

Girl in Translation



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JEAN KWOK

Much of Jean Kwok's early life mirrors that of Kim in *Girl in Translation*. When Jean Kwok was five years old, she immigrated with her family to Brooklyn, New York, from Hong Kong. Their apartment was infested with roaches and rodents and had no central heating, and when she wasn't at school, she worked in a clothing factory in Chinatown. She was accepted to the prestigious Hunter College High School after elementary school, which prepared her to later gain admission to Harvard. Though Kwok began her college education studying science, she eventually changed her major to study English and literature. Throughout college, she worked multiple jobs at a time. In between earning her bachelor's degree and her master's degree at Columbia University, she spent several years working for a dance studio as a professional ballroom dancer. Her experiences there influenced her second novel, *Mambo in Chinatown*. Kwok currently lives in the Netherlands with her husband and two sons, where she writes and speaks about her work. Prior to turning to writing full time after *Girl in Translation's* publication, Kwok taught English and worked as a translator, as she speaks three languages (Chinese, English, and Dutch) fluently.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Ma and Kim emigrated from Hong Kong as part of a major wave: the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration, which transferred the British colony of Hong Kong to China's jurisdiction, made it exceptionally clear that Hong Kong residents wouldn't be granted British citizenship. This prompted mass migration out of Hong Kong. Many settled in New York City, where much of the work available was in garment factories in Chinatown. Though the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union would've technically been responsible for advocating for workers like Kim and Jean Kwok's family, the union became relatively ineffective as the demographic makeup of union members shifted to Chinese, Puerto Rican, and Dominican members after World War II. Conditions in garment factories returned, in most cases, to sweatshop conditions like Kim and Matt experience. By the 1990s, factories in New York owned by Chinese and Korean workers produced around 70 percent of the clothing manufactured in the city.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Jean Kwok has written one other novel that also follows a

Chinese-American girl living in New York's Chinatown; *Mambo in Chinatown* tackles similar themes of the immigrant experience and the difficulty of life in Chinatown. Other works that touch on similar storylines or themes include Esmeralda Santiago's memoir [When I Was Puerto Rican](#) (the protagonist's mother even works in a garment factory after the family's move to New York) and [The Book of Unknown Americans](#), Cristina Henríquez's novel about Panamanian immigrants in Delaware. Kwok has cited authors such as Amy Tan ([The Joy Luck Club](#)) and Margaret Atwood ([The Handmaid's Tale](#)) as influences in her writing. Margaret Chin's nonfiction work *Sewing Women: Immigrants and the New York City Garment Industry* explores the intricacies of the immigrant garment workers' lives and working relationships with their employers, and is based on extensive interviews with individuals who work or employ people in the industry.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Girl in Translation*
- **When Written:** 2009
- **Where Written:** The Netherlands
- **When Published:** 2010
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Semi-autobiographical fiction; historical fiction
- **Setting:** Brooklyn, New York in the 1980s
- **Climax:** Kim receives her acceptance letter from Yale and refuses to cave to Aunt Paula's abuse anymore.
- **Antagonist:** Aunt Paula; poverty
- **Point of View:** First person, narrated by an adult Kim

EXTRA CREDIT

It Continues. Today, the cost of making clothes and labor laws in the U.S. means that most clothing is manufactured overseas. Despite consumer pressure for brands to pay garment workers a living wage, garment workers interviewed in Bangladesh and India have stated that they're paid less than half of what they require to support their families. Further, despite labor laws in the U.S., the Los Angeles garment district has repeatedly come under fire for unsafe, sweatshop-like working conditions, even into the 2010s.

A Family Affair. Kim's character is based in part off of Kwok's older brother Kwan, who would've been closer in age to Kim than Jean was. Like Kim and Jean, Kwan escaped a life in the garment district by securing a full-ride scholarship to MIT. He died tragically in a plane crash not long before *Girl in Translation*

was published.



PLOT SUMMARY

Kim stands outside a Chinatown bridal shop and watches a five-year-old girl in the window. Seeing the girl, Kim is reminded of why she didn't want this life for her child—this little girl will spend her life working in a factory. When the girl's father walks in, Kim feels as though her heart is breaking.

Kim and Ma immigrate to the U.S. when Kim is eleven. Aunt Paula and Uncle Bob drop Ma and Kim off at their new apartment, which is in a rundown neighborhood. They're both shocked to see that the apartment is filthy and infested with bugs. Kim believes that Paula did this on purpose, and that she must know how bad the apartment is. No longer requiring Ma's services as a caretaker for her sons, Nelson and Godfrey, Aunt Paula creates a job for Ma at her garment factory. Kim suspects this isn't actually a favor, though Ma reminds her that they owe Paula a huge debt. Ma tearfully tells Kim that she'll need her help at the factory.

Ma and Kim are very late for Kim's first day of school. Her school is in a neighborhood that's much nicer, thanks to Aunt Paula's suggestion that Kim use a different address as her official one. After spending the day struggling with the cultural differences between Hong Kong and American schools, Kim's teacher, Mr. Bogart, accuses her of cheating on a quiz. After school, Ma teaches Kim how to take the subway to the factory in Chinatown, which is loud, hot, and noisy. Before beginning work, Ma asks Aunt Paula about getting a different apartment. Paula insists they'll get a new apartment soon and points out the thread cutting table. She explains that kids start at there and then return to the table as old ladies. Kim also meets a boy named Matt. Kim understands that she, Matt, and the other factory kids aren't real employees; because employees are paid by the piece, bringing one's children is necessary to get more done.

Kim skips school for several weeks to help in the factory. Ma tells Kim that she needs to be careful hanging out with Matt, because she could end up spending her entire life in the factory, as he likely will. Kim understands that she needs to use her intelligence to save herself and Ma, so she decides to return to school on Monday. At school, she becomes friends with a white girl named Annette. When Kim mentions that she works at a factory, Annette returns the next day and insists that can't be true—her father told her about child labor laws, so Kim must be lying about working. Kim vows to keep that part of her life secret. When Mr. Bogart assigns a diorama, Kim and Annette decide to work together at Annette's house. Kim is in awe of the heat, the housekeeper, and Mrs. Avery's kindness. Ma forbids Kim from going over to Annette's again, insisting that they won't be able to repay the debt by inviting Annette over.

Shortly after the Western New Year, Ma and Kim discover faux fur in a dumpster. With it, Ma makes sweaters and robes, and she and Kim are finally warm. When the Chinese New Year arrives, Ma and Kim pray together for their future. They learn a week later from their neighbor Mr. Al that their block is going to be demolished. Ma believes that this means that Paula will move them, while Kim thinks that it's more likely that Paula will never fix anything. When Ma brings up the apartment again with Paula, Paula insists they need to work harder. To combat this, Kim dedicates herself to learning English. Kim fears she's ruined everything when she engages in a fight with Luke, the school bully. Mrs. LaGuardia, the principal, pulls Kim out of class the next day. Kim thinks she's going to be expelled, but Mrs. LaGuardia encourages Kim to think about a private school given her high scores on her standardized math test. Kim suggests she'd like to go to Harrison Prep, where Annette is going next year. Mrs. LaGuardia makes an appointment for Kim to visit the school. Kim goes alone. She considers turning back when she sees the campus and the students, as she knows she and Ma can't afford it. Kim has an appointment with Dr. Weston in which she's tested orally on math, and then she tours the school. When she returns to Dr. Weston's office, she insists the school is too expensive and leaves.

Ma takes the morning off work to attend Kim's graduation ceremony. At the ceremony, Kim is shocked to learn that Harrison Prep is granting her a full scholarship. Later, at the factory, Paula has the letters from Harrison Prep and is angry that Kim applied without her permission. Over the summer, Annette shows up at Kim's house once, though Kim pretends to not be home.

Kim's first day at Harrison Prep is exhausting. She knows she's in trouble when she learns she has to change in a locker room for gym. All the other girls have store-bought **underwear**, while Ma still makes Kim's. Kim works in the library after school, and when she arrives at the factory, she asks Ma for new underwear. Ma insists that good girls don't look at other girls' underwear. A few weeks later, the school bully, Greg, and the popular girl, Sheryl, start teasing Kim about her underwear. Ma agrees to buy Kim underwear and a bra.

Aunt Paula invites Ma and Kim for dinner, and Nelson baits Kim into admitting that she's doing poorly in school. However, Kim improves rapidly. She devours all the reading material she can and does well in math, though her one wish is to be liked by her peers. During an important science test, a girl named Tammy drops a note near Kim. Kim picks it up thinking it's a friendly note, but Mrs. Reynolds intercepts and discovers that the paper contains notes on the test material. She accuses Kim of cheating and takes her to Dr. Copeland's office. A boy named Curt advocates for Kim's innocence. Kim does extremely well on the test while Tammy fails, and Mrs. Reynolds seems convinced of Kim's innocence. Kim keeps this a secret, as she's embarrassed that she wanted to be liked badly enough to pick

up a note during a test.

Over the summer, Kim cuts down the time it takes her to bag **skirts** to seven seconds per skirt. One afternoon, she and Matt flirt, and she admits she's never seen the **Liberty Goddess**. As Matt suggests they go, a man named Mr. Pak gets his hand stuck in a steamer. After this, Paula cuts Ma and Kim's pay and moves Matt to the steamer, which enrages Matt's mother, Mrs. Wu. Ma, Matt, and Kim go to Times Square and to see the Liberty Goddess on Sunday, and Kim feels as though she's truly in America.

When the school year starts, Kim continues to do well enough to make Dr. Copeland suspicious that Kim is cheating. She explains that Kim will take an oral exam to prove her innocence. She studies hard, though she discovers that the magazine *Car and Driver* is an excellent escape. In one magazine, she finds an article about a motorcycle that Matt's disabled little brother, Park, loves. She reads the article to Park at work one day, disproving Matt's insistence that Park is deaf. Kim manages to pass the exam with flying colors. Not long after, Matt invites Kim to come with him to meet Matt's father. Matt's father spends his days gambling, and Kim recognizes that this is Matt's shameful secret.

By tenth grade, Kim is one of the school's best students. She continues to refuse social invitations, as she knows she can't return them. She also becomes increasingly attracted to Matt, though she doesn't voice her feelings. When Matt begins dating a young woman named Vivian, who is perfect in every way, Kim is heartbroken. Meanwhile, Curt breaks his leg and asks Kim for help with his grades. He's not secretive that she helped him, which boosts Kim's popularity and means that boys begin to take an interest in her. Kim fools around with boys whenever she can and loves the freedom she has with her body.

That winter, Ma and Kim's stove breaks. After a Chinese man attempts to take advantage of them, a man from the gas company is able to fix it. Matt drops out of school to work full-time, while Kim begins taking classes at a local university. Kim remains in love with Matt, and when they end up locked in a restroom together during an inspection, they kiss. Matt insists he'll never be good enough for her, which shatters Kim.

Curt invites Kim to a party to thank her for her tutoring, and Kim lies to Ma so she can go. At the party, Kim smokes marijuana for the first time and begins a physical relationship with Curt, which continues into senior year. Dr. Weston helps Kim apply to Yale and finally, Ma and Kim pay off their debts to Aunt Paula. Paula still becomes angry every time she learns that Kim is doing well in school. Kim also learns that Mrs. Wu is ill and can barely work anymore. One afternoon, as Kim is studying for her naturalization exam, Annette shows up unannounced. She's aghast at Kim's living conditions and insists they need to speak to her mother, who's a real estate agent. A month later, Kim meets with Mrs. Avery about an apartment in

Queens with heat and no pests. Kim and Ma have the money; they just need a character reference for Ma.

In March, Matt comes to Harrison and sees Kim with Curt. Matt tells Kim that his mother died. They go to Kim's apartment and have sex, though they decide to use two condoms. After Matt leaves, Kim discovers that the condoms broke. Not long after, Aunt Paula calls Ma and Kim to her office to open two letters from Yale. Aunt Paula is furious, especially when she learns that one letter is an acceptance letter and the other offers Kim a full-ride scholarship. Ma and Kim finally break their ties with Aunt Paula, and Mrs. Avery offers to provide Ma's character reference. That afternoon, Matt takes Kim out on a date and they discuss their future. She tells him about her acceptance to Yale, but Matt insists he wants to stay in Chinatown. They spend a few happy weeks with each other, though Matt continues to insist that Kim shouldn't go to school. Kim soon discovers she's pregnant and believes she can't tie Matt down with a baby.

In the epilogue, Kim is a pediatric cardiac surgeon. She recounts seeing Matt's daughter in the bridal shop window. When she realizes one of her patient's fathers is an old friend of Matt's, she asks him to pass her card to Matt; Matt shows up at the hospital a week later. She and Matt cry as he admits that he knew she had an abortion. She gives him a ride home and sees him with Vivian, who's pregnant. Kim rides home in tears. When she gets home, the reader learns that her twelve-year-old son, Jason, is the spitting image of Matt. Kim thinks about her decision to have Jason and not tell Matt. She now lives in a big house and was able to buy Ma a piano. Kim recognizes that in keeping Jason a secret she's depriving him of his father, but thinks she couldn't have made any other decision.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Kim – Kim is a Chinese immigrant and the protagonist of the novel. She and Ma immigrate to New York when Kim is eleven years old. Though Kim had been a star student in Hong Kong, she struggles in school for several years as she adjusts to American customs and learns English. Her hard work pays off, and she earns a scholarship to a prestigious prep high school, and then to Yale University. Kim's one friend at school, a white girl named Annette, helps her navigate the complex social landscape. Kim spends every afternoon and evening helping Ma at the factory while also dedicating herself to her studies. Because Kim is far more comfortable navigating the English-speaking world, she effectively becomes the head of household; she files Ma's tax returns and takes on much of the shopping. Kim meets a boy named Matt at the factory and as the two grow up, their attraction to each other intensifies. To cope with her belief that they can't be together, Kim spends her free time

kissing other boys, something she's able to do with minimal emotional investment. Things in Kim's life come to a head when she's a senior in high school: her acceptance to Yale means that she and Ma can cut ties with the deceitful Aunt Paula; Annette discovers the shocking way that Kim and Ma live; and Kim and Matt have sex, which results in Kim becoming pregnant. Kim breaks things off with Matt, though she chooses to continue her pregnancy without telling him. In the epilogue, Kim has become a pediatric cardiac surgeon and lives with Ma and her son Jason in a big house. She explains that she still loves Matt, but choosing to not build a life with him was a necessary sacrifice for both of them.

Ma – Ma, Kim's mother, is a former music teacher and musician, who now works at a garment factory in New York. As a young woman, Ma married Pa for love, though she became a widow at a young age when Pa died of a heart attack. Being a widow means that Ma must rely on her older sister, Aunt Paula, to bring her and Kim to the United States and to finance her tuberculosis treatment. Ma adheres to the Chinese belief in the importance of repaying one's debts, and thus believes that she and Kim have no right to challenge Aunt Paula's poor treatment of them. Ma never learns much English, which means that Kim is in charge of getting them around in their English-speaking world. Ma wholeheartedly believes that Kim's education is the only way that they'll escape their poverty. She cautions Kim to not become too close with the other factory children, including Matt, as that will keep Kim from living up to her educational potential. Ma brings her **violin** with her to the U.S. but seldom plays it, as she's often too tired or cold. However, when she does play, she explains to Kim that she plays for herself so she remembers who she is and what she loves. Like Kim, Ma is very ashamed of her poverty. She's distraught when Kim gets her application fees for Yale waived, as she believes they should pay for at least some of it. Ma is surprisingly understanding when Kim admits she's pregnant, as she blames herself for leaving Kim to her own devices. She ends up doing most of the work of raising Jason and in the epilogue, Kim notes that she no longer tells Ma about her romances as Ma insists she marry each suitor, suggesting that Ma is still very culturally Chinese.

Annette – Annette is Kim's first and only friend at school. Her skin is so pale as to be translucent, which Kim finds fascinating. For the first year of school, Annette helps Kim in class by writing answers for her; Kim usually knows the answers in Chinese, and Annette's translations simply help her verbalize her thoughts. Annette is relatively well off; she and her brother live in a large house with pets and a housekeeper. At the beginning of their friendship Annette is curious as to how Kim lives, but when Kim mentions that she works in a factory, Annette insists that cannot possibly be true. At various points Annette takes Kim shopping or out for fun events, where they experiment with makeup and perfume—and because Annette is white, salesladies are willing to help her in a way they're

unwilling to help Kim. In high school, Annette gets involved in theater and becomes very interested in protesting for social or political causes; she even calls herself a communist. Annette's activism is somewhat troubling for Kim, as Kim recognizes that Annette doesn't have real-world experience to guide her beliefs. Kim fears, for example, that Annette would protest and have the factory shut down if she knew Kim worked there, something that Kim and Ma couldn't afford. When Annette is a senior, she finally discovers that Kim and Ma live in dire poverty. Though she's hurt and feels betrayed, she's mostly upset that Kim never asked for help. Annette is instrumental in helping Kim find a new apartment. She also attends Kim's abortion appointment with her and is a pillar of support while Kim decides whether or not she wants to continue her pregnancy.

Matt – Matt is Kim's only real friend at the factory. At first, he and his mother, Mrs. Wu, and younger brother, Park, work at the thread cutting table, though Matt later moves up to being a steamer. Right away, the adults realize that there's attraction between Matt and Kim. However, their very different trajectories keep them from acting on their feelings for each other for a long time. Matt begins skipping school at a young age to take a second job and support his family, while Kim devotes herself to academics and believes it's her way out of the factory system. Matt eventually decides that Kim is too good for him and then begins dating Vivian, a gorgeous young woman who shares his unwillingness to look outside the factory system for employment. Matt is naturally charming and gregarious, which means that he easily makes friends at his usual haunts as well as his places of work. After Mrs. Wu dies, Matt is overcome with emotion, leaves Vivian, and he and Kim have sex. Their relationship continues for a few blissful weeks, during which Matt suggests getting married and having babies of their own, though he doesn't want Kim to attend Yale. He believes it's his responsibility to care for and support her, not the other way around. Because of this, Kim chooses to break up with Matt without telling him that she's pregnant. He returns to Vivian and later, marries and has at least two children with her. When he and Kim reunite twelve years later, their chemistry is still there. He admits he knew she was pregnant and believes she had an abortion, though Kim never tells him that he has a son, Jason, who looks just like him.

Aunt Paula – The antagonist of the novel, Aunt Paula is Ma's older sister and Kim's aunt. She moved to the U.S. thirteen years prior to the start of the novel after marrying Uncle Bob. She initially plans to have Ma provide childcare and Chinese lessons to her sons, Nelson and Godfrey, in order to repay her for sponsoring their immigration fees and paying for Ma's tuberculosis treatment. Instead, she chooses to create a job for Ma at her factory and illegally rent them a pest-infested and unheated apartment. This is the first in a long line of injustices that Aunt Paula carries out against her sister. Aunt Paula

consistently abuses her power by threatening to fire or evict Ma if Ma doesn't go along with her wishes, and she takes particular offense to Kim's knack for academics. Kim understands that Paula wanted Nelson to outshine her, something he has no hope of doing. Keeping Kim and Ma in dire poverty allows Paula to maintain her control over them, as they all understand they need the work and will do most anything to keep it. To this end, she cuts their pay rate when she realizes that Kim is working fast enough to significantly up her pay. It's no secret that Paula is a nasty overseer to everyone at the factory; the factory kids secretly refer to her as Dog Flea Mama. Near the end of the novel, Kim learns that Paula is bitter towards her sister because she believes that Ma has spent her whole life refusing to do what was expected of her and sacrifice for her family; because of this, Paula thinks of everything she's ever done as unwilling sacrifices in service of Ma. Though Paula does express some remorse for her actions at the end of the novel, Kim and Ma still cut ties with her.

Curt – Curt is the only boy at Harrison Prep that Kim seriously dates. When Kim begins at Harrison, Curt goes along with Greg's bullying, though he begins to come around in high school when Kim agrees to help him fix his grades after an injury. This leads eventually to tutoring sessions and later, a romance. Many of their tutoring sessions take place in the art room, where Curt spends as much time as possible carving polished abstract wooden sculptures. Though Curt and Kim very much enjoy kissing each other, Kim knows from the start that their relationship won't go anywhere: Curt has no idea what it's like to be poor, is callous and unfeeling when he talks about lower class people he encounters, and he's unable to recognize his own privilege as a wealthy kid from the suburbs. Kim and Curt break up when Mrs. Wu dies and Kim and Matt profess their love for each other, though Curt is later the first person Kim tells about her pregnancy. Kim realizes how good of friends they are when he offers seriously to marry her, though she turns him down. He goes on to attend the Rhode Island School of Design.

Uncle Bob – Uncle Bob is Aunt Paula's husband; he's a wealthy Chinese-American who went to Hong Kong to find a wife. Kim learns later that he did this because Uncle Bob has a limp and walks with a cane, and thus needs someone who can care for him and his assets. Though he technically owns the factory, he allows Paula to do most of the work of running it, and as time goes on, he's seldom there. When Kim or Ma do confront him about their subpar living situation, he brushes them off and distracts them by buying them iced tea.

Mr. Bogart – Mr. Bogart is Kim's first teacher at school. He's tall, and Kim initially thinks that he's strangely bald, though she eventually realizes he's just blonde. His teaching methods don't make school easy for Kim; he marks her down for solving math problems in ways that are slightly different than the way he teaches, and has a habit of assigning projects like collages that

require expensive supplies like glitter to do well on. He often marks her down for carelessness or shoddy workmanship. To make matters worse for Kim, Mr. Bogart is also openly sexist and doesn't think that his female students are capable of doing well at math or science.

Luke – Luke is a boy in Kim's first class who's known for bullying and fighting, something he's especially good at given that he's been held back several years and is much bigger than his classmates. He challenges Kim to a fight several months after she begins school, an invitation she interprets at face value, and kicks him hard during their fight. Later, she discovers that Luke was actually courting her when she watches Luke's "fights" with another girl devolve into kissing. He stops bullying her after she kicks him.

Vivian – Vivian is Matt's girlfriend and later, his wife. Kim is extremely envious of Vivian not just because she also loves Matt, but because Vivian is gorgeous, genuinely nice, and extremely charming. Her father works as a tailor and employs her when she's a teen, but Matt tells Kim when they meet as adults that Vivian was later forced to find work in a bridal shop. She and Matt have a five-year-old daughter in the epilogue and another baby on the way.

Dr. Weston – Dr. Weston is the guidance counselor and psychiatrist at Harrison Prep who conducts Kim's school admissions interview. She appears unused to dealing with such low-income students, as her secretary mistakenly asks if Ma is parking the car—it's unthinkable to them that a child would come to an admissions interview alone. Though she's impressed with Kim, some of Kim's behavior at the interview makes it clear to Dr. Weston that Kim is truly very young. She ends up offering Kim a full-ride scholarship to Harrison Prep and later, personally helps Kim apply to Yale.

Dr. Copeland – Dr. Copeland is the head of the math and science department at Harrison Prep. She's very concerned when Kim is accused of cheating on tests, especially when in the months after the accusation, Kim continues to perform well above what's normally expected and achieve near-perfect grades. To make sure there's no foul play, Dr. Copeland designs a test in which Kim is orally tested on math and science in front of a panel of the department faculty.

Mrs. LaGuardia – Mrs. LaGuardia is the principal at Kim's first public school. Though students tease her about her name's association with the LaGuardia airport, she's generally well liked and respected. She approaches Kim about applying for private high school, and when she realizes that Kim is functionally on her own in that regard, Mrs. LaGuardia helps Kim apply and get into Harrison Prep.

Mr. Scoggins – Mr. Scoggins is one of Kim's teachers her first year at Harrison Prep. He is intent on teaching his students about current events and instructs them to either read their parents' newspapers or speak to their parents about current

news. He seems unable to grasp that Kim can't afford newspapers and fails his assignments and quizzes because of this, though he does allow her to make up her failing grade at the end of the term.

Park – Park is Matt's younger brother. He's mentally disabled and doesn't speak, which in Chinese culture is seen as a stain on the entire family. To combat this, Mrs. Wu allows people to think that Park is merely deaf by communicating with him in sign language. Like Kim, Park loves motorcycles and carries a toy motorcycle with him everywhere. In the epilogue, Park helps out his older brother working at UPS.

Pa – Pa is Kim's father and Ma's husband; he died suddenly of a heart attack when Kim was three and so never appears in the novel. He was the principal of a school where Ma taught music, and the two married for love despite the fact that he was fifteen years her senior. Throughout the novel, Kim often wishes that Pa were around to help them, as she believes that life would be easier for them with him in it.

Nelson – Nelson is Aunt Paula and Uncle Bob's oldest son, who is the same age as Kim. Nelson and Kim don't like each other and are actively pitted against each other as rivals in academic achievement whenever Kim and Ma see Aunt Paula. However, though Nelson is a smart boy, he's nowhere near as gifted as Kim.

Mr. Al – Mr. Al is a black man who lives on the same street as Kim and Ma. He operates a shop and an apartment building, and he's very interested in Chinese culture. Kim teaches him some Chinese words, and Mr. Al repays her kindness by advocating for them at the local grocery store. He moves away to escape the supposed leveling of their street.

Tammy – Tammy is an Indian student at Harrison Prep, and at first, Kim wonders if they might be able to be friends given their shared minority status. However, Tammy and Sheryl conspire to set Kim up to be accused of cheating when in reality, Tammy herself cheats on tests. The conspiracy is unsuccessful, and though Tammy does apologize, she and Kim never become friends.

Mrs. Avery – Mrs. Avery is Annette's mother. She's an extremely kind and caring woman. She's also a real estate agent, and when Annette becomes aware of Kim and Ma's living situation, Mrs. Avery is able to arrange for them to rent a better apartment in Queens. She even offers to provide Ma's character reference.

Mr. Jamali – Mr. Jamali is a Pakistani librarian at Harrison Prep. He also runs the theater program. Kim is entranced because Mr. Jamali is one of the only men at school who doesn't wear a suit; he prefers to wear traditional Pakistani clothing. He employs Kim in the library and later, pulls Annette into the theater program.

Jason – Jason is Kim and Matt's son, though Matt doesn't know Jason exists, and Jason doesn't know anything about his father.

Ma raises Jason while Kim attends Yale and then med school. In the epilogue, Jason is twelve years old. He speaks both Chinese and English and is the spitting image of his father.

Mr. Pak – Mr. Pak works one of the steamers at Aunt Paula's factory. During a rush to complete an order, he traps his hand in a steamer, burning it badly. Matt later explains that he'll likely go on to work with his wife in a jewelry factory, where the work is less dangerous.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mrs. Wu – Mrs. Wu is Matt and Park's mother. She's ill for much of the novel and gets progressively worse until she dies when Kim and Matt are eighteen. To protect her family and Park in particular, Mrs. Wu allows people to think that Park is deaf rather than mentally disabled.

Tyrone Marshall – Tyrone is the smartest boy in Kim's class at her first school, something that Mr. Bogart makes a big deal out of given that Tyrone is black and poor. He's nice to Kim, and Kim nurses a crush on him for the entire time they're in school together.

Matt's Daughter – A beautiful five-year-old girl whom Kim sees in the window of a bridal shop in the prologue and the epilogue. She's the spitting image of Vivian, her mother.

Greg – Greg is a Harrison Prep student who mercilessly bullies Kim when she first starts school there. She gets him off her back by telling him she's not romantically interested in him, thereby embarrassing him in front of all his friends.

Sheryl – Sheryl is the most popular girl at Harrison Prep; she dates Curt for much of high school and torments Kim. It's her idea for Tammy to frame Kim for cheating on a test.

Mrs. Reynolds – Mrs. Reynolds is a math teacher at Harrison Prep. Kim is wrongfully accused of cheating in her class, and though she takes it seriously when she "discovers" her cheating, she later impresses upon Kim that she believes her innocence.

Mr. N – A businessman and distant relative of Uncle Bob's who lives in Taiwan. He owns apartment buildings in Brooklyn, including the one that Ma and Kim live in, and Aunt Paula manages them for him.

Mr. Ho – A former friend of Matt's who moves Matt and any of Matt's guests to the front of the line at the restaurant where he works. In the epilogue, he brings his young son Pete to Kim's hospital and passes Kim's card onto Matt.

Pete – Pete is a small boy with a heart problem who Kim treats when she's an adult. His father is Mr. Ho, a former friend of Matt's.

Kerry – Kerry is Kim's English tutor for a year once she starts at Harrison Prep. She helps Kim with her spoken and written English.

Matt's Father – Matt's father is mostly absent from his life; he spends his days in a Chinese gambling den and lives with his girlfriend rather than his wife, Mrs. Wu.

Godfrey – Godfrey is Aunt Paula's youngest son; he's three at the beginning of the novel.

Mr. Avery – Mr. Avery is Annette's father.

The Housekeeper – The housekeeper at Annette's house.



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.



POVERTY AND SHAME

In *Girl in Translation*, Kim and Ma are able to immigrate to the United States thanks to the kindness of Ma's older sister, Aunt Paula—prior to the start of the novel, Aunt Paula and her husband, Uncle Bob, paid for Ma's tuberculosis treatment and sponsored their immigration fees. Ma expects that upon her arrival in the U.S., she'll repay these debts to her sister's family by providing in-home childcare and Chinese lessons for Paula's two sons, but these hopes are quickly dashed; Aunt Paula instead creates a job for Ma at the family clothing factory and sets them up in an unheated and insect-infested apartment in Brooklyn. After setting aside part of her earnings to put towards those debts and housing, Ma takes home around two dollars per hour, keeping her and Kim in dire poverty. This is something that both Ma and Kim are deeply ashamed of, and Kim in particular spends the entire novel attempting to hide her poverty from those around her. By noting the ways in which Kim's poverty is extremely visible to others despite her best efforts, as well as the ways in which her peers and teachers at school fail to grasp the depths of her poverty, the novel suggests that poverty is profoundly isolating and makes one extremely vulnerable to exploitation.

It's not for lack of trying that Ma and Kim are stuck in poverty; rather, their poverty directly benefits greedy and selfish Aunt Paula. Aunt Paula's language betrays that she knows she's abusing her power as a lender, a family member, and an employer. She's also well aware that these abuses of power are illegal. However, Ma believes that she's obligated to repay her debts and do Paula's bidding in order to thank Paula for her "kindness" in sponsoring her immigration, and so she feels confronting Paula to push back against this ill treatment would make her appear rude and ungrateful. This illustrates how Ma's shame at having to rely so heavily on someone else traps her in a situation that's nearly impossible to escape. It takes her until

the middle of Kim's senior year of high school to finally pay off her debts to Aunt Paula, at which point Paula attempts to place other conditions on her sister and niece to keep them in her control. However, because Kim has a job at the school library at that point, she and Ma are able to cut ties with Paula and finally move to a better apartment—suggesting that even a modest gain in income can help break the cycle and escape the exploitation that their poverty left them vulnerable to.

Kim tries her best to hide her financial situation from friends, classmates, and teachers, although she admits in her adult narration that this was a misguided and unsuccessful endeavor. Instead, Kim's attempts to hide her poverty only make her situation more isolating. At school, Kim discovers that her financial situation means that she has to work extra hard in order to keep up, especially at her first public middle school. Her teacher, Mr. Bogart, commonly assigns projects such as collages, which require supplies (such as glue or poster board) that are far beyond her capacity to purchase. At one point, he also assigns a writing project in which students are asked to write about their bedrooms and the meaningful objects they have, an assignment that Kim cannot complete given that she owns no luxuries and shares a bare mattress with Ma in their two-room apartment. Though Kim notes that many students at this school are African-American and also receive free lunch (a marker of poverty), Mr. Bogart's assignments suggest that he's blind to his students' financial situations and the ways in which they may impact their academic performance. He often marks her down for the materials she uses, essentially punishing her for being unable to complete assignments as a middle-class student would.

As the injustices Kim experiences due to her poverty pile up—from being teased for her homemade **underwear** to not being able to read the newspaper to keep up with current events, to not being allowed a social life outside of school due to needing to spend her afternoons at the factory—the novel shows how poverty, and the shame that Kim and Ma feel about their financial situation, trap them and render them paralyzed. Through the kindnesses of those who discover just how impoverished Kim is and then offer to help with tuition, housing, or her library job, *Girl in Translation* suggests that, at least in Kim and Ma's case, shame and keeping their poverty hidden did them no good in the end. Rather, the novel ultimately proposes that asking for help from those that truly care is one of the few ways to escape poverty.



FAMILY, CHOICES, AND SACRIFICE

Throughout the novel, Ma and Kim remind each other often that they are like a "mother and cub"; they are all the other has. Because of the many obstacles facing them, most notably crushing poverty, a substandard living arrangement, and inhumane working conditions, both women are forced to sacrifice for each other

over and over again as they make their way through life in New York as Chinese immigrants. By exploring the ways in which Ma and Kim make sacrifices for each other, as well as the ways that other Chinese immigrant families find themselves doing the same, the novel ties the act of sacrifice directly to its definition of family—and to the cultural norms that guide the decision-making processes of the Chinese families in question.

The way that the novel handles the idea of sacrifice is directly informed by the Chinese customs and beliefs that the Chinese characters follow. Ma explains to Kim early on that all of one's debts, no matter how small, must be repaid. Along with this, it's also important to note that Ma considers a debt to be absolutely anything that someone might do for her or for Kim, like a fellow classmate inviting Kim over to their house. This belief means that Kim feels pressure, for example, to somehow repay her fellow underage factory worker Matt when he informs her that she'll need to come up with an excuse as to why she didn't show up for work on Thanksgiving Day—at that point, Kim had been skipping school for more than a week and had no idea that there was no school on a Thursday. Though this idea is humorous and charming in Kim's interactions with Matt, it takes a much more sinister feel in the case of Ma's older sister, Aunt Paula. Aunt Paula and her husband, Uncle Bob, financed Ma and Kim's immigration as well as Ma's treatment for tuberculosis in Hong Kong. Ma feels as though she has no choice but to cave to all of Aunt Paula's wishes or desires in order to repay her debt, even as doing so subverts all of Ma's own wishes, desires, or simple hopes for humane treatment. Because Ma believes she owes Paula, she feels she has no choice but to agree to live in a roach- and rodent-infested apartment with no heat and to work unbelievable hours six days per week for around two dollars per hour. Essentially, Ma's cultural beliefs make her feel as though she has absolutely no power to push back and must continue to make sacrifices.

Ma's sense of indebtedness to Aunt Paula is magnified because of their familial relationship and their family history, in particular the fact that Aunt Paula feels as though she's been asked to sacrifice all manner of things for her younger sister since they were teens. Kim eventually learns that because Ma's only remarkable characteristics as a teen were her musical talent and her beauty, Ma was actually supposed to marry Uncle Bob—the idea being that Ma would then be cared for by a wealthy Chinese-American husband and could use her marriage to bring a far more self-sufficient Paula to the U.S. However, when Ma fell in love with and married Pa, a principal at the school where she was teaching music, Paula ended up being the one to marry Uncle Bob. Though Ma believes that Paula ultimately got the objectively better deal (Pa died unexpectedly when Kim was three, while Paula and Bob were able to raise their sons in the U.S. and succeed financially), Paula nurses a grudge against her sister through the end of the novel and presumably beyond. This grudge, and the power that

Paula exerts over Kim and Ma, illustrates the consequences of making choices that don't fall in line with the culturally approved conception of sacrifice—and shows that those consequences have far-reaching effects in the long term.

As Kim discovers her pregnancy at the end of the novel, she's once again confronted with choices that seem less like choices and more like givens: Ma expects her to not seek an abortion; Annette expects her to tell Matt; and Kim herself feels it would be unfair to deprive Matt of the choice of whether or not to stay together, while also knowing that she has no choice but to go to Yale as planned. In the epilogue, Kim explains that she made a significant sacrifice, on her part and on her son Jason's, by choosing to follow through with her pregnancy and break up with Matt without telling him she was pregnant. In doing so, she allows Matt to have the life he wants in Chinatown with Vivian, while Kim is able to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor. Kim understands that while she and Matt each got some version of the lives they wanted, her choice didn't come without sacrifice: Matt tells Kim when they meet as adults that he knew about her supposed abortion and believes that "their baby paid the price," while Kim and Jason live and grow up without a husband or father figure in their lives. However, Kim ends the novel firm in her belief that she made the right choice and sacrificed the right things for herself, her lover, and her family—and that those sacrifices, while extremely difficult, were the only way they were able to achieve some sense of happiness in their lives.



WORK VS. EDUCATION

Immediately upon their arrival in the United States, Chinese immigrants Ma and Kim begin working at Aunt Paula and Uncle Bob's garment factory in Chinatown. There, Ma and Kimberly perform backbreaking labor putting finishing touches on garments and hanging them in garment bags, often staying at the factory until late into the night. As Kim helps Ma at the factory, she quickly becomes aware that the factory offers roles for every member of one's family through every stage of life, while never paying factory employees enough to ever be able to do anything but work at the factory. However, Kim's trajectory shows clearly that education has the power to not just save Kim from a lifetime of factory work, but to save Ma and future family members from the same fate.

As Kim makes friends with Matt, a boy her age who also works on the factory floor with his mother and brother, Ma cautions Kim to not become too close to Matt or any of the other children at the factory. She insists that if Kim does so, there will be nothing to set her apart from them, and she'll therefore spend the rest of her life working in a factory, as Ma expects those other children will. With this, Ma shows that she has a very clear grasp of the way that the factory traps entire families. Though Kim as the adult narrator notes in hindsight

that it was technically illegal to pay by the piece instead of by the hour, she explains that Aunt Paula and Uncle Bob aren't the only factory owners to get around this law by simply converting piece payment to a corresponding "hourly rate" to abuse employees and keep them in dire poverty. Because of this payment system, it's imperative that adult employees bring along their children whenever possible to help with the work, as more hands mean it's possible to get through more items. This in turn introduces young children to the factory system and starts them on a lifelong trajectory in which they begin as thread cutters, graduate to sewing, steaming, or finishing, and finally, as elderly people, return to cutting thread—while bringing their own children into the factory system as soon as they're old enough.

Ma, Kim, and even Aunt Paula all understand that the only way to truly break this cycle is for a child to receive a quality education, specifically through scholarships or grants given that factory pay is nowhere near enough to fund an education at a New York City private school. Fortunately for Kim, she has a natural aptitude for academics, specifically science and math, which allows her to secure a full-ride scholarship to the prestigious Harrison Prep high school and later, to Yale. However, even as Kim understands that working hard in school is her ticket out of dire poverty and factory life, she struggles to complete her schoolwork or to truly devote herself to academics exactly because Ma continues to require her help at the factory. Because of this, Kim's ability to quickly understand material without truly studying becomes her only saving grace. She's able to perform well in school while only doing homework on the subway to and from the factory and fortunately doesn't need to dedicate her afternoons to studying in order to achieve high marks, as Annette and her other classmates seem to do.

In the struggle between work and education, Matt acts as a foil for Kim. He begins skipping school early in high school to take a second job delivering Italian food, and he drops out for good later to devote himself to his jobs. Notably, however, he also doesn't see his laborious and often illegal jobs as a bad thing: he sees them as stepping stones to find better work eventually, but he has no interest in using education to find other work. This conflict comes to a head when Matt and Kim's romance finally develops fully when Kim is a senior. They begin a relationship and even discuss getting married and starting a family, though their ideas of what their future should look like differ dramatically. Kim wants to follow her academic path and move to New Haven so she can study to become a doctor and go on to support their family. Matt, on the other hand, wants to remain in Chinatown and vehemently rejects Kim's desire to be the primary breadwinner. When Kim discovers she's pregnant with Matt's child, she keeps her pregnancy a secret from him, breaks off their relationship, and implies she decided to have an abortion so she wouldn't "trap" Matt in a life he didn't get to fully choose—she insists she couldn't give up her dreams of

attending Yale, and she couldn't bear the thought of condemning herself and her child to a lifetime of factory work in Chinatown. However, in the epilogue, Kim reveals that she did indeed choose to continue her pregnancy, as well as become a doctor. She suggests that her son Jason's life in a big house, with access to good schools, after-school sports, and the luxuries she never had as a child far surpasses the life she believes that Matt's daughter will lead, as she believes the five-year-old girl will grow up working in the bridal shop where Vivian works. In this way, the novel shows clearly that while choosing education absolutely entails making sacrifices, it is truly the only way to escape the cycle of poverty that the illegal factory work guarantees.



INDEPENDENCE AND COMING OF AGE

After her move to New York from Hong Kong, eleven-year-old Kim is immediately faced with having to grow up and become independent long before she's truly ready to do so. By exploring the many instances in which Kim is forced to either act alone or prematurely act like an adult, as well as the consequences of this on such a young child, *Girl in Translation* ultimately suggests that being forced to grow up so fast robs Kim of her childhood and sets her up to rebel as an older teen in devastating ways.

Though Kim explains that she helped Ma around the house in Hong Kong with simple tasks such as cleaning up after meals and folding laundry, Ma requires Kim's help in a very different way at the factory, encumbering her with adult work and responsibilities at an early age and essentially depriving her of a childhood. Despite the fact that Kim is technically just Ma's helper in the finishing department, she performs the work of an adult employee from her first day on the job. The factory is loud, hot, and dangerous in innumerable ways—it's clearly no place for a child. However, because of Ma's debts to Aunt Paula, Kim has no choice but to dedicate every afternoon and evening after school to working at the factory to help support her family. In addition, Kim's expanding grasp of English means that she's responsible for tasks such as filling out Ma's tax returns and doing much of the family's shopping, as she's able to more easily navigate the English-speaking world. This puts Ma and Kim's relationship in a strange place in which Kim very nearly takes on Ma's place as the head of their household, given that she's the only one capable of representing the family in the public sphere. This puts a great deal of pressure on Kim, and she notes at several points that she simply refused to allow herself to think too hard about it—as a child, she's well aware that she's being forced into a role she not only doesn't want, but oftentimes puts her in situations that are far outside her still youthful understanding of the world.

When it comes to school, Kim is again forced to take her education into her own hands. Though she begins by actively excluding Ma by forging her signature, lying to her about report

cards, and not mentioning meetings, it soon becomes clear that Ma is genuinely unable to be involved in Kim's academic life. Kim's principal at her first school, Mrs. LaGuardia, is the first adult to realize that Kim is functionally on her own when it comes to navigating the world of prestigious middle and high school admissions. When Mrs. LaGuardia realizes this, she does as much as she can to help Kim apply to Harrison Prep without Ma's help. Kim's admissions interview at Harrison Prep is a poignant example of the liminal state she finds herself in: Kim and her interviewer, Dr. Weston, are both embarrassed by Dr. Weston's assumption that Kim's mother must be parking the car, as it's unthinkable to her that a child would attend an interview alone. Kim aces her interview questions in math and science but to end the interview, Dr. Weston asks Kim to draw a picture of anything. Kim draws a picture of a fairy-tale princess, impressing upon Dr. Weston that though Kim may present herself maturely and as capable of operating alone, she's still very much a child.

This independence becomes easier for Kim to handle as she moves through her teen years. As she becomes romantically and physically involved with boys, she discovers that her independence allows her the freedom to fool around without Ma (who is sure to disapprove) knowing and reminding her that "good girls" don't kiss boys like Kim does. Essentially, Kim is fully aware that as she reaches a point where teens normally begin to actively seek independence from their parents, Ma would finally attempt to stop her and make her feel like a powerless child—despite the fact that Kim has been acting like an adult for years by this point, just not in a sexual way. This culminates in Kim and Matt's decision to have sex, an event that's framed as an inevitability thanks to courting teenage hormones and years of repressing their attraction to each other. However, even as they take the very adult step to sexual maturity, they do make the dangerous (and stupid, in Kim's later opinion) choice to use two condoms at once, which causes them to break. When Kim finally tells Ma that she's pregnant, Ma handles the news surprisingly well: rather than blame Kim for youthful stupidity, Ma blames herself. She essentially frames Kim's pregnancy as a natural consequence of being forced to grow up too early and without proper parental guidance.

Though Kim notes that she was unable to make up for the childhood she lost, her relationship with her son in the epilogue suggests that the way she grew up taught her the true value of having a childhood unencumbered by work. Because of this, she's able to give Jason what she never had: an involved parent and an involved grandmother to love him, guide him, and do the adult work necessary to allow him to be a child.

their status as Chinese immigrants. For Kim, being an immigrant entails rejecting many of the conventions surrounding how to be properly female and Chinese in order to be successful at school. For Ma, the difficulty and foreignness of life in the U.S. provides the justification for clinging to Chinese customs and language as much as possible. For both women, the experience of being an immigrant is one that's isolating and in Kim's case, makes her feel alone in both her very Chinese life at home and her very American life at school.

For both Kim and Ma, being in the United States means having to learn a new language. The way that Kim experiences language in particular encapsulates some of the difficulties and complexities of being an immigrant. From the start, Kim struggles to come to terms with the fact that while she was a star student in Hong Kong and the top of her class, in the U.S., her inability to understand English means that she receives extremely poor grades (except for in math and physical sciences) for the first few years in school. She also receives poor grades due to her inability to complete certain assignments in light of her poverty, as when she's unable to complete any of Mr. Scoggins's assignments about current events—he tells students to read their parents' newspapers or talk to their parents, two things that Kim knows would be impossible for her. Ma, however, never truly learns English; she remains unable to say much more than "please," "thank you," and "I'm sorry." This is notably due to the fact that she spends most of her time in a factory with other Cantonese-speaking Chinese immigrants. Learning English isn't nearly as pressing of an issue for her as it is for Kim, who seeks to enter the prestigious (and English-speaking) worlds of school and medicine.

Another consequence of not knowing English that's almost more damaging to Kim is the social price she pays for not knowing the slang, social customs, or etiquette rules of her new home. This is exacerbated by the fact that Hong Kong was a British colony, which means that the little English she does know is British English. This results in her asking her teacher for a rubber only a week into school, not understanding that in American English she asked for a condom, not an eraser. She's also completely lost when Annette explains various American slang terms, most notably that being called a know-it-all is an insult, something that goes against everything Kim has ever been taught about the importance of education and knowledge.

Similarly, Kim also discovers that her life doesn't at all fit with the neat vision of immigrant life that her classmates appear to believe. Early on in her friendship with Annette, Kim mentions that she spends her afternoons helping Ma at the factory. When Annette returns to school the next day and informs Kim that according to her father, it's illegal for kids to work in factories, and so Kim must've made up a story, Kim also learns that she has to keep important parts of her life secret. She believes it's impossible for middle-class, white Annette to



THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

As *Girl in Translation* follows Kim and Ma's journeys, it pays special attention to the ways in which both of them, but particularly Kim, think of and handle

understand what it's like for an impoverished Chinese immigrant struggling to pay back crushing debt, so she simply omits these truths from her public-facing life in order to appear more American.

All of this, from the struggles to hide her poverty at school to her struggles to keep her social life secret from Ma, works together to make Kim feel absolutely alone in her world. Notably, Kim isn't able to feel truly at home until she's forced to admit her poverty to Annette and her pregnancy to Ma. In doing so, she finally allows her family and closest friend to see that she is truly caught between cultures and as a result, is finally able to ask for help in reconciling her Chinese identity with her American identity. The fact that she's able to go on to become a doctor, have a seemingly well-adjusted bilingual son, and care for Ma in a fancy house in the epilogue is a testament to the power of openness about her conflicting identities to remedy some of the struggles she experiences as a result.



SYMBOLS

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



THE LIBERTY GODDESS

The Liberty Goddess (the Statue of Liberty) symbolizes Kim's hope that, regardless of the obstacles and issues she and Ma face, New York still holds opportunities for success. At several points throughout the novel, Kim describes how New York is thought of in Hong Kong: a sparkling paradise where the Liberty Goddess watches over the city and where anything is possible—a place that is equated with success. Notably, though Kim finds herself disillusioned with much of her life in New York, including the city itself, the Liberty Goddess is the one thing that holds up to her idealized hopes and dreams. When Matt takes Kim and Ma to see it for the first time, about three years after their arrival in the U.S., Kim is in awe of its size and the goddess's beauty.



UNDERWEAR

When Kim begins school at Harrison Prep and has to change for gym class in front of female classmates, her homemade underwear and lack of a bra soon make her a bullying target. The conflicts and arguments she and Ma have over Kim's underwear come to encapsulate Kim's experience of being caught between two cultures: Ma simply doesn't understand why anyone is even looking at Kim's underwear in the first place, as such a thing doesn't happen in Chinese culture, while Kim knows that one's underwear are a marker of fitting in and feels extremely self-conscious that she doesn't. When Ma concedes and purchases Kim a package of

American underwear and a training bra, it symbolizes Kim's transition to being more of an American girl than a Chinese one.



MA'S VIOLIN AND PIANO

One of the few things that Ma brings to New York with her is her violin. She was a music teacher in Hong Kong, and throughout her life, her violin and music in general have stood in as symbols for her dreams and her happiness with her life, despite the odds. This symbolism is intensified in New York, as playing the violin is the only way that Ma is able to connect with her old self and remember her identity as a musician. The few times per week that she plays violin help Ma and Kim both maintain their hope that their situation will improve. In the epilogue, Kim makes a specific note to mention the piano in her living room. This upgrade to a larger and far more expensive instrument signifies that Kim and Ma have truly made it, and suggests that Ma is able to reconnect with an old version of herself thanks to Kim's success.



SKIRTS

In *Girl in Translation*, skirts come to represent the way that the inhumane factory system fundamentally warps Kim's outlook on the world and threatens to doom her to a lifetime of factory work. At the factory, Ma and Kim are paid one and a half cents per skirt, forcing them to work long hours to simply survive. Displeased that Kim has learned to hang a skirt in an impressive seven seconds (which would make Ma and Kim more money, seeing as they can get through more skirts each day), Aunt Paula cuts down their wage to one cent per skirt, forcing them to work harder and longer still. Furthermore, as Ma and Kim spend more time at the factory, their thoughts about money begin to shift from thinking in dollars to thinking in skirts—as in Kim's dictionary costing 200 skirts, rather than \$2.99—illustrating the way that the factory system has ensnared them.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Riverhead edition of *Girl in Translation* published in 2010.

Prologue Quotes

☞ I know how it will go: she already spends all of her time after school at the shop, helping with small tasks like sorting beads; later, she will learn to sew by hand and then on the machines until, finally, she can take over some of the embroidery and finishing work, and then she too will spend her days and weekends bent over the unending yards of fabric.

Related Characters: Kim (speaker), Matt's Daughter, Matt, Jason

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

As Kim stands outside a bridal shop in Chinatown, she watches a little girl whom she believes is Matt's daughter and thinks about how his daughter will likely spend her life working in sweatshops. With this, Kim shows that she recognizes that the illegal work in the Chinatown garment industry robs every child involved in the system of their childhood. By making this connection, Kim positions work as being in opposition to childhood as well as to education, given her belief throughout the novel that education is truly the only way out of the system. Kim sees that because Matt doesn't necessarily see anything wrong with this system, he's condemned his daughter to a lifetime of backbreaking, dangerous work that will keep her from ever truly being a child. Further, unless she's like Kim and has an uncanny aptitude for academics, school won't even be able to save her given that she'll have no time to study or do her homework.

One Quotes

●● Nelson rolled his eyes. "Welcome to America," he said loudly for the adults' benefit. He leaned in to pretend to kiss my cheek and said softly, "You're a rake filled with dirt." A stupid country bumpkin. This time, his tones were perfect.

[...] I felt a flush crawl up my neck, then I smiled and pretended to kiss him back. "At least I'm not a potato with incense sticks for legs," I whispered.

The adults beamed.

Related Characters: Nelson, Kim (speaker), Uncle Bob, Ma, Aunt Paula

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 8


Explanation and Analysis

When Kim first meets her cousin Nelson upon her arrival in the United States, the two surreptitiously exchange insults in Chinese while pretending to politely greet each other. This sets up the rivalry between Kim and Nelson at a very early stage, before Kim and Ma are even truly aware that

Aunt Paula means to purposefully foster such a rivalry. This shows that for Paula, the success available to immigrants is something that she believes is finite—and because of this, she wants to make sure that her son has access to as much as possible. This sets the stage for Paula to spend the rest of the novel doing her best to prevent Kim from doing well in school by both broadcasting when Kim does poorly, as well as punishing Kim and Ma when Kim does well.

●● "Never forget, we owe Aunt Paula and Uncle Bob a great debt. Because they got us out of Hong Kong and brought us here to America, the Golden Mountain."

Related Characters: Ma (speaker), Uncle Bob, Kim, Aunt Paula

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

When Kim realizes that Aunt Paula never meant for her and Ma to drink her special tea, Ma reminds Kim that they need to put up with Aunt Paula's faults, as they owe her so much. The delicate situation with Aunt Paula illustrates the complicated pressures to resist or give into assimilation. For much of the novel, Ma endures all manner of abuse from her older sister, as she believes that she genuinely owes Paula. Ma's Chinese conception of family and debt traps her in an awful situation in New York, and she's unwilling to Americanize herself enough to push back. Kim, on the other hand, does become more American and independent and thus pushes back on Aunt Paula on several occasions.

Two Quotes

●● Aunt Paula walked us to our workstation, passing an enormous table I hadn't seen earlier. A combination of very old ladies and young children were crowded around it, clipping all the extraneous threads off the sewn garments. This seemed to be the easiest job.

"They enter at this table as children and they leave from it as grandmas," Aunt Paula said with a wink. "The circle of factory life."

Related Characters: Aunt Paula (speaker), Mrs. Wu, Ma, Kim

Related Themes:   



Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

On Ma and Kim's first day of work, Aunt Paula points out the thread cutting table and briefly explains the cycle of factory life. Aunt Paula's tone and emotional tenor here is extremely important; her wink suggests that she sees nothing wrong with the fact that children work in the factories and never are able to escape. In short, she doesn't care about trapping children in a lifetime of backbreaking labor; for her, her own financial success is enough to justify abusing countless others for their entire lives. This has to do in part with the fact that Paula and most of the factory workers are Chinese and alludes to the general racism of the era, as Kim later suggests that non-Chinese inspectors turn a blind eye to the child labor they know is happening in Chinese-owned garment factories. The other reason that Paula is able to trap children in this life is because of the way she severely underpays them. Because none of the families are able to ever make enough money to lift themselves out of poverty, they must then remain in the factory's employment and continue the cycle even when they have children of their own.

☞ As Ma had explained earlier, all employees were secretly paid by the piece; this meant that the work the children did was essential to the family income. When I was in high school, I learned that piece payment was illegal, but those rules were for white people, not for us.

Related Characters: Kim (speaker), Matt, Ma, Aunt Paula

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

Kim explains how and why factory workers are paid by the piece rather than by the hour, despite the fact that piece payment is technically illegal. This shows how the kind of work that people do at the factory makes individuals particularly susceptible to exploitation, as none of the Chinese workers have enough wealth or power in other ways to push back on this treatment. People in charge, like Aunt Paula, are well aware that there are plenty of people willing to work in such horrible conditions for very little money, which thereby discourages dissent among the workforce she's already employed. This also explains why

exactly children are brought into the life of factory workers so young, as the piece payment means that children's work is valuable, even as the children themselves aren't employees. This in turn allows Paula to technically employ fewer people, but complete much more work than those official employees could actually complete by themselves.

Three Quotes

☞ "Don't get too close to the other children here. Ah-Kim, you must always remember this: if you play with them, learn to talk like them, study like them, act like them—what will make you different? Nothing. And in ten or twenty years, you'll be doing precisely what the older girls are doing, working on the sewing machines in this factory until you're worn, and when you're too old for that, you'll cut thread like Mrs. Wu."

Related Characters: Ma (speaker), Mrs. Wu, Kim

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

As Ma becomes concerned that Kim is developing too close of a friendship with Matt, she cautions Kim to not become close to the factory kids so that she has a chance of escaping the system that is bound to trap the other kids. With this, Ma shows that she's well aware of the way the factory system traps people from a very young age, though this also shows that she understands that an education is the only way that Kim has any hope of getting out. This again places education in direct opposition to work, as Ma understands that an education will allow Kim to find work that pays better and isn't illegal.

However, Ma's words also put a great deal of responsibility on Kim at a very young age. She essentially tells Kim that it's her sole responsibility to do well in school and in doing so, save both of them from the factory system. This forces Kim to become the head of household in many significant ways—she fills out Ma's tax returns, does shopping at English-speaking stores, and because Ma doesn't speak English, Kim is totally alone as she struggles with academics.

☞ Annette was referring to a girl in our class she didn't like because she said the girl was a know-it-all, which she also wrote down for me. It confused me because wasn't it a good thing to know so much?

Related Characters: Kim (speaker), Annette

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

As Kim and Annette become friends, Kim teaches Annette some Chinese insults, and Annette helps Kim decipher American slang terms. Throughout the novel, these slang terms that puzzle Kim succinctly encapsulate the difficulty she has adjusting to her new home. Slang commonly doesn't rely on a logical use of language and instead, can seem nonsensical and requires cultural context and an understanding of irony to truly grasp. Learning that a "know-it-all" is a negative term for an annoying person is a very unsettling thing for Kim in particular, as she understands that doing well in school—in her understanding, literally knowing as much as she can—is her ticket out of poverty. In this way, Kim's inability to understand these slang terms is also indicative of the particular situation she's in because of her poverty, as her classmates' relative wealth in comparison provides another layer for Kim to uncover as she attempts to keep up with the way they use language.

☝ She asked me what I did after school, and when I answered that I was usually working at the factory, she went home and asked her father about it. The next day, she told me it had been a silly thing to say since kids didn't work in factories in America [...] that day, I began to understand that there was a part of my life that should remain hidden.

Related Characters: Kim (speaker), Mr. Avery, Annette

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

When Kim shares with Annette that she works in a factory during her first year of school, Annette is disbelieving. Though this misunderstanding doesn't destroy Kim and Annette's friendship, it does illustrate the extreme distance between them and their lived experiences. Annette, as an upper-middle class white girl, simply has no idea of the injustices that her nonwhite and comparatively poor classmates suffer daily. Further, to her credit, her father is correct in terms of the law; child labor *is* illegal, though Kim points out at several points that in her experience, those

laws only effectively protect white children.

Kim's decision to keep this part of her life hidden and not try to help Annette understand it is rooted entirely in Kim's sense of shame about her situation. Her shame keeps her from saying anything or asking for help in meaningful ways, something that Annette later insists she would've done if she'd truly known what Kim was going through. Also as a result of her shame, Kim feels alienated from her classmates even more than she might have otherwise as she understands that most of them would likely react like Annette did, as Kim's experiences are so far outside their own.

Four Quotes

☝ "Ah-Kim, if you go too many times to her house, we will have to invite her back to ours one day and then what? Little heart's stem, we already have too many debts we can't repay."

Related Characters: Ma (speaker), Kim, Annette

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

After Kim visits Annette's house for the first time, she spends several weeks begging Ma to let her return. She stops begging when Ma points out that they'd be unable to invite Annette to their apartment to repay Annette's kindness. By refusing to allow Kim to accept Annette's kindness on the grounds of needing to repay a debt, Ma shows that she believes that absolutely every act of kindness can be thought of as a debt. For Annette and Kim, spending time together outside of school is something beneficial to both of them and to their friendship, something that Ma doesn't understand. This also suggests that Ma and Kim are too ashamed of their living situation to allow anyone in, which in turn continues to keep them isolated and unable to ask for help.



Five Quotes

☝ "Honey, look at me."

I was so startled by the word "honey" that I obeyed. I had heard Mrs. Avery using it for Annette. This was not a word principals used back home.

Related Characters: Mrs. LaGuardia (speaker), Mrs. Avery,

Kim, Annette

Related Themes:  



Page Number: 98


Explanation and Analysis

When Kim lands in Mrs. LaGuardia's office for what she believes is her expulsion, she guiltily refuses to look at Mrs. LaGuardia or listen to Mrs. LaGuardia's suggestion that Kim think about private school. The fact that Kim is so extremely startled by Mrs. LaGuardia calling her "honey" makes it clear that even though Kim is beginning to improve in school, she's not yet adjusted culturally to the U.S. and still expects that teachers are her enemies, as they were in Hong Kong. This shows how Kim looks at education as her way out of the factory system, though she also views it as something terrifying and possibly out to get her as well. In turn, this adds to Kim's crushing anxiety about school, teachers, and every assignment, as this cultural belief that teachers are all-knowing and mean authority figures proves difficult to break.

“I stopped walking for a moment and thought about turning back, going back to who I was. If they knew that Ma made even my underwear for me, that we slept under pieces of fabric we'd found in the trash, they would surely throw me out. I was a fraud, pretending to be one of the rich kids. What I didn't know then was that I shouldn't have worried about pulling any of this off; they weren't fooled at all.”

Related Characters: Kim (speaker), Ma, Dr. Weston

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

As Kim walks onto the Harrison Prep campus for the first time, she considers turning back since she knows she has no hope of passing as rich. When she notes that none of the adults or classmates around her were fooled by her attempts to pass, she admits that some of her anxiety was wholly unfounded. However, it's important to note that Kim's intense anxiety is rooted in a great deal of shame about her financial situation and the fact that she knows she can't fit in. She understands that her underwear broadcasts clearly that she's not wealthy, given that Ma isn't able to

make underwear that look at all like the store-bought underwear her classmates wear. The rest of her clothes as well come to symbolize the ways in which Kim does everything she can to try to make herself look like her classmates but fails to do so, as she notes that it was very obvious that her clothing was cheap and didn't fit her well.

Six Quotes

“I said to her once, "Ma, you don't have to play for me every week. You have so many other things to do.”

"I play for myself too," she'd answered. "Without my violin, I'd forget who I was.”

Related Characters: Ma, Kim (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis


Over the summer before Kim begins school at Harrison Prep, Ma takes to playing her violin on Sunday evenings. Ma's reasoning for why she plays, even though she's exhausted, illustrates the dehumanizing consequences of working in the factory system. For Ma, her violin is one thing to remind her that she once was an independent, creative person with far more power in the world. For Kim, Ma's playing impresses upon her the importance of getting them both out of the factory system by making it even clearer to her that Ma is suffering. This also shows Kim that Ma is an independent person with her own hopes and dreams, not just her mother—an important thing for Kim to recognize as she grows up and comes of age.

Seven Quotes

“How could I have thought that it had been a personal note for me? I burned with shame at wanting so much to be liked, to belong to a circle of friends, that I had picked up something during a test.”

Related Characters: Kim (speaker), Tammy, Mrs. Reynolds, Dr. Copeland

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

After Mrs. Reynolds and Dr. Copeland accuse Kim of cheating on a test, Kim is overcome with shame—she only picked up Tammy's dropped paper because she hoped it was a friendly note for her. The fact that Kim is specifically upset that she did this during a test, something she implies is out of character for her, makes it clear just how desperate Kim is to form friendships with her classmates and feel accepted. This shows that for Kim, education itself is certainly important as she works to better her situation, but what she truly craves is belonging, friendship, and understanding from the other kids at school.

Though Kim's thoughts on this are completely understandable, it's also worth noting that Kim doesn't do much to foster relationships with her classmates. Part of this has to do with the fact that she actually *can't* spend time with them after school, but much of it also has to do with Kim's unwillingness to open up to her classmates and share anything meaningful about her life. This suggests that it's Kim's shame about her living situation and desire to hide it from everyone that keeps her feeling so lonely and desperate enough to pick up notes during a test.

Eight Quotes

☝ "Our living conditions didn't change but with time, I stopped allowing myself to be conscious of my own unhappiness."

Related Characters: Kim (speaker), Ma

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

In the summer between Kim's eighth and ninth grade years, she starts doing what she can to not think about how horrible her living situation is and how unhappy she is in it. This illustrates the great lengths that Ma and Kim must go to survive their poverty—they very literally sacrifice their happiness in order to maintain their barely-livable situation. Further, as Kim sacrifices her own wants and desires in order to survive, she simultaneously ends up turning her poverty into even more of a secret. This in turn makes her increasingly unwilling to tell anyone about her situation, as hiding it becomes a real habit and not necessarily something she's doing consciously.


☝ "I held my breath when we finally got a good view of the Liberty Goddess. She was so close and so magnificent. Ma and Matt were right next to me. Ma squeezed my hand."

"How long we've dreamed of this," she said.

"We're here," I said. "We're really in America."

Related Characters: Ma, Kim (speaker), Matt

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

Three years after Kim and Ma's arrival in the United States, Matt takes them to see the Statue of Liberty, which they refer to as the Liberty Goddess. The goddess herself acts as a symbol for the hope that Ma and Kim hold onto, and their belief that the U.S. does indeed hold the key to their success. Finally seeing the Liberty Goddess marks a turning point in Kim's story. Though her living situation remains horrific, she begins to let Annette into her life by later confiding in her that she does indeed work in a factory. She quickly rises to the top of her class, much to Aunt Paula's chagrin, which in turn helps Kim gain admission to Yale and later, care for her family singlehandedly.

Nine Quotes

☝ "Annette. Stop it [...] This is not some abstract idea in your head. This is my life. If you do something to protest, we could lose our job."

Related Characters: Kim (speaker), Ma, Annette

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

As Kim and Annette begin ninth grade, Annette becomes more attuned to the fact that Kim is hiding things and convinces Kim to tell her about the fact that she works at the factory illegally. By this point, Annette has begun to get political and attend protests, so this is extremely shocking for her. In this way, Kim's insistence that Annette not do anything about the fact that Kim is working illegally illustrates the vast distance between the two girls and the worlds they inhabit. For Annette, child labor is unthinkable

and must be stopped; for Kim, working with Ma is the only way that the two of them have any hope of staying alive. As she makes this clear to Annette, Kim helps Annette to gain a more nuanced understanding of the world as she also deepens their friendship by choosing to trust Annette with something so personal.

●● Ma had told me that Pa had been a brilliant student, with a talent for both languages and science, and that I'd gotten my intelligence from him. I used to take comfort from that, but now I just wished he were here to help me.

All I wanted was to have a break from the exhausting cycle of my life, to flee from the constant anxiety that haunted me: fear of my teachers, fear at every assignment, fear of Aunt Paula, fear that we'd never escape.

Related Characters: Kim (speaker), Pa, Ma, Aunt Paula

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

As Kim studies hard for her math and science exam with the faculty to prove her innocence following a cheating accusation, she desperately wishes Pa were around to help and comfort her. When Kim voices these wishes here, it shows the true cost of being forced to grow up far too early and take on adult responsibilities as a mere teenager. Kim's desire to have her father around is as much a desire for him in particular as it is for some sort of parent figure in her life to be able to guide her and remove some of the burdens she shoulders as the only English-speaking person in her home. Because Kim lacks this support and is effectively on her own, the pressure manifests as anxiety. Essentially, because Kim is only a teenager and yet is tasked with the responsibility to get her and Ma out of their horrible situation, she betrays her youth here by showing the consequences this pressure.

Ten Quotes

●● School was my only ticket out and just being in this privileged school wasn't enough; I still needed to win a full scholarship to a prestigious college, and to excel there enough to get a good job.

Related Characters: Kim (speaker), Annette

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 206

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of tenth grade, Kim declines to tell Annette how essential it is that she does well in school; Annette is unaware that school is Kim's ticket out of poverty. This suggests too that Kim understands that if she were to remain in Chinatown and at work in factories, she'd never escape, as those jobs never pay enough to allow someone to lift themselves out of poverty. The particular way that Kim phrases this statement suggests that she still feels a great deal of anxiety about whether or not she'll actually be able to pull herself and Ma out, as she seems somewhat unsure of whether or not all her hard work will actually pay off in the end.

When Kim refuses to share this information with Annette, she continues to widen the gulf between the girls, when the novel ultimately insists that letting Annette in may have lessened some of Kim's burdens. This shows that the consequences of Kim's situation are manifold; besides experiencing profound anxiety, she also suffers due to the weaker social relationships she's unable to bolster because of her desire to hide her poverty.

Twelve Quotes

●● I was just a poor girl whose main practical skill was bagging skirts faster than normal [...] I was good at school but so were many of the other kids, most of whom had been groomed since birth to get into the right college. No matter how well I did in my classes or how well I managed to fake belonging to the cool circle, I knew I was not one of them.

Related Characters: Kim (speaker), Dr. Weston, Curt, Annette

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 247

Explanation and Analysis

When Kim begins the process of applying for Yale, she's gripped with fear that she's not good enough to get accepted because she doesn't have the long familial educational background that many of her classmates do. Kim's sense that she exists separately from her peers is one consequence of being forced to grow up so early and not

allowed a childhood. Unlike her peers, Kim has had to fill out tax returns and learn to navigate the world as an adult for years now, something that she doesn't believe will interest anyone at Yale. Her sense that she's different is also something the novel overwhelmingly attributes to Kim's experience of being an immigrant. In other words, it's not just her poverty that sets her apart; rather, it also has to do with the fact that she's from Hong Kong, doesn't have two highly educated working parents at home, and doesn't have the extracurricular activity opportunities that nearly all of her classmates brag about regularly.

☝ I didn't say anything more, but I thought about the fathers and brothers of the kids at the factory who worked as waiters [...] What would they have done if they'd had to pay for such an expensive meal out of their tips? Many of them weren't paid anything but their tips [...] Curt had no comprehension of what it was like to be working class.

Related Characters: Kim (speaker), Curt

Related Themes:   



Page Number: 249

Explanation and Analysis

One afternoon when Kim is tutoring Curt, he tells her about leaving a restaurant without paying and mentions that he laughed at the appalled look on the waiter's face. This makes it abundantly clear to Kim that Curt is so comfortable in his wealth, he has absolutely no idea what it's like to not have money. The fact that he's unaware that many of the Chinese waiters take home only tips and not an hourly wage as well mimics the way that Annette was shocked and disbelieving when Kim told her she works at a factory. For both Annette and Curt, such labor practices are unheard of, given that they're white and believe that the labor laws protect everyone, not just wealthy white people like them. Kim, on the other hand, knows otherwise and is aware that those labor laws only protect white people.

☝ "I knew you didn't have a lot of money but this is ridiculous. No one in America lives like this." I stated the obvious. "Actually, they do."

Related Characters: Kim, Annette (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 251

Explanation and Analysis

When Annette finally comes over to Kim's apartment unannounced, she's furious to discover that Kim lives in such dire poverty. Her insistence that nobody in America lives in such poverty is indicative of her own comfortable life. This illustrates how Annette's privilege and specifically, the fact that she was allowed to be a child, protects her from these hard truths and even had the potential to keep her from ever finding out about them.

Though this is a difficult moment for Annette and Kim, it does help them deepen their friendship now that Annette is aware of some of the obstacles Kim faces in her daily life. Annette is able to act as a genuine friend and use her privilege for good by putting Kim in contact with her mother, a real estate agent, to find a place with heat and without pests. While this isn't necessarily a sacrifice for Annette, it means that Kim is able to stop making such deep sacrifices to merely keep her and Ma afloat.

☝ "Does it have heat?" She looked startled. "Do you mean central heating?" "Yes, does it have radiators that work?" "Of course it does. I mean, don't worry, the heat works great."

Related Characters: Mrs. Avery, Kim (speaker), Dr. Weston, Annette

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 254

Explanation and Analysis

During Kim's meeting about an apartment in Queens with Mrs. Avery, Mrs. Avery is shocked when Kim asks if the apartment has heat and is free of pests. By asking these questions, Kim begins to share some of the depths of her poverty with people who actually have the power to help her. When Mrs. Avery seems somewhat embarrassed by her reaction to Kim's questions, it shows that like Annette, Mrs. Avery had no idea the kind of poverty that Kim and Ma are living in. It's unthinkable to her that someone would live in such horrible conditions, especially since Mrs. Avery is surely aware that renting someone an apartment without heat is actually illegal.

As Kim takes matters into her own hands and secures this apartment for herself and Ma, it suggests that taking on such an adult role doesn't always have negative or anxiety-inducing consequences. Finally, Kim is able to do something to take control of her life and make it better, and she's able to do so because she's been effectively preparing for this for years.

Thirteen Quotes

☝☝ When she saw us, she seemed heartbroken, her grief so complete that it left no room for anger. I thought, *I never want to love someone like that, not even Matt, so much that there would be no room left for myself, so much that I wouldn't be able to survive if he left me.*

Related Characters: Kim (speaker), Vivian, Matt

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 267

Explanation and Analysis

During the short period of time that Kim and Matt are together, she notices Vivian once looking so sad, she's not even capable of being angry. This causes Kim to decide that she never wants to be that dependent emotionally on anyone. This represents a major turning point in the way that Kim thinks of herself. While she thinks of herself as independent for much of the novel, she doesn't always conceptualize that as being a good thing, nor does Ma. At this point, Kim realizes that her independence actually will allow her to protect herself from heartache.

Though Kim is unaware at this point that she's pregnant, this realization can be read as a major influencer in Kim's later decision to hide her pregnancy from Matt and continue it without his knowledge. She understands that if she were to stay with Matt, he'd effectively require her to love him like this, something she thinks she's wholly incapable of doing.

☝☝ "I promised I would make a better life for you, Ma. I'm sorry I was so stupid."

Ma's voice broke. "My little girl, you've had to do everything for us. I am the one who is sorry, sorry I couldn't do more to help you."

Related Characters: Ma, Kim (speaker), Matt

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 282



Explanation and Analysis

After Kim admits to Ma that she's pregnant, Ma is filled with remorse that she wasn't able to do more to help or guide Kim through life in such a way that would've helped her avoid this situation. With this, Ma implies that Kim's pregnancy, while earth-shattering in this moment, isn't necessarily unexpected—it's a consequence of Kim being forced to grow up so young without much of a parental presence to guide her through life. This suggests that Kim's pregnancy isn't entirely her fault; rather, it can be traced to Ma's need to work long hours at the factory, Kim's detached way of dealing with boys in general, and the fact that experimenting sexually with boys was the one way that Kim felt truly in control and as though she was being a "normal" teenager.

Epilogue Quotes

☝☝ I kept him from his father all these years. When I gave Matt up, I forced Jason to do the same. For my attempt at nobility, our son paid the price.

Related Characters: Kim (speaker), Matt, Ma, Jason

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 302

Explanation and Analysis

In the hour after Kim and Matt say goodbye to each other, Kim thinks about her choice to keep Jason a secret from Matt and vice versa. She believes she made the best choice for her, as she knew then and knows now that she wouldn't have been able to make Matt happy had they stayed together. She also knows that Jason will have a much better and happier life than Matt's daughter will; Jason will have access to amazing opportunities and importantly, be able to be a child thanks to her financial success as a surgeon.

However, even as Matt is mostly happy with Vivian, and even as Jason seems well adjusted and happy in his life, Kim recognizes that her choice means that he won't grow up knowing anything about his father or having that familial connection. It's possible that Kim sees this as a reasonable consequence because she, too, grew up without a father, but she also recognizes that this has the power to deeply hurt Jason. With this, Kim shows that while sacrifices are

necessary, it's not always easy to choose which ones to

make—often, someone will have to pay the price.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

PROLOGUE

The adult narrator, Kim, explains that she was born with a talent for school. School was only difficult for her as she was learning English right after immigrating to the U.S. She notes that in Chinese, there's a saying that the fates dictate people's lives and urge them along; strong people can fight those winds, while the weak have no choice. Kim says she feels as though her life has been dictated more by her decisions, though she's spent her life longing for those things she couldn't have—and her decisions have led her far away from those desires.

Kim stands outside a Chinatown bridal shop, watching a little girl sitting by a mannequin in the window. She thinks that this isn't the life she wanted for her child. She knows that the little girl will learn to make the dresses herself when she's old enough, and will do nothing else. Both Kim and the girl look up when the girl's father walks into the shop. Kim feels as though her heart is breaking again, and she wonders if she was ever as beautiful as this man's child. There's only one photo to answer this question: her school photo from her first year in America. She ripped the photo up at one point, but saved the pieces. Recently, Kim rediscovered the pieces and put them back together. Despite the shoddy clothes and bad haircut, Kim can see hope and ambition in her young eyes.

Kim's nuanced and thoughtful interpretation of Chinese beliefs suggests that at least at this point, she's no longer traditionally Chinese. By beginning the novel with the assertion that Kim is really only good at school, it shows that education and schooling will be extremely important to the novel and likely are major factors in the decisions she speaks of here.



When Kim compares her school photo to the looks of this little girl, it suggests that she doesn't necessarily see beauty and ambition as qualities that are particularly related to each other. Her note that this little girl will likely grow up to do nothing but make wedding gowns introduces the reader to the concept of the factory cycle of life, in which people become trapped in the system as children and never make enough money to escape. This also implies that Kim escaped this life. Further, note that Kim briefly thinks of the girl as her own child—this will later give a clue as to the girl's identity.



ONE

After a drive in which eleven-year-old Kim searched futilely for skyscrapers and the **Liberty Goddess**, Aunt Paula and Uncle Bob park the car in a run-down, dirty neighborhood. Everyone gets out of the car. Uncle Bob unloads Kim and Ma's suitcases and Ma's **violin** case and stacks them in front of a boarded-up storefront. Aunt Paula seems embarrassed as she explains that she hasn't had a chance to inspect the apartment yet, but she'll fix anything wrong with it promptly. She offers Ma a box with sheets, an alarm clock, and a small television in it, and then she and Bob leave for the factory.

For Kim, New York City means skyscrapers, the Statue of Liberty, and a great deal of hope. The street where Uncle Bob and Aunt Paula leave them suggests that she's not going to see much of the New York she hoped to. When Aunt Paula seems embarrassed, it suggests that she knows there's something wrong with the apartment and is aware she's doing something awful to Ma and Kim.



Ma unlocks the front door to reveal a dark and cavernous hallway. She instructs Kim to stay downstairs while she makes her way upstairs, wielding the broom, to make sure it's safe. After a few minutes, Ma calls for Kim. As soon as Kim enters the apartment, Ma tells her not to touch anything—the apartment is filthy, and the windows are either cracked or missing entire panes. Dead roaches litter the floor, and Kim catches sight of live ones out of the corner of her eye. Ma stops her from banging the broom handle on the floor to scare them, insisting it'll disturb the neighbors. Kim suspects there are no neighbors.

Kim inspects the bedroom; there's nothing there but a stained mattress, a flaking dresser, and a wobbly coffee table. Kim realizes that Aunt Paula lied: it's clear nobody has lived in the apartment for a while. Kim believes that Paula let them move on a weekday so that she had an excuse to leave while Kim and Ma were still thanking her for her help. Ma reassures Kim, but Kim believes that Ma must also feel betrayed by her older sister.

Stepping back, Kim explains that she and Ma spent their first week in the U.S. in Aunt Paula's house on Staten Island. Kim met her Uncle Bob for the first time and realized that though he's a rich man, he married Paula so he'd have someone to take care of him: he has a limp and uses a cane. Kim met her cousin Nelson and as the children greeted each other, they each whispered insults in the other's ear. The plan was for Ma and Kim to live with Paula and Bob so that Ma could care for Nelson and Godfrey, Paula's three-year-old. Paula had shown off her house and made special note of her fine white tea, insisting that Ma and Kim drink as much as they'd like.

The next day, Ma and Kim woke alone in the house. Kim suggested they try the special white tea, though Ma gestured to the old teapot and an inexpensive box of green tea on the counter. Ma told Kim that Aunt Paula left the cheap tea out on purpose; the special tea was never truly meant for them. She reminded Kim that they owe Aunt Paula and Uncle Bob a great debt for bringing them to the U.S. Kim explains that then, it was difficult for anyone to get out of Hong Kong unless they were female and married a rich Chinese-American man, as Paula had done.

Ma and Kim's fear and surprise indicate that they absolutely weren't expecting these kinds of living conditions. This suggests that they trusted Paula to do better by them, which in turn indicates that there's going to be some shift in the way that Ma, Paula, and Kim engage with each other and choose to trust each other. The fact that Paula can do this suggests that she has much more power than Ma does.



The fact that Kim is able to make these connections suggests that in some ways, she's already becoming less Chinese—later, Ma will reprimand Kim for saying things like this out loud, as doing such a thing isn't befitting of a polite Chinese girl. Kim is already becoming Americanized.



Nelson's nastiness here can be seen as a reflection of his mother and therefore suggests that Paula isn't at all the generous sister she pretends to be. The fact that he speaks Chinese still (he was born in the U.S.) shows that Chinese culture and keeping those cultural traditions alive is very important to the Chinese immigrants of the novel.



When Ma brings up that she and Kim owe Paula a great debt and thus shouldn't push back on her nastiness, it suggests that Ma will be willing to put up with all manner of abuse in the name of repaying her debts. Notably, she conceptualizes the idea of repaying one's debts as something uniquely Chinese, which shows how Ma's identification as Chinese will later trap her in an abusive situation.



Aunt Paula returned around lunchtime, sat with Ma and Kim at the table, and complimented Kim's intelligence. Ma politely played down Kim's intelligence and asked when she should begin Nelson's Chinese lessons, which made Aunt Paula hesitate. Aunt Paula carefully said that Ma's services were no longer needed, and implied that this was because Ma had contracted tuberculosis the year before. Aunt Paula explained that she fired someone to create a job for Ma as a finisher at the clothing factory, which she insisted was a huge favor. Ma promised to work hard. Ma and Kim spent the rest of the week watching television. Kim felt as though she missed Pa, even though she doesn't remember him.

Back in the present, Ma and Kim spend days cleaning their apartment. On the second day they go to the grocery store to buy some ice cream as a reward for their hard work. However, the shopkeeper charges them three times as much as the price listed, and the ice cream is disappointingly thin and sour. Kim and Ma walk home quickly with their heads down. As they pass an old black man sunning himself in front of his shop, the man leaps up, assumes a martial arts pose, and shouts "hi-yah," terrifying Ma and Kim. The man laughs, explains he loves kung fu, and introduces himself as Mr. Al. When he realizes that Ma and Kim are Chinese, he asks what he can call a customer who he describes as a whale. Kim teaches him the Chinese word for "whale." Ma giggles and wishes him good fortune. Mr. Al smiles and thanks Ma and Kim.

The roaches prove impossible to exterminate or get used to. Kim misses their neat apartment in Hong Kong, especially Ma's **piano**. In the Brooklyn apartment, Ma kills roaches while Kim protects Ma from the rats and mice. Though they attempt to use mousetraps, Kim is too squeamish to empty and reuse them, so they soon give up. They put the *Tong Sing*, the Chinese almanac, at the head of their mattress in the hope that it will help keep thieves and evil spirits away. Once the apartment is clean enough, Kim and Ma set up five altars, leave offerings for the gods and goddesses, and ask for protection.

The night before Kim starts school, Ma says that she needs Kim to come to the factory with her after school every day to help. Kim agrees immediately, but Ma looks ready to cry. She says ominously that she's been to the factory. She hugs Kim and says that their future in the U.S. is the only one forward, though Kim thinks she's saying this mostly for her own benefit. Ma tucks Kim into bed, wrapping her in coats and one thin blanket, and promises to speak to Aunt Paula about the state of their apartment. Then she pulls out her **violin** and plays a Chinese lullaby.

The fact that Paula is open about firing someone to create this job for Ma casts her in a sinister light already, as it suggests that she doesn't view her workers' lives as valuable or worth much consideration or respect. This raises the question of whether Paula will actually value Ma and Kim's lives—and her decision to install them in their horrible apartment answers with a resounding no. Ma's promise to work hard again shows that she's willing to take the abuse in order to repay her debts.



After the horrors of the infested apartment and the racist shopkeeper, Mr. Al is a breath of fresh air. While his interest in Chinese and kung fu isn't exactly culturally sensitive, he's the first person to not treat Ma and Kim as though they're nasty or a burden. This suggests that there are people around who are willing to help Ma and Kim, if only they can find them and attempt to build relationships with them. It's also worth noting that Mr. Al is likely aware that their apartment is in poor condition, so they don't have to hide their poverty from him.



Ma owning a piano in Hong Kong is a symbol of their relative economic success there; this casts her violin, which she brought with her to the U.S., as a symbol of her poverty. Their actions of praying to the Chinese deities and setting up the altars shows that Ma and Kim are still very entrenched in their Chinese customs. As time goes on, Kim in particular will walk a fine line between being Chinese and being American.



Kim's immediate willingness to help Ma is indicative of their strong relationship and Kim's desire to help smooth their transition in any way possible. Ma's response, on the other hand, suggests that the factory is no place for a child, and that she understands the sacrifice she's asking Kim to make by requiring her to work there—but Ma feels she has no other choice.



TWO

Kim begins school in the third week in November. She attends a school that's very far away from the apartment, in a cleaner neighborhood. Aunt Paula set it up so that that Kim will use an address in that neighborhood as her official one, as it'll allow her to go to the nicer school. Ma and Kim struggle to find the school and finally get there late. A black security guard curtly greets them and gives Kim nearly unintelligible directions to her classroom. Kim walks away and feels horrible for not saying goodbye to Ma, but she turns to her task of finding her classroom.

Kim knocks on her classroom door and enters when the muffled voice tells her to come in. Her teacher, Mr. Bogart, is extremely tall, thin, and unnaturally pale. Kim struggles to understand what he's asking as he asks for her excuse as to why she's late, but finally, she manages to haltingly explain she couldn't find the school. He points her to a desk next to a chubby white girl (Annette) and Kim promptly spills the contents of her pencil case in her nervousness. Annette helps her pick things up.

As Mr. Bogart resumes his lecture, Kim places her hand behind her back to listen, as is customary and respectful in Hong Kong. When he calls her out for sitting strangely, she notices that her classmates are sprawled in their desks. At lunch, Kim is shocked: her classmates are wild, and because there's no rice with her lunch, she feels as though she hasn't eaten. When she returns to class, Mr. Bogart passes out a piece of paper with a map. Kim can't understand his intent (a pop quiz on capital cities), so she looks at Annette's sheet for a clue. Mr. Bogart snatches Kim's paper away, calls her a cheater, and corrects her grammar when she apologizes. Kim hopes to impress Mr. Bogart when they clean the classroom in the afternoon, but the students race out when the bell rings. Kim follows.

Kim holds back tears as she meets Ma outside of the school. She doesn't tell Ma the truth and settles for saying that everything is different. Ma sighs and turns her attention to showing Kim how to take the subway to the factory. Kim is terrified when she notices that the two black boys sitting across from them have a big knife. When they exit the subway station, Kim is surprised that Chinatown looks like Hong Kong.

At this point, Aunt Paula's plan to have Kim use a different address for school seems like a kindness and not something sinister. However, it also implies that Paula has some connection to this nicer neighborhood and possibly could've housed Kim and Ma here. This suggests that Paula is possibly using Kim and Ma's poverty to her advantage by making them work harder to get ahead.



Annette's kindness suggests that there's a great deal of power in doing these small things for someone. On the other hand, Mr. Bogart's treatment of Kim illustrates the immense power that teachers have over their students, and Mr. Bogart is clearly abusing it. This will eventually instill in Kim a fear of teachers as a whole, given that he never seems to care about her.



The rest of Kim's day is a lesson in all the things she'll need to get used to going to school in the U.S.: students are disrespectful, loud, and don't care about learning, and Mr. Bogart clearly has little interest in helping Kim figure out what's required of her here. In particular, Kim's hope to impress Mr. Bogart when she cleans the classroom (as is customary in Hong Kong) shows that she believes there's value in practical skills like cleaning. However, this belief in the importance of those skills is something that will erode in Kim as time goes on.



Chinatown's appearance indicates that there is one place in New York where Kim will feel more at home. However, it's important to note that the only line of work available to Kim or Ma in Chinatown is sewing, something that the novel is clear doesn't allow anyone a future.



Ma leads Kim to a freight elevator and then onto the factory floor. The air is hot and thick, and the sound of the sewing machines is a roar. The seamstresses are coated in sweat, and young boys push racks around. A layer of fabric dust coats everything. Ma points out Aunt Paula, who is handing out work to seamstresses. The ones who get larger piles seem grateful. Ma asks Aunt Paula if they can talk for a moment, and Paula leads them to the office. As soon as they're in the office with Uncle Bob, Paula declares that they can't talk for long or it'll look like favoritism. Ma quickly explains that their apartment is dirty and unsafe. Paula warmly assures her that as soon as a better apartment opens up that they can afford, she'll help them move there. Kim and Ma both believe her.

Aunt Paula leads Ma and Kim through the factory. They pass a large table with old ladies and young children gathered around it, trimming threads. Paula proudly explains that employees begin at that table as children, and end their tenure there as grandmothers. Finally they reach the finishing station, where she explains that Ma and Kim will hang, sort, and bag finished garments in time for the next shipment. Ma quickly gets to work, and Kim begins sorting pants by size. Neither of them wears their face mask, as the air is too stifling. Kim surreptitiously reads from a Chinese paper as she works.

After an hour, Kim smells a pork bun in addition to the fabric stench. She notices a boy about her age eating a bun. The boy comments that Kim can still read Chinese and offers her a bite of his bun. He tells her she can't tell anyone about it, as he swiped it from "Dog Flea Mama's" station. When Kim looks confused, the boy mimics Aunt Paula's habit of scratching her neck. Kim gasps and says that Paula is her aunt, and the two begin to laugh. The boy introduces himself as Matt.

When Kim takes a break, she finds Matt at the thread cutters' table. He's sitting with his mother, Mrs. Wu. Mrs. Wu notices Kim's flat chest and cropped hair and asks Kim if she's a boy or a girl, embarrassing Kim. Kim greets the little boy next to Mrs. Wu. He doesn't look at her and ignores Matt as well. Matt explains that Park is shy and doesn't hear well, and then declares he's taking a break. Other kids join Matt and Kim near the soda machine. Kim understands the other kids are like her: not real employees, just there to help their families, as employees are secretly paid by the piece. Kim later learns that piecework is illegal in the U.S., but says "those rules were for white people, not for us." After ten minutes, the children return to their stations. Later, Ma and Kim have dinner at their station and don't leave until nine. Kim later learns that this was an early night.

Kim will say it outright later, but when the seamstresses are thankful to receive larger piles of fabric, it shows the reader that employees are paid by the piece, not by the hour. The fact that Paula is handing out work personally indicates that she has a great deal of power to make or break her employees' careers. Similarly, Aunt Paula's insistence that speaking too long with Ma will make her look bad suggests that she's not necessarily a friend; rather, she has little interest in truly helping her sister or niece.



Paula's tone when she describes the thread cutting table implies that she sees nothing wrong with people spending their lives at work in the factory from the time they're small children. This demonstrates a shocking lack of regard for childhood and education, as those children definitely don't have time for fun activities or school.



Any suspicious observations the reader might have about Paula were seemingly correct: she's not liked and is actually mocked. Mocking her, however, is a comparatively ineffective way to get back at Paula, which again reinforces the fact that Aunt Paula has an immense degree of power to control her employees' lives.



While Kim is embarrassed by Mrs. Wu's question, her question points to the liminal space Kim inhabits between being truly Chinese (and femininely demure) and being American (and having the potential to be more masculine and independent). This push and pull between being properly Chinese and female and being American and more masculine will haunt Kim throughout the novel, and both sides of the scale punish her in important ways. This suggests that because of the situation Kim is in, she can't truly win.



The next morning, Kim feigns illness and insists she needs to stay home from school. Ma knows that Kim is lying. Through tears, Kim tells Ma about how mean Mr. Bogart had been to her the day before. Ma offers to speak to Mr. Bogart, but Kim realizes this won't help. She promises to try harder but decides secretly to skip school instead. Kim spends her day huddled in the living room, watching television. She's too afraid to make herself lunch; she knows everything must be cooked fully and fears the water will give her diarrhea. She fantasizes that Pa is still alive and thinks about Ma at work at the factory.

Kim decides to go through Ma's things. She finds an old record of an Italian opera with a photo inside, and remembers hearing this record once before in Hong Kong. The music had made Ma cry, and Kim had learned then why Ma relied on music. Ma's parents had been killed during the Cultural Revolution after getting Ma and Paula into Hong Kong, and then Pa died in his early forties. Music is how Ma processes her grief. Kim studies the photograph of her with both of her parents. She doesn't recognize the handwriting on the back and reasons that it must be Pa's. Kim understands that as much as she misses Pa, Ma's grief must be far worse. Kim carefully puts the record back and then leaves for the factory.

THREE

Ma and Kim scrub the radiator in their apartment but no matter what they do, it refuses to work. They also discover that they're the only ones living in their trash-filled building. Later, Ma asks Aunt Paula about the heat, and Paula assures them that she's already asked Mr. N., the landlord, for permission to fix it. Kim's days spent at home are freezing cold. Their thin blanket from Hong Kong is nowhere near warm enough, so she and Ma sleep under coats and clothes to stay warm.

One afternoon, Kim peels back the garbage bag covering the broken kitchen window and looks out the back of her building. She can see into the neighboring apartment in Mr. Al's building. Inside, Kim can make out a sleeping black woman cradling a baby. The woman wears only a housedress, which tells Kim that they have heat. Kim longs for the better times she and Ma had in Hong Kong.

Remember that Kim was an exceptional student in Hong Kong. Knowing this, her decision to skip school makes it clear just how damaging it is to be treated like a stupid outsider by Mr. Bogart when Kim's only crimes are not knowing the language or cultural expectations. The fact that she fears the water in New York (which is likely safe) suggests that she has many things still to learn about the cultural landscape.



Kim shows her maturity in that she is able to understand how Ma must be drowning in grief for the death of her parents and her husband. Though she's only eleven years old, Kim is already growing up and becoming mature beyond her years, trying to better help Ma make it through life. This is reinforced when Kim still leaves for the factory at the appropriate after-school time; she understands she can't get out of her promises to help Ma.



It's worth noting that it's long been illegal to rent an apartment that doesn't have heat in places that get cold. Again, when Ma and Kim don't push back on Paula to fix their heat sooner, it suggests that either they don't know this or don't feel as though they have the power to push back at all.



The mother and baby in Mr. Al's building represent, in Kim's eyes, a more ideal family and life than she currently leads. Though she and Ma love each other very much, their sacrifices for each other to stay afloat mean that they're unable to experience the kind of happiness Kim sees in this apartment.



When Kim gets to the factory the next afternoon, she sees Matt dragging a cart piled high with **skirts**. She helps him push the cart to the hemming station and learns that she made a mistake: today is Thanksgiving, all the schools are closed, and her absence all morning makes it obvious that she's skipping school. Matt assures her that Ma doesn't know, but he says she'll need to think of an excuse as to why she didn't come earlier. He suggests she say she didn't know, went to school, and then returned home to work on a project. He also says he regularly skips school and never does his homework. Kim feels as though she has to pay Matt back but has only tissues in her pocket. He tells her to forget about it.

Kim finds Ma and admits outright that there was no school, but she spent the day at home working on a project on current events. She hesitates a moment too long as she explains that she came at her usual time because she never takes the trains at any other time of day. Ma is quiet and then tells Kim to be careful with Matt and the other children, as spending time with them will make her grow up to be like them. Ma says that it's too late to do anything with her own life, but she's done everything she can to give Kim a better life. She reminds Kim of her intelligence and apologizes for bringing her to the U.S. Kim promises to get them out of this situation.

Kim vows to go back to school on Monday, as she can't bear the thought of Ma cutting threads as an old lady. She thinks of Aunt Paula saying that Nelson will be a great lawyer someday. Though Kim has no idea what lawyers do, she does know they make lots of money, and she reasons that if Nelson can do it, so can she. Kim spends the weekend worrying about her return to school, but her first day back is surprisingly uneventful. Kim had the foresight to forge a letter from Ma explaining her absence, and Mr. Bogart accepts it without question.

Mr. Bogart hands out a test. It takes Kim a few minutes to realize that they're simple math problems in word form. She already knows how to solve them. However, she makes a mistake and, not wanting to look like a cheater again, she decides to ask Mr. Bogart himself for an eraser. She enunciates as she asks him for a "rubber," which sends a titter through the class. Kim has no idea why everyone laughed and returns to her seat, burning with shame. Annette whispers to Kim that it's called an "eraser" in the U.S., and she pushes one to her.

This afternoon at the factory represents a major turning point for Kim in terms of how she thinks of her education. Here, Matt offers her one choice: to decide that school isn't all that important and to instead prioritize factory life, a choice that Kim has been making in some ways by skipping school. This begins to set up work and education as being in opposition to each other, given how Matt clearly prioritizes work over school.



Ma's pep talk here shows Kim what her task is: to choose the opposite of what Matt chose and to use education to help her and Ma leave the factory. Though Kim appears to take on this responsibility, it's important to recognize that this is a great deal of pressure for such a young child. This then becomes one of the many ways that Kim is forced to grow up long before she's actually ready to, thereby depriving her of a real childhood.



It's worth noting that Kim decides to go back to school for Ma's sake, not necessarily her own. This places Kim's coming academic achievements and the work she does to succeed in school as being all in the service of Ma—it's more of a sacrifice, not necessarily something Kim does for herself. The idea of sacrifice infiltrates many of Kim's thoughts.



Hong Kong was a British colony; this means that the English that Kim does know is British English, as evidenced by calling an eraser a "rubber" (which, especially in America, is also a slang word for condom, which is probably why the other students giggle). Kim is at even more of a disadvantage than she thought, as she'll also need to switch to the appropriate English dialect.



Kim does well on her test, though her method of solving the problems is slightly different and so Mr. Bogart takes off points. After the eraser incident, Kim and Annette become friends. Annette draws rude drawings of Mr. Bogart that Kim doesn't fully grasp but understands the intention, and writes answers in her notebook and shows them to Kim. School becomes bearable for Kim because of her friendship.

Ma and Kim begin leaving their oven on and open all the time. Kim is used to the heat of Hong Kong and so the bitter cold of New York is especially jarring. She doesn't have **underwear** like the other girls, and so wears two layers of pajamas under her pants. She has one sweater that was once pretty, but is now shrunken and pilled. Despite the layers and the oven, Kim is never warm. Ma often brings clothing home from the factory and never goes to bed before Kim. She tries to play her **violin**, but it's too cold for her to properly move her fingers.

Kim begins to look forward to school because of the heat and because of Annette. Annette wears braces, which is a new concept for Kim, and brings cold snacks to school, which she delights in sharing. Kim is also secretly fascinated by Annette's paleness. Annette constantly admires Kim's black hair and loves learning Chinese insults, though her pronunciation is horrendous. She also teaches Kim American slang.

Kim soon learns that her school is in a middle-class black neighborhood, though white kids from the nearby wealthier neighborhood also attend. Kim thinks of herself as one of the black kids, as they all get free hot lunch. However, Kim has no friends aside from Annette, and she doesn't fit in at all. Her clothing is homemade, and Ma keeps her hair chopped short, insisting that it takes less time to dry in the freezing apartment. Sometimes, fights break out that leave kids bleeding. The students are beginning to become romantically interested in each other and play games in which they "transmit cooties" to each other. Kim often ends up losing, as she'd been taught not to touch people without permission and therefore can't pass the "cooties" on.

Mr. Bogart's choice to take off points casts him as being very picky and not at all confident in Kim's abilities. Kim and Annette's friendship helps to make Kim's horrible situation easier to bear.



Even at this early stage, Kim is extremely attuned to all the ways in which she's different from her classmates. The fact that she fixates on her undergarments shows that she's extremely interested in fitting in, as she doesn't really acknowledge the fact that her pajamas keep her far warmer than American underwear would.



Annette provides Kim a window into American culture in a way that's relatively non-judgmental and friendly, something invaluable as Kim does her best to transition to life in American school. Their curiosity about the other's skin color suggests that these racial differences don't have to be a cause for prejudice or stereotyping—they can be interesting when shared between people who treat each other as equals.



Just as Ma suffers because she relies on Chinese cultural norms and feels unable to push back on Aunt Paula because of them, Kim "loses" at the cootie games because she also is unwilling to step outside of Chinese cultural norms in a way that would actually help her fit in. When she says that she feels like the black kids, it suggests that Kim divides people more by economic standing than she does by skin color. In turn, this implies that she believes there could be some sense of community with those kids who are poor like she is. Unfortunately, the nature of poverty is often isolating, as shown by how ashamed Kim is and how she tries to hide it from others.



That winter, Kim is sick most of the time. Ma cooks traditional Chinese remedies for her but continues to send Kim to school, as she's too afraid to leave Kim in the freezing apartment. Mr. Bogart remains unimpressed with Kim, even as she proves herself a whiz at math and science. He constantly makes jokes about "the fairer sex" and acts as though his female students are incompetent. Kim continues to do poorly in any subject that relies too much on words. She buys a dictionary to study with, which costs her \$2.99—200 **skirts**. She begins thinking of any cost as being in skirts rather than in dollars.

Kim tells Ma that in the U.S., students don't get to keep their homework or tests, so she doesn't have to show Ma her poor grades. She continues to struggle with Mr. Bogart's assignments, as he assigns things that are nearly impossible for her—collages out of old magazines and writing assignments about one's treasured objects pose problems, as Kim doesn't have treasured possessions or a collection of magazines. These issues plague other students too, but Kim feels as though she's the only one who truly tries.

Mr. Bogart's favorite student is Tyrone Marshall, a poor black student. His grades are exceptional and Kim nurses a secret crush on him. Mr. Bogart often speaks about how wonderful Tyrone is, which embarrasses Tyrone to no end. Kim secretly leaves Tyrone candy when Annette gives her some.

Kim notes that in Hong Kong, her best friend had been the second-smartest student at school. She'd been envious when Kim mentioned she was leaving, but Kim believes she was happy to finally take Kim's spot as the best student. With Annette, Kim revels in how kind she is: she gives Kim whatever she has, whether it's candy, drawings, or information. She once asks Kim what she does after school. The next day, Annette informs Kim that she asked Mr. Avery about kids working in factories and he said that that doesn't happen anymore. Kim understands that she needs to keep that part of her life hidden from Annette.

FOUR

Mr. Bogart assigns a diorama depicting conflict resolution skills. Annette and Kim decide to work together, and Ma allows Kim to go to Annette's house one afternoon to work on it. Kim greets Mrs. Avery formally, which seems to surprise Mrs. Avery. Annette and her little brother fight over a comic book on the drive to Annette's house, and Kim is immediately struck by how grand the house is. There's a chandelier, fresh fruit, and pets. Kim is scared of the animals; she believes they bite and have fleas and germs. Mrs. Avery shows Kim how to pet the cat and assures her that there are no fleas.

The shift to thinking of costs as being in skirts rather than dollars illustrates how the factory system fundamentally warps Kim's perception of the world, and normalizes beliefs, thought patterns, and practices that are decidedly not normal. Mr. Bogart's sexism offers some explanation as to why he punishes Kim for little things; she's disadvantaged twice for being female and not speaking English well.



When Kim hides her struggles from Ma, she may be right that it's shielding her from Ma's disappointment—but it's also true that keeping this a secret is making Kim feel even more alone. Mr. Bogart's assignments suggest that he either has no idea that some of his students lead difficult lives or simply doesn't want to do the work to help them succeed by meeting them where they are.



Kim's crush on Tyrone likely has to do with the fact that he fills the student archetype that she did in Hong Kong; this suggests that Kim desperately wants to regain her star student status.



Annette's response to Kim admitting that she works in a factory betrays that Annette's privilege blinds her to the harsh realities of lives that differ significantly from her own. Remember that Kim said that piecework (being paid by the piece, not the hour) is really only illegal for white people; this is one of the places where this is shown to hold true. For Annette, piecework and child labor are illegal, and her viewpoint is understandable.



The pets are another way in which Kim discovers that America is very different from what she's used to in Hong Kong; her beliefs about animals are likely rooted in personal experience or conventional wisdom specific to Hong Kong. Mrs. Avery is one adult who is willing to get down on Kim's level and begin to break down her belief that all American adults are mean and out to get her.



Mrs. Avery introduces Kim to the housekeeper, whom Kim greets with a handshake. The housekeeper makes Kim and Annette a snack of yellow cheese on Ritz crackers and finally, Annette leads Kim to her room. It's filled with toys, and Kim feels the warmest and happiest she's felt since arriving in the U.S. As Annette's brother pesters them, Kim wishes that Ma could worry about her behavior. Finally, Kim and Annette turn to their diorama. Mrs. Avery has laid out all manner of materials and the girls finish quickly.

When they're finished, Kim asks Mrs. Avery to drop her off at the school. Mrs. Avery starts to protest, but then agrees. As she lets Kim out, she invites Kim for dinner any time. Kim feels lonely as she walks home. She dreams about the Averys' warm house often, though Ma forbids Kim from going over again. Ma insists that they wouldn't be able to invite Annette to their apartment to repay the debt.

Though Ma has a green card and is legally allowed to work, she still gets paid in cash like the illegal workers so that Aunt Paula and Uncle Bob can take their debt payment directly from Ma's paycheck. By the time they've taken money for the tuberculosis medicine, rent, and immigration fees, Ma and Kim get very little money. One afternoon, Ma tries to ask Uncle Bob about getting a new apartment, as Kim is still sick from the cold. He insists that Paula will take care of it and buys Kim an iced tea.

As Christmas approaches, Kim agonizes over what to get Annette for a gift. Ma isn't sure what they should buy for a white girl, but they eventually decide on a plastic plant that costs \$1.99, or 133 **skirts**. On the last day of school before Christmas vacation, Kim presents the plant to Annette as she gets out of Mrs. Avery's car. Annette is puzzled and asks if it makes noise; Kim later realizes that Annette thought it was a toy. Mrs. Avery thanks Kim and Annette gives Kim a small package. It contains a panda bear keychain and Kim loves it immediately.

On the last day before vacation, Ma walks Kim to school instead of heading straight for the factory. Much to Kim's horror, Ma walks into the school and offers Mr. Bogart a takeout box, saying "Merry X-y-masy." Mr. Bogart opens the box, which contains a drumstick. Kim can't read Mr. Bogart's expression. The female teacher next to Mr. Bogart saves the situation, telling Ma that Kim is adjusting well.

Annette's room shows Kim what the U.S. could be—warm, happy, and friendly. Kim's thought about wanting Ma to be able to worry about her behavior shows that because of Ma and Kim's poverty, Kim has no option but to behave. She also has no extra time or energy to act out at all.



It's likely that Mrs. Avery suspects that Kim's living situation is subpar, but it's important to note that she treats Kim like an adult and doesn't pry. Though this is one way for Mrs. Avery to respect Kim, it also allows Kim to continue feeling like an adult alone in the world.



The fact that there are illegal workers who get paid in cash offers one more way that Aunt Paula and Uncle Bob skirt the law in order to make a profit. While they're certainly doing a good thing by employing vulnerable people, they're also exploiting them, and their employees have almost no power to push back on their ill treatment.



Ma and Kim's choice of gift shows that they're still very much adjusting to American cultural norms; it seems fairly inappropriate when Annette gets it. Regardless, the fact that Ma and Kim spend valuable money on a gift for Annette suggests that they understand the importance of fostering the friendship.



Again, Ma's choice of gift (and of giving it to Mr. Bogart in such a public place) reinforces that she's still at a loss when it comes to American customs, though her intentions are entirely good.



At the factory several days later, Kim approaches Matt, tells him "joyful Christmas," and offers him the panda keychain. She tells him that it's in exchange for all his help. Gently, Matt gives the panda back, and Kim is torn between feeling relieved and disappointed. She asks about a bruise on Matt's face. He tries to sound nonchalant as he says that he was standing up for Park. Later, Kim and Ma give Mr. Al an elephant from Chinatown to bring him good luck.

Kim had heard of Santa Claus, but she'd always been told that he didn't visit warm places like Hong Kong. She fully expects him to visit her now that she's in the U.S. Carefully, Kim lays out one of Ma's socks and wakes up on Christmas to find \$2 in the sock. She realizes that there's no Santa Claus, but thinks that Ma is more than enough.

Not long after the Western new year, Ma and Kim pass a dumpster overflowing with faux fur from a toy factory. They decide to go to work as usual, hoping the fur will still be there when they head home. Fortunately, it is. With the lime green fur, Ma makes robes, sweaters, and pants, as well as curtains and tablecloths. Though it's scratchy, Kim and Ma are finally warm at night.

The Chinese new year arrives at the end of January. The factory closes, as no Chinese person will work on that day. Per Chinese belief, all the gods leave at midnight the night before, and return on the new year. Ma and Kim carefully prepare by performing ceremonies to honor the dead and making offerings to the altars in the kitchen. When this is done, they burn sacred papers in their backyard and pray together for their future.

The next Sunday, Ma and Kim notice lights on at Mr. Al's shop, an unusual occurrence. They decide not to bother him, but he notices them and invites them inside. He explains that he's sorting things in preparation for moving, something that shocks Kim: Mr. Al has become their friend and advocates for them at the local grocery store. Mr. Al says that the street is going to be demolished, though it could happen next year or in ten years. He insists that the landlords won't do anything about the apartments on the block because of this. He's leaving in March.

In the case of Mr. Al, an elephant from Chinatown is, fortunately, an extremely appropriate gift given his interest in Chinese culture. The fact that Ma and Kim are trying at all to appropriately observe an American and Christian holiday shows that they do desperately want to assimilate into their new home.



Here, Santa Claus functions much like Kim's father does in her imagination: she wishes he were there to take some of the burden of growing up off of her. Realizing Santa isn't real is one more way that Kim is forced to grow up and realize that Ma is all she has.



The lime green faux fur reinforces the absurdity of Ma and Kim's living situation. It has the potential to be funny in any other situation, but in theirs, it simply makes it extremely clear that Aunt Paula is forcing them to remain in horribly inhumane living conditions.



The factory closes on the Chinese New Year, suggesting that the factory is very bound up in Chinese tradition and may, in some ways, use those traditions to its advantage. This is supported by the fact that so many children work in the factory, which feeds into the conception of familial loyalty.



The block is going to be demolished, so Ma and Kim may have some hope of getting out of their freezing apartment. However, losing Mr. Al means that they'll be on their own in their neighborhood and will need to make their own way. This suggests that the small community they are building is fragile and liable to dissolve; it's not something dependable for them.



FIVE

When Ma and Kim get to their apartment, Kim translates what Mr. Al said about the block being condemned. Ma insists it means that Aunt Paula will soon move them, but Kim believes that it means that Mr. N. will never fix anything in the apartment. She suggests they find a new place to live, but Ma reminds her that they can barely afford their apartment as it is. Kim mentions that she believes it's not even legal for them to live in the building, which is probably why Paula makes her use a fake address for school. She suggests they run away from the factory and Aunt Paula, feeling as though she's never been more desperate to change her living situation.

Ma sternly tells Kim that they have to repay their debts to Aunt Paula, even if Paula is flawed. Kim asks if Paula has always been like this. Ma explains that Paula had worked while Ma finished high school, and Paula had been very angry when Ma married Pa. Ma admits that she'd been the one intended to marry Uncle Bob. The next day, Kim and Ma ask Aunt Paula about the apartment. Paula insists their housing situation is temporary and reminds them that they almost missed their deadline on the last clothing shipment. Ma promises to work harder. They pass Matt working alone at the cutting table on their way back to their station. He politely explains that Mrs. Wu is ill and he's covering her workload today. His politeness impresses Ma.

Kim dedicates herself to learning English. She works through her dictionary and begins teaching herself to read with kids' books. By the time Kim gets her report card in February, she's not doing well, but she's passing most subjects. She forges Ma's signature and tells Ma that they only get report cards once per year. She also discovers that Annette will be attending a private school called Harrison Prep next year, and she wonders what she'll do without Annette in school.

In March, Kim and Ma say goodbye to Mr. Al. He gives them folding chairs and a mattress as parting gifts, and Ma gives him a wooden Chinese sword. Kim explains that it's supposed to go under his pillow to take away worries and bad dreams, but Mr. Al insists that it's a fantastic weapon. After Mr. Al leaves, Kim looks across to his building again, into the apartment of the black woman and her baby. She can't see the woman, but the baby hangs on the side of a playpen and cries. Kim wishes she could comfort him.

Ma's insistence that Paula will move them because the block is condemned shows her leaning heavily on her cultural beliefs in order to deal with the situation in front of her. Given what the reader knows about Aunt Paula, Kim's suspicions are far more likely. The fact that Kim has these suspicions at all suggests that she's becoming more "American" in her cynicism as time goes on, as she's clearly unwilling to follow Ma in thinking the best of Aunt Paula just because she's family.



Kim's suspicions were correct: Aunt Paula is going to continue to abuse her power in order to keep Ma and Kim from doing any better in life. However, Ma's admission that she was supposed to marry Bob opens up the possibility that Paula feel like Ma has taken advantage of her in the past. This humanizes Paula a bit, and could explain how she's able to justify her poor treatment of Ma and Kim to herself.



It's important to recognize that the improvements Kim makes from the start of the novel to now are very impressive, even if she doesn't see them as such. Kim is very hard on herself and isn't yet able to see that she's already done amazing things—and she won't understand her success until she's completed much more.



Now that the black woman's baby is alone and in distress, he represents Kim's feelings of loneliness and anxiety after the departure of Mr. Al. Mr. Al was one of the only true friends Ma and Kim had; his absence means that their lives will be very lonely without him to look after them.



The school bully, Luke, had begun staring at Kim in February. He stares at her for months until finally, he tries to trip her in the cafeteria. He grabs for her, but she evades his grasp. This makes him think she knows karate, so he challenges her to a fight after school. Kim and Annette are terrified. Annette insists they need to tell an adult, but Kim resists—she's more afraid of adults than she is of Luke. Annette offers to drive Kim home to avoid Luke, but Kim insists she has to fight Luke and be done with it.

After school, Kim is almost nervous enough to vomit. A circle of kids forms outside the school with Kim and Luke in the center. He's twice her size. Kim begins to curse quietly in Chinese as Luke swings his book bag at Kim and kicks her. Kim swings her own bag at Luke, pummeling him with it. He doesn't fight back and she's able to kick him hard in the calf. Luke gives her a push and then saunters away. Kim has no idea what happened.

The next day, the principal, Mrs. LaGuardia, calls Kim to her office. Kim is terrified that she'll be punished for her fight with Luke, as Mrs. LaGuardia motions for Kim to sit. Kim can barely understand as Mrs. LaGuardia says that Kim's standardized test scores came back, and her math scores are exceptional, though her reading scores are still low. Kim believes she'll be suspended for the fight and for failing English. Mrs. LaGuardia asks Kim what she wants to do next year, though Kim continues to wonder how she'll tell Ma that she's been kicked out of school. Finally, Mrs. LaGuardia calls Kim "honey" and tells her to look at her. Kim is so surprised that she obeys.

Mrs. LaGuardia assures Kim she's not in trouble and goes on to talk about how there are few public schools for gifted students in the area. She says she's worried that Kim might fall through the cracks at a normal public school, and suggests that Kim apply to a private school. Kim is surprised; she thinks Mrs. LaGuardia believes she's like Annette, with a housekeeper and wealth to afford private school. Kim tries to pretend this is true and rejects Mrs. LaGuardia's offer of names of schools. When Mrs. LaGuardia looks annoyed, Kim shamefully admits she can't pay. Mrs. LaGuardia laughs and explains that the school would likely offer scholarships. Kim suggests she might like to go to Harrison, and Mrs. LaGuardia promises to make some phone calls.

When Kim comes back from Mrs. LaGuardia's office, Luke begins challenging her to fights every day. Another girl starts standing up for Kim and Luke shifts his attention to her. They soon begin kissing after school and Kim understands that Luke didn't want to actually fight her; he'd had a crush on her.

Kim and Annette's terror isn't entirely unfounded given who Luke is, but it does seem overblown. This suggests that because the girls are so young, they take these things more seriously than they might need to—though when Kim insists on dealing with Luke alone, it shows another way that she feels she has to grow up and be mature in order to get by.



The events of the "fight" and Kim's confusion afterwards suggest that Kim and Annette seriously misunderstood Luke's intentions. In Kim's case, this can be seen as indicative of her outlook on life and other people, in which most people are out to get her and can't be trusted.



Kim's meeting with Mrs. LaGuardia again shows the consequences of believing that all adults are out to get her, or that she is supposed to constantly be ashamed of herself. To the reader, it's clear that Mrs. LaGuardia is genuinely trying to help and recognizes that Kim is capable of a lot, given her math scores. Calling Kim "honey" shows that she truly does care for Kim and her students as a whole, and plants the idea for Kim that teachers aren't all bad.



Kim later notes that it was foolish of her to think that she was actually successful in getting her teachers and peers to think that she was middle class like them; knowing this, it makes Mrs. LaGuardia's offers seem even more genuine and kind. Even as Kim attempts to reject help from teachers like this, these teachers' willingness to push through Kim's embarrassment and shame is one of the major reasons she eventually is able to escape the factory system and complete her education.



This amusing misunderstanding reinforces just how young and immature Kim still is. Also note that the other girl is clearly not actually standing up for Kim; she's using Kim as a way to get close to Luke.



In the spring, Mrs. LaGuardia makes Ma and Kim an appointment at Harrison Prep. Ma is thrilled until she realizes the appointment is on a day that a shipment is due, so Kim decides to go alone. Harrison Prep is in a nice part of Brooklyn and Kim realizes that though she thought she was walking in a park, the "park" is actually the school grounds. She sees kids in gym classes playing a strange game while wearing "square shorts," and she considers turning back. She knows Ma wouldn't be able to afford those shorts; Ma still makes Kim's **underwear**. Kim as the adult narrator notes that while she was very concerned with looking as though she and Ma weren't impoverished, she fooled nobody at this meeting.

Kim finds her building and the secretary asks if Ma is parking the car. When the secretary realizes that Kim came alone, she instructs Kim to wait. A few minutes later, Dr. Weston shakes Kim's hand. Dr. Weston shows Kim to her office and explains that she's going to conduct an oral test. Kim braces herself for questions like what people wear for Easter or how to properly hold a knife, but the questions deal mostly with math. After an hour, Dr. Weston asks Kim to draw a picture of anything. Kim draws a fairy-tale princess, which makes Dr. Weston laugh. She suggests that Kim tour the school and then come back.

The secretary shows Kim around the school, pointing out their trophy case filled with awards and school photographs. The students wear expensive blazers and all have white, straight teeth. There are only a few photos of nonwhite kids. Kim is shocked that there are more buildings than just the one, and gasps at the tennis courts and the football field. She understands that the school is special.

SIX

When Kim returns to Dr. Weston's office, she inadvertently offends her by saying the school is quiet. Dr. Weston speaks at length about the school's prestige and students' achievements, and then explains that the scholarship committee will need to meet about finding the funds for Kim. Kim understands almost none of this. Dr. Weston asks Kim if she'd like to attend Harrison Prep, and Kim smiles and says she likes school. She only has the vocabulary to say that she may be too different to attend. Dr. Weston picks up on Kim's meaning and explains that minority students often can't attend due to the cost, but Kim tunes out. She knows the school is too expensive.

It quickly becomes obvious to Kim that this isn't an ordinary school—it clearly has a great deal of money and likely serves a very particular and probably elite population. When Kim considers leaving and thinks about her underwear specifically, it reinforces just how ashamed she is of her poverty and the ways her poverty isn't something she can hide.



The secretary's initial question suggests that in her mind, it's near unthinkable that a child would come alone to a meeting like this; in other words, she's not used to dealing with kids whose poverty means they have to operate alone. Kim's imagined questions betray just how uncomfortable and self-conscious she is about her poverty and her immigrant status, as the questions she thinks of are ones that would test her knowledge of U.S. culture.



Though Kim notes that the school is special, it's also important that she recognizes that the school is overwhelmingly white and, judging by their blazers, wealthy. In this way, the blazers act like a similar but opposite symbol to Kim's underwear; they signal wealth, while her underwear signals poverty.



Like her secretary, Dr. Weston clearly isn't accustomed to interviewing students who are in such dire straights financially. Kim is again at a disadvantage because of her lack of English language skills when she can't communicate to Dr. Weston about why she feels so "different."



Dr. Weston mentions that they may be able to get up to 50% of tuition covered. Kim knows the school is still too expensive, so she tries to leave. Dr. Weston asks if she can speak to Ma at some point, and Kim, burning with shame, says they don't have a phone and that Ma works and doesn't speak English.

By asking to speak to Ma, Dr. Weston shows that she expects parents to be involved in their students' schooling; something that Ma and Kim recognize is a luxury they cannot afford. Essentially, this makes Kim's poverty even clearer to Dr. Weston.



In class the next week, Kim mentions her interview to Annette. Annette wants to know if Kim thinks she passed the admissions test, which she insists was very hard. Kim is too ashamed to say that she passed but cannot afford to go. She tries to tell Annette that she actually doesn't want to go, and Annette declares that she'll stay in public school too.

Remember that Kim didn't find the test particularly difficult; this offers some hope that her knack for academics might be enough to get her over the money hurdle. Annette's parents won't actually let her stay in public school just for Kim's sake, but Kim still recognizes her friend's kind offer.



As the end of the school year approaches, students buy autograph books to have their friends sign. Ma even agrees to buy Kim one. Kim writes the same thing in everyone's books but Annette and Tyrone's; she writes in Annette's that they're best friends and in Tyrone's, she wishes him protection from the gods in Chinese. Ma buys Kim a pretty dress for 1,500 **skirts** to wear to her graduation ceremony. Ma is sad they can't afford Harrison, but declares they'll make the best of it. For weeks leading up to graduation, Kim is sick with worry about Ma's reaction when she finally gets Kim's reports card and learns that Kim isn't doing as well as she did in Hong Kong.

Kim likely feels so worried about Ma's reaction because she desperately wants to impress Ma and make her proud. In addition to shame, one of the reasons Kim feels so alone is because of her sense of familial duty and her understanding that she's the one responsible for getting herself and Ma out of the factory system. Ma's willingness to buy Kim an autograph book suggests that she's becoming more comfortable with American customs of friendship.



Aunt Paula excuses Ma from work on the morning of Kim's graduation ceremony. Kim wishes she could make Ma proud as she watches Annette and Tyrone win all the academic awards. Mrs. LaGuardia stands to speak. Kim is barely listening as she announces that Tyrone got into Hunter College High School and Kimberly is being granted a full scholarship to Harrison Prep. Kim can't believe it. After the ceremony, Ma finds Kim and Kim translates the news. Mrs. LaGuardia approaches and compliments Ma on Kim, and Ma stutters her thanks in broken English, much to Kim's embarrassment. When Mrs. LaGuardia asks if Kim received her letter, Kim realizes that Aunt Paula must have the letter for them at the factory.

Kim's realization that Aunt Paula likely has her letter shows that as Kim moves forward with her education, Aunt Paula is going to have to be involved whether Kim and Ma want her to be or not. This is one of the more insidious ways that Aunt Paula seeks to gain and keep control over Ma and Kim, as it means that she technically has the power to dole out important mail as she sees fit—or keep mail from them altogether.



Annette finds Kim and hugs her, excited they'll both be going to Harrison. Mr. and Mrs. Avery introduce themselves to Ma and invite them out to lunch with them, but Ma refuses. She and Kim board the subway and head for the factory, where they have a great deal of work to catch up on. Strangely, Aunt Paula invites them to her office. Kim catches Matt's eye on the way and laughs when he rudely mimics Paula. In her office, Paula pulls out a letter from Harrison and asks why Ma didn't ask for advice when she let Kim apply to Harrison; she insists the school is too expensive and not even Nelson could get in. Kim admits the envelope contains her acceptance and scholarship letters, not an application.

Aunt Paula is furious that Kim and Ma applied behind her back, but she composes herself quickly. Ma insists that they're grateful for Paula's help, and Kim says that they can take care of themselves. Kim understands that Paula has revealed her true self in her anger—she doesn't have their best interests at heart, Kim is not supposed to do better than Nelson, and Paula would be happy to have them stay in their apartment and work in her factory their whole lives.

Annette sends Kim postcards from camp over the summer. Kim gives Annette her real address, as she doesn't want Aunt Paula to handle the postcards. Kim writes to Annette that she's getting to relax and read books, though she actually spends her summer sweating in the factory. She and Ma struggle to keep the roaches and rodents at bay and Ma plays her **violin** on Sunday evenings. Ma tells Kim that she plays so she doesn't forget who she is. Eventually, Ma buys them a fan, though it does little to cool them.

One afternoon, Kim is shocked to hear someone ringing their doorbell. She looks outside to see Annette and immediately ducks down and waits for Annette to leave. A few days later, Annette sends Kim a letter saying that she came to Kim's house, and she asks for Kim's phone number.

Ma buys Kim a boxy polyester blazer, a white shirt, and a dark blue **skirt** with rhinestones on it—it was the cheapest one. Kim feels uncomfortable and unrecognizable, especially since all of the clothes are too big. On the plus side, Kim is able to take a private bus to Harrison. The bus is an unexpected luxury and Kim tries to not stare at her white classmates, as well as one girl who's darker-skinned. Kim follows the mass of students and quickly finds her homeroom classroom. One boy teases her about the rhinestones on her skirt, and Kim vows to remove them as soon as she can. Kim is very glad to see that some of the other kids' blazers also have shoulder pads, like hers.

Paula's behavior suggests that she wants to pit Nelson and Kim against each other academically, and that what she wants most of all is to shame Kim and Ma when Nelson does well. Even as Paula runs the factory, she absolutely values education and is aware that it could be Kim's ticket out of the factory system. In turn, this makes Paula's continued mistreatment of Ma and Kim at the factory seem even crueller, as she understands that more time at the factory means that Kim has less time for school.



Kim stands up for herself (and for Ma) here in telling Paula that she and Ma can take care of themselves. This is notably not something that a respectful, quiet Chinese girl would do—this shows that Kim is becoming more American, especially as she becomes more educated (and also more aware of Paula's mistreatment).



Kim is beginning to be more open with Annette about her life, though what she writes in the postcards suggests that she still believes it's very important to hide most of her crushing reality. The rodents and the heat again illustrate just how awful the apartment is.



Annette seemingly still believes that Kim is far better off than she actually is, in that she assumes Kim must have a phone. This is another symptom of Annette's relative privilege and wealth.



Kim's clothes make it very obvious to her that she's not like the other kids, as the way she describes her clothes pays special attention to the fact that they're recognizably cheap. This illustrates how Kim is technically able to fit in and pass as a Harrison Prep student, but even as she "passes" in terms of the dress code, her inability to look exactly like her peers still makes her feel self-conscious and alone in her world.



Kim spends her day attempting to stay away from the bullies. Her Social Studies teacher, Mr. Scoggins, tells them that they'll need to keep up with current events and stock prices, and Kim wonders how she'll follow stock prices without regular access to a newspaper. Kim is exhausted from trying to keep up with the English instruction by lunchtime, when she finally meets Annette. She's shocked when Annette gets in line with her for hot lunch; Annette explains that lunch is included with tuition.

Happily, Kim is able to answer a challenge question in Life Science. When she does, her teacher says that she must be Kimberly Chang, without even looking at his roster. Kim learns that while she's not the only minority student, she's one of only a couple. Her last class of the day is gym, which she realizes is considered a serious subject. Ma had taught Kim to not do anything unladylike or dangerous, which includes most movement required in gym. Kim feels as though she's in trouble already, but when she's given her gym uniform and sent to the locker room to change, she knows she's in even deeper trouble.

SEVEN

In the locker room, Kim's classmates begin changing. They all have store-bought **underwear** and some have bras. Kim is envious; she's begun growing breasts, but doesn't yet have a bra. Her underwear was poorly handmade by Ma. She notices toilet stalls and changes in one. Kim is almost happy to have been working in the factory, as she's able to do fairly well on her physical strength evaluation. By the end of the day, Kim has learned the names of several classmates: the bully's name is Greg, his partner in crime is Curt, the popular girl's name is Sheryl, and the Indian girl is Tammy.

After school, Kim is scheduled to work in the library three days per week and have an English tutoring session on the fourth day. The library is small and used mostly for studying. Kim approaches the librarian, Mr. Jamali, who is dressed in a maroon tunic with beautiful embroidery. He explains that he's Pakistani and refuses to wear a suit. Then he shows Kim her tasks. For the most part, Kim has free time to study. She asks Mr. Jamali if she may be able to shift her hours at all so that she can help Ma after school, and Mr. Jamali promises to help.

Just as Mr. Bogart's assignments were predicated on an assumption of a certain level of wealth, Mr. Scoggins's assignments also assume that his students have access to what are, for Kim, luxuries. This suggests that even at such an academically focused school, Kim's poverty will still keep her from truly succeeding.



The inclusion of gym as a serious subject highlights another difference between Kim's school life in Hong Kong and in America, as well as what's considered appropriate now that Kim is in the U.S. This offers another way in which Kim will be pushed into becoming less femininely Chinese as she immerses herself in the world of American school.



Here Kim realizes that even something as private and personal as her underwear is going to set her apart negatively from her classmates, indicating that there's no way for her to entirely escape markers of her poverty. In short, there's no way for her to hide, even when it comes to intimate garments that should be the one thing her classmates can't use to figure out how poor she is.



Mr. Jamali's promise to help suggests that he's going to become a friendly and understanding person for Kim, as he's clearly respecting her privacy by not asking why or how she has to help Ma. Though Kim sees this as a good thing, it's also important to recognize that by keeping all of this a secret, Kim is still trying to hide her poverty-- which in turn, means that she's not asking for more concrete (and useful) help.



When Kim arrives at the factory, Matt comments on Kim's new clothes and says she looks pretty. Though she relishes the compliment from him, she understands that she needs to not show up to the factory in school clothes. When Ma asks Kim about her day, Kim says first that she needs new **underwear**. Ma insists that no decent girl would look at her underwear and Kim feels unspeakably angry. She calms down when she remembers that Ma hasn't bought anything for herself since arriving in the U.S. Kim tries to remove the rhinestones from her **skirt** during a break, but settles for finding a fabric scrap to use as a sash and cover them.

Kim has her first tutoring session the next day. She meets her tutor, Kerry, and Kerry promptly asks what would help Kim to work on the most. Kim is surprised; she didn't expect to get a say. She says that speaking would be helpful, so she and Kerry talk their entire session. Kim learns that Kerry is a scholarship student too. Kerry suggests that Kim get involved in afterschool activities, but Kim knows she can't.

Greg has several bullying targets and is merciless and cruel. In classes, Kim still struggles to keep up, especially in Mr. Scoggins's class. He doesn't understand why Kim can't watch the news every night or read her parents' newspaper. Kim tries to keep the radio on while she's at the factory, but between the hissing boiler, the unfamiliar vocabulary, and her spotty background on current events, it's nearly impossible to keep up. The only subjects Kim does well in are Life Science and Math. She has to spend hours poring over her textbooks for her other subjects and often goes to bed long after Ma.

On a Monday a few weeks after the start of school, Kim hears a noise above after she changes in the bathroom stall for gym. A girl shrieks that boys were up there, though Kim notes that most of the girls don't seem upset. The next day, Greg yells at Kim and asks about her boxer shorts. Finally, Kim has the evidence she needs to convince Ma she needs real **underwear**. She spends the rest of the week trying to hide while she changes, as Sheryl takes to peeking into the stall and laughing. On Friday, Kim decides to wear her swimsuit, reasoning that it's more underwear-like than her homemade underwear. Greg still teases her for it.

Ma's insistence that nobody is looking at Kim's underwear demonstrates a total lack of understanding of the American culture that Kim is part of at school. This begins to create a gulf between Ma and Kim and allows Kim to feel even more alone, as now it's obvious to her that she's not going to get much sympathy at home or at school. But after her flash of anger, Kim again shows her maturity in empathizing with Ma and recognizing all the sacrifices she has made for her.



The shock of getting to dictate her own course of study in her tutoring sessions reminds Kim again that she's no longer in Hong Kong and the customs are different. However, the fact that she finds being able to dictate their activities helpful suggests that this difference is truly a good thing and will help her adjust.



Though Kim never really explains what kind of a teacher Mr. Scoggins is aside from his lack of understanding of her poverty, it is possible that if Kim were willing or able to tell him the truth about her situation, he'd be happy to help. Again, this shows how the shame that Kim feels about her poverty keeps her from doing well and in turn, will make it even harder for her to do well enough to escape the poverty at all.



When the girls aren't really upset that the boys peeked, it implies that Kim was—another marker of her outsider status as it clearly differentiates her from her American classmates. Sheryl and Greg's cruelty makes Kim's desire to hide her poverty in other places more understandable, as their actions make it seem as though Kim has no reason to expect that anyone would do anything but ridicule her for being poor.



Ma and Kim buy a package of **underwear** at Woolworth's, but they have to go to Macy's to find a bra. None of the salespeople acknowledge Ma and Kim, so Kim looks through the bra displays for anything her size. Finally, Kim picks up a bra, approaches a saleslady, and asks if they have anything for her. The woman laughs, says that Kim needs a training bra, and asks Kim if she knows her size. Kim makes a wild guess based on European measurements: 70. This makes the woman laugh again, but she measures Kim and hands her a bra. Though Kim feels better with her new undergarments, Greg continues to tease her.

Kim and Annette sit together for lunch every day, where Annette talks at length about her classes and boys. Kim doesn't want to share how much of a hard time she's having, so she asks Kerry what she should do about Greg. Kerry insists that Kim needs to tell a teacher. Kim, remembering that in Hong Kong, the parents of fighting children are required to talk to each other, refuses to do so. Instead, she asks Matt for help. She tells Matt about her fight with Luke and he suggests that maybe Greg also has a crush on her. Kim waits until her next gym class and then walks right up to Greg. She apologizes, saying that she doesn't like him like that. Then, she kisses him on the cheek. This shocks Greg and the other kids take the opportunity to tease him. He stops teasing Kim.

Kim does her best to avoid Aunt Paula at the factory. One afternoon, Paula invites Ma and Kim to her house for dinner and suggests that Kim wear her school outfit. When Paula leaves, Ma cautions Kim to be careful. Kim asks if Paula is still upset about Harrison, and Ma reprimands Kim for being so direct—but explains that Paula is surely going to figure out how to use Kim's education to her own advantage. Kim realizes that Paula wants her to set a good example for Nelson.

At Aunt Paula's house, Kim notices that Nelson is wearing his school uniform too. She realizes that Paula wants to show off that Nelson is also in private school. She and Nelson insult each other in Chinese and then go to the table for dinner. Paula has prepared a true feast. Over dinner, Paula asks about Kim's test scores, how she got into Harrison, and her current grades. Kim admits that her classes are hard, and Nelson baits her into admitting she only got 67% on her last English test. Ma is dismayed to learn this, but Kim meets Paula's eyes and says she doesn't have much time to study. Ma tells Paula she doesn't need to worry, which silences Kim.

To individuals used to American bra sizing, European bra measurements sound as though they're far larger. This is why the saleslady laughs; in American bra sizing, Kim's guess is way too big for a tiny twelve-year-old. Despite Greg's continued teasing, the fact that Kim does feel better wearing American undergarments illustrates the power of clothing to make someone look and feel more at home and more like part of a group.



Even though only approximately six months have passed since Kim misread Luke's meaning about the fights, it's telling that she's able to get the better of Greg here. Though she's well aware that she's pretending to misread the situation, she's now able to figure out how to work the social system so it does things for her, not just acts against her. At the same time, Kim's cultural background (and fear of teachers) isolates her again, as she refuses to ask a teacher for help.



Again, Kim's directness is another indicator that she's becoming more "American" in her values, much to Ma's consternation. However, Kim's understanding that she's supposed to set a good example for Nelson suggests that she's still engaging with more polite Chinese thought patterns, as her belief is one that's far more generous to Aunt Paula and Nelson than it likely should be.



As expected, Aunt Paula and Nelson are actually hoping to make Kim feel like an outsider and undeserving of her education, especially when compared to Nelson himself. Ma is dismayed to learn about Kim's grades but doesn't push, suggesting that even though she feels she has to be loyal to Aunt Paula, she's loyal to her daughter first and foremost—and that means changing the subject so that Paula cannot continue to make Kim feel bad.



Annette also struggles to fit in at Harrison, as she looks funny and is outspoken. Tammy occasionally sits with Kim, but after Kim makes excuses as to why she doesn't have a phone, Tammy stops trying. By the second semester of school, Kim understands her teachers just fine—but her classmates' slang and her lack of cultural context make them extremely difficult to understand. One afternoon, Kim believes she's going to learn something about her classmates' religious beliefs when she overhears a discussion about nuns. She soon realizes that the "discussion" is actually a joke that she doesn't understand. Regardless, Kim is happy to be at Harrison Prep, not least because she no longer has "fun" assignments like Mr. Bogart assigned. Her tests and papers only require paper and pens.

Kim's teachers grade her on how much her English improves, and it does improve. During her shifts at the library, Kim tries to read as much as she can. Mr. Jamali begins to bring her old books and magazines to help her improve her English, and by the end of the year, Kim is doing well in every class but Social Studies. Mr. Scoggins allows her to write a paper to make up her failed current events quizzes. As the eighth-grade school year begins, the school decides that Kim no longer needs an English tutor. She takes it as a compliment.

Kim watches her classmates develop social lives and notices them starting to go out as a group in the evenings. She's especially struck that they all seem relaxed and happy together. She keeps her distance, as she knows that Ma wouldn't allow her to go out with them, even if she didn't have to be at the factory. One afternoon, Kim is shocked when Tammy invites her to see *Rocky Horror*. Kim pretends that it might be a possibility, but ultimately passes on the invitation.

Kim's classmates are extremely stressed about an upcoming science test, though Kim is thrilled to have a test on something that requires math. One afternoon, Kim overhears them complaining that they'll all fail, but Sheryl looks at Kim and drily points out that not everyone will fail. On the day of the test, Tammy asks Kim for a pencil. As Tammy takes the pencil, a folded piece of paper falls out of her sleeve. Kim picks it up, hoping that it's a note for her. Mrs. Reynolds takes it from her before she can even open it. Kim believes it must be something private; instead, the paper is filled with notes on the test material. Tammy stares straight ahead.

Kim continues to lie and make excuses for why she doesn't live like her classmates do, and in doing so actively pushes them away and removes any chance she may have had to make friends. It's also important to recognize that her lack of cultural context comes jointly from her immigrant status and her poverty.



Just as when Mr. Jamali agreed to shift Kim's schedule so that she could help Ma, bringing Kim books and magazines is another way that he can show her he wants to help her and may understand what she's going through—while still respecting her desire for privacy. Kim's choice to see not getting a tutor as a compliment suggests that her habit of seeing teachers as terrifying is possibly lessening.



Kim chooses to decline these invitations without even asking Ma, illustrating another way that Kim has to grow up and manage herself far earlier than her peers do. In other words, this is another instance when Ma doesn't have the luxury of monitoring Kim's behavior.



Sheryl's comment suggests that Kim isn't just excluded in the group because she's poor and separates herself; she's likely actively excluded because her classmates are jealous of her. This shows how Kim's academic skills may be her one ticket out of poverty, though they're also one of the many reasons her classmates (wrongfully) choose to exclude her and make fun of her.



Kim realizes what happened and Tammy catches her eye, silently pleading for her not to tell. Mrs. Reynolds leads Kim to the office of Dr. Copeland, who is the head of the math and science department. Dr. Copeland is furious but calm as Kim insists the note isn't hers. Kim is so flustered she can't even bring herself to tell on Tammy, and she's ashamed that she wanted to be liked badly enough to pick up a note during a test. Curt knocks on the door, enters, and tells the adults that he saw Kim pick up the paper. Kim insists that Curt isn't her friend and therefore isn't covering for her. Finally, Kim mumbles that she's too smart to cheat. Dr. Copeland smiles wryly and sends Kim and Curt back to class.

Though Kim gets in trouble precisely because she wants so badly to be liked, it's worth noting that she chooses to not tell on Tammy so that she'll be able to maintain her low-level and precarious social status, since telling on Tammy would likely lead to her classmates ostracizing her even more. It's clear that despite her academic successes, Kim feels extremely alone, and even more than she wants to do well in school, she just wants to be accepted.



EIGHT

In the hallway, Curt explains that he heard Sheryl give Tammy the idea to put the notes in her sleeve. He makes a joke about saving Kim so that he can continue cheating off her tests. When they re-enter the classroom, Kim notices that Tammy is crying, though she's not sure if it's from guilt or because she lost her cheat sheet. The next day, Tammy slides a card into Kim's locker apologizing, but avoids Kim after that. Kim doesn't tell Ma or Annette about what happened, especially since she's still embarrassed that she thought Tammy would pass her a friendly note. The next day, Mrs. Reynolds passes back the tests. Kim sees that Tammy failed. Kim received a 96, and Mrs. Reynolds explains that they're going to give Kim the benefit of the doubt.

When Kim keeps what happened a secret even from Annette, it illustrates just how ashamed she is of her outsider status. It's likely that if Kim were to tell Annette, it would help her and Annette become even closer; when Kim doesn't recognize or consider this possibility, it shows that she's still very much ruled by shame and trying to appear as adjusted as possible, even to her own detriment. In another way, this shows how Kim chooses to act independently to keep from being vulnerable with her friends or family.



At about this time, Ma and Kim finally get a phone. Kim tells Ma she needs it for homework, though the truth is that she feels not having a phone broadcasts her poverty for her classmates to see. Kim begins filling out Ma's tax returns and does most of the shopping outside of Chinatown. At school, Kim keeps to herself. When winter arrives, she notices her classmates tanned from ski trips and marvels that their special ski jackets cost 20,000 **skirts**. Girls also begin applying makeup, which fascinates her. One day, Annette uses a cover-up stick in the bathroom. Kim is entranced, and Annette gives her the stick. With this, Kim realizes that Annette does understand her poverty on some level.

Though the phone allows Kim to connect more with her classmates, getting the phone also means that Kim's poverty is less obvious to an outside observer, as the lack of a phone is a sure sign of financial struggles. As she begins filing taxes for Ma and shopping for them, Kim continues to take a more adult role in the family that very nearly tips her into a head-of-household position. As Kim is forced to grow up, Ma is similarly forced to cede control.



Ma struggles through the cold winter but fortunately, her tuberculosis doesn't return. Kim stops allowing herself to be conscious of how horrible her living situation is. Ma brings up the subject of moving with Aunt Paula, but Paula's reaction scares Ma into not asking again. With the difficulties of surviving, Kim and Ma are also too tired to fight for anything better. Sundays, their one day off, are spent running all of their errands for the week and preparing for upcoming Chinese holidays. The best days are when they go to the temple in Chinatown, where the nuns serve free vegetarian food. Kim feels a sense of peace there she feels nowhere else.

Kim essentially chooses to ignore that she has fundamental human needs—she's attempting to be more independent than is healthy or even humanly possible. When Paula makes it clear that she has no intention of moving them, it suggests that she's aware that keeping Ma and Kim in poverty will make it far more difficult for Kim to do well at school, which will keep both of them at the factory and under Paula's control.



One afternoon, Annette convinces Kim to come with her to a movie. Kim makes up an excuse for Ma, and the girls go to see *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. Annette pays for their tickets. The girls are early, so they go to the bathroom and Annette puts makeup on them both. Kim feels very American, and a woman compliments the girls. Kim can't follow the film at all but enjoys it anyway. Afterwards, the girls scrub their faces before going home.

For the summer, Annette goes to camp upstate and Kim returns full-time to the factory. She explains that she and Ma are responsible for bagging garments, which takes Ma thirty seconds per **skirt** to do. Kim begins timing herself and by the end of the summer, develops a system that allows her to bag skirts in seven seconds. Kim tries her best to look industrious in front of Aunt Paula. One afternoon, Matt helps Kim and Ma in his free time. Ma tells Matt that he's growing up to be quite handsome. When Matt notices Kim sneaking a glance at him, he strikes a pose with one arm raised. Kim giggles that he looks like the **Liberty Goddess**.

Matt pretends to be offended and as they banter, he learns that Kim has never actually seen the **Liberty Goddess** or Manhattan. He suggests they all go out on Sunday. Kim is delighted. She's disappointed when Matt invites Ma along, though she recognizes that it's the only way that Ma will allow it. Suddenly, a man starts screaming. Mr. Pak, one of the steamers, had gotten his hand trapped in the steamer. Several men help Mr. Pak release his hand, and Kim tries not to look. Aunt Paula and Uncle Bob arrive, and Paula yells at Mr. Pak to not be so clumsy. She shouts that nobody should call an ambulance; she's going to take Mr. Pak to the factory doctor, and everyone else should get back to work on the shipment. Matt quietly tells Kim that the factory doctor is just a friend of Paula's who won't report the accident.

Later, Aunt Paula approaches Ma and Kim and tells them that the rate for **skirts** is going to drop to one cent after this shipment. Kim is enraged; she realizes she's been working fast enough to earn more. She tells Paula that it's not fair. Paula reminds her that she and Ma are free to make other choices and says there's no slavery in America anymore. As Paula turns to leave, Ma grabs her and apologizes for Kim's impudence. Paula remarks that Kim is a bamboo shoot, meaning she's too Westernized.

Kim feels American in makeup, suggesting that being American is something that Kim can play at by changing the way she looks. In this way, makeup acts somewhat like clothing and Kim's underwear do in that they're a way for her to try to look the part of an American girl, even if she still feels Chinese.



While Kim is well aware that education is her best way out of the factory, dedicating herself to making as much money as possible is also extremely important if she wants to ever leave. Her desire to look good in front of Aunt Paula shows that Kim still believes there's a possibility that Paula can be convinced to care for them, if only they work hard enough.



Note how Paula handles Mr. Pak's injury, which is certainly very serious. Reprimanding him right off the bat shows that she absolutely doesn't care for his welfare, and her desire to not have anyone outside the factory find out that he got hurt means that she's certainly aware that the working conditions at the factory are unsafe and illegal—she just doesn't care. Again, the powerless status of Paula's workforce means that they're unable to push back at all on this ill treatment, as they're all replaceable fairly easily and cannot turn to legal recourse.



Aunt Paula's comment that there's no slavery in America shows clearly that she's aware of the horrendous factory conditions she makes her employees work in. Essentially, she knows she's being abusive, but because there are few ways to stop her without hurting her employees even more, she has every intention of continuing to abuse her power.



Matt butts into the conversation, and Aunt Paula suggests that he take over for Mr. Pak. Matt accepts nonchalantly, and both he and Paula leave. When they're gone, Ma hisses at Kim that they need Aunt Paula to employ them, as she's friends with the other factory owners and could blacklist them elsewhere if she wanted. The next day, Kim lurks around the steamers and watches Matt. At fourteen he's smaller than the men around him, but he tries hard to keep up. He suddenly emerges from a cloud of steam, startling Kim. She apologizes for getting him moved to steaming, though he makes jokes and insists it's not a big deal. Then, seriously, he says he needs the job; Mrs. Wu can barely work anymore.

Matt gives Kim his gold necklace and asks her to give it to Mrs. Wu. Kim is puzzled until Matt pulls his shirt open—the heat from the steamers caused the necklace to burn his chest. Matt glosses over this, confirms that they're still going to Manhattan on Sunday, and goes back to work. As Kim approaches Mrs. Wu, she notices that the woman is scolding Park. Park, however, isn't facing her to read her lips, though he seems to be responding. Kim tries to hand over the necklace as Mrs. Wu looks disgusted. Ma comes up behind Kim, claims responsibility for Matt's move, and the women eye each other and say that they need to give their impulsive children time. Kim runs back to her station, wondering if that means that Matt really likes her.

On Sunday, Ma and Kim meet Matt in Times Square. Kim is struck by how fancy everything and everyone looks, especially the women. Ma points to a **piano** store and Kim and Matt usher her in. As Ma begins leafing through music, Matt tells Kim that Matt's father is "gone." Kim takes this to mean that he's dead. When Ma is finished playing one of the pianos, they leave the shop and admire the skyscrapers. As they walk, Matt explains that Mr. Pak won't return to the factory; he'll go to work with his wife at a jewelry factory, though it pays worse.

Finally, Matt ushers Ma and Kim onto the Staten Island Ferry to see the **Liberty Goddess**. When they finally see her, Kim thinks she's magnificent. Kim says that they're really in America, and Matt suggests that she looks like a Chinese goddess. Later, Ma notes that Matt is compassionate, embarrassing Kim.

Like Kim, Matt is also being forced to grow up and act maturely well before he's actually an adult. While for Kim this means doing well in school, Matt sees that working the system at the factory is the only way for him to get ahead and make a life for himself. This continues to develop Matt's character as someone who places a great deal of importance on work, something that will be important later.



The fact that Park seems to be actually listening to Mrs. Wu suggests that he's not deaf, as Matt and Mrs. Wu insist. This implies that he has some other issue that's possibly considered shameful—and that Mrs. Wu and Matt probably feel very isolated because of it. When the steamers burn Matt, it shows the reader that even when things at the factory are working properly, it's still a very dangerous place, and certainly no place for a teenager to be working as though he's an adult.



At the piano store, Ma is able to remember her life before coming to the U.S. and the relative economic success she experienced there. Matt's insight into Mr. Pak's future makes it seem as though Aunt Paula's factory and those like it are actually good places to work monetarily speaking; in short, as the danger increases, so does the pay.



Even though Matt is more Americanized than Kim in some ways, he's still very connected to his Chinese roots, as evidenced by his comment about the Statue of Liberty.



As the ninth-grade school year starts, Kim's classmates all take placement tests in math and science. Kim loves those subjects, as they offer her an escape into a satisfyingly logical world. She tests into the accelerated math and sciences program. After a few weeks, Dr. Copeland calls Kim to her office. She expresses concern about Kim's near-perfect grades, and Kim realizes that she's still concerned that Kim is cheating. Dr. Copeland explains that Kim will have to take an oral exam, conducted by the entire math and science faculty. Kim is terrified of losing everything because she might not be able to understand the English. As she walks out of the office, Curt asks Kim if she's okay. Both Kim and Sheryl are surprised he spoke to her.

The fear that she might fail because she doesn't know enough English reminds the reader that even though Kim is doing very well at this point, she's still hyper-aware of her immigrant status and the fact that she has to work much harder than her classmates for the same things, just because she's not a native English speaker. On the plus side, the reader knows that Kim isn't cheating, so it's possible to read Dr. Copeland's suspicion as proof that Kim is smarter than she's giving herself credit for.



NINE

Though Kim has several casual friends, Annette remains her only true friend. In ninth grade, Annette begins to "get political." She starts wearing buttons, passing around petitions, and even calls herself a Communist. Kim struggles with this, as Ma's family was killed because of Communism. As Annette changes, she becomes more attuned to the fact that she's never been to Kim's apartment. Kim continues to make excuses and hide her situation from Annette; she feels as though she can only make it through if she keeps hiding.

The gulf between Kim and Annette's understanding of Communism shows Kim that Annette is extremely sheltered. In short, she doesn't have the real-world experience to understand why Communism might be dangerous and scary for some people who have seen it go very wrong. This is because Annette was allowed to have a protected childhood, thanks to her family's wealth and her status as a white American citizen.



One afternoon, when Annette finds Kim in the library, she asks why Kim is never home in the afternoons. Kim dances around it, but finally asks if Annette remembers her saying that she and Ma work in a factory. Annette's eyes widen, but Kim shushes her—she tells Annette that if she starts to protest, she and Ma could lose their jobs and they can't afford that. Annette tells Kim that she can trust her. Kim thinks for a moment and then tells Annette everything about the cheating accusations and her oral exam. Annette assures Kim she'll pass the test. A week before Kim's exam, she finally tells Ma the entire story as Ma studies for her naturalization exam.

Kim understands that factory work for underage employees is illegal and in theory, should be stopped, but she also recognizes that she has no choice but to participate in the system, as it's her only way out. Choosing to then tell Annette about the exam and the cheating allows Kim and Annette to continue to become close by letting her in on a major stressor in Kim's life. Annette's encouragement suggests that there is support for Kim if she asks for it.



A week before the exam, Annette insists on taking Kim to Macy's to relax. Kim is skeptical that this is even possible, but she lies to Ma and follows Annette through Macy's. The perfume ladies offer them sample spritzes without question, and they say nothing when Kim and Annette spritz each other with the other testing bottles. They giggle until Kim leaves for work. When she arrives at the factory, both Ma and Matt are aghast at the way Kim smells. Kim tells Ma that Annette simply let her try a new perfume, which Ma accepts. Later, Kim can still smell the perfume and feels as though she's surrounded by Annette's friendship.

Annette's plan helps Kim both to relax and to feel American in a way that she seldom does as a poor Chinese immigrant. This reinforces that if Kim were more willing to ask for help, Annette would likely find ways to offer it—even if those might seem unconventional or strange at first. It's also telling that Kim has this positive experience only when she momentarily abandons Ma; her independence brings her some happiness, as her constant responsibility keeps her from enjoying her youth.



Kim obtains working papers, which means that she can actually be paid for time working at the library. She opens a bank account in Ma's name and begins stashing all her paychecks there. Kim spends all her free time studying and wishes Pa were around to help her, as he'd been a brilliant student. Eventually, Kim picks up a copy of *Car and Driver* and discovers that the fancy cars offer her a wonderful escape from her adult responsibilities in real life. One afternoon, as Kim flips through *Cycle* magazine, she notices an article on a motorcycle that Park has in model form. At the factory later, Kim finds Park watching a lady sewing. The woman uses a rude Chinese euphemism to call Park disabled, which annoys Kim.

Kim tells Park that she has an article on his motorcycle. The sewing ladies are shocked to see Park turn around eagerly. Kim reads him the article and when she's finished, Park slowly smiles at Kim. An hour later, Matt approaches Kim and offers to pay her for the magazine. She asks why he pretends that Park is deaf when he just doesn't talk. Matt sadly says that Park has never spoken, and Kim understands why they cover it up: in Chinese culture, a disability like that is feared like a contagion. After this, Kim and Park bond over motorcycles and Kim learns some of Park's signs. She continues to bring him magazines.

The night before Kim's exam, a shipment is due at the factory. She and Ma get home after 2am and then Kim stays up the rest of the night studying. Kim is trembling the next morning as she stands on a stage in front of a blackboard. The math and science faculty fill the first two rows of the auditorium. An upper level chemistry teacher begins the questioning and when the exam is over, the faculty claps. The chairperson of the program congratulates Kim, and they allow her to skip two years ahead in the program.

Later, at the factory, Matt invites Kim to go with him to deliver something to his father. Kim is surprised, as she thought Matt's father was dead, but she's too interested in spending time with Matt to ask questions. He leads her downstairs to his bike, admits he has a second job as a delivery boy, and implies he's skipping school to work. Kim climbs onto the bike behind him and as they zip through the city, she refuses to put her arms around him. After they get out of the congested streets of Chinatown, Kim starts to relax and enjoy the ride.

Now that Kim is able to legally work (though not at the factory), she's able to become even more independent. Notably, this bank account is an important way that Kim can somewhat escape Aunt Paula's grasp. The way that the woman at the factory speaks about Park begins to add more evidence to the novel's quiet suggestions that Mrs. Wu and Matt are hiding something more serious about his condition—and that whatever is going on, it's something socially unacceptable.



Forming this relationship with Park and with Matt shows Kim becoming more of an integrated part of their family, which suggests that Kim and Matt's budding romance may be able to take off soon. However, by choosing to befriend Park like this, Kim also opens herself up to possible abuse from the factory workers who are also mean to Park, showing that these sacrifices always have possible consequences.



Kim's stellar performance here (and the fact that she presumably understood the English just fine) shows that she absolutely has a talent for school that she doesn't give herself credit for. It also shows that her grasp of English is improving, which will in turn help her feel more integrated at school and in the English-speaking world.



The implication that Matt is skipping school to work does several things. First, it reminds the reader that in the conflict between work and education, Matt is clearly choosing to work. Second, it shows that Matt's family is possibly more impoverished even than Kim's is, as Matt is basically the only one working and must work two jobs to make ends meet for himself, his mother, and his brother.



Finally, they stop in an alleyway near an abandoned building. Matt raps on a doorway and after a minute, a man lets them in. They walk through a hallway into a room that had once been a bar. Chinese men sit around a card table piled with cash, and Matt looks at Kim as though to ask her if it's okay he brought her here. She gives him a little nod; she understands this means that he trusts her. Matt unfolds a chair and motions for Kim to sit down, and a man passes them two beers. Kim doesn't like it and only sips at it.

Matt walks to one man who Kim assumes is Matt's father. The man seems annoyed to be interrupted but accepts Matt's proffered envelope. It contains cash. Matt's father nods and then pushes Matt backwards. Kim stands and squeezes Matt's arm, and then insists she wants to stand and watch to cover up her impulsiveness. She finds the game fascinating. A bit later, the phone rings for Matt's father. He tells a woman named Louisa that he'll be home soon and that he's not gambling. Matt quietly tells Kim that Louisa is his father's live-in girlfriend. Kim realizes that the money Matt gave his father is likely from his own salary to protect Mrs. Wu.

As Matt's father returns to the table, he notices Kim and asks her what cards she would play. Kim knows the game is about statistics, not luck, and she points to the two cards she'd choose. Matt's father wins the pile of cash after playing those cards. A few minutes later, he tells Matt that Kim is "a great girl" and the other gamblers invite Kim to play with them. Matt insists that Kim isn't going to leave his side and the men back down. Kim explains that Matt never took her back there, but that event had the effect of letting her in on his shameful secret. It could've been the start of their romance if "the girl" hadn't shown up.

TEN

By tenth grade, Kim is one of the best students at her school. One evening, Annette asks Kim on the phone how she manages to do so well, given that she does all her studying at the last minute. Kim suggests it's like being born with an extra head. However, Kim doesn't see it as particularly remarkable; she believes she's simply doing as she's told. What's more, she knows that doing well, securing a scholarship to a prestigious college, and getting a good job afterwards is the only way to get out of poverty. Though Kim receives top scores on her Advanced Placement tests, the other kids at school still don't want to be friends.

The amount of cash on the table suggests that Matt's family is extremely dysfunctional, given that Matt's father clearly has enough to gamble and isn't using it instead to support his very ill wife. The silent exchange between Matt and Kim shows them both accepting that Matt has a secret that's likely shameful for him; sharing it with Kim means he'll get some support.



Kim's realization that Matt is working in order to protect his mother helps her to see just how grown-up Matt has to be in order to survive. For him, school would be a luxury if he were interested at all—work is the only way he can keep his family from outright dissolving. However, Matt's father's behavior towards Matt suggests that he may or may not even really think of Matt as family. This may explain why he's seemingly unwilling to help Mrs. Wu.



Kim's knowledge of statistics would absolutely make her a great gambler, as gambling is essentially a matter of statistics and calculated risk. This shows Matt that Kim's focus on education isn't necessarily a bad thing, as it does offer her some practical skills for the "real world" even as it seems to keep her in an "ivory tower" for now.



It's important to recognize that academics simply aren't that difficult for Kim. This is a clear leg up for her, and is one of the only reasons she's able to split herself so much between the factory and schoolwork. The mention that the other students still aren't friendly to her suggests that what Kim actually longs for is acceptance, which would certainly make her journey easier.



Ma finally allows Kim to grow out her hair, and since her body settles in a perfect size six, Kim is able to take samples from the factory and not stand out so much at school. Regardless, other kids view her as too serious. Even when Kim is invited places, she makes excuses and doesn't even ask Ma, as she knows she'd eventually have to invite them to her apartment.

Annette accepts Kim's limitations for the most part. As the year goes on, Annette develops an admiration for Mr. Jamali. Annette's crushes continue to be more of a way to pass the time than actual feelings, and Kim enjoys pretending she's normal as she talks about crushes with Annette. She tells the reader that she gave up long ago that Aunt Paula would move them, and she knows there's little chance that anything will change.

At the factory, Kim is tuned into Matt's every move. One afternoon, she mistakenly comments that his pants look different. He admits he's not wearing underwear, and Kim explains to the reader that she spends so much time staring at Matt's backside, she's sure he's telling the truth. One day, as Kim takes a break outside, she comes across Park fixing Matt's bike chain while Matt watches. Matt flirts with Kim, which she ignores. Kim's feelings for Matt are so intense that she avoids contact with him. She feels halfway as though giving into her emotions would make her lose everything she'd worked for academically. As an adult, she recognizes that she simply didn't know what love was, and should've taken Matt when she had the chance.

One afternoon, a girl named Vivian is waiting for Matt outside the factory. She's gorgeous, kind, and perfect in every way. Kim learns that Vivian's father is a tailor from Singapore who runs a shop near Matt's apartment. Though their relationship begins when she's taller than Matt, he soon grows tall and broad. Kim watches them together and aches with regret.

Curt breaks a leg skiing right after Kim turns sixteen. They haven't spoken at all since he defended her to Dr. Copeland in eighth grade. Because of this, Kim is surprised when he calls her late one night. He explains that he's stuck in bed for a month and will fail out of school if she doesn't help him. He admits that he's in trouble for all sorts of reasons and has to keep his grades up, and he insists that nobody at school is smarter than Kim. Kim agrees to let Curt borrow her notes and sends them home every day with his brother. Curt calls occasionally late at night and never asks why she's not home earlier. When he returns to school, he doesn't hide that Kim helped him. Because of this, the popular group finally accepts Kim.

For Kim, finally living in an adult's body offers her a very important way to fit in at school to some degree. While Kim's too-early sense of adult responsibility does have ill effects, physically coming of age actually has several important benefits.



Given the way that Kim describes Annette's crushes, it makes Annette sound exceptionally youthful, especially compared to Kim. This reinforces the economic and cultural differences between the two, and the way those differences influence how the girls come of age at different rates.



Kim's fears about Matt and the way she handles her crush show that she is indeed still very young, woman's body or not. However, it's also worth keeping in mind that given Kim's extremely busy schedule, she doesn't necessarily have time to dedicate herself to figuring out how to actually foster a healthy romantic relationship. Similarly, Kim's fear that voicing her feelings for Matt would jeopardize her academic progress suggests that she's beginning to see that he's very much on the opposite side of the work/education conflict, and that could pose problems for them both.



Kim's assessment of Vivian as being perfect suggests that Kim doesn't necessarily see her new, more adult body as being particularly helpful anymore, at least in this situation.



Though Curt is likely not aware of Kim's poverty, his choice to never ask why she's not home shows him respecting her privacy just as Mr. Jamali and Mrs. Avery have in the past. In this way, he allows her to function as an independent adult and not call her poverty into question. It's also worth noting that Curt is able to get himself in such deep trouble, and then get help getting out of it, exactly because his family is wealthy. They have the means to ensure he stays in school whether or not he's truly trying to succeed.



As Kim's popularity rises, boys begin to take interest in her. She feels liberated now that Matt is no longer available. She spends most of her weekend evenings on the phone with boys, which drives Ma crazy. Kim recognizes that she's not pretty, funny, or a good listener—all the things girls think boys want—but she understands that the boys really want freedom from their parents and expectations. This is exactly what Kim wants too. This makes her extremely attractive to them, and she spends most of her free periods kissing them. Kim relishes the freedom she has with her body, as it's the only place in her life she has such freedom. Kim remains detached emotionally from these dalliances, as she recognizes that they're just a dream. Her reality is poverty, cold, the factory, and Matt.

Kim finds a sense of freedom in becoming physically and romantically involved with boys, suggesting that this is the only way Kim gets to come of age on her own terms, when she's ready—unlike the rest of her life, where she's been filling out tax returns and working in a factory since she was a child. The recognition that these boys are just a dream for her shows that Kim still thinks of herself as fundamentally different from her peers, even as she recognizes the ways in which their desires are similar.



Kim begins tutoring Curt once per week, which she's initially happy to do. However, as Curt's grades recover, he stops taking it seriously. He often forgets appointments altogether or comes with marijuana. Kim learns that he forgets about time when he's working on a sculpture. Finally, she confronts him and insists that he should do his homework and possibly, get a different tutor. This improves things somewhat, and things get even better when they begin holding their sessions in Curt's studio.

Again, Curt's desire to not take his tutoring sessions seriously can be read as a symptom of his privilege: his family's wealth means that he'll likely not have to work too hard to do well in life, even if he does squander his educational opportunities.



Curt makes polished woodcarvings, all of which are abstract. Kim studies one that looks almost like the Chinese character for water and asks why he never sculpts things from real life. Curt cracks a joke about Kim modeling for him, but then seriously says that the abstract shapes can mean or be anything the viewer wants. Kim doesn't like having so much choice; she insists that she needs purpose. Curt laughs that Kim doesn't care about superficial things. Kim insists she does—she wishes she could look like the other girls but doesn't know how. Curt declares she's too busy saving the world to care, and Kim insists that she's not a "paragon of virtue."

Kim's dislike of so many choices is something she's learned from living in poverty, where she sees that she truly has few choices: either remain in the factory system and remain impoverished, or do well in school and get out of the factory system. The fact that this makes her uncomfortable even in art that's comparatively nonthreatening shows just how much her experiences of poverty color how she sees the rest of the world.



Curt asks about her phrasing, and Kim asks if Curt's parents don't talk that way. He explains that his parents are editors and they absolutely talk that way, and Kim admits that she doesn't speak like that at home. She returns the subject to Curt's sculpture. The next week he brings a small carving of a swallow. Kim compliments it but refuses to take it when Curt offers.

This conversation had the potential to allow Curt to see some of how Kim lives. Her decision to not let him in reinforces how independent she is, but that choice to remain independent also makes her lonelier and more isolated.



Annette gets involved in theater in eleventh grade. Mr. Jamali comments on her love of the dramatic and convinces her to try out. Kim loves to watch Annette during rehearsals, as she never gets to see the evening performances.

It's important that Kim does choose to watch Annette after school; she understands that this support is necessary to maintain their close friendship.



Aunt Paula and Uncle Bob invite Kim and Ma to accompany them to see Nelson's debate competition. Apparently, he's very good. In Bob and Paula's minivan, Ma and Kim sit in the very back and listen as Nelson and Godfrey make fun of Bob's Chinese silk shirt. They turn around so Bob can change and Nelson also makes Paula take off her "tacky" gold jewelry. Paula makes a point to ask Kim about her extracurriculars and remind her how important they are to colleges. Kim continues to let Paula think that she's still doing poorly in school, as it seems to make Paula abuse her less. Nelson starts to shame Ma for her simple clothes, but Kim stops him. His debate team loses.

Even though the novel very much associates prioritizing education with being appropriately Chinese (and in turn, associates Nelson with being Chinese), Nelson and Godfrey's rudeness to the adults here betrays that they're actually very American—something that Paula is surely not very pleased about. Another factor motivating Paula to be so cruel to Kim and Ma might be that she's losing control of everyone in her life, even her own sons.



That winter, Ma and Kim's stove finally breaks. After a few nights huddled together under blankets, Ma calls a man recommended by a lady at the factory. The man doesn't have certifications to work in the U.S. After a while, he deems the stove unfixable and asks for \$100. Kim accuses the man of taking advantage of them and ignores Ma's pleading for her to stop. She notes that she had the confidence that comes from having to act like an adult for too long. Kim asks the man for his passport and papers and when he attempts to intimidate her, she dials Annette's phone number but says to the man that she's calling the police. The man races away.

Kim's behavior and the manner in which she scares this man away show that she is truly becoming American in fundamental ways, as she clearly has no intention of letting Ma barter with him or get cheated. When she links this boldness to having to act like an adult long before she's ready, it suggests that this isn't always a bad thing. At the very least, it means that Kim and Ma won't lose \$100 they don't have.



ELEVEN

Kim calls the gas company and they send a repairman. He looks around the apartment with pity and says he'll do his best, but he can't promise anything. Fortunately, he is able to fix the stove. He very politely refuses Ma's attempt to tip him and tells her to buy something nice.

Note that the repairman doesn't make Ma and Kim feel ashamed for living the way they do. Ma's desire to tip him shows her trying to maintain her dignity and pride despite her miserable situation.



Matt drops out of high school to work full-time, while Kim begins taking freshman classes at Polytechnic University. Those classes end later in the day, so she sometimes comes across Vivian waiting for Matt when she gets to the factory. One day in the spring, Kim sees Vivian, surrounded by a group of Chinese boys doing their best to impress her. One is holding a potted plant for her. Vivian says hi to Kim on Kim's way in and as Kim approaches the door, Park runs into her on his way out. He's dressed strangely and seems disoriented. Vivian asks if he's okay, but Park keeps walking.

Kim follows and notes Matt's trajectory, and places his choices right next to her own. This continues to build on the idea that regardless of their attraction to each other, the two are on very different paths. With Vivian in the picture as well, it's suggested that Kim and Matt will never be able to actually be together.



One of the boys steps in front of Park and tries to get him to speak. Kim puts herself between Park and the boy, insults him, and yells for Park to run. She runs with him but when she looks back, she sees Matt grab the boy and yank him around. The boys try to insist that they were just playing, but Matt knows otherwise. The boys scatter. Matt re-clips a lost barrette back into Kim's hair and Kim insists that Vivian tried to make the boys stop too. Matt picks up Vivian's discarded potted plant and leads her and Park away.

Kim continues to tutor Curt for the upcoming SATs. One afternoon, she sits in the studio with him while he puts finishing touches on a sculpture. As he happily talks about finding a pair of cool boots in the dumpster, Kim tells him that being poor isn't actually fun. She notices his expensive jacket dragging on the floor and picks it up for him. He doesn't notice. Curt invites her to a party, which his parents are throwing to celebrate the fact that Curt hasn't flunked out—because of Kim. Kim promises to think about it.

Kim finds Annette at the theater and tells her about the party. Annette believes that Kim likes Curt, but frowns and asks why she never comes to *her* parties. Kim understands she's a difficult friend for Annette, but she still believes she can't reciprocate Annette's invitations. She promises to come see one of Annette's plays, and they devise a plan: Kim will tell Ma she's sleeping over at Annette's house. Ma is skeptical when Kim brings it up, but finally agrees.

Several days later at the factory, Aunt Paula starts yelling that the inspectors are coming. She and Uncle Bob race around, cleaning up and ushering children into secret places. Kim ends up in a dark men's bathroom with Matt and three little kids. They huddle together, trying to avoid the open toilet. Kim comforts a little boy and one of the girls hisses that there's a roach in the sink. Matt leaps away and ends up right next to Kim. The boy crushes the roach, and Kim leans into Matt with relief. Suddenly, Kim hears Matt make a noise and opens her eyes to see the roach dangling in front of her, not totally dead. Kim screams in surprise. Uncle Bob yells for them to be quiet.

Kim hears the inspectors pass by. Her heart pounds, both with the fear of being found out and because of her proximity to Matt. Finally, the door opens. The little kids tumble out. Kim moves to leave as well, but Matt pulls Kim close. Suddenly, they're kissing. Kim finally pulls away, thinking of Vivian, and Matt says as he leaves that he'll never reach Kim's heights. Kim feels shattered; she thinks that she's made Matt believe he's not good enough for her.

Kim's decision to actively defend Park and get him out of the situation is another way in which her growing American-ness shines through. Her choice to defend Vivian as well shows Kim beginning to sacrifice herself to make Matt happier, even if it means lessening her own chances of a romantic relationship with him.



Kim sees that for Curt, finding things in dumpsters is cool—when in reality, to someone like Kim who is actually poor, his actions just make him look like he has no idea what a working-class existence is like at all. The possibility of going to Curt's party suggests that Kim likes Curt (or wants to be popular like him) enough to lie to Ma, which she'd need to do to go.



While it's true that Annette probably wouldn't be all that interested in a sleepover at Kim's apartment, it's still possible that Kim is selling Annette a little short here. It's very likely that Annette would be happy to come for a meal and not be as embarrassed by Kim's poverty as Kim believes she'd be.



Though there's certainly an emotional and fearful tenor to the children being hidden from the inspectors, Paula and Bob's efficiency in hiding them all suggests that this is, to a degree, a normal part of factory life—essentially, they're not going to stop just because having to hide the kids is somewhat inconvenient. Again, this illustrates how the laws in place to protect children are actually ineffective at doing so, because those in charge know how to work around them.



Matt and Kim's kiss begins to bring their relationship to maturity, while his admission that he's not good enough shows them finally being truthful with each other about what's between them. Again, the novel conceptualizes this as a sacrifice and suggests that Kim and Matt are paying the price.



After this, Kim makes a point to be kind to Park and flirts openly with other boys at the factory. She reminds herself that despite the kiss, Matt has still chosen Vivian, not her. All of this is made worse by the fact that Kim genuinely likes Vivian. Finally, Kim confides in Annette, who insists that Kim is more in love with the idea of Matt than Matt himself. She does helpfully urge Kim to move on and forget.

On the evening of Curt's party, Kim goes to Annette's house. She greets Mrs. Avery warmly and Annette lets Kim borrow a daringly short dress and a pair of pumps. She does Kim's makeup as well. Mrs. Avery drives them to Curt's apartment in the city, which has a doorman and real flowers in the elevator. When Curt answers the door, he seems shocked to see Kim dressed up. He tells the girls to leave their things in his parents' bedroom. Kim is very curious to see what a party is like. All the lights are out, loud music plays, and a disco ball spins in the living room. There's no sign of Curt's parents.

Annette spots a friend from theater, so Kim takes Annette's purse to the bedroom. Kim flips on the light and screams when something moves in the bed. She realizes it's two classmates kissing and quickly leaves. She finds Annette, who makes her a gin and tonic, and the two dance to the music. As Kim spins, she feels like a real American teenager. After a few minutes, Curt leads Kim to his bedroom. A group of kids, including Sheryl and a boy Kim previously kissed, sit in a circle and pass a massive Chinese water pipe filled with marijuana around. Kim feels reckless and wants to try it.

Though Kim has never smoked before, she's watched men in Hong Kong smoke and knows how. Curt calls her a natural and Kim takes several hits. She lies back and enjoys the feeling of the carpet on her head. The rest of the group dissipates, and Curt begins kissing Kim.

Uncle Bob begins spending less and less time at the factory, and Aunt Paula effectively takes over running the factory. One afternoon, Paula brings Kim an envelope containing her test scores. Kim insists she wants to wait to open them until Ma returns from the bathroom. Later, when Kim does open them, she can only find the list of possible scores. She remarks on this and hears Paula behind her, saying that that's ridiculous. Paula snatches the paper away, turns red, and spits that those *are* Kim's scores—she got the highest scores possible. Kim apologizes for making Paula jealous, though Paula insists she's just proud.

Annette's wisdom is likely correct to some degree. It's worth keeping in mind that for Kim, Matt is more real than the boys she kisses at school because he's aware of her and shares her, poverty and she feels she wouldn't have to hide from him (as she does from Annette). This suggests they do actually know each other on a level that goes deeper than just "ideas."



The absence of Curt's parents suggests that Curt may have bent the truth when he invited Kim to the party; remember he told her that his parents were throwing this party for him. Curt may know Kim better than her narration has let on thus far, as he seemingly knew she would never come if she knew no adults would be present. For Kim, this is one of the few times that she gets to feel like a real American teenager, which makes this a moment of coming of age in her new home.



Finding classmates kissing in the dark impresses upon Kim that this is certainly not an adult-sanctioned party, which also situates it firmly as a coming of age moment for Kim and something that helps her feel independent and American. Her decision to try marijuana suggests that she desperately wants to have these experiences that would allow her to feel more American—and she also just wants to finally fit in with her peers.



Beginning this romantic relationship with Curt shows Kim coming of age at school where her classmates can see, given how popular and prominent Curt is. She finally has an "in" to the dominant culture at school.



Paula likely understands that even if she were to force Kim to work even more at the factory, she'd continue to earn scores like this and do well in school. This moment then acts as a turning point in which Paula realizes that there's actually very little she can do to stop Kim practically. In turn, this suggests that she may turn to more emotional means to try and keep Ma and Kim under her thumb.



TWELVE

As Kim begins her senior year, she and Curt continue to fool around and rumors circulate that they're going out. Kim enjoys spending time with Curt, as he makes it easier to bear seeing Matt with Vivian. One fall day, Curt asks Kim why she doesn't love him. She insists that everyone's in love with him and admits that she's only in love with his body. Curt laughs.

Soon, Dr. Weston calls Kim into her office to talk about where Kim wants to go to college. Kim wants to go to Yale based only on her knowledge that it's a top school and it's beautiful. Dr. Weston asks to look over Kim's application, and Kim asks if she actually has a chance. Dr. Weston insists that if Kim can't get in, nobody can. When Kim asks for the fee waiver, Dr. Copeland asks to see Kim and Ma's tax return to see if Kim qualifies. When she looks at the return, she gives Kim the waiver immediately. Later, Ma is appalled that Kim asked at all. Though they've finally paid off their debts to Aunt Paula, Kim knows they have to save every cent in order to move for school.

The next day, Ma brings home a stack of cheap china plates and tells Kim to break them, which is supposed to bring good luck. Kim breaks them even though she doesn't believe the superstition; she knows if she can't get admitted somewhere with a need-blind aid policy, she can't go to school at all. She becomes increasingly worried as she listens to her classmates talk about writing their application essays about picking grapes in Italy or winning gymnastics competitions. Kim feels even more like an outsider, as she thinks her only real skill is bagging **skirts** very fast. She feels she has no chance against kids who have been groomed since birth to attend prestigious colleges.

Mr. Jamali casts Annette as the lead in [Our Town](#), and Kim promises to be there on opening night. However, Kim discovers she has to back out—her naturalization exam is that afternoon and she can't postpone it, as then she won't qualify for financial aid. Annette is hurt and asks if this is a real excuse or just another false excuse.

Even if Kim won't tell Curt, it's likely that he's functioning in the same way her other dalliances did: as a distraction that allows her to feel, for once, like she's in control of her life.



Ma's response to Kim asking for the waiver suggests that she puts a great deal of importance on looking as though they have the money to actually do things, much as Kim did when she first began at Harrison. The fact that Kim asked for the waiver at all suggests that she's learning to ask for help in times like these, as she understands that assistance like this is the only way she's going to be able to actually do well.



Kim's willingness to break the plates suggests that she's very interested in keeping Ma happy and doing things that let Ma feel better about their chances. At school, Kim still feels like an outsider and believes that her outsider status will negatively affect her chances at college. As she so often does, this shows her downplaying her academic achievements, which are truly extraordinary.



Annette's question betrays that Kim's secrecy and shame has taken a real toll on their relationship, even as they've remained friends regardless. Again, this illustrates the consequences of secrets kept because of shame.



Aunt Paula still receives Kim's score reports in the mail. Though Kim and Ma try to keep Kim's results a secret, Paula seems aware that they're very good. Because of this, she harasses them more than usual. One afternoon, Matt watches Paula say nasty things to Kim and Ma and when she leaves, he asks Kim what Paula's problem is. Kim explains that she's jealous because she's doing better in school than Nelson. To keep Matt around a moment more, Kim asks where Mrs. Wu and Park are, as she hasn't seen them recently. Matt explains that Mrs. Wu is often ill and keeps Park home with her. He proudly explains that he's able to take care of them, and tells Kim he misses her. Kim reminds him he has Vivian.

One afternoon, Curt tells Kim about an "arrogant waiter" at a restaurant. The waiter wouldn't bring Curt his bill, so Curt and his friends walked out and laughed at the waiter's dismay as they did. Kim points out that the waiter likely had to pay for Curt's meal out of his tips, which is often all the waiters are paid. Curt seems somewhat ashamed. Other times, he's exceptionally sweet. One afternoon he brings her an umbrella skeleton twisted into the shape of a flower.

On the day of Kim's naturalization test in January, she sits at home studying. She hears a knock at the door and is so surprised she opens it. Annette stands there and looks over Kim's shoulder at the apartment, taking in Kim's faux fur vest, the open oven, and the clouds from her breath. Rather than looking embarrassed, Annette is furious. She spits that nobody in America lives like this, and says that she's spent years telling herself that Kim likely had some interesting secret that kept her from inviting her over. Annette is the most upset that if she'd never come, Kim wouldn't have told her or asked for help. At the thought that Annette would help, Kim hugs her.

Kim explains that she'll be able to get out of the apartment soon as Annette looks around. She shrieks when she notices Kim's iced-over soy sauce and a roach drinking from the dish. Kim washes the dishes while Annette walks around and explains that the stage lights blew out, so [Our Town](#) is temporarily canceled. Annette insists that the apartment isn't legal and says they have to tell Mrs. Avery so she can help. Kim, ashamed, says she doesn't want Mrs. Avery to know about the depths of her poverty. Annette promises to not share details.

At a tutoring session with Curt a week later, Curt tells Kim that life in the suburbs is hell on earth. Kim thinks that life in the factory is *actually* hell and says that she thinks the suburbs sound satisfying and extraordinary to her. Curt says he wants to be great and free, and promises to visit Kim in the suburbs.

The fact that Paula continues to harass Kim and Ma because of Kim's grades shows that she is now turning to emotional abuse to make Kim's life more difficult and hopefully (for Paula) make Nelson look better in comparison. Matt's pride at being able to support his family properly shows that he believes his work helps him truly come of age and grow up. Further, this suggests that he believes supporting people is how one comes of age and gains independence.



This insight into the food service industry shows that it's not just the factories that are utilizing illegal employment practices when they hire Chinese people. This suggests that this kind of discrimination and mistreatment is widespread, and is just a fact of life for many Chinese immigrants at this point in history.



It's most telling that Kim is so shocked and touched that Annette would help her. Kim's desire to be independent and keep Annette out rendered her unable or unwilling to ask for help from people who would actually be able to do something. Notably, this is also something that Paula actively fostered. She led Ma and Kim to believe that she was the only one capable of helping them; Annette's offer here shows that that's incorrect.



Again, though Annette is technically right—unheated apartments in New York City are illegal—Kim is well aware that those who could help her may be less willing to because she's not white. When Annette continues to insist on involving her mom against Kim's wishes, it shows that Kim has reached the end of being able to hide and ask people to respect her shameful privacy.



Just as Matt and Kim appear to be going different directions with school and work, Kim and Curt will also go different directions because of what they want out of their lives. Curt could easily have a "normal" life in the suburbs, so it seems unappealing to him, while this sounds like a distant ideal for Kim.



A month later, Mrs. Avery invites Kim to her office. She explains that she found an apartment in Queens, though it's not in great condition. This worries Kim, so she asks if it has heat. The question shocks Mrs. Avery. She explains the apartment is heated, furnished, and has appliances including a washer and dryer. Kim asks if there are insects, and when Mrs. Avery says there aren't, Kim suspiciously asks why the apartment isn't in optimal condition. Mrs. Avery says the carpet is worn and there's some peeling paint. She writes the rent down on a piece of paper, and it's not that much more than Kim and Ma had been paying Aunt Paula for their debts.

Mrs. Avery notices Kim's hopeful look and mentions that she'll need a deposit, paperwork, proof of employment, and salary slips. Kim thinks that she and Ma will be able to manage the deposit with a bit more time, though she has no idea where Ma would get a character reference. Mrs. Avery reassures Kim and suggests she include her salary slip from the library as well. Later, when Kim tells Ma, Ma's face glows.

In March, Kim and Curt are leaving a school building together one afternoon when Kim notices Matt watching. His eyes show shock, pain, and jealousy, and he turns and strides away. Kim chases after him and doesn't look back at Curt. Finally, she reaches Matt. He yells and asks if Curt is Kim's boyfriend, to which she screams back that Matt has a girlfriend too. Suddenly, Matt deflates and admits that Mrs. Wu died. Kim holds Matt while he cries and then leads him onto the subway and home to her apartment.

When Kim and Matt arrive, they're too emotional to think clearly. Kim offers Matt a towel and he begins to dry Kim's face. They begin kissing and Matt leads Kimberly to the mattress. After a few minutes, Kim says they have to use a condom and suggests they use two. Kim feels as though Matt is more beautiful than she'd imagined as they have sex. Matt cries again when it's over.

A while later, Matt talks about having to care for Park and admits that he's never even told Vivian that his father is alive. Matt admits that the moment Mrs. Wu died, he knew he didn't want Vivian. He declares that he's stupid and not a hero out to save Kim, and Kim replies that she's going to be the one to save them anyway. Kim promises she's not going to see Curt again and finally, Matt leaves. As Kim tries to clean the blankets, she discovers the condoms. Both of them are torn, and Kim feels extremely stupid.

This exchange illustrates the world of difference between what Kim considers a sub-par living situation and what Mrs. Avery considers to be sub-par. Mrs. Avery's idea of a "not great" apartment is certainly on the right side of legal matters, and it's also a result of her privilege compared to Kim. The price of this apartment suggests that Paula has also been lying to Ma and Kim about what's possible for them, given that it doesn't cost that much more to have heat.



The character reference becomes one place where Paula's attempts to isolate Ma and Kim have been successful, as she's really the only person able to write such a reference. This means that Ma and Kim once again find themselves in a situation where they'll either be alone or dependent on her.



Concerning as Matt's jealousy may be, it's likely that his desire to have his romantic interests all to himself is rooted in his fear of not being able to provide for them. Essentially, he likely sees that Kim's ability to make her own choices about romantic partners means that she won't need him to care for her, which is how he feels valuable.



Kim comes of age sexually with Matt. Their choice to take this step together reinforces the novel's suggestions that Matt and Kim are able to connect because of their shared backgrounds and the tragic system that traps them.



Kim's comment that she's going to save them suggests that she's not willing to let Matt be the sole provider for the family they might have together. The broken condoms remind the reader that choosing to take this adult step has the potential to bring all manner of adult consequences.



THIRTEEN

Ma and Kim aren't surprised when Aunt Paula calls them to her office; they know that they should hear from Yale soon. When they enter, they see two fat envelopes from Yale. Aunt Paula looks furious. She asks why Kim applied to Yale without her permission, and insists that Ma and Kim are supposed to keep her informed about everything. Kim is also furious and angrily asks if Paula would've really helped her. Paula demands that Kim open the letter. Kim does and translates her acceptance into Chinese for Ma's benefit. The other envelope contains documents giving Kim a full financial aid package. Ma proudly insists that Kim has earned the right to go to school wherever she wants.

Aunt Paula says that Ma and Kim are ungrateful, points out that she sacrificed to get them all to America, and then begins sobbing. Ma puts a hand on Paula's shoulder, but Paula shakes it off. She shouts that Ma has always done what she wanted and shirked her responsibilities, and reminds them again that she's suffered for Ma and Kim. Quietly, Kim says that this doesn't mean that Paula has the right to mistreat them. Both Ma and Paula are aghast, but Kim continues. She tells Paula she's aware that their living situation is illegal and being paid by the piece is illegal. Paula seems regretful as Ma begins to take Kim's side. Paula finally sputters that Ma and Kim will never be able to repay her for bringing them to the U.S., but Kim suggests Paula think about her "life debts" to the gods.

Aunt Paula suggests that Ma and Kim leave the factory and the apartment if they feel taken advantage of, and her eyes pop when Ma says that Kim found them an apartment in Queens. Ma reminds Paula that she's repaid her debts, and as Ma and Kim leave, Kim tells Paula that she'll report her if she tries to stop them. On the street, Ma admits that she's afraid, but she feels light. Kim reminds her that they're still like mother and cub. Back at the apartment, Kim phones Mrs. Avery and explains the situation. She also mentions her acceptance to Yale. Mrs. Avery offers to provide Ma's character reference herself.

Later, the doorbell rings and Kim leads Matt up into the apartment. He and Ma chat over tea and after a bit, he asks to take Kim to Chinatown for soup. Surprisingly, Ma allows them to go. On the way, Kim tells Matt about what happened with Aunt Paula, but leaves out her acceptance to Yale. They wait in line for a moment until a short man, Mr. Ho, leads Matt to a table. As they eat, Matt explains that he used to wash dishes at this restaurant.

Paula now seems to be grasping for straws as she senses that she's losing control of Ma and Kim. In reality, the scholarship means that Paula has truly lost control of them, as it gives them the freedom to escape her wrath and begin to make a better life for themselves. It also shows that in Kim's case, education is truly her ticket out—she doesn't need to question the truth of that anymore.



When Kim stands up to Paula and calls her out on her bad behavior so specifically, this completes Kim's coming of age in terms of independence. It shows that she no longer feels she needs to defer to Ma and behave in a properly Chinese way. In Paula's case, her words imply that she feels as though she's spent her entire life putting other people's needs first—as is expected of her in Chinese culture—and as far as she's concerned, Ma and Kim aren't appropriately thanking her for her kindness.



Ma and Kim are only able to take this step towards independence from Paula because they've been able to save enough money to give them some wiggle room. This shows that even a small gain in income is enough to allow them to lift themselves out of such dire poverty—but the lack of that money could keep them trapped forever. Mrs. Avery's kindness teaches Kim that asking for help will often lead to actual help—she just needs to let herself be vulnerable.



Matt's relationship with Mr. Ho suggests that he's extremely well connected in Chinatown and has developed a sense of community for himself. Though the novel ultimately suggests that Kim's focus on education allows her to be more successful, it's also worth noting that education doesn't make her feel less alone.



Haltingly, Matt says that when he was out with Vivian, he'd sometimes see Kim's face in front of him. He chose Vivian because she needed him, and it seemed like Kim didn't. Matt explains that he thought their kiss in the bathroom was a one-time thing but when Mrs. Wu died, he didn't care anymore; he just had to see her. Kim asks about Matt's insistence that he couldn't reach her heights, but Matt explains he just needed more time. Kim finally admits that she's been admitted to Yale. Matt congratulates her but also looks confused. In a rush, Kim says that she's moving away, but she could take him and Park with her.

Matt says he's not sure he wants to be rescued, and says he likes Chinatown. He insists he doesn't need money or success to love someone, have kids, and make a life. He tells Kim she'd be a great mother, to which Kim says she'd be a great surgeon. Matt sits back and admits he's worried that she's going to leave him for bigger things. He says he'd go anywhere with her, but he wants to be the one to take care of her.

The next few weeks are extremely happy for Kim. Mrs. Avery is able to arrange for Kim and Ma to move to their new apartment in a matter of weeks, and Ma gets a job at a jewelry factory. She's able to work at home and Kim's library job supplements their income. Kim plans on getting an office job over the summer as well. Kim and Curt officially break up and Matt spends all his free time with Kim. Park, however, withdraws after Mrs. Wu's death and seems nearly unreachable.

Kim and Matt spend time wandering around Chinatown, where she learns that Matt knows everyone. One afternoon, Kim invites Annette to join them in a Chinese café. Annette is insistent on getting a real Chinese drink, not one that's been altered for American tastes. Once, Kim catches sight of Vivian in a flower shop. She's amazed to see that Vivian's sadness seems to make her even more beautiful. Kim silently vows that she never wants to love someone so much that she'd be unable to survive without him.

Once, when Kim and Matt are lying together at his apartment, he suggests that Kim skip Yale and stay in Chinatown with him. He insists school isn't important. Kim thinks of Yale and says that she can't give up the opportunity—she could be a professor or a doctor and enable them to travel. Matt studies his hands and says *he* should take care of *her*, and he hates the idea of her being around other guys like Curt. Matt admits he's jealous. Stepping out of the narrative, Kim tells the reader that she wanted to believe then that their love was permanent, but she knows now that it was effervescent and more like a memory.

Matt saying that he chose Vivian because she needed him confirms that he wants to be a provider more than anything; it's how he maintains his sense of worth. This again foreshadows that Matt and Kim's relationship cannot work out, as Kim doesn't need or want someone to care for her like that. It's also important to keep in mind that their relationship will be more difficult because of the different ways that they prioritize education and work.



This conversation shows again that Matt and Kim have very different priorities when it comes to their futures. Notably, Matt also speaks as though he'd ideally like to have control over Kim's decisions. He is used to being the "man of the house," and seems to want that in a marital relationship as well. Given Kim's independence, this won't go over well.



Park's unreachability suggests that this isn't all fun and games for Kim; there are still undercurrents of the real and difficult world despite her happiness. This reminds her and the reader that she still has very real obstacles to overcome—remember that the jewelry work pays even less than the garment factory.



Kim's vow to never love someone as much as Vivian loves Matt is a major turning point in her development, as it shows her making a conscious decision to remain emotionally independent in a way that will allow her to keep control of her own life. Again, this suggests that her relationship with Matt isn't going to work out, as that's the exact opposite of what he wants.



When Matt says that Yale and school aren't all that important, he demonstrates a major lack of understanding for everything Kim has worked hard for. Essentially, this moment shows Matt laying down his cards and coming out on the side of work as being the way to make it through the world. For him, the community he's able to build because of work makes his life bearable.



Kim thinks that she's known she's pregnant ever since she saw the broken condoms. She tells Curt first and cries on his shoulder. He offers to marry her, and she can tell it's a serious offer. Kim insists that they're just friends who kiss, and Curt offers to give her money for the baby. She refuses that offer as well. When Kim leaves, Curt tries to kiss her, but she redirects his lips to her cheek. Later, Kim tells Annette. Annette insists that Kim tell Matt, but Kim explains that if he knew, he'd want them to stay in Chinatown and get married. She doesn't want to force him to stay with her, as she knows she won't be able to make him happy. Annette tells Kim that an abortion would be easiest, while a baby would make her life harder but won't end it.

Kim waits for Ma to get home and then runs to her, sobbing. Ma guides Kim to a chair and says with certainty that Kim is pregnant. Kim says she can't tell Matt, which makes Ma worried she's thinking about having an abortion. Kim cries that it's her only option and she'd never be able to support Ma, Matt, Park, and a baby. She apologizes for being stupid, but Ma haltingly says that she's sorry—Kim has had to do everything, and she's sorry she couldn't do more to help her.

Kim asks Ma if she ever worried about marrying Pa. Ma explains that when she did, she never imagined that Aunt Paula would still bring her to the U.S.—Paula had said cruelly that Ma would die in Hong Kong. Ma says that she knows she would've regretted marrying Uncle Bob and doesn't regret marrying Pa. Kim notes that choosing to be together like that isn't the same as tying Matt to her with a baby. Ma takes Kim's shoulders and admits that at first, she was afraid that Matt would lead her down the wrong path, but she knows now that Kim can't be led astray. She suggests that sometimes, one's fate is different than what one once imagined.

EPILOGUE

Twelve years later, Kim explains to a man named Mr. Ho that his young son, Pete, has a congenital heart defect. She shows both Mr. Ho and Pete a model of a heart and points out where exactly the problem is, and then explains that if Pete doesn't have surgery, he could eventually die. She says that fortunately, the operation will cure him. Pete asks his father if the "pretty doctor" will be there for the operation, and Mr. Ho and Kim tell Pete that she's the surgeon and will be with him the whole time. Kim thinks that Mr. Ho looks familiar, and asks him if he knows a Matt Wu. Mr. Ho does, but he clearly doesn't recognize Kim from years ago. She asks if he'd give Matt her card and tell him she says hi. Mr. Ho agrees.

The support that Kim receives from Annette and Curt (and even more importantly, the fact that she asks for it) suggests that Kim has learned the power of asking for help. In doing so, she admits that she's afraid and doesn't feel as though she's in control anymore. Notably, Kim sees marrying Matt as something that would keep her fundamentally Chinese by keeping her in Chinatown, something she rejects by wanting to go to Yale and continue her life as someone who presents as more of an American.



Ma's apology shows that she recognizes the sacrifices Kim made to keep the two of them afloat—most notably, the fact that Kim gave up a childhood and wasn't afforded true parental guidance, as she was forced to act like an adult herself from such a young age.



It's implied that Ma knows Kim will choose Yale whether or not she chooses to continue her pregnancy. Further, Ma recognizes that this choice isn't selfish; it's also the best way for Kim to support herself, Ma, and if she chooses, her child and Matt. However, Ma also quietly suggests that Matt isn't going to be a part of Kim's life, given what she knows of what he wants.



Kim's conversation with Pete and Mr. Ho shows that she did follow her belief in the importance of education, attended Yale, and became a doctor. When Pete calls Kim the pretty doctor, it suggests that one of Kim's teenage dreams did come true: she spent much of high school wanting to be pretty like the other girls, and at least in a young boy's eyes, she's now considered beautiful.



Kim explains that in her mind, she runs into Matt everywhere. She wonders if that's why she chose to work at the hospital close to Chinatown, though she doesn't expect him to ever walk into her department, which is pediatric cardiac surgery. Once she went looking for him in Chinatown and finally saw him going into a bridal shop. She noticed Matt's daughter in the window and watched the girl run to Matt. Seeing that, Kim remembers why she lied to Matt twelve years ago: to keep their child from being doomed to a lifetime of factory work.

Early one Saturday morning, Kim stops in at the hospital to check on a newborn patient who'd had surgery the night before. She doesn't bother to change out of her motorcycle gear. As Kim wonders if she chose her work, which requires no mistakes, so that she doesn't have to listen to her heart, she hears Matt calling to her in English. Kim is immediately overcome with joy as she looks at Matt. She invites him to her office and tries not to bump into him as they walk. He admires her diplomas as Kim tries to casually flip over the one photo she has on her desk. Matt assures her he doesn't want to see her husband.

Kim asks after Park and Vivian. Matt explains that he and Park are working at UPS, while Vivian started work in a bridal shop after her father's business closed down. He says she may become the manager, though Kim doesn't believe it and can tell that Matt doesn't either. Matt admits that she modeled for a short time, but he was too jealous to let her continue. Kim asks Matt how he is, lays a hand on his cheek, and starts to say that she has to tell him something. Matt says he knew that Kim was pregnant and had an abortion. He says that's why he went back to Vivian; it broke his heart that Kim never gave him a chance to choose.

Kim says that she regrets what she did, but she felt as though she had no choice. She also insists she knew that she couldn't make Matt happy. Kim asks if he could live with a cardiac surgeon for a wife who works eighty-hour weeks, and insists that if she'd had the baby, he wouldn't have had a choice. Matt points out that she didn't have to become a surgeon; he could've taken care of her. Softly, Kim says she couldn't change who she was, and she had to care for Ma. Matt's eyes fill with tears as he says that their baby paid the price.

Kim opens her mouth to say something, but Matt interrupts and says that Vivian is pregnant again. Kim starts to sob, and Matt holds her. She thinks that she's been hoping that if Matt knew the full story, they could somehow be together, even though she knows it's not possible. Kim asks why Matt even came, and he says that he came to say goodbye.

Kim's narration indicates that the girl and the girl's father in the prologue were certainly Matt and his daughter. The "lie" to Matt could mean that Kim did terminate her pregnancy without him knowing. Her decision to do it for the fate of her child shows that she understands that staying with Matt would've meant a lifetime of factory work for her and her child, something she believes is cruel and unsustainable.



Kim still seems to use education as a crutch to detach emotionally, just as she did as a teen when she didn't get emotionally involved with the boys at Harrison. In this case, it suggests that her heart has something to say (presumably, that she still loves Matt) and she desperately doesn't want to have to listen to it. Her many diplomas signal to Matt and to the reader that Kim was very successful as she pursued her higher education.



When Matt admits to cutting Vivian's modeling career short, it again illustrates how his jealousy and his desire to be the sole provider for his family means that he takes it upon himself to shut down his romantic partners' decisions, especially when they're more profitable than his own. He previously attempted to do the same thing to Kim when he asked her to give up Yale for him.



Notice that Kim frames the situation as one in which she had no choice but to continue with her education. When Matt points out that he could've taken care of her, it shows that he absolutely prioritizes his own desires about his life over Kim's, as is very willing to ask her to give up everything with no indication of ever reciprocating.



Kim's mental note about the "full story" suggests there's more to what happened than the reader and Matt are currently aware of. This implies that Kim is making some sort of sacrifice that she can only continue to make if this information stays secret.



Kim offers to give Matt a ride home on her Ducati motorcycle. The ride feels much like their first bike ride on Matt's delivery bike. She stops around the corner from his apartment and listens to the nearby highway. They look at each other sadly and then Kim touches Matt's gold necklace, the same one he used to wear at the factory. They kiss, and Kim feels as though she's lived her entire life for this kiss. She wonders if she made the right decision. When they break apart, Matt gives Kim the necklace and says that he'll tell Vivian he lost it.

Kim and Matt say goodbye, and Kim watches him walk into his apartment. She begins to ride away, but stops down the block and looks back. She watches Matt step out onto the fire escape and notes all the plants. Kim thinks that Vivian should have her garden; thanks to Ma, it's filled with so much produce, Ma constantly offers extra to the neighbors. As Kim watches, Vivian comes out to join Matt. Matt holds her as they look out on the city.

As Kim rides home, it begins to rain. She thinks that the worst part is that seeing Matt again brought up an old dream of raising a family with him, which she thought she'd let go of. By the time Kim gets home, she feels better. She thinks she could even be glad she gave Matt his happiness with Vivian. As she parks and starts up the walkway, her twelve-year-old son, Jason, barrels out the door with his gym bag. In near-perfect Chinese, he insists he's going to be late for baseball practice. Kim thinks he looks so much like Matt that Matt would've recognized him in an instant if he'd seen Jason's photo in her office. Kim reminds Jason of their special goodbye. He performs it, kisses Kim goodbye, and pedals away.

Ma is wiping off her **piano** in the living room when Kim gets inside. Ma says without looking up that the vet called, though the cat seems to be fine. Kim says nothing; she's gone out with the vet a few times, but she no longer tells Ma about the men she dates. Ma wants her to marry all of them. Kim excuses herself, locks herself in her room, and puts on a CD of an opera she and Ma saw at the Met. She lies on her bed with Matt's necklace and thinks back on everything.

Kim explains that both Ma and Annette had gone with her to her abortion appointment. They sat outside as a tech performed an ultrasound to confirm the length of her pregnancy. As soon as Kim saw the tiny fetus jumping around on the screen, she loved him. Part of it had to do with the fact that the baby was Matt's. Kim had wondered if she could make it work with Matt, but when she learned that he'd gone back to Vivian, she decided to accept that she'd never have been able to make Matt happy.

A motorcycle is, notably, a risk to ride—this suggests that in adulthood, Kim has discovered that taking risks can be thrilling and not a bad thing. The highway near Matt's apartment shows that he's likely not living in a great neighborhood, given the noise that would come from a highway.



The fact that Vivian can support houseplants suggests that she and Matt likely have some disposable income, though Kim's mention of Ma's garden indicates that she and Ma have much more to spare now. In short, while Vivian and Matt may be doing well for themselves, they're still likely living in poverty.



By keeping it a secret from Matt that she went on to have Jason, Kim allows Matt to live the simple and happy life he wanted to have with either her or Vivian. It's also important to recognize that in making this decision, Jason is allowed to have a real childhood and not have to take on adult responsibilities as a young child, like Kim did. As evidenced by his baseball practice he's clearly involved in after-school sports and likely other activities as well—not working in a factory.



The piano symbolizes Ma and Kim's final success: Kim has made enough money to allow Ma to have the luxury of music that she spent so long without. In doing so, Kim is able to give back to Ma and thank her for the sacrifices she made when she was a child and for the years of factory work.



By going through with having Jason, Kim gets to keep Matt with her in some ways. This reinforces just how much Kim did truly love Matt, given that his paternity was one of the most important factors in her decision. In accepting that she couldn't make Matt happy, Kim also chooses to look forward, for both herself and Jason.



Jason loved Kim desperately, though she was away for much of his early childhood. He cried whenever she left, and she often came home to Ma and Jason fast asleep in a chair, where they'd fallen asleep waiting for her to come home. Kim deferred Yale for a year to have him. She and Ma worked on jewelry at home and then Kim took a job sorting mail at night. At Yale, with the help of scholarships and loans, things were easier. She went on to attend Harvard Medical School and finally, became a surgeon.

Kim thinks that she gave Matt his life with Vivian and his children, though she took away his life with her and Jason. She recognizes that in keeping Jason hidden from Matt, she's depriving her son of his father—Jason is paying the price for Matt's happiness. Kim isn't sure what she'll tell Jason when he starts to ask about his father. Kim listens to the music, takes a deep breath, and leaves her bedroom.

The many struggles that Kim went through in order to pursue her education and raise her son reinforce Ma's earlier assertion that Kim's trajectory couldn't be shaken: she was truly destined to do well academically and become a high-powered medical professional. The fact that she was able to do it against these odds is testament to her talent for school and her desire to give herself, Ma, and Jason a better life.



Even though to the reader, Jason seems to have lucked out (in that he doesn't have to work in a factory), it's possible that he won't necessarily see it that way. He may, like Annette, simply not be able to grasp what that life is like. However, Kim suggests that she believes her ability to give this blindness to her son is a gift, even if it's also a sacrifice.





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