

from

The Book of Unknown Americans

Novel

by Cristina Henríquez



The Toro family faces obstacles whenever they try to visit their home country of Panamá.

- I** was less than a year old when my parents brought my brother and me to the United States. Enrique was four. He used to tell me things about Panamá that I couldn't possibly have remembered—like about the scorpions in our backyard and the cement utility sink where my mom used to give us baths. He **reminisced** about walking down the street with my mom to the Super 99, the dust blowing up everywhere, the heat pounding down, and about looking for crabs between the rocks along the bay.
- “It’s in you,” my dad **assured** me once. “You were born in Panamá. It’s in your bones.”
- I spent a lot of time trying to find it in me, but usually I couldn’t. I felt more American than anything, but even that was up for debate according to the kids at school who’d taunted me over the years, asking me if I was related to Noriega, telling me to go back through the canal. The truth was that I didn’t know which I was. I wasn’t allowed to claim the thing I felt and I didn’t feel the thing I was supposed to claim.
- The first time I heard my parents tell the story about leaving Panamá, my mom said, “Our hearts kept breaking each time

Panamá, my mom said, “Our hearts kept breaking each time we walked out the door.” They tried to give it time. They assumed conditions would improve. But the country was so **ravaged** that their hearts never stopped breaking.

Eventually they sold almost everything they owned and used the money to buy plane tickets to somewhere else, somewhere better, which to them had always meant the United States. A while after I was old enough to understand this story, I pointed out how backwards it was to have fled to the nation that had driven them out of theirs, but they never copped to the irony of it. They needed to believe they’d done the right thing and that it made sense. They were torn between wanting to look back and wanting to exist absolutely in the new life they’d created. At one point, they had planned to return. They’d thought that with enough time, Panamá would be rebuilt and that their hearts, I guess, would heal. But while they waited for that day, they started making friends. My dad got a job as a busboy and then, later on, as a dishwasher. Years passed. Enrique was in school, and I started, too. My dad was promoted to line cook. More years slid by. And before they knew it, we had a life here. They had left their lives once before. They didn’t want to do it again.

- 5 So they applied for U.S. citizenship, sitting up at night reading the Constitution, a dictionary by their side, and studying for the exam. They contacted someone at the Panamanian consulate^[1] in Philadelphia who helped them navigate the paperwork. Then they woke up one morning, got dressed in their best clothes, caught a bus to the courthouse, and, while my mom held me in her arms and my dad rested his hand on Enrique’s shoulder, took an oath along with a group of other men and women who had made living in the United States a dream. We became Americans.
- 6 We never went back to Panamá, not even for a visit. It would have taken us forever to save enough money for plane tickets. Besides, my dad never wanted to take time off from his job. He probably could’ve asked for a few days of vacation time, but even after years of being there, making omelets and flipping

pancakes, he knew—we all knew—that he was on the low end of the food chain. He could be replaced in a heartbeat. He didn't want to risk it.



- 7 Because of that, we'd missed my tía Gloria's wedding, which she'd had on a hillside in Boquete. She told my mom that she'd convinced her new husband, Esteban, to dance and that therefore the whole event was a success. We had my aunt on speakerphone and my mom had said, "Take it from me, hermanita,^[2] they dance at the wedding and then they never do it again." My dad had said, "That's what you think?" and clutched my mom by the wrist, sending her into a small spin in the middle of the kitchen. She squealed with delight while he swayed with her for a few beats and then he broke out into some goofy merengue^[3] moves, kicking his leg up at the end and shouting "¡Olé!" My aunt started yelling through the phone, "Are you still there? Celia! Rafael!" And my parents laughed until my mom dabbed the corners of her eyes with the back of her hand. I'd never seen them so happy with each other, even though it was just for those few seconds.

- 8 We almost went back for my dad's high school reunion, which my dad somehow got into his head that he didn't want to miss. The reunion was on a Friday, so maybe, he told us, he could fix his work schedule so that he was off on Friday. We could fly there, go to the reunion, and then fly back Saturday night. He was usually off on Sundays, but if he took off Friday instead, he'd have to be back and work Sunday to make up for it. So one night would be the longest we could stay, but one night would be enough. He had decided. And it looked like we were going to try.
- 9 My mom was as excited about the trip as I don't know what. She went to Sears to buy a new dress and had giddy phone conversations with my aunt about seeing each other again and what they would be able to pack into our eighteen hours on the ground. She started laying out her clothes weeks in advance even though my dad kept telling her she only needed two outfits—one to go and one to come home. "And why do you have ten pairs of shoes here?" he asked, pointing to the sandals and leather high heels my mom had lined up along the baseboard in the bedroom. "Ten!" my mom scoffed. "I don't even own ten pairs of shoes." My father counted them. "Fine. Seven. That's still six too many." He told her that he intended to take only a duffel bag for our things because that would make it easier to get through customs. My mom said, "I'll check my own bag, then." My dad kicked the row of shoes my mom had lined up and sent them flying into the wall. He walked right up to my mom and held his index finger in front of her face. "One bag, Celia. One! For all four of us. Don't talk to me about it again."
- 10 A few weeks before the reunion, my dad called the number on the invitation to RSVP. The guy who answered had been the class president. He and my dad joked around for a minute and then my dad told the guy we were coming. According to what my dad told us later, the guy said, "We'll roll out the red carpet, then." When my dad asked him what he meant by that, the guy said that my dad would have to forgive him if the party

wasn't up to my dad's standards. "We didn't know the gringo[4] royalty was coming. We'll have to get the place repainted before you arrive." When my dad asked again what the guy was talking about, the guy said he hoped my dad didn't expect them all to kiss his feet now and reminded my dad how humble Panamá was. It didn't take long for my dad to slam the phone down. He stormed over to my mom, who was washing dishes, and said, "We're not going. If that's what they think, then we're not going."

- 11 My mom said, "What?"
- 12 "They think we're Americans now. And maybe we are! Maybe we don't belong there anymore after all." My dad went out on the balcony, which he did whenever he was really upset.
- 13 My mom stood in the kitchen, a soapy pot in her hand, and looked at me, baffled. "What just happened?" she asked.
- 14 When I told her everything I'd been able to gather, she walked out to the balcony and closed the door behind her. At the commotion, Enrique came out of his room.
- 15 "We're not going anymore," I told him.
- 16 "Huh?"
- 17 "On the trip."
- 18 "Are you serious?" Enrique asked.
- 19 My brother and I huddled together, listening through the front door. I heard my mom say, "Please, Rafa. He doesn't know anything about us. We can still go. You'll see. Once we get there . . . All your friends . . . And everyone will love you." I imagined her reaching out to touch his shoulder, the way she did sometimes when she was asking for something. "Don't you miss it?" she asked. "Can't you imagine landing there, being there again? You know how it smells? The air there. And seeing everyone again. Please, Rafa."


20 But my dad wasn't swayed.

21 The following year, we talked about going back, too. My dad's anger over being cast as a holier-than-thou gringo had finally simmered down, and my mom, who couldn't bring herself to return the new dress she'd bought and who hadn't gotten over the disappointment of not being able to see her sister after all, had been dropping hints ever since that she would still like to go even if the trip was only for one night again. She'd become a genius at turning any and every little thing into a way to talk about Panamá. She would get a mosquito bite on her ankle and point out the welt to us, reminiscing about the bites she used to get in Panamá and wondering aloud "what the mosquitoes there looked like now," as if they were old friends. She would make rice and start talking about the gallo pinto at El Trapiche, which was her favorite restaurant, saying things like "I wonder how Cristóbal—wasn't that the owner's name?—is doing. Wouldn't it be nice to find out?" We would drive over a bridge and suddenly she was talking about the Bridge of the Americas near the canal. "Do you remember, Enrique? That time we took the ferry back from Taboga at night and it was all lit up? It was so beautiful. Mayor, I wish you could have seen it." She sighed. "Maybe one day." And my dad would sometimes shake his head at her [melodrama](#) and other times would just stay quiet, like he'd fallen into the haze of a particular memory himself.

22 My mom's birthday was September 22, so my dad finally gave in and made plans for us to go to Panamá. The Toro Family! One night only! Put it in lights! My mom worked herself into a froth all over again, conferring with my tía Gloria on the phone. My aunt apparently said she wanted to take my mom to the new mall and for a drive through Costa del Este, which used to be a garbage dump but now had been transformed into an up-and-coming area of the city, and out for sushi on the causeway, and afterwards they could hit the clubs along Calle Uruguay and yes, she realized they weren't twenty anymore but it would be so much fun! Besides, she and my tío Esteban weren't doing so well, she told my mom. He was never home. He spent the night at friends' apartments. So she

could use some distraction and someone to talk to. “Not a divorce!” my mom gasped. To her, there could be nothing worse. “No,” my aunt assured her. “Just problems.”

23 Then, less than two weeks before we were scheduled to go, two planes flew into the World Trade Center in New York City and another one into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. The country went into shock and we went right along with it. My dad called my mom from the diner, where, on the television above the counter, he had just seen the second plane hit the second tower. “They’re blowing it up!” he apparently told her. “It’s just like El Chorrillo.[5] They’re destroying it!” And my mom, in her nightgown, rushed to the set and stood in front of it, watching with her hand over her mouth. I had been eating cereal in the kitchen. I carried my bowl over and stood next to her and kept eating, which, when I thought about it later, seemed kind of messed up, but at the time we didn’t know what was happening. The world hadn’t stopped—just stopped—like it would later that day and for days after. Everything was still just unfolding in front of our eyes and we had no idea what to make of it.

24 It didn’t take long before everyone in our building was knocking on each other’s doors and **convening**  out on the balcony, standing around stunned and shaking with fear. Nelia Zafón just kept repeating, “What is happening? What is happening? What is happening?” I heard my mom say to someone, “We moved here because it was supposed to be safer! Where can we go after this?” All day long she kept herself no more than an arm’s length from me and my brother, hugging us against her and then letting us go, like she wanted to assure herself that we were still there and that we were okay. Enrique, who was old enough by then that he usually squirmed away from my mom’s embraces, must have known the situation was serious, because he let her do it. I let her, too, even though every time she did, instead of comforting me, it only made me more scared.

- 25 By evening, everyone's front doors were open and people were roaming in and out of each other's units, watching each other's televisions as if a different set would deliver different news, checking to see if anyone had heard anything new, getting tedious translations. Benny Quinto led prayer circles in his living room. Micho Alvarez paced up and down the balcony, talking on his cell phone and jotting things in his notebook. Gustavo Milhojas, who was half-Mexican and half-Guatemalan, wrote a letter to the army telling them that as of that day he was 100 percent American and that he was ready to serve the country and kill the cowards who had murdered his fellow paisanos^[6] At the end he wrote, "And here is a list of people who are willing to join me." He drew a few blank lines and spent the afternoon trying to recruit everyone in the building. When my mom saw what it was, she said, "More killing? That's what you want? *More?*" And Gustavo said, "Not killing. Justice."
- 26 That year around the holidays we were all miserable. Holidays were always bad—my mom in particular got homesick sometimes like it was a genuine illness—but that Christmas was the worst. We were depressed and on edge, still shaken up about September 11, and then re-shaken when someone tried to blow up another plane by hiding a bomb in his shoes two days before Christmas Eve.
- 27 My aunt called, which cheered my mom up for a while, but once that wore off, she was more down than ever, shuffling around the house in her slippers, no makeup, her hair a disaster. She carried tissues in the pocket of her bathrobe and made a big show of dabbing her nose with them every so often. Eventually, my dad came up with an idea. "You want Panamá?" he said. "A beach is the closest thing you're going to get." He hustled us out the door and down the street, where we took a chain of buses for an hour and a half to Cape Henlopen in southern Delaware. It was snowing when we arrived—Enrique kept complaining that the snow was going to mess up his beloved Adidas sneakers—and everything was so colorless and barren that it looked like the moon. I had to hand it to my

dad, though. With the water and the sand, my mom said it almost *was* like a little piece of Panamá. The waves roared in toward us and then silently pulled back again, slipping over the shore. Even with the falling snow, the air had the sting of salt water, and we crunched broken seashells under our shoes. But one beach isn't every beach. And one home isn't every home. And I think we all sensed, standing there, just how far we were from where we had come, in ways both good and bad. "It's beautiful," my mom said, staring out at the ocean. She sighed and shook her head. "This country."



Review your notes and add your thoughts to your Response Log.



ESSENTIAL QUESTION
*What are the places that
shape who you are?*

TURN AND TALK

Is the ending of the story satisfying? Why or why not? Discuss with a partner.



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The Book of Unknown Americans

TEXT SKETCH

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CHARACTERS



Mayor (the narrator)



Celia (mother)



Rafael (father)



Enrique (brother)

CONFLICT

- How does Mayor feel about being both Panamanian and American?
- Celia, the mother, misses Panamá and wants to visit. Rafael doesn't want to miss work for a trip.
- The family plans on visiting Panamá, but Rafael cancels after an old friend makes him feel unwelcome.
- Later, what prevents them from visiting for Celia's birthday?
- At Christmas, they settle on a trip to a nearby beach. How does this trip affect the family's ideas about home?



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de **El libro de los
americanos desconocidos**

TEXT SKETCH

Novela de Cristina Henríquez

PERSONAJES



Mayor (el narrador)



Celia (la madre)



Rafael (el padre)



Enrique (el hermano)

CONFLICTO

- *¿Qué piensa Mayor de ser panameño y estadounidense?*
- *Celia, la madre, echa de menos Panamá y quiere viajar allí. Rafael no quiere ausentarse del trabajo por un viaje.*
- *La familia piensa hacer un viaje a Panamá, pero Rafael lo cancela cuando la actitud de un viejo amigo lo hace sentir rechazado.*
- *Más tarde, ¿qué les impide viajar allí para el cumpleaños de Celia?*
- *En la Navidad, quedan en hacer un viaje a una playa cercana. En este viaje, ¿cómo cambia para la familia el significado de “estar en casa”?*



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