest of her life.

*Tita has identified with the plights of different female role models at different times. The stories that most often move her are those of lost or forbidden love—Nacha lost her fiancée to the cruelty of Mama Elena's mother, and Mama Elena lost her true love to the cruelty of her parents. Mama Elena is dead now, though, and there is no clear villain figure left. Tita now identifies with Jovita, whose suffering was caused by no villain except a sexist male culture that offers no romantic hopes for women who have already belonged to other men.*



*Tita uses her infidelity and lost virginity as "reasons" why she can't marry John. She assumes John will no longer see her as marriage material, thereby transferring the burden of choice onto him. His response puts the choice back in Tita's hands, however. Traditional society teaches women that they must be chaste and faithful, or else they are essentially "streetwalkers" (prostitutes), as Rosaura called Tita. John's ability to see beyond Tita's lost virginity and infidelity shows the openness and modernity of his views and his capacity for independent thinking. Like Gertrudis' husband Juan, John chooses not to be troubled by Tita's sexual past.*



*John's selflessness contrasts with Pedro's recent jealousy, making the choice even more painful for Tita. After a lifetime of other people – Mama Elena, Rosaura, and Pedro – choosing for her, Tita finally holds her future in her own hands. The power dynamics have been reversed, as Tita now holds the futures of John, Pedro, and Rosaura in her hands as well.*





## CHAPTER 12: DECEMBER: "CHILES IN WALNUT SAUCE."

Tita and Chenchu are tirelessly preparing chiles in walnut sauce for a wedding banquet. The narrator states that the wedding has a "special significance" for Tita, who is very happy, and "for John too." The narrator then switches over to following John. He has been happily assisting Tita with preparations, and now lays his clothes out for the following day, "filled with strong emotion." Pedro, in contrast, has been in a terribly jealous mood. When John came over to help Tita cook, John handed her a box of matches, taking "her hand in his." Pedro is baffled by John's "attitude," given what he knows about "what was between Tita and him." The night before the wedding, Pedro leaves to find John and "teach him what a man does when he really loves a woman," but he turns back, deciding it would look bad for "Tita's brother-in-law to get in a fight with John on the day before the wedding."

As Tita finishes shelling the last nuts, she thinks of how much Rosaura would have liked this wedding. The narrator reveals that Rosaura has been dead for a year, and then tells the story of her death. One night, when Pedro went to go say goodnight to Rosaura, he heard a loud episode of flatulence from outside her door. It was so loud that it rattled the house. Pedro asked through the door if Rosaura was all right, but heard no response. When he entered, he saw her purple face and "wild" eyes just before she finished passing the gas and died. John diagnosed her cause of death as "acute congestion of the stomach." Few people attended her funeral, disturbed by the smell still emanating from her body.

On the day of the wedding, everyone is impressed when Gertrudis and Juan pull up in a Model T ford coupe. They are sporting the latest trends, with Gertrudis in shoulder pads and a wide-brimmed hat and Juan wearing a suit and top hat. Their oldest son has become handsome, with dark skin and Mama Elena's blue eyes. Rosalio and Nicolas wear traditional clothing as they collect the wedding invitations handmade by Alex and Esperanza, using an old family recipe and the wedding ink left over from Rosaura and Pedro's wedding.

*Esquivel carefully describes the wedding preparation, without actually stating whose wedding it is. The cliffhanger at the end of Chapter 11 was the moment of decision for Tita – would she marry John? Esquivel begins this chapter with Tita and John's actions and thoughts before the wedding, and describes them both as happy. The first mention of Pedro is to describe his jealousy. The author thereby plays with the reader's suspense, implying that Tita is marrying John. John's lack of jealousy or possessiveness contrasts with Pedro, who believes that if a man loves a woman, he will use violence to defend his "right" to her.*



*Rosaura's death through indigestion reinforces the importance of her character's relationship to food and its symbolic role in the novel. Tita's example shows that those who show love and generosity are likely to find more love. Love, as John taught Tita, nourishes the soul. Those who display loving qualities, like Nacha, Gertrudis, and Tita, enjoy food deeply. In contrast, Rosaura's inability to enjoy or digest food reflects her bitterness and jealousy. Rosaura's death by indigestion serves as a metaphor for her failure to nourish her own spirit.*



*Gertrudis, who led troops on the side of the rebels and defied traditional women's roles, represents modernity. Pictured as rich and worldly, Juan and Gertrudis continue to represent the most daring and prosperous side of modernity and the future of Mexico. Through this depiction, the novel hints at the inevitability of a future that is more liberated, materialistic, and international.*



At the wedding, Pedro and Tita request that the band play the old waltz, “The Eyes of Youth.” The narrator comments that Tita is still beautiful, even though she is now thirty-nine. As they dance, cheek-to-cheek, John watches with a “look full of affection and just a hint of resignation.” Pedro asks Tita if she remembers the first time they danced to the song, and then says, “he didn’t know [then] that it would take twenty-two years before I asked you to be my wife.” At this point, the novel confirms that the wedding that is happening *isn’t* for Tita. Tita asks Pedro if he is serious, and he tells her that they have no reason to fear anyone’s judgment anymore. He suggests that they could have their own children, “now that Esperanza is leaving us.”

The narrator explains that for twenty years, Pedro and Tita had kept their love hidden. Out of fear of public scrutiny and the belief that Esperanza should grow up in a traditional household, Rosaura insisted they “maintain the appearance” of a happy marriage. Tita and Pedro agreed to keep their relationship discreet, which meant Tita had to abandon the possibility of having a child with Pedro. Rosaura agreed to try to live together harmoniously, and to share the role of raising Esperanza with Tita. Rosaura would be in charge of Esperanza’s “education,” and let Tita be in charge of her “feeding.” Tita disagreed with Rosaura on many subjects, and took advantage of Esperanza’s trust in her and fondness for the kitchen to discreetly teach Esperanza her own views.

It was during one of their secret kitchen talks that Esperanza first told Tita about John’s son Alex. Alex had just returned from medical school, and Esperanza was reacquainted with him at a party. When he looked at her, she says, she felt **hot** like “dough being plunged in boiling oil.” Upon hearing this, Tita knew they would be “bound together forever.” Tita and Pedro pleaded with Rosaura to change her mind about continuing the family tradition regarding the youngest daughter, but Rosaura refused.

The narrator describes a previous argument that Pedro and Tita had with Rosaura year before, when Rosaura refused to let her daughter go to school. She argued that she only needed to learn skills like piano, singing, and dancing, which would make her a good companion to Rosaura and a charming socialite. Tita contended that Esperanza should go to school to learn enough to be an engaging conversationalist and so she could meet upper-class friends, and Rosaura reluctantly agreed. The narrator comments that Tita continued to teach Esperanza “the secrets of love and life as revealed by the kitchen.”

*While the previous passages hint that the wedding may not be Tita and John’s, this passage finally reveals the answer for certain. It also reveals just how much time has gone by since the last chapter. While the novel doesn’t yet reveal what happened to lead up to this point, the author narrows in on what is most important in the novel – that Tita and Pedro’s love was unbreakable, despite several struggles and setbacks. The image of them dancing to the same song they danced to when they were first in love creates the sense that their love exists outside of time.*



*Rosaura had a choice when she learned about Pedro and Tita’s plan to stay together—and she chose a false, loveless marriage over the shame of being a divorcee, or the world of unknowns she would have had to face had she started life over without Pedro. Her desire to maintain a flawless public image, coupled with her attachment to the value of a “traditional household,” compelled her to spend the rest of her life living an elaborate lie. Her arrangement with them came not only at the expense of their happiness, but also at the expense of her own.*



*Tita and Pedro’s relationship is mirrored in Esperanza and Alex’s relationship. This parallel connects back to Tita’s wish for Esperanza not to be named after her, lest she have the same destiny. The fact that they use the same words to highlight their experience of love at first sight further highlights the magical connection between the destinies of Tita and her niece.*



*Rosaura’s wish that her daughter only learn things that will make her a good companion and socialite further highlight Rosaura’s priorities and growing resemblance to Mama Elena. To her, nothing matters more than family structure and social status. The fact that she doesn’t even consider what Esperanza might enjoy learning highlights the extent of her selfishness. Rosaura, still unaware of the magic of food, has no idea the power she gives Tita by letting her teach Esperanza about cooking.*



When Alex proposed to Esperanza, the narrator explains that Rosaura “fought like a lioness to defend what according to tradition was her right – a daughter who would stay with her until she died.” In her fits of rage, she broke the arrangement she had with Pedro and Tita by “hurling curses” at them for all the pain their relationship had caused her. It was after several days of bitter fighting that Rosaura died of her digestive illness.

At the wedding, everyone compliments Tita and Pedro for their fine job of raising Esperanza and for her excellent choice in Alex, who has won a grant to complete his doctorate at Harvard and will be taking Esperanza with him. They also praise Tita’s chiles in walnut sauce. Remembering the day long ago when Tita felt as discarded as the last chile on the platter, Tita wonders if the fact that every last chile has been eaten means “good manners have been forgotten.” After eating the dish, a **magical** sexual passion takes hold of all of the guests. Gertrudis, just as she was years before, is the first to shown signs of this. All of the guests begin to leave early, eager to find the first available place to stop and make love, including in their cars, under bridges, and by the river.

Chencha is among the last to leave, asking permission to go and find her husband at once. Seeing the passion between Tita and Pedro, John leaves too. Tita wishes John had found someone to love after her, but he never did. Pedro and Tita are now alone on the ranch for the first time ever. Without words, they walk to the dark room.

Hundreds of burning candles surrounds the brass bed, which Tita and Pedro each think the other has prepared. Neither sees the ghost of Nacha as she lights the last candle and fades away. Tita and Pedro make love more passionately than ever before, letting go of all the feelings they’ve ever held back. As Tita orgasms, she sees a bright tunnel. She remembers John telling her years before about the bright tunnel that appears when all of one’s inner candles are lit at once. She doesn’t want to die, so she steadies her breath, and the tunnel disappears. She then realizes that Pedro is dead, and assumes that he entered the tunnel. **Cold**, she finds a box of candles and begins to eat them, concentrating on recalling moments with Pedro. Slowly, the tunnel reappears. At the end of the tunnel, Pedro awaits her, and she joins him. After they die, their bodies catch **fire**. The dark room becomes a volcano, shooting sparks so high and bright that people mistake them for fireworks.

*Rosaura’s intense show of suffering reveals her repressed pain over watching Pedro abandon her for Tita. Believing she had a right to his love as his legal wife, she chooses to see herself as a victim. Continuing the same tradition that tore apart their love in the first place is the more dramatic way she can get back at them.*



*As there was no mention of Tita being aroused when she made the chiles the night before the wedding, it may be that she poured the repressed passion of her whole life into the chiles. Esperanza’s wedding is significant to Tita – through watching and helping her niece break the family tradition, Tita sees the end of her own subjugation to propriety and tradition. Noticing that all of the chiles are gone, Tita feels the release of the loneliness of her own past and feels hopeful that society and her family are changing their values from the “good manners” that have oppressed her all her life.*



*The novel poses but never answers the question – can true love be one-sided? Tita and Pedro are portrayed as each other’s true loves, but John’s resilient, unselfish affection for Tita implies that he may still be in love with her, too.*



*The connection between magic, love, life, and death is never clearer than in this scene. The appearance of the tunnel proves that Pedro and Tita’s love is “true” because they were the only ones able to light each other’s “inner candles.” The spectacular appearance of the volcano and the fireworks creates the idea that true love is as powerful and as unstoppable as a natural disaster. Where there is true love, sex becomes a magical ritual. Just as it is the bridge to the creation of life through conception, so it can be the bridge to death and the afterlife. The cold Tita begins to feel symbolizes her spirit preparing to shut down without Pedro’s love to light her.*



When Esperanza and Alex return from their honeymoon, they find the ranch covered in ash from the **fire**, with nothing remaining but Tita's cookbook. Afterwards the land surrounding the ranch became famous for its fertility, and all kinds of life flourished there. The narrator explains that the cookbook was left to her when her mother, Esperanza, passed away. Later, her parents put up apartments where the ranch used to be, and her father Alex remains there. Today, the narrator is going to see her father and prepare for him the Christmas rolls that her mother lovingly taught her to make from great-aunt Tita's cookbook.

*The supernatural fertility of the land reinforces the metaphor of Pedro and Tita's love as a volcano. Volcanoes bring great destruction as well as fertilize the soil, just as the two characters' love gave them inner life as well as suffering. For Tita, cooking was the medium for love, communication, magic and survival. Through her cookbook (and the voice of the narrator, her great-niece), Tita lives on, teaching the secrets she held most dear to future generations of women in her family.*





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