The Latehomecomer

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KAO KALIA YANG

Kao Kalia Yang is a Hmong American immigrant. Her memoir, *The Latehomecomer*, captures much of her life story. Yang's family fled genocide in Laos after the Vietnam War and spent several years in various Thai refugee camps. Her older sister was born in Laos (when Yang's mother was held captive by Pathet Lao soldiers), and Yang was born a year later in Ban Vinai Refugee Camp. When Yang was six years old, her family emigrated to the United States, and she describes her immigrant childhood as a stressful and financially strained time. Despite struggling with learning and speaking English, Yang discovered that she had an aptitude for writing. She completed a Bachelor's degree in American studies, women's and gender studies, and cross-cultural studies from Carleton College in 2003, before completing graduate studies at Columbia University. Her debut book, *The Latehomecomer*, was published in 2008. She has since published two additional memoirs and several children's books.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Yang's memoir covers several politically turbulent events in Southeast Asia. Her story addresses the Vietnam War, in which American soldiers recruited men from Hmong communities to fight for them, resulting in over 30,000 Hmong deaths. The book begins in the aftermath of the war, when North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao soldiers initiate a genocide against the Hmong people for their involvement with the American military. The genocide wiped out a third of the Hmong's total population. Yang also documents her family's experiences at several Thai refugee camps in the 1980s, including Ban Vinai Refugee Camp (operational from 1975–1992). It housed over 45,000 Hmong refugees. The final portion of Yang's story is set during a large wave of Hmong immigration to the United States in the late 1980s. Over 90,000 Hmong people, including Yang's family, emigrated to Minneapolis, Minnesota around this time.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Yang has written two other memoirs about her family and Hmong identity, *The Song Poet: A Memoir of My Father* (2016) and *Somewhere in the Unknown World: A Collective Refugee Memoir* (expected to be released in late 2020). Other books addressing Hmong culture include *Dia's Story Cloth* by Dia Cha (1996), *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* by Anne Fadiman (1997), *Tangled Threads: A Hmong Girl's Story* by Pegi Deitz Shea (2003), and *Hmong in Minnesota* by Chia Vang (2008). Books addressing similar themes—notably war, migration, and refugee experiences—include Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003), which focuses on Afghan communities; Malala Yousafzai's *We Are Displaced* (2019), which focuses on refugee girls' experiences around the world; and Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Refugees* (2017), which focuses on Vietnamese communities.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir
- **When Written:** 2007
- **Where Written:** Minneapolis, Minnesota
- **When Published:** 2008
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** Laos (during the 1970s Hmong genocide); several refugee camps in Thailand (in the 1980s); Minneapolis, Minnesota (from 1987–2007).
- **Climax:** Youa's death
- **Antagonist:** North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao soldiers; Thai refugee camp guards; the American military and welfare authorities
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Spinning a Yarn. Yang's writing style is strongly influenced by the Hmong culture's oral storytelling traditions. In *The Latehomecomer*, she weaves several smaller stories into her overarching storyline.

PLOT SUMMARY

Kao Kalia Yang thinks about what it means to be Hmong. To her, the Hmong identity is wrapped up in being a refugee—she explains that American soldiers recruited the Hmong people during the Vietnam War, and over a third of the Hmong died. When the American soldiers left, another third of the Hmong were killed by the Laotian government. The rest, like Kao's parents, fled into the jungle. She's been thinking about her Hmong heritage since her family emigrated to the United States in 1987.

Shortly after the American military withdraws from Vietnam, North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao soldiers invade Hmong communities to carry out a genocide against them. Many flee into the jungle; Kao's parents, Chue and Bee, meet in the jungle as teenage fugitives and get married soon after. Their first

month of marriage is hard, and Chue (who's living with Bee's family) misses her mother. Chue visits her family for one day in the jungle, and it's the last time she sees her mother alive. When Chue is three months pregnant with her and Bee's first child, soldiers ambush the Hmong in the jungle. The women in Bee's family—led by Bee's mother, Youa—surrender, and the soldiers take them to a village. Chue gives birth to her first daughter Dawb there.

After several hard months in the village, the Hmong men sneak in and help the women make a daring escape. They make their way to the Mekong Delta to cross over into Thailand, trekking through monsoon rains for days. Bee can't afford a raft, so he sells his clothes for a bamboo pole. Chue, Bee, Dawb, and Youa (who won't abandon Bee) tie themselves to the pole and float across. They don't think they'll ever make it—but somehow, they do, and they approach some soldiers who lead them to a refugee camp. Bee never forgets the way the Thai people look at him like he's less than human.

For several weeks, Thai soldiers move the family between putrid camps that stink of human excrement before assigning them to Ban Vinai Refugee Camp. Kao is born there in 1980. Many people are malnourished because they're only fed rotten soup, and the camp perpetually smells of urine. Youa, who's a shaman, is happy that her family is all together, and she ekes out a living performing shaman rituals for Thai soldiers' families. Kao remembers feeling loved during this time, though she fantasizes about a life that's not fenced in. Meanwhile, Chue has several miscarriages, and Bee's family encourage him to take a second wife so that he can have a son—though Chue knows she will leave him if he does that.

In 1986, Kao's family relocates to Phanat Nikhom Transition Camp, where they can take tests to emigrate to the United States. Youa is beside herself with grief and anger, because she doesn't want her family to be separated. When Kao's family arrive at the new camp, they're housed in a room that used to be a bathroom. The family attends school to pass tests for emigrating to the United States. Eventually, Youa joins them, and Kao is thrilled, since she can spend her days with Youa instead of going to school. Eventually, the family gets approved to go to the United States; Youa will follow later with one of her other sons. Bee has a nightmare about dying in the United States and wandering as a lost spirit along endless highways.

The family flies to Minneapolis via Tokyo; they're intimidated and overwhelmed by the experience, but they try to be polite and follow the rules. Kao feels proud when Bee figures out how to take her to the bathroom in the airport, and she's confident that he can take care of her in the United States. Chue and Bee sign a piece of paper saying that they owe the government $2,400 for their flights, and they enter the United States. Upon arrival, Kao is mesmerized by how clean everything is.

The family moves into an apartment, and they scrape by on welfare while learning English and gaining the qualifications they need to find work. There are many other Hmong refugees living in Minneapolis, though hostile locals vandalize their homes. Kao and Dawb struggle at school, and get they expelled for fighting back against a bully. Eventually, they end up in a school with lots of other Hmong children. Kao longs for Youa, but Youa is in California now, and the family can't afford to fly her to Minnesota. Kao is too shy to speak English at school, although she likes to write—the teachers worry about her progress.

When Kao is nine years old, Chue gives birth to a son, Xue, and the family is overjoyed. Youa also visits for the summer, and the family cries for hours at her arrival. In the years following, Chue has two more babies, Sheelue and Shoually, and Youa continues to visit every summer. Eventually, the family moves to a Section-8 house. It turns out that a little boy previously died in the house, and the family gets spooked when they see his ghost, so they move out.

Several years later, the growing family buys their first home: it's dilapidated, small, and moldy, but it's theirs. Chue and Bee work exhausting factory jobs while Kao and Dawb stay home and look after their younger siblings. Kao's extended family holds many meetings encouraging the children to succeed in school and work, though they're more interested in the boys' progress. Kao finally finds her footing in school when she writes an essay about love in ninth grade about. But although Kao is starting to fit in, she develops deep anxiety. She feels torn in two—part Hmong, part American. Youa performs shaman rituals on Kao and gives her a charm bracelet, which helps.

When Kao graduates from high school, she enrolls at Carleton College. She wants to do something to help the Hmong in the future, so she decides to collect their stories and write about them. She spends all of her summer and winter breaks from college sitting with Youa, listening to her life story. Youa was orphaned at a young age and married off to an aging widower; she didn't want to marry him, but he was very kind and loving. When her husband died, Youa had to raise her family herself. They were very poor, but her children never went hungry.

As Youa grows older and weaker, Kao tries to prepare for Youa's death. When Youa falls ill, the family rallies to help her, but eventually she dies. The funeral is an extravagant affair with feasts lasting for several days. A funeral guide places Youa's social security papers next to her body, saying that she'll need them to leave the United States. The funeral guide tells Youa's spirit to go back to the camps in Thailand and then cross the Mekong Delta into Laos using a bridge, because he knows that Youa can't swim. He tells her to find the house where she was born, dig up the placenta from her birth (which is buried underneath), and unite with her ancestors in the **clouds**. After a eulogy, the whole community agrees that Youa was a true leader, and they're happy that they can honor her death properly, unlike the Hmong who died in the war and in the refugee camps. At the burial, Kao kisses Youa goodbye and says

that she will love her forever.

The epilogue flashes forward to 2007. Bee is getting old, and he has diabetes, so Kao vows to take care of him. They discuss Kao's memoir: Bee thinks that it's important for Hmong stories to be told. Kao wonders if the Hmong will find their dreams in the United States. She tells Youa's spirit that they are embracing each other, even now.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Kao Kalia Yang – Kao is the author and narrator of *The Latehomecomer*. She documents her family's life story, including her grandmother Youa's life, and her parents Chue and Bee's courtship and marriage. Kao is born in a refugee camp in Thailand in 1980, shortly after her family flees genocide in Laos. Kao's memories of her early childhood show that the camps were filthy and constrictive; she often felt captive, but she also felt very loved because she was surrounded by her family. When Kao is six years old, her family immigrates to the United States, where they experience the hardship and poverty of immigrant life. Kao develops overwhelming anxiety from her bicultural identity, her struggles to feel comfortable speaking English, and her difficulties fitting in as an immigrant youth in the United States. Despite her difficulties with speaking English, Kao has a knack for writing, and she cultivates her skills by writing short stories and essays on subjects like love. She thinks familial love is much stronger than romantic love, and she's grateful that she doesn't have to be forced into a marriage like Youa was. Kao's life story is dominated by her love for her grandmother Youa, which forms the overarching love story in the book, stressing how important familial love is to Kao. Kao is therefore deeply motivated to document her family's stories, which is why she eventually writes *The Latehomecomer*. She hopes that doing so will help many people understand about the plight of the Hmong people in the late 20th century and have compassion for Hmong immigrants living in the United States today.

Youa – Youa is Bee, Uncle Chue, Nhia, and Eng's mother, and Kao's paternal grandmother. She was orphaned at a young age and forced to marry with an elderly widower. Youa works for her whole life to keep her family together—through the trials of the Vietnam War, the Hmong genocide, refugee camps in Thailand, and life in exile in the United States. Although Hmong culture is deeply patriarchal, Youa is her family's pillar of strength and emotional resilience. She stays strong for her family through hard times in captivity in Laos, and she's fiercely protective of her children. She refuses to abandon her son Bee when he can't afford a raft across the Mekong Delta river and has to float across the river tied to a bamboo pole. Youa makes the best of life in Thailand's refugee camps, and she ekes out a living as a shaman for Thai soldiers' families, showing her adaptability and mental resilience. Eventually, she immigrates to California before settling in Minnesota with the rest of Kao's extended family. Youa's love for Kao proves essential to Kao's ability to weather life's hardships in exile, despite Youa's own hesitance to move so far away from the Hmong's ancestral lands in Laos. When Youa dies, her community honors her with a lavish funeral affirming her status as the head of her family.

Bee Yang – Bee is Kao, Dawb, Xue, Sheelue, and Shoually's father; Chue's husband; and Youa's son. Bee meets Chue while they are teenagers, both of them having fled to the Laotian jungle to escape the Hmong genocide. He's deeply committed to his family, and he works hard to ensure that they stay together and establish a safe, secure life. Bee values education and works diligently to learn English, though he struggles with it when he and the rest of the family immigrate to the United States. Bee continuously expresses gratitude for his chance to live in the United States to authorities like welfare officers, even though he has a hard time in his day-to-day life—Bee and Chue are both factory workers, and they work long, grueling hours. Bee both reflects and contradicts Hmong culture's patriarchal values: he feels pressure to have a son, and he even considers taking another wife after Chue has several miscarriages. At the same time, he tells his daughters Kao and Dawb that he values them no matter what, and it doesn't matter to him what gender they are. Kao adores and looks up to Bee throughout her childhood. Bee encourages Kao to write her memoir, as he thinks that the Hmong's stories need to be told.

Chue Moua – Chue is Kao, Dawb, Xue, Sheelue, and Shoually's mother, and Bee's wife. Chue and Bee meet in the Laotian jungle as teenagers while they're fugitives fleeing the Hmong genocide after the Vietnam War. She feels deeply loved by her own family and is reluctant to leave her mother when she marries Bee, representing the idea that familial love runs deeper than romantic love. When Chue is living in a refugee camp as a young mother, she's horrified by the filth, and she grows obsessed with keeping her young daughters, Kao and Dawb, clean. Chue struggles to conceive a boy, and she has several miscarriages, which cause her a lot of grief in her life. Nonetheless, like other women in the story, she remains strong, and she stands her ground when Bee feels pressured to take a second wife, ultimately dissuading him from doing so. In the United States, Chue and Bee stick together and work hard to support their family. Though Chue initially struggles with her choice to marry Bee, her love for him grows gradually over time, and she sticks with him through all their trials as refugees in Thailand and immigrants in the United States. Chue's approach to her relationship with Bee embodies Yang's notion of love as a gradual phenomenon that grows and develops when people commit to each other through life's many hardships.

Dawb Yang – Dawb is Kao's older sister; she's born while Chue and Youa are being held captive by Pathet Lao soldiers. When the family flees captivity, treks through the jungle through monsoon rains, and crosses the Mekong Delta into Thailand, Dawb grows dangerously ill and nearly dies. She survives, but she struggles with illness and malnourishment throughout her early childhood in various Thai refugee camps—she even develops polio, giving her lifelong limp. Yang leverages Dawb's struggles with illness to emphasize the lasting effects of war and statelessness on children's health. Despite her health struggles, Dawb is fiercely confident and mentally resilient; she always helps to support Kao when Kao struggles with anxiety or feels intimidated, emphasizing the power of family bonds. When Dawb's family immigrates to the United States, Dawb adapts quickly, and she takes on a parental role in the family unit, often helping her parents with babysitting, paperwork, and tasks involving English. Despite her high academic achievement and hopes to attend the University of Minnesota, Dawb has to commute to a university with cheaper parking, so that she can continue supporting her family while they adjust to life in the United States. Dawb's sacrifices show the additional labor that immigrant children often have to take on when their families are settling somewhere new.

Chue's Mother – Chue's mother is a fugitive who flees into the Laotian jungle in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. She showers her daughter Chue with love, and Chue is traumatized when they're separated forever after Chue's marriage to Bee. In many instances, Chue even thinks that her love for her mother trumps her love for her husband, and she often regrets leaving her family to marry Bee and live in Bee's family unit. The last time Chue sees her mother alive is when her mother is walking away to fetch water in the jungle; they are separated by distance and exile, as Chue and Bee flee to a refugee camp and then to the U.S. after this. Chue's mother dies several years later in Laos, and Chue is inconsolable with grief. Chue's unyielding love for her mother stresses the power of the mother-daughter bond.

Youa's Husband – Youa's husband dies before the story starts—although he's dead, Youa often calls on his spirit to protect her family, emphasizing the significance of ancestors in Hmong spirituality. Toward the end of the book, Kao learns that Youa was forced into marrying her husband, an elderly widower, when she was 20 years old. Despite the forced marriage, he was a kind and generous man, and Youa grew to love him dearly. Yang leverages Youa and her husband's marriage to argue that true love grows over the course of a lifetime and has little to do with romantic infatuation.

Dying/Dead Woman – Kao develops deep anxiety after seeing a woman die in Phanat Nikhom Transition Camp. Kao believes that she'll be haunted by the dead woman's spirit unless she immigrates to the United States and can leave the woman's spirit behind in Thailand. Her reaction to the dead woman illustrates the Hmong people's belief that their spirits stay in the physical location where they die, which causes spiritual anxiety for many Hmong refugees and immigrants, because they worry that their spirits won't be able to return home to their ancestral homelands and unite with their ancestors if they die in exile. Kao's stress about the dead woman also shows that the traumas refugee children witness often cause them emotional problems (like anxiety) that affect them for years to come.

Funeral Guide – The funeral guide is an elderly community member with knowledge of Hmong traditions. Kao's family recruits him to lead Youa's funeral rituals toward the end of the book. The funeral guide explains important aspects of Hmong spirituality. From his comments, the reader learns about the Hmong's belief that after death, their spirits must travel backwards through all the places they've lived, ending in their ancestral lands in the mountains of Laos, where they can ascend to the **clouds** and unite with their ancestors.

Uncle Chue – Uncle Chue is Bee's older brother. He's caught by Pathet Lao soldiers when he attempts to cross the Mekong Delta river into Thailand. Uncle Chue's ordeal highlights the persecution faced by Hmong communities during the Hmong genocide (shortly after the Vietnam War). Eventually, Uncle Chue and his family escape again, and they follow Bee's family through various Thai refugee camps and on to the United States.

Sheelue – Sheelue is Kao's younger sister; she's born four years after the family emigrates to the United States. Kao's grandmother Youa is living across the country when Sheelue is born, and she feels disconnected from Sheelue, which shows how living separately from extended family (like many immigrants do) weakens family bonds.

Romeo and Juliet – Romeo and Juliet are the titular star-crossed lovers in William Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*. In ninth grade, Kao writes an essay arguing that Romeo and Juliet died before it was possible to assess if they were in love. Kao reveals, through this essay, that she thinks true love is different from romantic infatuation, and that it grows over a lifetime.

Yer – Yer is a character in a traditional Hmong myth. In the myth, a tiger kidnaps Yer, and she ends up marrying the tiger and having three tiger babies. A young man in her village saves her, but Yer is beside herself when the young man kills her tiger babies. Yang (Kao) uses this myth to emphasize that she thinks family bonds are more important than romantic love.

Tiger – The tiger is a character in a traditional Hmong myth. In the myth, the tiger kidnaps a beautiful young Hmong woman named Yer. Tigers have profound significance in Hmong folklore—and Hmong women joke that they are destined to be either eaten by a tiger or made into a tiger's wife (like Yer is in the myth). In the story, the tiger gets trapped forever behind a

rock wall. When Kao hears this story, she empathizes with the tiger, equating his plight to the feeling of being caged in a refugee camp.

Young Man – The young man is a character in a traditional Hmong myth. He saves a woman named Yer from the clutches of a tiger. Despite his actions, Yer is miserable when the man slaughters her three tiger babies, as she values her bond with her children more highly than her bond with him.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Nhia – Nhia is one of Bee's brothers. He ends up in various Thai refugee camps and eventually immigrates to the United States.

Eng – Eng is one of Bee's brothers. He delivers the eulogy at Youa's funeral, in which he affirms her status as the family's leader (despite the Hmong community's patriarchal values).

Xue – Xue is Kao's younger brother; he's Chue's first son after several miscarriages. Yang leverages Xue's birth to emphasize the immense pressure on Hmong women like Chue to birth sons in their families.

Shoually – Shoually is Kao's younger sister. She's born in the United States in 1993. The name "Shoually" is an Americanized version of "Youa."

Hmong Girl – The Hmong girl is another Hmong immigrant in Kao's class at school who is much less shy than Kao. Kao resents the Hmong girl and feels jealous of how easily she fits in and makes friends at school.

Mrs. Gallentin – Mrs. Gallentin is Kao's ninth grade English teacher. She realizes that Kao has an aptitude for writing after Kao writes an essay on the concept of love in William Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*.

Boy – When Kao's family moves to their second home in the United States, a Section-8 house, they're haunted by the ghost of a little boy who previously died in the house. The little boy's ghost spooks them, so they decide to move out and find another place to live.

Youa's Sister – Youa's older sister dies in childhood after being cursed by a witch. Kao learns about this story from Youa.

Witch – The witch is a woman who lives near Youa's childhood village. Youa tells Kao that the witch cursed and killed Youa's older sister.

Old Woman – Youa tells Kao a story about an old woman in her village who turned into a tiger.

TERMS

Hmong – The Hmong people are an Asian ethnic group, primarily concentrated in Southern China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar. During the Vietnam War, the Lao People's Party called for a genocide against Hmong people—**Kao Kalia Yang**'s family included—which is what led Yang and her family to refugee camps in Thailand and eventually to a new life in the U.S.

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.

POLITICS, REFUGEE CAMPS, AND INHUMANITY

The Latehomecomer, Kao Kalia Yang's memoir of her family's lives as Hmong refugees, questions the inhumane experiences that refugees are subjected to in today's world. Yang was born in a refugee camp in Thailand in 1980, a few years after her family fled the Hmong genocide in Laos in the wake of the Vietnam War. Although Yang's family knows that being alive in a Thai refugee camp is better than being dead in Laos, their experiences in several camps are nonetheless utterly dehumanizing. Yang grows up malnourished, living in squalor, and surrounded by sickness and death. Moreover, her parents (Chue and Bee) and grandmother (Youa) suffer the humiliation of losing their freedom and being treated like they're less than human. In exposing the dire conditions that refugees face, Yang questions the cruelty of a world that punishes people for being stateless, especially when their statelessness is forced upon them by wars and politics that have little to do with their own communities.

Throughout the story, Yang highlights the physical squalor, starvation, sickness, and death in refugee camps to underscore the inhumane conditions in which most refugees are often forced to live. Many camps don't have toilets, and people are forced to sleep on platforms above their own excrement, surrounded by a "stream of urine and diluted feces." Yang's mother, Chue, becomes obsessed with keeping her children clean, and her family suffers deeply from the "stench and humiliation of human waste," all of which emphasizes that being forced to live in such squalid conditions is utterly inhumane. The refugees subsist on meager, rotten soup rations, which cause widespread malnourishment and sickness. Yang notes that sometimes, soldiers squirt food at refugees out of a hose—much like the way farmers feed animals—highlighting further daily humiliations that refugees must face to access basic human needs like food.

Yang also emphasizes the emotional anguish of being treated as less than human and feeling perpetually caged, underscoring the cruel mental suffering that refugees must endure. When Yang's parents are herded into a refugee camp, a soldier knocks

her father, Bee, down for fun. Bee wonders why the soldier doesn't see that Bee is "a man too," showing that he feels dehumanized by the experience. Yang's parents wake up after their first night of being fenced in at a camp to find the local community staring and pointing at them, emphasizing once more that they're treated more like animals in a zoo than like human beings. Many of the Hmong refugees also feel trapped in their state of perpetual waiting—they're unable to go back home, and they're unable to move forward in their lives until the authorities let them, which feels disheartening and adds to their mental suffering.

Yang stresses throughout the book that the Hmong people are forced into statelessness by international political forces outside their community, showing how war refugees often find themselves stateless through no fault of their own, which makes their poor treatment in refugee camps seem exceptionally cruel. Yang explains that the Hmong people became political targets after American soldiers forced over 30,000 young Hmong men into helping the United States in their war against the Vietnamese. When the Americans left, Laotian and North Vietnamese governments began a genocide against the Hmong for their "support" of the United States military efforts. Both sides in the Vietnam War, thus, targeted the Hmong, who were caught up in a dispute that had nothing to do with their community. Yang implies that it's ultimately cruel to punish stateless refugees, because such people—like the Hmong—often find themselves stateless for reasons that are beyond their control. Yang thus motivates her readers to understand that refugees are human beings too, and she concludes that they deserve to be treated with more dignity, especially given the suffering they've already endured.

THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

The Latehomecomer explores Kao Kalia Yang's family's experiences as Hmong immigrants in the United States in the 1980s after fleeing genocide in Laos in the wake of the Vietnam War. Despite their profound gratitude for the promise of new opportunities that living in the United States brings, Yang's family finds that the immigrant experience is bittersweet and fraught with hardships. Yang's family suffers from poverty and struggles with language barriers, which limit their opportunities and force them into exhausting lives as industrial factory workers. Immigrant children must also grapple with the anxiety of growing up bicultural, the labor of taking care of parents who struggle with language barriers, and the pressure to succeed and live out their parents' dreams. Yang stresses, in all this, that immigrant life is far from easy. Yang highlights that the immigrant experience is difficult no matter what, but that immigrant parents and immigrant children each face a unique set of challenges: for parents, financial strain and language barriers are most troublesome, while immigrant children tend to struggle with supporting their parents and navigating their bicultural identity.

Although Yang's parents are profoundly grateful for being able to resettle in the United States, they struggle with poverty and their language barrier, showing that immigrants suffer substantive hardships because they have to adapt in environments for which they are unprepared. In recounting her family's story, Yang exposes the undue financial hardships that immigrants face when trying to begin their lives anew. Because the Hmong people's homes and villages were massacred by war, they have nothing to start their new lives with when they arrive in the United States. Moreover, Yang's family enter the United States saddled with debt: they owe the government thousands of dollars for their flights from a Thai refugee camp to the United States, which takes them years to pay off. Yang thus shows how immigrant families often start out at a gross financial disadvantage, which limits their possibilities and chances of success. Yang also highlights how language barriers limits her family's options, making it even harder to gain the footing they need to build a new life. Because Yang's parents (Bee and Chue) struggle with English, it takes years for them to gain basic qualifications like high school equivalency certificates, which they need to find work. At best, their efforts give allow them to work as manual laborers—jobs that are time-consuming, exhausting, and poorly paid. This takes a tremendous toll on them over the years and drives them into poor health, showing how profoundly language barriers can set people back when they try to adapt in a foreign country. Yang's parents also often feel inadequate and ashamed because of their poor English skills, and they face constant pressure to be exceptionally polite and express gratitude to non-immigrant Americans at all times—even when they face prejudice and hostility. This adds to their emotional burden as they try to establish themselves in the United States.

Yang stresses that immigrant children face heavy burdens in helping their parents cope with the challenges of immigrant life, while trying to find their own bicultural footing at the same time. Immigrant children often have to put in extra time and effort to help their families fit in to a new culture. Yang (Kao) and her sister Dawb have to step in and manage many aspects of daily life for their parents, who struggle with English, highlighting the time-consuming and laborious nature of being a bilingual immigrant child. Kao and Dawb's cousins also feel tremendous pressure to succeed in school, find careers, and support their families, which adds an emotional burden their childhoods as well. Yang also stresses how difficult it can be for immigrant children attempting to fit in to two cultures at once. Kao develops crippling anxiety from trying to become American while also trying to hold on to her Hmong culture, emphasizing how emotionally taxing it can be for immigrant children to grow up in multiple cultures at once. Yang's cousins also struggle with meeting the social demands of American childhood (such

as socializing with their non-Hmong friends out of their homes) while trying to keep their traditionally minded parents (who would prefer their children to stay at home and socialize within the family unit) happy, which also emphasizes the emotional stress of trying to fit into two cultures at once.

Yang thus highlights the unique challenges that immigrant families face to enjoy everyday things like access to homes, education, family, friends, and careers. Yang ultimately argues that the burdens of language barriers and financial strain (for immigrant parents), as well as navigating family dynamics and bicultural identity (for immigrant children) limit people's ability to fit in somewhere new.

DEATH, SPIRITUALITY, AND HOME

In *The Latehomecomer*, author Kao Kalia Yang shows that Hmong spirituality is closely connected to physical places and objects. According to the Hmong, when a person dies, their spirit must travel back to their ancestral lands and reunite with their ancestors. The Hmong also believe that objects from a person's life guide their spirits through this post-death journey. Yang emphasizes that it's deeply important to Hmong communities that they live physically close to their ancestral lands and retain their possessions. She explains that those who die without proper funerals, far away from their ancestors' homelands, or without symbolic possessions to guide them after death, risk wandering forever as lost, suffering spirits in the afterlife. Yang thus highlights that war and exile make it harder for the Hmong to honor such traditions, which causes them deep spiritual anxieties. Yang ultimately stresses that the physical loss of their possessions and homeland is doubly painful for the Hmong—they believe that this loss causes lasting damage, not only in life, but also in death.

Hmong spirituality is deeply tied to physical objects, which the Hmong believe are important for their post-death journeys to reunite with their ancestor's spirits. Yang shows that the Hmong thus experience deep spiritual anxiety from being separated from their possessions. When Yang's grandmother Youa dies in exile in Minnesota, the funeral guide places Youa's social security card in her body's hand, saying that she'll need it for her post-death journey back to her ancestral lands in Laos. With this, he reveals that ordinary objects from a person's life hold deep spiritual significance for the Hmong. Yang also explains that an important part of marriage ceremonies is gift giving, as the Hmong believe that objects passed down from older to younger people enable them to reconnect after death. Being parted from such possessions is deeply distressing for the Hmong, because they believe such losses will make them suffer after death. When Yang's mother, Chue, has to cross the Mekong River while fleeing Laos, she can't take her family photos and wedding presents with her, so she buries them in a place she'll remember. Having to part with the objects causes Chue deep anxiety, as she worries about her spirit not finding her family after death without such objects. Chue's actions show that the Hmong believe physical objects are important in Hmong spirituality, and that being separated from those objects by events like war and genocide is thus doubly stressful.

Hmong spirituality is also connected to the community's ancestral homelands, and living and dying so far away—because of war and exile—causes deep worry for the Hmong, who believe their spirits will suffer if they cannot find their way back to their ancestral lands after death. When Yang's grandmother Youa dies, the funeral guide gives Youa's spirit explicit directions to retrace her steps back from the United States to her homeland in Laos, via all the places she's lived (including several refugee camps in Thailand). The guide even directs Youa to a specific bridge where her spirit can cross the Mekong River from Thailand into Laos, because he knows that Youa couldn't swim when she was alive. The level of detail that the guide goes into shows that the Hmong believe their spirits travel just like a living person would, which explains why they have so much anxiety about dying so far away from home—the distance makes the post-death journey even more arduous. Yang also explains that part of her community's grief for people who died in the war without proper funeral rituals (which give their spirits the directions they need to return home) centers on the fear that those people's spirits will get lost, which adds to her community's suffering. Similarly, When Yang's family are preparing to emigrate from a Thai refugee camp to the United States, Youa worries that "my spirit would not be able to find its way across the ocean," showing that she's terrified of moving so far away from her ancestral lands because she worries her spirit will not be able to find its way back to her ancestral lands after death. Yang's father, Bee, also has a nightmare about dying in the United States. He imagines his spirit wandering around "big American cities with loud cars and bright lights [...] in lonely circles," unable to find its way home to "the land of our ancestors." Like Youa, Bee worries about life in exile because he thinks living so far away from his ancestral home will doom his spirit to suffer after death. Yang thus shows, through her exploration of Hmong spirituality and death rituals, that being separated from their ancestral homeland and their family possessions compounds the Hmong community's anxieties—beyond the hardships that such events cause in their lives, the Hmong also fear the suffering it will cause them after death.

LOVE AND FAMILY

Author Kao Kalia Yang ruminates on the nature of love in her memoir *The Latehomecomer*. She notes that fictional stories tend to depict love as intense, short-lived, romantic infatuations, whereas she sees love as the slow-burn labor of a lifetime. Yang begins her story by describing her mother and father's courtship as Hmong

fugitives in the Laotian jungle after the Vietnam War. Their initial attraction to each other is a relatively unimportant component of their overall love story. What matters to Yang is her parents' decisions to keep choosing and supporting each other through their experiences of war, refuge, and exile, and in their everyday domestic hardships. Yang also includes stories of familial love that don't involve romantic infatuation, such as her deep love for her grandmother Youa, which forms the crux of Yang's personal story. Through these love stories, Yang depicts love as deeply familial, suggesting it manifests gradually through endeavors like raising families, managing conflicts, and pushing through hardships over the course of a lifetime.

Yang argues that romantic infatuation is not real love, and that real love proves itself over the course of a lifetime. When Yang is in high school, she writes an essay arguing that Romeo and Juliet (the titular protagonists in William Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*) die before they "had the chance" to develop their love for each other. Yang concludes that in real life, love is "more complex" than a brief romantic infatuation. When describing the first time her parents, Chue and Bee, meet as teenagers in the Laotian jungle, Yang imagines them becoming immediately infatuated and "smiling shyly and then walking away, lips bitten by clean, white teeth." However, Yang ultimately decides that this vision is "fanciful" and unrealistic: Chue recalls not knowing if she loved Bee when she first met him, because it was far too soon to love him "in a real way." Yang thus suggests that Chue and Bee's love grows over time, and that it has little to do with the romantic infatuation that Romeo and Juliet embody. Yang ultimately decides that her parents' love is captured in their continued choice to "stick together in a hard life," suggesting that she sees love as a process that shows itself through ongoing solidarity (rather than infatuation), which helps people weather day-to-day hardships while carving out a life together.

Yang also argues that real love is much broader than romantic love, and she ultimately concludes that familial love is the strongest and most powerful form of love. When Yang's maternal grandmother (Chue's mother) dies, Chue, is inconsolable because she chose a life with her husband, Bee, instead of staying with her own mother "who had loved her best in the entire world." Yang suggests here that motherly love far more powerful than romantic love. Yang reinforces this emphasis on motherly love when she realizes that she's free to "choose my own mother—instead of a man," which makes her feel deeply empowered. Yang (Kao) also spends most of the story fixated on her paternal grandmother, Youa, whom she loves dearly. Her relationship with her grandmother forms the central love story in the book, which ends with Youa's death. In placing such emphasis on this relationship as the book's overarching love story, Yang shows that she identifies true love with familial—rather than romantic love. Her descriptions of love frequently focus on her connections with her family. Yang says, "I see me, loved by the older cousins, the aunts and uncles, protected and approved," stressing that familial love is profoundly valuable because it makes her feel safe and accepted. In emphasizing the importance of familial love repeatedly throughout the story, Yang shows that her concept of "real love" is deeply bound up with the love that family members share, rather than the infatuation that romantic couples experience.

GENDER

In her memoir *The Latehomecomer*, Kao Kalia Yang explores gender dynamics in Hmong culture. Yang stresses that traditional Hmong communities are patriarchal: women (like Yang's mother, Chue) live with their husbands' families, and they face tremendous pressure to bear sons instead of daughters. In earlier generations, Hmong women also had less personal freedom (to choose their own spouses, for example). But Yang shows that, despite their strong patriarchal values, the Hmong community's strongest leaders are often its women. Yang's grandmother Youa, for instance, single-handedly keeps her family alive through the Vietnam War. She also provides an endless supply of emotional strength that all of her sons lean on, so much so that when Youa dies, they acknowledge Youa's true status as the head of their family. Through Youa's life story, Yang asserts that although Hmong society privileges men, it's the community's women who provide the strength, support, and resilience to keep their communities intact, meaning that women are actually the Hmong community's true leaders.

Yang stresses that Hmong communities have strong patriarchal values that uphold the idea that men are more important that women. When Yang's mother Chue marries Yang's father, Bee, Chue must to leave her own family and join Bee's family, which causes her deep heartache. When Hmong couples get married, it's customary for the wife to join the husband's family, which betrays a strong emphasis on patriarchal lineage. Yang's grandmother Youa is also forced into a marriage with an elderly widower because her male family members demand it, showing that women have less freedom than men in traditional Hmong society. Yang's mother, Chue, has trouble giving birth to a son. Her husband's family puts a lot of pressure on him to seek a second wife so that he can have a son, which shows that sons are more highly valued than daughters in this community. And when Yang (Kao) immigrates to the United States, her extended family holds meetings to encourage the youths to succeed in school and their careers. Kao notes "these meetings were more for the boys of the family than the girls," suggesting that her extended family tends to put more stock in the men's achievements than women's.

Despite the traditional emphasis on patriarchy, Yang shows that the women in her family—especially her grandmother Youa—are actually the community's strongest members, and its

true leaders. Despite facing poverty, genocide, and statelessness, Youa works tirelessly to keep her family together. She feels like it's her life's purpose to keep her family intact, showing that she takes a leader's role in her family unit. When Yang's parents are fleeing Laos, they have to cross the Mekong River despite not knowing how to swim. Although there's room for Youa on a raft, she doesn't abandon her son Bee and she floats across the river with him on a bamboo pole instead. Youa values protecting her family above her own safety, emphasizing her role as the head of the family. Youa also provides relentless emotional support that her family members continually lean on, showing that Youa is the family's central pillar of strength and resilience. Early in the story, Youa's family are kidnapped by Pathet Lao soldiers during the Hmong genocide. Despite her own fear and sadness, Youa convinces her family that she will keep them safe, which gives them the emotional strength to push on through the harrowing ordeal. Youa's emotional fortitude establishes her the most resilient and powerful figure in her family in times of crisis. After Youa dies, the whole community aspires to learn from her example and be strong for their own children, which emphasizes Youa's role as a leader in her Hmong community. When Youa's son Eng delivers Youa's eulogy, he notes that "she, a woman, taught us how to become men." Eng suggests that although men are seen as the leaders of the family, it's actually Youa who teaches them all they know. Youa's community admits, in the end, that Youa is the true head of the family. Despite their outward patriarchal posturing, these responses to Youa's death expose that women are often the true leaders in Hmong families.

SYMBOLS

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

CLOUDS

Clouds take on multiple meanings throughout *The Latehomecomer*. The Hmong believe that babies descend from the clouds when they're born and return to the clouds when they die—in this way, clouds loosely represent the Hmong people's interpretation of paradise, heaven, or a place of peace and happiness. Drawing on this idea, Kao Kalia Yang uses clouds to represent what the Hmong people have lost since becoming political targets following the Vietnam War—including freedom, empowerment, close connections with one another (and with their ancestral home), and peace of mind.

When Kao is young and living in a refugee camp, her father, Bee, tells her that babies come from the clouds before descending down to Earth when their mothers give birth to them. Kao finds it empowering to think about unborn babies having access to all the things she's denied—the freedom to roam, abundance, joy, and autonomy. Clouds thus represent the opposite of her day-to-day reality, which is marked by being captivity, filth, hunger, and powerlessness to change her situation.

Later in the story, when Kao's grandmother Youa dies, Kao thinks about Youa's spirit returning to the place she was born, ascending to the clouds, and uniting with her ancestors. This aspect of Hmong spirituality—captured by the idea of a return to the clouds—explains why the Hmong have profound spiritual anxieties about being born or dying far away from their ancestral lands. The Hmong believe that if the dead are unable to retrace their steps to their ancestral lands, they're doomed to wander alone forever. Life in exile thus makes them worry that their spirits will be separated in death as well as in life. In this context, clouds represent the Hmong people's yearning for other things that they've lost: close-knit communities, their homelands, and peace of mind about the afterlife. Clouds represent the opposite of what life is actually like in exile—families are separated, scattered, and perpetually anxious.

In both senses, then, clouds represent the things that were taken away from the Hmong when they became political targets following the Vietnam War: freedom, empowerment, community, peace of mind—and ultimately, home.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Coffee House Press edition of *The Latehomecomer* published in 2008.

Chapter 1 Quotes

On May 9, 1975 *Khaosan Pathet Lao*, the newspaper of the Lao People's Party announced the agenda: "It is necessary to extirpate, down to the root, the Hmong minority."

Related Characters: Kao Kalia Yang (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of the book, Yang quotes an announcement by the Laotian government that establishes the narrative's social and political context. The Vietnam War has just ended, and the Laotian government decide to purge Hmong communities—Yang's family among them—by

instating genocide. Yang explains that, during the Vietnam War, American soldiers coerced 30,000 young Hmong men (most of whom were still children) to fight and die for them. Following the war, the Laotian government instates genocide (referenced in this quotation) as revenge against the Hmong for helping the American military.

In establishing this context, Yang stresses that the Hmong were exploited by American forces during the war and subsequently persecuted for that exploitation by the Americans' enemies. In other words, the Hmong were caught up in a conflict that had little to do with them—they had to flee Laos or face death. By presenting this information, Yang informs readers that the Hmong's statelessness was forced upon them through no fault of their own. She'll later use this fact to question why refugees are treated so inhumanely—as if they are being punished—when, in fact, they are victims of war, violence, and pervasive trauma.

❝ I imagine sun-dappled jungle floors, a young man and a young woman, peeking at each other through lush vegetation, smiling shyly and then walking away slowly, lips bitten by clean, white teeth. Slow movements toward each other again, like in a dance. An orchestra of nature: leaves and wind and two shadows, a man and a woman, moving in smooth motions on even ground. How fanciful I am.

Related Characters: Kao Kalia Yang (speaker), Chue Moua , Bee Yang

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

When Laotian authorities begin pursuing the Hmong to instate genocide, many of the Hmong flee into the jungle. Yang's mother, Chue, and father, Bee, meet as teenagers while they are scavenging for food in the jungle. Yang imagines her parents' first meeting as a romantic moment that sparks an infatuation, but She'll later explain that her parents' actual meeting is nothing like this. They notice each other, but they don't fall in love at first sight.

As the story progresses, Yang will argue that descriptions of love like the one she herself offers here are a fantasy—this is why she calls herself "fanciful" for over-romanticizing the moment. Yang thinks that real love grows over the course of a lifetime as people get to know each other and build a life together. To Yang, the notion that people fall in love at first sight, without knowing each other at all, is absurd. This quote thus functions as a false and mistaken depiction of what Yang believes constitutes genuine love.

❝ My mother says she would not have married my father had she known that in doing so she would have to leave forever her mother and everyone else who loved her.

Related Characters: Kao Kalia Yang (speaker), Chue's Mother , Bee Yang , Chue Moua

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Yang describes her parents' marriage, shortly after they meet as Hmong fugitives escaping genocide in the Laotian jungle. When Chue decides to marry Bee, she has to leave her own family unit and join Bee's, which causes her a lot of emotional suffering. Their respective families scatter in different directions when soldiers encroach, and Chue never sees her family again. Here, Chue reflects on her choice to marry Bee and separate from her own blood family members. Chue decides that despite loving her husband, she would have chosen to stay with her mother over going with him, had she known that she'd never see her own family again.

Yang highlights three important ideas in this passage: first, she exposes that Hmong communities have a strong emphasis on family, as evidenced by the fact that Chue is expected to enter Bee's extended family unit and live with all of them. Second, Hmong communities are patriarchal: women typically leave their own families and enter their husbands' families upon marrying. This means that Hmong women like Chue often have to make the difficult choice between their husbands' families and their own.

Third, in highlighting Chue's regret, Yang suggests that familial bonds are of the utmost importance. Chue decides—in weighing up the love she knew with her own family versus the love she built with her husband—that her familial love for her mother eclipses her romantic love for her husband. Yang has already argued that romantic infatuation has nothing to do with real love, which grows over a lifetime. Here, she also suggests that familial love runs deeper than romantic love, an idea that will play out throughout the book.

Chapter 2 Quotes

With her fingers she dug into the moist ground of a bamboo patch. In the shallow hole, she placed all the pictures of her brothers, her mother herself. She felt the bamboo trunk with her hands in the dark. If she ever touched that bamboo again, she told herself forming the words on her lips, she would remember. One day, she would find the pictures again.

Related Characters: Kao Kalia Yang (speaker), Chue's Mother , Bee Yang , Chue Moua

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

Yang's parents, Chue and Bee, are fleeing Laos with soldiers in hot pursuit—they need to cross the treacherous Mekong Delta river into Thailand to escape the genocide that the Hmong people are facing. Just as they're leaving, Chue buries her personal possessions—and she's is anxious about remembering where she buries her things, because she believes that her spirit will need those possessions after death.

The Hmong believe that personal possessions (especially objects that connect them with relatives, such as Chue's photos and gifts from her mother) have powerful spiritual significance. According to Hmong belief, such objects enable deceased spirits to find their relatives' spirits and avoid a lonely afterlife. This is why Chue is anxious to remember where she buries her things: she worries that she'll suffer after death without them. Yang highlights how the Hmong's pain and trauma from losing all their worldly possessions is doubly cruel—they have to suffer material losses *and* worry about their spiritual losses as well. Having to part with their possessions is thus doubly stressful for the Hmong.

Chapter 3 Quotes

My heart hurt more than my body-the flesh can take blows, the heart suffers them. […] The soldier who hit me was an older man. I was like a prisoner. I stood still, and then I walked into the place they would keep me. And I kept thinking: I was a man, too. I had a wife and a child. But it didn't matter because we had no home anymore.

Related Characters: Bee Yang (speaker), Kao Kalia Yang, Chue Moua

Related Themes:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

Yang's parents, Chue and Bee, have just fled Laos and crossed the Mekong Delta into Thailand, and they're now refugees. Here, Bee describes his first few encounters with the authorities in charge of Thailand's refugee camps: almost immediately, Bee becomes acutely aware of his dehumanizing powerlessness as a refugee. Bee's thought that "I was a man, too" is telling. People look at him with disgust, soldiers knock him down for fun and lock his family behind fenced walls without food, and the local population stares at them through the fence like they're zoo animals. This treatment, for Bee, is tantamount to being treated like he's less than human, and he wonders why others can't recognize his basic humanity—or see that he's "a man too"—he's not inferior just because he has no country to call home.

Yang leverages Bee's comments to show that refugees are often unfairly dehumanized, treatment that she thinks is morally unacceptable. Yang also wonders (through Bee's voice) why anyone would ever want to treat other human beings as less than human just for being stateless, like the Hmong are. To Yang, punishing people for having no country of their own is especially cruel, since most refugees are themselves faultless victims of violence, persecution, and war.

For the adults, the stench and the humiliation of human waste were the worst part of that long week.

Related Characters: Kao Kalia Yang (speaker), Dawb Yang , Youa, Kao Kalia Yang, Chue Moua

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

When Yang's family escape genocide in Laos and arrive in Thailand, they're herded into a series of filthy refugee camps. In their first week of life as refugees, the family is horrified to see that refugee camps have no sanitation: refugees sleep on the floor, surrounded by puddles of their own urine and piles of their own feces. Yang highlights that the experience is both physically taxing (because the "stench" is difficult to tolerate) and emotionally traumatic (since being forced to sleep in such an unsanitary environment is humiliating).

Yang thinks that refugee camps are utterly dehumanizing places in which human beings are treated more like animals, which she highlights through her emphasis on their overwhelming filth. Living like this also causes lasting mental trauma: Yang's own family members develop compulsive obsessions with cleanliness, and they relive their troubled times (like the experience noted in this quotation) in nightmares for years to come. In highlighting the sheer squalor and trauma that refugees are often forced to endure, Yang hopes to foster compassion in the reader and encourage them to question why victims of war are treated so poorly.

Chapter 4 Quotes

I loved the idea and power of a journey from the clouds. It gave babies power: we choose to be born to our lives; we give ourselves to people who make the earth look more inviting than the sky.

Related Characters: Kao Kalia Yang (speaker), Bee Yang

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

Kao is a young girl living in Thailand's Ban Vinai Refugee Camp. One day, she asks her father, Bee, where babies come from, and Bee tells her that babies fall from the clouds. Bee's comment hints at an important aspect of Hmong spirituality: the Hmong believe that people's spirits fall from the clouds when they are born and (if they are able to find their way back after death) return to the clouds when they die. The clouds thus represent a heavenly, peaceful, happy place.

Kao imagines that the clouds are an "inviting" place in which unborn babies are both free and empowered (to choose where and with whom they'll live once they're born). Yang uses this vision of the clouds as an idyllic, free, and empowered place to symbolize the opposite of life for refugees (and later, immigrants). Refugees aren't free because they live behind fences, and they can make few choices of their own; immigrants too, are often limited by financial hardship, which also limits their choices. Both refugees and immigrants experience sadness and pain from being severed from their homelands, rather than the happiness that Kao associates with life in the clouds. The clouds thus represent everything that the Hmong lose in their post-war experiences: happiness, freedom, empowerment, and peace of mind.

Although my grandma had always looked like an old person to me, in the camp, she never rested like one. She was always busy selling her herbal remedies because health care was bad in the camp and people were scared of Western medicine. Because Grandma was the type of woman who looked like she knew things, and did, people came to her for medicinal remedies frequently. Once they heard about her talent for healing, even the Thai men, the ones who wore guns and kept us in place, came to her, mostly for concoctions to nurse their sexually transmitted diseases. She was the only person whom I knew who could safely venture out of the camp under the supervision of armed guards.

Related Characters: Kao Kalia Yang (speaker), Youa

Related Themes:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

As a young child, Kao is living in Thailand's Ban Vinai Refugee Camp with her extended family. Most of the adults feel trapped and listless in the camps, because they're unable to work or carve out their own lives. In this passage, Kao's paternal grandmother, Youa, showcases her adaptability and resilience. Despite living in confinement, Youa finds a way to earn a living and support her family, and she even extends her business beyond the walls of the camp—a feat that no other person in the camp can accomplish. These capabilities indicate that Youa is a formidably strong character: she finds a way to thrive no matter what her circumstances, and she always ensures that her family is taken care of.

Youa's actions offer a stark contrast with the Hmong community's patriarchal values: in Hmong societies, men tend to have more authority and are generally considered to be the heads of their families. Youa, however, has several adult sons, yet she consistently proves herself as the true head of her family. Yang leverages Youa's character to argue that although Hmong societies favor men, it's often the women—like Youa—who prove themselves to be the strongest and most resilient people in their communities.

Still, to be a ferocious tiger with a raging heart caught in a cave blocked by boulders was too mean.

Related Characters: Kao Kalia Yang (speaker), Young Man , Tiger , Yer , Youa

Related Themes:

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

When Kao is a young girl living in Ban Vinai Refugee Camp in Thailand, her grandmother Youa tells her a Hmong fable about a tiger who kidnaps a woman named Yer and marries her, until a young man traps the tiger in his cave and takes Yer back to his village. When Kao hears the story, she immediately sympathizes with the tiger, because she understands the emotional pain of being confined, even though she is very young. The tiger's fate symbolizes refugee experiences: his "raging heart" represents refugees' hopes and dreams in life. But, like him, refugees like Kao and her family are trapped behind inescapable walls, separated from their loved ones, and unable to live out their "ferocious" energy for life.

Yang thus leverages the story of Yer and the tiger to expose the emotional trauma of being confined behind walls, the way refugees are in camps; Yang wants the reader to question why refugees are treated so poorly and made to suffer so much emotional pain. In the story, the young man assumes that the tiger is a threat, but in reality, the tiger just wants to carve out a life for himself with Yer. Similarly, Yang argues that refugees are just people trying to live their lives, yet they're confined in terrible environments and treated with unnecessary cruelty.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ I had never had brothers. I could not see any good changes that a boy would bring to my life. Still, if my father wanted one so badly, fine. I was too young to grasp the position that my mother was in.

Related Characters: Kao Kalia Yang (speaker), Dawb Yang , Chue Moua , Bee Yang , Youa

Related Themes:

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

When Kao's family is living in Ban Vinai Refugee Camp, her mother, Chue, has several miscarriages. Kao's family pressures her father, Bee, to seek a second wife so that he can have a son. Yang reflects on this episode here, noting that she's frustrated with her father and empathetic toward her mother.

Through this plot point in the story, Yang highlights the strong patriarchal values in Hmong communities. Even though Chue and Bee have two daughters (Dawb and Kao), Chue suffers several painful miscarriages because she feels pressure to bear a son. Bee, too, is pressured by his family into seeking a second partner, despite the stress that the family already faces from living in a refugee camp.

Despite the family's preoccupation with boys, Yang consistently shows that the women in the family are its strongest assets. Although Bee doesn't want to take a second partner, he ultimately caves to the pressure from his family and halfheartedly starts looking for one to appease others. Chue, in contrast, courageously stands her ground and threatens to leave Bee, because she's uncomfortable with the idea of him having another sexual partner or wife. Chue also makes it clear that has no qualms about coping on her own if she has to. Chue's strength (contrasted against Bee's weakness) in response to this external pressure suggests that women's capabilities are undervalued because of the Hmong community's emphasis on male authority.

❝ It is many years from now. We are in America. The girls are grown and married. You and I—we are alone. First, you died. I did not live long without you. One day, I died in a silent house. There was nowhere to go. You were waiting for me. We wandered around, you and I. We walked in big American cities with loud cars and bright lights. Our spirits walked in lonely circles. How would we ever get back to the hills of Laos, the land of the ancestors?

Related Characters: Bee Yang (speaker), Kao Kalia Yang, Dawb Yang , Chue Moua

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83-84

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly before Kao's leave the Thai refugee camp they live in and emigrate to the United States, Kao's father, Bee, has a nightmare, which he describes in this quotation. Bee's dream, of "spirits walk[ing] in lonely circles" in the U.S., reveals that Hmong spiritual beliefs are closely tied to a sense of place: the Hmong believe that after death, a person's spirit achieves lasting peace by uniting with its

ancestors' spirits. Bee's dream speaks to the Hmong's belief that people's spirits dwell in the place where they physically die. Bee's ancestors' graves are all in Laos, where their bodies are buried—far away from the United States. Bee imagines dying in the United States and wandering, lost forever amidst endless highways, unable to make his way back to Laos.

This passage speaks to the Hmong people's profound anxieties about losing access to their ancestral homeland. Not only do they suffer the hardships of life as stateless people, they also worry about their spiritual lives and suffering after death, because their spiritual beliefs rely on a close connection to their ancestral lands. And with this in mind, Yang implies that the Hmong's forced displacement from Laos was doubly cruel.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ On October 20, 1980, the *St. Paul Dispatch* published a story titled "Hostility Grows Toward Hmong." On June 11, 1987, the headlines read similarly, "Hmong Gardens Vandalized for the Third Time This Spring." My family arrived in July; we were just beginning. On the streets, sometimes people yelled for us to go home. Next to waves of hello, we received the middle finger.

Related Characters: Kao Kalia Yang (speaker), Dawb Yang , Chue Moua , Bee Yang

Related Themes:

Page Number: 133

Explanation and Analysis

It's 1987, and Kao and her family have just emigrated from a Thai refugee camp to Minnesota in the United States. Although they're grateful to be there and optimistic about the possibilities that lie ahead, they soon learn that immigrant life is extremely challenging. Here, Yang cites actual newspaper headlines from the 1980s to expose the extreme hostility that the Hmong experienced during this wave of immigration. Hmong immigrant families like Kao's face harassment and vandalism, which adds to their burdens as they try to adapt in a new environment, learn a new language, and restart their lives.

By juxtaposing descriptions of her own family's experiences with newspaper headlines spanning almost a decade, Yang highlights how widespread, persistent, and pervasive the racism against the Hmong community was. Yang also shows—through this juxtaposition—that her own family's personal story represents the Hmong community's experiences as a whole. Yang's memoir thus functions both as a personal memoir and as a cultural memoir for the Hmong immigrant experience in general. Yang encourages her readers to empathize with immigrants in order to mitigate the kind of hostility she documents here.

❝ Money was like a person I had never known or a wall I had never breached before: it kept me away from my grandma. I saw no way to climb this wall. Sometimes I thought so much about money that I couldn't sleep. Money was not bills and coins or a check from welfare. In my imagination, it was much more: it was the nightmare that kept love apart in America.

Related Characters: Kao Kalia Yang (speaker), Youa, Dawb Yang , Chue Moua , Bee Yang

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

Kao's family has emigrated to the United States, but it takes them several years to save enough to buy Kao's grandmother Youa a ticket from California to Minnesota for a visit. Yang stresses that it takes the family years just to buy a plane ticket for one person to show how much her family struggled financially during their initial years as immigrants in the United States. She compares money to a wall to show that her family's poverty feels a lot like imprisonment they experienced in the refugee camps. Although her family anticipated being free when they stopped being refugees, they experience new—and crippling—barriers as immigrants that keep them metaphorically confined, separated, and suffering. In this way, immigrant life doesn't feel all that different to refugee life: both are fraught with pervasive barriers that prevent Kao's family from achieving basic things that many people take for granted—such as the ability to buy a plane ticket without saving for several years beforehand.

Chapter 9 Quotes

My parents tried their best at English, but their best was not catching up with Dawb's and mine. We were picking up the language faster, and so we became the interpreters and translators for our family dealings with American people. In the beginning, we just did it because it was easier and because we did not want to see them struggle over easy things. They were working hard for the more important things in our lives. Later, we realized so many other cousins and friends were doing the same.

Related Characters: Kao Kalia Yang (speaker), Youa, Dawb Yang , Chue Moua , Bee Yang

Related Themes:

Page Number: 168-169

Explanation and Analysis

As Kao's family settles into their new lives in the United States, the language barrier proves to be formidable challenge, particularly for the adults in Kao's family. Yang explains that language barriers set people back for years, holding them back from opportunity and assimilation. And here, Yang explains that immigrant children often take on significant responsibility in their households, because they have to help their parents navigate aspects of life that demand speaking English (ranging from buying diapers in a grocery store to negotiating house sale contracts, two examples that Yang highlights in the story). The extra parental support adds to immigrant children's workloads.

Yang highlights how hard immigrant life is for parents and children alike in order to foster compassion in her readers toward immigrants, who struggle with heavy burdens that non-immigrant families typically don't face, such as a language barrier. As before, Yang shows that her personal experience applies more broadly to her whole community, suggesting that her memoir functions as much as a cultural account of the Hmong immigrant experience as a personal account of her own family's experiences.

A part of me grew protective of the little boy and the unspoken expectations of the man he would have to become.

Related Characters: Kao Kalia Yang (speaker), Xue

Related Themes:

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

After settling in the United States, Kao's extended family hold numerous meetings in which they put pressure on their children to succeed. Kao notices that her extended family focuses mostly on the boys, and she worries about the pressure that her new baby brother, Xue, will face in life. In raising this issue, Yang highlights the patriarchal values in Hmong culture: Yang's extended family has a strong interest in the family's boys, and they have high expectations for them to succeed, support their families, and carry the Yang name forward.

In addition to those expectations, immigrant children also face additional pressure when they're told they need to somehow make all their parents' sacrifices as immigrants worthwhile, and immigrant sons are expected to support their families once they become adults. Yang shows here that patriarchal values aren't only problematic because they make the girls in her family feel sidelined—they're *also* problematic because they place so much pressure on the boys in her family. Yang thus exposes how patriarchal values can be oppressive for men as well as women.

The adults continued having nightmares. They cried out in their sleep. In the mornings, they sat at the table and talked to us about their bad dreams: the war was around them, the land was falling to pieces, Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese soldiers were coming, the sound of guns raced with the beating of their hearts. In their dreams, they met people who were no longer alive but who had loved them back in their old lives. There were stomach ulcers from worrying and heads that throbbed late into the night. My aunts and uncles in California farmed on a small acreage, five or ten, to add to the money they received from welfare. My aunts and uncles in Minnesota, in the summers, did "under the table" work to help make ends meet if they could, like harvesting corn or picking baby cucumbers to make pickles.

Related Characters: Kao Kalia Yang (speaker), Nhia , Eng , Uncle Chue , Chue Moua , Bee Yang

Related Themes:

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

Kao and all of her extended family members are living as immigrants in the United States. Here, Kao highlights how

difficult the immigrant experience is for the adults in her family, including her parents, Bee and Chue, and her uncles (Eng, Nhia, and Uncle Chue). Yang highlights two kinds of stress that people living in exile typically face: first, if they came from a war-torn place, or experienced violence and hardship before leaving their homelands (as the Hmong did), the adults must grapple with the lasting emotional traumas of the abuses they faced. Yang notes the persistent nightmares that the adults have, in which they relive the horror of being hunted down by various authorities.

Second, the adults must process their grief: many of their loved ones are dead, and they've lost their homeland too. In addition to the mental toll of processing their past traumas, the adults have profound worry about their present lives, such as how they'll make ends meet and support their families. All these emotional burdens take a physical toll on the adults, giving them ulcers and headaches. Yang highlights all this to show that people who live in exile carry a heavy mental burden and struggle consistently: they're never free of worry or stress. She encourages readers to look more compassionately at people, like the Hmong, who often struggle much harder than others who don't have a background of trauma and loss.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ I had the freedom to stand strong in the wake of love and to perhaps choose my own mother—instead of a man.

Related Characters: Kao Kalia Yang (speaker), Chue's Mother , Chue Moua

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis

Kao's maternal grandmother (Chue's mother) has just died in Laos, and Chue is beside herself with grief. In highlighting Chue's difficult choices in the past, Yang reflects on the patriarchal values that forced Chue into a difficult predicament in her teenage years. Kao feels bad that her mother had to choose between her own family and her love for her husband (because being with her husband meant living with his family instead of her own). Yang thus stresses that Hmong culture's emphasis on women entering their husbands' families caused Chue a lot of heartache.

Yang also uses Chue's prolonged grief to suggest that familial love is stronger and more profound than romantic love. In light of this, Kao decides that were she to face that choice herself, she would likely choose her mother over a man. This suggests that familial bonds are far more important to her than romantic ones, something that will continue to define Kao as she grows older.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ Love is the reason why my mother and father stick together in a hard life when they might each have an easier one apart; love is the reason why you choose a life with someone, and you don't turn back although your heart cries sometimes and your children see you cry and you wish out loud that things were easier. Love is getting up each day and fighting the same fight only to sleep that night in the same bed beside the same person because long ago, when you were younger and you did not see so clearly, you had chosen them. I wrote that we'll never know if Romeo and Juliet really loved because they never had the chance.

Related Characters: Kao Kalia Yang (speaker), Bee Yang , Chue Moua , Romeo and Juliet, Mrs. Gallentin

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

Kao is in ninth grade, and she's writing an essay on the topic of whether or not Romeo and Juliet (the titular star-crossed lovers in William Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*) were actually in love. This is the answer that Kao gives, and it lays out her thesis on romantic love. Although fiction tends to romanticize the idea of love at first sight or blind romantic infatuation (as Shakespeare does), Yang (Kao) believes that these notions fall short of describing what true love really is. She's stressed throughout the story that in real life, people don't fall in love straight away, but rather grow to love each other as they get to know each other and face life's challenges together.

Here, Kao notes that people choose each other in the beginning of their relationships (like her parents, Bee and Chue, did) but they don't really know each other well enough to actually fall in love until they start building a life together. Love, for Yang, is not really a feeling—it's more like an action, and it's captured in the cumulative choices that people make to stick by each other, support each other, and help each other. This is why she thinks that Romeo and Juliet never had the chance to find out if they were really in love, because the characters die before they're able to start building a life with each other.

There was a clear division: the Hmong heart (the part that held the hands of my mom and dad and grandma protectively every time we encountered the outside world, the part that cried because Hmong people didn't have a home, the part that listened to Hmong songs and fluttered about looking for clean air and crisp mountains in flat St. Paul, the part that quickly and effectively forgot all my school friends in the heat of summer) or the American heart (the part that was lonely for the outside world, that stood by and watched the fluency of other parents with their boys and girls [...] The more I thought about it, the sicker I became[.]

Related Characters: Kao Kalia Yang (speaker), Youa, Chue Moua , Bee Yang

Related Themes:

Page Number: 205-206

Explanation and Analysis

Kao is a teenager, and she's been living in the United States for almost a decade. One night, she has a crippling panic attack and develops ongoing anxiety because she feels like her heart is divided. On one hand, she wants to connect with her Hmong culture, protect her parents from their hardships, and nurture her relationships with her parents and grandmother. On the other hand, she wants to embrace the environment around her and fit in with American culture: she longs to go out with friends and socialize the way American teenagers do (instead of having to stay at home with her family). She envies the way American families seem to have no language barriers or cultural barriers that prevent them from engaging in the world around them.

This conflicting pressure to fit into two cultures causes Kao to experience debilitating anxiety, because she's trying to appease two contrasting ways of life at the same time: the Hmong life (with its family-oriented focus) and the American life (with its focus on individuality). Yang highlights her mental health struggles to show that immigrant youths often experience a tremendous amount of stress from the dissonance they experience while navigating a dual cultural identity.

Chapter 12 Quotes

Dawb, in her usual hurry to succeed, had enrolled in the post-secondary program at Hamline University: the parking situation was more affordable than the University of Minnesota. We didn't talk about our dreams of the University. The choice became as simple as easier parking.

Related Characters: Kao Kalia Yang (speaker), Bee Yang , Chue Moua , Dawb Yang

Related Themes:

Page Number: 213

Explanation and Analysis

Dawb has just finished high school. Since the beginning of the story, she's been fiercely academically motivated, and it's been her dream to go the University of Minnesota. In the end, however, she ends up at the less prestigious Hamline University because the parking is cheaper there. Despite the unbounded opportunity that Dawb, Kao, and their family members hope to find in the United States, Yang highlights how financial hardship and poverty can be severely limiting. The fact that Dawb is commuting to school rather than moving into the dorms also reinforces the idea that her limited financial resources prevent her from accessing a full college experience.

At the same time, Yang subtly hints that Dawb might be commuting to school so that she can also look after her parents and manage their day-to-day affairs. They continue to struggle with navigating beaurocracy in a foreign language, and Dawb always steps into handle that part of their lives (earlier in the story, for example, she wrote Chue's resume and negotiated the family's purchase of their first home). In highlighting Dawb's actions, Yang emphasizes the sacrifices that immigrant children often have to make—due to both financial hardship and the pressure to support their parents.

My younger brother and sister could not take care of themselves. They were still just children, so I did not want to marry. Your grandfather was old. I cried at the ground when my cousin agreed to the marriage. There was nothing I could do. I had to marry him.

Related Characters: Youa (speaker), Youa's Husband , Kao Kalia Yang

Related Themes:

Page Number: 223

Explanation and Analysis

When Kao is in college, she starts collecting her grandmother Youa's life stories. Here, Youa explains that she was forced into a marriage with an elderly widower at a

young age. Her experiences highlight the Hmong community's patriarchal values: Youa's male cousin is the one who decides on the marriage, and Youa has no choice but to obey her cousin's wishes. These facts emphasize the lack of autonomy of Hmong women in Youa's time.

Youa also reveals that her central objection to the marriage is her concern for her younger siblings (whom she's been taking care of since her parents died) rather than herself. In contrast to the Hmong's favoring of men as authority figures, it's clear that Youa is acting as the head of her family, and she's concerned for the welfare of those she feels responsible for. Her character thus challenges the patriarchal bent of Hmong culture—she consistently proves herself to act like a leader and protector for her own family, even when her own freedom is limited.

My grandfather was not a bad man, as my grandmother grew to know and love him.

Related Characters: Kao Kalia Yang (speaker), Romeo and Juliet, Youa's Husband , Youa

Related Themes:

Page Number: 224

Explanation and Analysis

During one of Kao's visits home from college, Youa tells Kao her life story. Youa has just told Kao that she was forced into a marriage with her husband against her will. Yet, when Youa describes the marriage itself, she describes it with love and affection—she thinks that her marriage years were the happiest years of her life, despite her initial hesitance to marry.

So far, Yang has argued that Chue and Bee chose to marry each other, but their love evolved gradually. Yang has also argued that Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet died before it was clear whether or not they were actually in love, because love manifests in the choices people make to stick together as they carve out their lives. Here, she argues that Youa's situation was similar: Youa "grew to know and love" her husband as they built a life together, despite her initial resistance to the marriage. As before, Yang asserts that romantic infatuation has nothing to do with real love. Instead, genuine, long-lasting love evolves gradually as people get to know each other and weather life's challenges as a team.

Chapter 13 Quotes

Aren't *you* proud?

Related Characters: Kao Kalia Yang (speaker), Bee Yang , Youa

Related Themes:

Page Number: 235

Explanation and Analysis

Kao is due to graduate college in a few months, and Kao's grandmother Youa is confident that Kao will make her father, Bee, proud. Youa has been influenced by her culture's patriarchal values—which hold that men are the rightful authority figures in families and communities—she assumes that Kao wants to make her father proud. But really, Kao is mostly concerned with making *Youa* proud. Even though Hmong culture tends to favor men as leaders, it's actually Youa who proves herself to be the head of Kao's family. She single-handedly raised and supported her sons after her husband died, stayed strong and protected her whole family unit during the war and genocide years, and she even carved out a living and supported her sons in the refugee camps. Kao's concern with making Youa proud reinforces the idea that although Hmong communities tend to favor men, Youa is actually the true authority figure in her family.

Kao's desire to make Youa proud also stems from her profound love for Youa. Throughout the book, Kao is preoccupied with familial love, and her relationship with Youa is the most important relationship to her in the book. Yang consistently suggests that familial love is much more important than romantic love, and Kao's interest in pleasing Youa reflects that too.

Chapter 15 Quotes

The guide apologized at this point for no longer being able to take Grandma directly to each place where they had been during the five years in the jungle. He explained that after all, it had been a war, and they had been running for their lives, and their homes had been only made of banana leaves, stacked on top of small tree limbs. There would be no markers left. There was no way anyone could remember the many places they had hidden, one mountain cave or the next. He only wanted her to do her best.

Related Characters: Kao Kalia Yang (speaker), Youa, Funeral Guide

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 255

Explanation and Analysis

Kao's family is holding an elaborate traditional Hmong funeral for Youa, who died a few days ago. Yang leverages the funeral ritual to educate her readers about Hmong spiritual beliefs. Here, the funeral guide instructs Youa's body to return, step-by-step, to all the places she's lived in her life and return to the place where she was born in her ancestral home in Laos, so that her spirit can ascend to the clouds and unite with her ancestors (who are all buried in Laos). In doing so, the guide reveals that the Hmong believe their spirits travel exactly like living people would, which is why he gives such specific directions in his funeral speech.

This speaks to the Hmong's deep spiritual anxieties about their precarious living situations during the Vietnam War and the subsequent Hmong genocide. In addition to the hardships that the Hmong endured during this time, they also worry that their spirits will struggle to retrace their steps to the unmarked places they fled to, which gives them anxiety about finding peace after death. The Hmong's hardships from fleeing their homeland are thus compounded, because being displaced leaves them uncertain about their ability to retrace their steps in this post-death journey, adding to their emotional stress overall.

> A woman alone, she carried us through with her guidance. Long after our father died, she taught us how to find lives in a world where life was hard to come by. She, a woman, taught us how to be men.

Related Characters: Eng (speaker), Youa, Funeral Guide , Kao Kalia Yang

Related Themes:

Page Number: 260

Explanation and Analysis

Kao's uncle Eng is delivering a eulogy at Youa's funeral. Throughout the book, Yang has argued that the Hmong have strong patriarchal values, meaning that they tend to view men as the leaders of their families and communities. Despite this emphasis on men, Yang has consistently shown that the Hmong women—and Youa in particular—often prove themselves to be the strongest members of their communities.

Here, Eng finally acknowledges that Youa was the true head of his family, despite being a woman. She raised her sons, supported them, and "taught [them] how to be men," suggesting that their manhood rests on the care, knowledge, and power that Youa—"a woman"—gave them. Yang leverages Eng's eulogy to question the Hmong's emphasis on men's authority over women. She's consistently shown, through Youa's actions throughout the story, that in day-to-day life, it's often the women who end up being the core pillars of their families and empowering the men to have the lives that they have. Yang thus suggests that women—rather than men—are actually Hmong families' greatest assets.

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: SEEKING REFUGE

Kao Kalia Yang thinks about her time at the In Ban Vinai Refugee Camp in Thailand from 1980 to 1987. Her parents taught her that she is Hmong, which she thinks means being "contained" by Thai men with guns. In 1987, when Thailand wants to close its refugee camps and send the Hmong to the United States, Kao notices her parents trying to stop longing for their old lives and prepare for their new one. She knows that the Hmong don't have a country—the Chinese didn't want the Hmong people on their lands, so they fled to Laos. Then, they fought the French in Laos and lost.

For Yang, refugee life revolves around the physical hardships of living in squalid conditions and the mental anguish of feeling imprisoned (or "contained"). She also touches on how the Hmong lost access to their ancestral lands because of political events beyond their control. This surely left Hmong refugees feeling disoriented—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Indeed, Yang's parents seem to be mourning their country and their heritage, unable to feign excitement about emigrating to the U.S. even though their living conditions there will almost certainly be an improvement than on the Thai refugee camp.

When American pilots dropped into Hmong villages in Laos during the Vietnam War, they made some Hmong people believe in democracy—but they took those people and made them die in the war. A third of the Hmong people died in that war, and another third were killed in the war's aftermath. The rest fled into the jungle and were left to fend for themselves. Kao has been in St. Paul, Minnesota since 1987. People ask her where she's from all the time, and she's learned to say that she's an ethnic minority without a home. After many years in the United States, she began reconnecting with her heritage.

Yang continues laying out the broader social history of when her story is set. She notes here that, during the Vietnam War, Americans and Vietnamese forces alike coerced the Hmong into fighting for their respective sides. Yang emphasizes that the Hmong's plight of statelessness is not their fault, as it was caused by an international conflict that was beyond their control. Meanwhile, she alludes to the fact that living as a refugee the U.S. distances her from her identity as a Hmong person, since people are often critical about who Yang is and where she's from.

CHAPTER 1: A WALK IN THE JUNGLE

It's 1975, during the Vietnam War. The Lao People's Party has just come to power in Laos, and they've issued a mandate to kill the Hmong people. The CIA recruited 30,000 Hmong men to fight in the Vietnam War, and most of them are dead. In the remote Hmong villages, mostly women and children remain, and they're ready for peace. The Hmong know that the Americans have left—they saw the planes disappearing into the sky. Now, the murders have started. They know that death is coming.

Both sides in the Vietnam War—the U.S. and Vietnam—cause nothing but death and persecution for the Hmong. In addition, during this time, the Lao's People's Party takes over Laos (the Hmong people's ancestral homeland) and calls for a genocide of the Hmong. This context introduces the fact that the Hmong are caught in the middle of a political battle that has nothing to do with their community. Yang thus encourages the reader to empathize with the Hmong's plight.

In 1975, before Kao Kalia Yang is born, her mother Chue Moua is 16 years old, and her father Bee Yang is 19 years old, but they haven't met yet. It's noon, and the communist soldiers are coming. Bee's brother looks around at his starving family and runs into the jungle, along with many others. The soldiers round up the remaining people and send them to death camps.

This is the beginning of the Hmong genocide, which forces the Hmong to face death or flee into the jungle to live as fugitives. From the start, it's clear that family is important to the Hmong, and that political unrest separates relatives from one another, which causes them a lot of suffering.

In 1978, Chue and Bee meet. They've been foraging in the forest for a few years, trying to stay alive. Kao imagines them meeting in a romantic, sun-dappled scene. Before the soldiers arrived, Chue dreamed of becoming a nurse; she always felt loved and cared for. Bee's childhood was tougher: he grew up without a father and spent most of his childhood looking after his siblings while his mother Youa, a shaman, gathered medicinal herbs. He longed for his father. Bee has never been to his father's grave, high on a mountain. When the soldiers came, he'd looked back at it as he ran into the jungle.

Yang imagines her parents meeting in a romantic setting and falling in love at first sight, the way heroes and heroines do in fiction—but given that they meet in such harrowing circumstances, this is likely an unrealistic fantasy. Bee's longing for his father reveals that the Hmong have patriarchal values—that is, that the older men in Hmong families occupy a respected position of authority. Furthermore, Bee's fixation on his father's grave suggests that the Hmong's ancestral lands—and relatives' graves—are deeply significant for their spirituality. As before, Yang emphasizes that the Hmong were forced to flee these sacred places.

The Hmong fled from China to Laos 200 years ago. Centuries later, when the Americans recruited Hmong boys to die in the war, they didn't think about how the Hmong would suffer. On the day that Chue and Bee meet in the jungle, Bee notices Chue's light complexion and long black hair. Chue pretends not to see Bee, though she notices his high cheekbones. Most of Chue's admirers talk nervously, which annoys her; Bee doesn't do this. The situation isn't the lush jungle scene that Kao imagines—Chue and Bee fugitives in a war. Looking back, Chue thinks that she wouldn't have married Bee if she'd known it would separate her from everybody she loved.

For centuries, the Hmong people were targeted by political events that caused widespread suffering and lasting damage to their communities—the Vietnam War is just one iteration of this. Here, Yang begins unpicking the romanticized notion of her parents' meeting: she notes that they didn't know if they liked each other at the beginning, and she highlights how Chue went on to regret her decision to leave her own family for Bee. This perhaps suggests that, for Hmong people, familial bonds are more important than romantic bonds.

Shortly after Chue and Bee meet, they hear soldiers. Bee walks away from the gunshots, and Chue doesn't want to let go of Bee's hand, so she doesn't. She's not thinking beyond that moment, but they wind up getting married. Chue's family worries about him being able to support Chue. The wedding is a muted ceremony in a jungle clearing; the Hmong feel sad that they can't have a feast. Chue's mother gives her a traditional silver necklace and some embroidery—exchanging gifts means that their spirits will find each other after they die.

Soldiers are pursuing the Hmong to commit genocide, which forces them into life as fugitives (and, later, refugees). Meanwhile, Chue isn't sure if she loves Bee yet, which casts further doubt on Chue's decision to marry him. Chue's mother's wedding gift to her is significant because they believe that it bonds Chue and her mother's spirits together—even on Chue and Bee's wedding day, the focus is on familial bonds rather than romantic love. Furthermore, this gesture more generally shows how physical objects connecting people with their relatives are important in Hmong spirituality. Having to flee and leave behind their possessions is doubly stressful, since they have to worry about their losses in life and in the afterlife.

Within a month, soldiers are closing in on the Hmong. It's been tense for Chue: she's lonely, and she hasn't been getting along with Bee's family. Chue wants to visit her mother, and Bee reluctantly agrees. Chue is overjoyed when they find her family in a thicket, and Bee waits patiently while they visit with each other. Chue wants to stay the night, but Bee doesn't think it's safe. Chue is upset by this, but she doesn't want to fight in front of her family. Chue's mother went to fetch water a while ago, but it's getting dark, so Chue and Bee have to leave. Chue never sees her mother again.

The description of Chue and Bee's difficult first month of marriage paints a contrasting picture to love stories centered on romantic infatuation. Chue's longing for her mother reinforces Yang's idea that familial bonds run much deeper than romantic bonds. And, amid all of this, the Hmong people are collectively experiencing pain, personal and cultural losses, and suffering while evading genocide.

CHAPTER 2: ENEMY CAMP

Chue is three months pregnant. She's boiling yams for breakfast when North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao soldiers ambush the group of Hmong people that Chue is staying with in the jungle. As Chue stokes the fire, it's quiet and still—until bombs begin to fall. Suddenly, smoke and debris are raining down on everyone, and children run for their mothers as bodies go flying. Chue and the rest of the group retreat to a cave. They know that if the men stay with them, the soldiers will kill them all, so they decide that the women and children will surrender, and the men will go into the jungle to look for the missing people. It's only at the moment when they have to part that Chue realizes she loves Bee.

The sudden bombing in this passage illustrates how the Hmong people were aggressively targeted by both Vietnamese and Lao soldiers—it's clear that they have no choice but to flee such violence. Meanwhile, it's clear that Chue's love for Bee is growing gradually, as it takes her until partway through her first pregnancy for her to realize she has feelings of love for him at all. As before, this undermines the idea of love as immediate romantic obsession—rather, it's something that must be cultivated over time.

Bee tells Chue that if they don't find each other within a few years, she must start a new life. Chue watches him disappear into the jungle, and then the women and children march on with raw, bleeding feet. Bee's mother, Youa, ties a white cloth to a stick as they approach the soldiers to indicate surrender. The six women in the group surround the 20 or so children, in case the soldiers start shooting. The soldiers see that there are no men in the group, so they march the women and children to an occupied village and lock them in a hut. Exhausted, the women fall asleep, hugging their children.

Bee's response to his separation from Chue also contrasts with romanticized notions of love: he's pragmatic and measured, and he's thinking about Chue's long-term well-being rather than their emotions in the moment. Bee's mother, Youa, reveals herself as a leader here, and as the book progresses, her role as the family matriarch will challenge the patriarchal values that Hmong society centers on. Amid all of this chaos, it's clear that the Hmong people—even those who survived—experienced unimaginable coercion and suffering during the genocide.

The group awakens in the morning, covered in dried blood. The younger children cry from hunger. The soldiers march them to another village, where soldier takes Chue's pack that contains her last few precious valuables: her embroidery, her traditional silver necklace, a blanket, and a rice pot. Chue worries about feeling shamed if other Hmong people see a man who isn't her husband carrying her pack. Eventually, he gives it back, laughing at her. At the village, a Hmong interpreter tells the group that the soldiers will keep them there, hoping to draw out Hmong men from the jungle. The village is surrounded by big rivers, so there's no hope of escape.

The captives are treated inhumanely: they're not permitted to bathe or eat, and they're forced to walk for hours on end. Chue's anxiety about having her pack taken away from her reveals that she's influenced by patriarchal values: even though she's a captive, she worries about being shamed for associating with a male soldier. She also feels anxious about losing her valuables because (according to Hmong spirituality) they connect her with her family, and she thinks she won't be able to find her relatives after death without objects like her embroidery. In this way, Chue's worries underscore how highly she values her family bonds.

The next day, the women go to gather firewood. Chue is shocked when she passes over a hill and sees thousands of graves and scorched grass. The old women in the village explain that planes came and dropped "bad rain." Years later, Chue learns about Americans using poisoned gas in Laos and Cambodia. The women grow afraid of drinking the water. Youa boils herbs to cleanse the water and conducts shaman rituals to protect them. She longs for her sons but stays strong for the group. Chue keeps pressing on to stay alive, though she's deeply lonely. She hugs her growing belly and thinks about her mother.

The "bad rain" and poisoned gas are chemical weapons used by the U.S. military, and the women's trauma in the wake of these attacks continues to emphasize how the Hmong suffered as bystanders in a war that had little to do with them. Youa, however, emerges as a strong leader for the group while they're held captive—she takes the lead on physically protecting the group by cleansing their water supply, and she also provides emotional fortitude that helps the group weather their captivity. But despite her strength, Youa suffers at having her family separated, further emphasizing the importance of family bonds in Hmong culture.

The women see how strong and caring Youa is, and this helps them keep pressing on. One day, the soldiers force the women to build themselves a hut out of bamboo. Once it's finished, the soldiers screen a film just outside the hut in which a Hmong man leaves his wife in the war and doesn't come back. The soldiers urge the women to start new lives and marry communist men. Chue longs for her baby to be born because she wants a friend—she doesn't yet know how hard motherhood will be. When her labor pains start, she's scared. Chue gives birth to Kao's older sister, Dawb, on March 5, 1979.

Youa's resilience and nurturing helps the captors pull through their fear and hopelessness, underscoring how much of a leader and role model she is in this community, despite the region's strong patriarchal values (which are illustrated in the film that the soldiers screen). This passage further develops the wider political context of the Hmong's persecution. During the genocide, it's clear that the Laotian authorities wanted to kill Hmong men and force Hmong women to abandon their communities. In this way, it seems that Laos wanted to destabilize the Hmong people's relationships, traditions, and belief systems as another means of exterminating their culture.

Busy caring for the baby, Chue forgets about death—but one day, the soldiers announce that they've killed Bee. The women are in disbelief. When the baby cries, Chue cries—she doesn't know what else to do. One night, however, two men steal into the camp. Their men are alive, and it's time to escape. Chue ties Dawb to her chest and carries her embroidery with her. As the women creep away, they see two rafts on the river. The soldiers begin shouting and chasing them, but the women are already on the raft. Then, Chue sees Bee, and she holds onto him like she'll never let go. It feels like a dream.

In addition to physical hardship, authorities also put Hmong captives through mental torture—they pretend that they've killed Bee, for example, which persecutes Chue emotionally. Chue and Bee's reunion, meanwhile, is the closest they've come to a romantic moment between two lovers. This perhaps suggests that true romance is more emotional than it is physical—their love deepens through mutual care and concern rather than mere infatuation or physical attraction.

The men push off the rafts, and fear pounds in Chue's ears as more soldiers approach, shooting wildly. The Hmong men have planted stolen grenades along the river. The rafts push off as the women hear Vietnamese soldiers screaming. The group scrambles to a mountain cave, and Bee holds Dawb for the first time. Chue tells Bee that she missed him even more than she misses her mother, and they feel like a family for the first time. They decide that there's no hope in Laos—the group will head to the Mekong River (which is a 10 days' walk away) and cross it to reach the refugee camps in Thailand.

As before, Yang shows the violence and aggression that the Hmong are fleeing to foster compassion for their plight. Chue and Bee have a profound moment when they see themselves as a family for the first time. This is also the first time in the story that Chue's feelings for Bee to surpass her love for her mother, showing that her notion of love is deeply bound up in family bonds—and that she's beginning to include Bee in her vision of what family means. It's only when Chue sees herself as starting her own family that she feels her love for Bee is becoming substantive.

The group gathers taro roots, drying them for the journey. The monsoon season is starting, and people begin falling ill from the constant dampness. Chue's breast gets infected and stops producing milk, and Dawb grows weaker by the day. One night, the group sleeps in a ravine as the rain washes the ground away. Chue and Bee think that the night will never end—but in the morning, the rain slows to a drizzle, and they set off again. They reach the Mekong on May 20, 1979; it's a formidable river. Many Hmong, who are mountain people and don't know how to swim well, have died trying to cross it.

The Hmong are forced to flee in miserable conditions, showing how damaging political persecution can be to people's health. Given that Dawb is still a baby, her illness during the monsoon will likely hinder her development and perhaps affect her in the long term. This detail emphasizes how forcing innocent babies into such conditions, as the Laos troops do, is utterly cruel and inhumane.

The group trades their possessions for rafts, but Bee can't afford one. Nobody will accept Chue's necklace—it's useless in wartime—so Bee trades his clothes for a bamboo pole. Chue and Bee tie themselves to it, hoping to float across the river. Chue buries her possessions and touches the spot to remember it, hoping to come back one day. She wears her necklace and ties Dawb to herself. Youa doesn't go on a raft, tying herself to Bee's pole instead—if her son dies, she'll die with him. They cross in the dark with the current swirling around them, all the while hearing gunshots behind them.

The high stakes of this situation, in which the Hmong are being gunned down at every moment, further emphasizes how aggressively they're being targeted. Meanwhile, Chue wants to remember where she buries her possessions because she believes her spirit will need them in the afterlife to reunite with her family's spirits. Personal possessions are deeply important in Hmong spirituality, and Chue's anxiety highlights the cruel suffering the Hmong face when they have to part with such possessions because of political persecution. As before, Youa proves her fierce strength: she has no qualms about risking her own safety to help those she feels responsible for, showing that she is a true leader. Youa's commitment to remaining with her son—even if it means dying—shows how important family is in Hmong culture.

Bee sees lights in the distance in Thailand, but he doesn't think they'll ever make it. The water is freezing. As dawn approaches, Bee feels pebbles on his feet, and he drags his family to shore. Behind them, soldiers drag others from a raft into boats, taking them back to Laos. As Bee, Youa, Chue, and Dawb crawl to shore, they see that Dawb has gone limp. Chue wonders if this was all for nothing. They crowd over the baby, and as the sun rises, Dawb's eyelids flutter open.

Even after the Hmong people flee the border of Laos and enter the treacherous Mekong River Delta, many of them are rounded up at gunpoint and forced to return to death camps. As before, Yang stresses how violent and aggressive the Hmong genocide was as an emotional appeal to the reader's empathy.

CHAPTER 3: REFUGEES

It's May 20, 1979, and the family finds themselves shivering on the Thai side of the river. Thailand smells different. The family feels safe, but they yearn for the land they left behind. Kao's family is lucky—in two months, Thai soldiers will start killing refugees as they cross the river, to stop the influx. Chue, Bee, and Youa walk along the banks, searching for the rest of their family. A gaunt-looking Bee leads the way. Chue holds Dawb to her chest, happy that the baby is alive. Eventually, they find their family scattered along the banks.

The Hmong people's yearning for their homeland (where their ancestors are buried) shows how important their ancestral lands are to their culture. Being separated from the physical place of their ancestry causes them deep spiritual angst, because they worry that after they die, they won't be able to unite with ancestors who are buried there. The ordeal also takes a physical toll on the Hmong people, as evidenced by Bee's gaunt appearance. Yang's family is barely alive and struggling to stay intact—but they're determined to stick together, again emphasizing the importance of family in Hmong culture.

Nearly all of the group made it, except for Bee's brother Uncle Chue and his family. Soldiers dragged his children onto a boat, and he went back for them. When Youa hears this, she falls to the ground, inconsolable. She cries out, praying to her dead husband to return her son to her. Her sons help her up, and they walk inland, away from their home and the graves of their family across their river. Soon, they meet some Thai soldiers. The soldiers throw some clothes at Bee, and he picks them up; it pains the proud Chue to watch Bee try to brush the dirt off.

The persecution that Uncle Chue and his family experiences continues to highlight the Hmong people's suffering, which is intended to foster empathy in the reader. Youa's grief shows how strongly the Hmong value keeping their family units intact. Her reaction reveals the Hmong people's belief that their deceased family members' spirits function like deities who protect them in life.

Kao's family follows the men with guns, just like they did on the other side of the river. Bee and Chue will never forget the face of a Thai passerby who looks at them like they're less than human—they realize what it feels like to be without a homeland. The soldiers bring out some rice, and the children swallow it up. A bus takes them to a fenced-in compound. Bee pauses—he doesn't want his family to be captives again. Some soldiers kick him, and he gets up quickly to mask his shame. The soldiers lock them in the camp. There's no more food, so Chue drinks rainwater so that she can produce milk for Dawb.

Being stateless is a dehumanizing experience: both the Thai passerby and the soldier look at Bee and Chue as if they're inferior, which seems profoundly cruel considering that they were forced to flee Laos. The family begins to experience the mental anguish of living behind walls and fences and feeling caged in—and the refugees also suffer physically for lack of food.

When the family awakes, Thai people are pointing at them through the fence. UN soldiers arrive to document them, and they make up their birthdays based on their best guesses. The soldiers take them to So Kow Toe, a temporary camp full of different Hmong tribes, surrounded by high aluminum walls. There are no toilets, so people have to defecate under their beds; the family spends a humiliating week there in the stench of human waste. Other Hmong people—feeling bonded by their shared circumstances, despite speaking different dialects—give them mats to sleep on. Trucks feed them watery soup from a hosepipe, one cup each per day.

Again, the refugees are treated more like animals than humans: when the family awakes to see people pointing at them through the fence, they feel like zoo exhibits rather than human beings, which makes them suffer emotionally. The filth and squalor of the camps also cause humiliation and physical discomfort, which further contributes to the dehumanizing atmosphere.

The UN soldiers move the family to another camp, where they sleep in the dirt, trying not to think about their hunger. A month later, soldiers move the family back to So Kow Toe for processing. Youa cries with relief when she sees her son Uncle Chue, who was taken from the river. Uncle Chue explains that the Vietnamese soldiers tried to sell his children—they tore his daughter's clothes off her body. The Vietnamese soldiers wanted to kill Uncle Chue, but he convinced them that he would learn about communism, so they let him live and reunited his family. A week later, he convinced the soldiers to let his family bathe at the river, and they escaped again.

Even though the family has made it to a refugee camp, the conditions are still poor: people have to sleep in the dirt and are constantly hungry. In this way, the Hmong people are constantly victimized and treated inhumanely, whether they're prisoners of war or refugees. Uncle Chue's return reminds the reader that the Hmong people were forced to flee violent abuses in Laos, which prompts readers to question why the refugees are treated so poorly—after all, it's clear that stateless people have no choice but to seek refuge.

The family talks late into the night, happy to be reunited—they have faith that whatever they face next, they'll be reunited again. Two days later, the UN soldiers transfer the family to Ban Vinai Refugee Camp. When they board the bus for the camp, there's no time to get rations. Dawb is very thin, but she's started crying again, which relieves Chue—she's starting to feel safe again. They arrive at the camp late at night; this is where Kao will be born.

Despite the precariousness of their position, Yang's family is thrilled to be reunited, underscoring the importance of family in Hmong culture. Meanwhile, Dawb is clearly suffering from the lack of nutrition in the camps, further exposing how innocent children suffer as helpless victims of war.


CHAPTER 4: BAN VINAI REFUGEE CAMP

Ban Vinai Refugee Camp is a dirty place. Whenever Kao runs around with the other children—just like children do everywhere—and then blew her nose, it was always full of black dirt. Kao was born after Chue and Bee had been in the camp for a year and five months, in December, when the Hmong would normally feast to celebrate the New Year. There was no feast, and the family had nothing except some donated clothes—but Kao was a symbol of hope for them. When she's older, Bee tells her that she fell from the **clouds** that year. That image makes Kao feel powerful.

Clouds represent the opposite of life in refugee camps, which are portrayed as filthy places where people go hungry, suffer from diseases, and feel captive. The clouds, in contrast, are connected to the vastness of the sky, as well as the spiritual realm that the Hmong people hold in such high esteem. In this way, they represent abundance, freedom to roam, happiness, and empowerment. By contrast, Yang highlights how the refugee experience is profoundly shaped by a feeling of powerlessness: refugees are forced to wait for years in squalid conditions without knowing when they'll be free. Kao imagines herself freely choosing to fall from the clouds, and her vision of that freedom makes her feel empowered in a way that life as a refugee cannot.

Youa delivers Kao and names her. Kao is a happy baby, and she smiles and giggles as she's passed around the laps of her family. In her earliest picture, she's smiling and plump, though she has no diaper. Kao gets sick when she's a baby, but the nurses at the refugee camp give her an injection, and she gets better. Even though the camp is dirty, Chue meticulously bathes Kao and Dawb twice a day to keep them clean.

The support of family bonds helps people weather difficult times in the refugee camp. Kao draws a lot of support from being surrounded by a loving family, which further contributes to the idea that true love is more familial than romantic. Despite these happy memories, Kao's childhood as a refugee is also marred by sickness and filth—Chue's obsession with bathing her children indicates that she's developed anxiety (and perhaps even obsessive behaviors) around cleanliness, which speaks to the mental toll of living in filth.


When Dawb is two, she gets polio. Youa prays to the spirits, offering them a chicken, and Dawb survives—though one of her legs goes limp forever. After Dawb recovers, she stops listening to her parents and often acts out. Kao is calmer and happier. From 1980 to 1987, about 40,000 people live in the camp together, just waiting. Like the other children, Kao dreams about having a pink doll, a bicycle to show that she's not poor, and a boiled egg to eat (instead of the usual rice and fish). They get rations of moldy-smelling rice and dried fish three times a week. Kao craves sweets, but ration days are still good days.

Dawb's continued struggles with illness show the lifelong damage that victims of war and persecution often experience—and her physical struggles seem to affect her emotional development as well. The refugees must live on meager rations, and children in the camp dream about food, which underscores how malnourished everyone is; this is almost certainly a factor in Dawb's poor health. The experience of perpetually waiting for rations is also deeply disempowering and dehumanizing.

Sometimes, the older kids in the camp climb trees to eat fruits that make them sick—they know that they'll get in trouble for, but they do it anyway. Other kids find a coin in the floor and buy rotten fish noodle soup. They pee on their hands to hide the fish smell, so that they won't get in trouble. Twenty years later, when Kao closes her eyes, she remembers the camp in vivid detail. It's dismantled now, and she wonders what happened to the unmarked graves of those who died in there. She imagines their spirits blowing through the grass. When Kao smells grass and water, she always remembers the camp. It was the last place her whole extended family were together.

The refugee children's obsession with food further underscores how hungry they are most of the time. Even though one might assume that being sent to a refugee camp would mean that people are protected and cared for, this clearly isn't the case for Yang's family and the other thousands of people in Ban Vinai. The way Yang frames her memories of those who died in the camp also speaks to the Hmong people's belief that their spirits will be unable to unite with their ancestors (who are buried in their homeland), and that this means they'll be doomed to wander alone (or blow through the grass) wherever they die. In this way, life in exile—away from their homeland—causes the Hmong people spiritual anxiety as well as practical hardships in day-to-day life. Yang's happiest memories always center on times when her family is together, showing that her notion of love centers on family bonds.

Kao vividly remembers being six years old in the camp. She knew even then that there were places she wasn't allowed to go, and she remembers children sneaking outside the camp to forage for food and being beaten by Thai soldiers when they were caught. Kao remembers the sound of her grandmother's flip-flops on the floor; the feeling of cement by well she bathed around; the heat and the dirt; and most of all, the adults' cries as they buried their dead. Whenever Kao heard crying, she'd run into her mother's lap to feel safe.

Even though Kao is very young, she knows that she's not free, as she grows up feeling like she's caged in. She and the other refugees were treated cruelly by the soldiers and were forced to live in dirty conditions and stifling heat, all of which contribute to the Hmong people's disempowerment and dehumanization. Yang's memories of adults mourning also paints the camp as a place filled with death and grief, which compounds the demoralization that comes with being a refugee.

Kao remembers the illness and disease—she could only drink water after Youa and Chue boiled it. As a kid, Kao feels like the camp is surrounded by magical walls that let others pass through but keep the Hmong inside. She grows quiet when adults talk of beatings, rapes, and death, or when they long for Laos. She's not tall enough to go to the camp's school yet, and time passes slowly while Dawb is in school. Other children tease Dawb and call her a cripple, but she never stops wanting to run and play. Life is hard in the camp, especially for the adults—but to Kao, it's home.

The refugee camps are physically taxing places marked by poor sanitation, disease, brutal violence, and death. Furthermore, the feeling of being fenced in makes the refugees (the adults in particular) suffer emotionally and feel demoralized. Yang mentions all of these hardships to question why refugees are treated with such inhumanity, particularly given that they're victims of war.

Kao thinks warmly about playing with her cousins and running into Youa's arms. The children play games, pretending that soldiers are shooting them, and then they sing songs, playfully urging each other to get up to run away. Youa likes Thailand—the family is poor and there's no work, but they're together, and the war is in the past. Youa refuses to let her sons register to leave the camp for faraway places like Australia and France. The Thai soldiers even let her leave the camp sometimes to perform rituals for their families—these outings are like grand adventures.

Kao's relationship with Youa forms the overarching love story in the book, which reinforces the idea that Yang thinks familial love is far more powerful than romantic love. Youa's hesitance to allow her sons to separate also emphasizes the importance of family bonds in the story. Youa continues showing her adaptability and resilience—even in a refugee camp, she finds a way to earn a living and support her family, showing that she's a true leader. The men in her family, meanwhile, feel disempowered by their lack of freedom and inability to move forward with their lives. Yang subtly suggests that women like Youa are actually stronger than men in Hmong culture, despite the fact that it's structured in a patriarchal way (meaning that the men are traditionally more powerful or more respected).

Youa is always busy gathering plants and selling her remedies. Kao loses her baby weight, becoming thin and skinny, and she has trouble urinating. Chue and Bee worry about Kao, so Youa takes Kao on a shamanistic walk with ritual items in the misty dawn to cure her. Kao walks behind Youa, avoiding the streams of excrement and urine in the camp, trying to pee.

Youa continues adapting and thriving, emphasizing her resilience and leadership. Meanwhile, Kao's childhood as a refugee is saturated with memories of filth, excrement, malnutrition, and illness. The camp is squalid and nearly unlivable, which begs the question of why victims of a genocidal war—like Kao and her family—aren't given better living conditions.

Kao hears traditional Hmong stories about life outside the camp, and they let her travel in her mind to places she can't go. In one story, a beautiful girl named Yer goes to the jungle surrounding her village and a magical tiger kidnaps her. The tiger keeps Yer in a cave and feeds her; he won't let the other tigers to bring her food. One day, a handsome young man goes looking for Yer, and she's the most beautiful Hmong girl he's ever seen, though her eyes are full of fear.

Kao relies on stories to experience a sense of freedom, which she's denied from as she lives behind fences and walls. The story of Yer and the tiger metaphorically represents Kao's feeling that she lives as a captive (like Yer does), and it implies that it's cruel and unnatural to keep human beings fenced in—especially when they're victims, not aggressors.

The young man doesn't know that Yer is pregnant with the tiger's babies. He blocks up the cave to trap the tiger, and he takes Yer home to be his wife, where she gives birth to three tiger babies. One day, the young man kills Yer's baby tigers and cooks them. When Yer realizes what the young man has done, she cries and cries. Kao feels bad for the tiger in the story—it makes her sad to think of it trapped in a cave, so she imagines the tiger being strong and living forever. There are no tigers or jungles in the refugee camp; Kao's memories of the camp feel like a contained life with the people she loves.

The story of Yer and the tiger juxtaposes romantic union (between Yer and the young man) and family bonds (between Yer and her children). As before, Yang suggests that the family bond is more important. As a child, meanwhile, she empathizes with the tiger because she feels trapped in the refugee camp. Even her happiest memories are shrouded in a feeling of being held prisoner, exposing the mental angst that life in captivity causes—even for children who have never known anything else.

CHAPTER 5: THE SECOND LEAVING

Youa is angry when Bee wants to leave the camp for the United States. Bee thinks that there's no future for him in Thailand—the Thai people don't want the Hmong there, and they have no home to go back to. Bee's brother Nhia left for the United States already, and Youa cried at her family being separated. Youa pleads with Bee to stay; she worked hard to keep their family together, through the jungle years and the war. Youa doesn't want to leave Thailand and start a new life—she'd rather die. She doesn't think that her spirit will be able to unite with her children after death if they live so far away.

The immigrant experience will shape Kao's family's experiences and hardships for the rest of the story. Already, it's clear that immigrant life entails separating families, which causes emotional suffering—Youa's anger and grief, in particular, show how troubled she is by her family separating, underscoring the importance of family in Hmong culture. Family separation causes the Hmong spiritual worries as well: they believe that they need to remain physically close in life to stay connected in the afterlife.

Youa grows depressed and walks aimlessly around the camp. She's spent her life keeping the family together—if they separate, her life has no meaning. Bee feels that the Hmong people are frozen in time in the camp; they can't even bury their dead properly to ensure their spirits return to their ancestral lands. He knows that the Thai people want to shut down the camp and send the Hmong back to Laos, which means death. Bee tells Kao that she can become educated in the United States, and he imagines Chue birthing brothers for Kao and Dawb. So far, Chue has had six miscarriages. Kao thinks of them as babies who fell from the **clouds** too soon.

Youa's depression at the thought of her family separating continues to emphasize the importance of family connection in Hmong culture: it's been Youa's life's work to keep her family intact through war, genocide, and exile. This also reveals how much of a leader Youa is for her family, despite the Hmong's patriarchal values (as evidence by Bee's desire to bear sons rather than daughters). The Hmong's anxieties about burials emphasize that being separated from their ancestral lands makes them worry about suffering after death. Meanwhile, Kao invokes the metaphor of clouds once more, in reference to the babies that Chue has lost. To Kao, clouds represent a kind of spiritual paradise where unborn children are free, in stark contrast to life in the refugee camps.

The miscarriages have made Chue thin and pale. Kao has no memories of Chue smiling in the camp—she only remembers Chue taking care of her and Dawb, washing them with soap. One night, Bee has a nightmare that he and Chue are old in the United States. In his dream, Chue hasn't birthed any sons; when Chue and Bee die alone, their spirits wander through endless American highways, unable to return to their homeland in Laos. Kao doesn't like that Youa has been pushing Bee to find a second wife so that he can have sons.

The poor sanitation, malnutrition, and stress of life in the camp likely contribute to Chue's miscarriages. Meanwhile, this passage hints at an undercurrent of patriarchy that runs through Hmong culture: Chue feels excessive pressure to bear a son, which makes her unhappy and stressed. Bee also feels anxious about not having a son. Bee's dream expresses this fear, and it also explains why the Hmong are hesitant to emigrate: they worry about dying far away from their ancestral lands and their spirits being lost forever.

Sometimes, while Chue gathers onions to sell from her small plot in the camp, Bee dresses in his best clothes and takes Kao with him to court other women, so that he can have a son. There aren't many men in the camp, so there are many eager candidates. Kao thinks that the women are loud, and she hates them. Chue is smart, so she knows what Bee's up to—she warns that she'll leave him if he takes another wife. She loves him dearly, but she learned how to survive without him in the jungle.

Bee's and Chue's relationship is tested when Bee caves in to the patriarchal values of his culture—he feels such strong pressure to have a son that he's considering finding a second wife. Despite this undercurrent of male-centric culture, Chue reveals herself to be strong, intelligent, and pragmatic, and she's not afraid to leave Bee and she knows she can survive without him. By sharing this anecdote, Yang is perhaps hinting that she thinks Hmong women often handle pressure and stress better than the men do.

Kao knows that Chue and Bee love each other, and she hopes that they feel happy having two daughters even though they long for sons. But she also understands that the family draws strength in numbers—the Hmong people believe that a large family team helps survive hardships like war, and four is a small number for them. Kao doesn't mind though; she thinks four people make a nice family photo. In 1987, they leave the camp for the United States. All Kao remembers is Youa crying.

Yang continues highlighting that Hmong society is patriarchal: families favor having sons over having daughters. Family bonds in general are also important in Hmong culture, because they give people strength and support in hard times. In celebrating familial love (just after describing Chue and Bee's marital problems), Yang again underscores that familial love is more important than romantic love.

Kao's family knows that they all have to leave the camp eventually. When Bee, Chue, Dawb, and Kao board the bus to leave the camp for the United States, Youa cries and cries. She tries to sound strong as she tells Kao that she's prayed to the spirits to let them return to her—if not in this life, then in the next. The Hmong people in the camp sing a song that wishes for them to be reunited. Chue is calm, but Bee is agitated; he promises Youa that he'll see her again. When the bus takes off, Kao feels hot, but no tears come.

Youa's crying in this passage highlights the mental suffering that refugees experience when they're separated from their loved ones. Kao's parents are forced to make a difficult decision here: they're choosing to give their kids a safer and healthier life in the U.S. at the expense of being far away from their extended family and their ancestral homeland. The Hmong people's songs center on reunions, reinforcing the idea that close-knit family units are cherished and deeply valued in Hmong culture—both in life and after death.

CHAPTER 6: PHANAT NIKHOM TRANSITION CAMP TO AMERICA

Kao is mesmerized as the bus travels through rice paddies; it's her first time in a car, and she feels like she's watching a movie screen through the window. She thinks that they're on the road to the United States—when they arrive at another camp, fenced in with barbed wire, her heart drops. Everything looks dry and hard. Looking back, Kao imagines the Hmong as fertile and growing people, like the lush jungle. She imagines the Hmong being pushed together and pulled apart in Phanat Nikhom—as if their trees are being cut down and new seedlings are being planted.

Kao's is deeply disappointed when they at arrive at another camp, surrounded by fences and walls, which stresses the mental anguish that refugees feel from being perpetually caged in. Yang continues stressing this point to show that treating people like caged animals is cruel and inhumane. By contrast, the imagery of the Hmong people as a lush jungle shows how inhospitable and prison-like the camps are, disrupting the Hmong people's lives and families like trees being cut down.

The adults at the camp look at one another and at the long cement houses with tin roofs that house multiple families. They're assigned a room that used to be a toilet—it smells like the dreaded excrement that Kao hated in Ban Vinai Refugee camp. The adults try their best to clean up around their sleeping space. Kao has trouble sleeping that night; she eventually nods off and wakes at dawn, surprised to find herself in the crowded concrete building.

As before, the new refugee camp is defined by its filth: Yang's family even has to sleep in a former restroom. Living among human excrement is humiliating and causes a great deal of stress for the refugees. Even Kao—who's still a young child—feels the strain of the inhospitable environment, and she struggles to sleep.

Kao sees that Bee is outside, staring at the mountains in the distance. She skips over to him, noticing that the camp guard with a gun. She wonders if she should wave to him, but she concentrates on skipping towards Bee instead. Bee tells Kao that the mountains look like the ones where his father is buried, and Kao doesn't know what to say—she's never seen mountains before. A few days later, Chue wakes Kao up and tells her that she's going to school—in fact, the whole family is going to school.

Bee often stares at mountains, suggesting that he's thinking of his father's grave in Laos. He worries about being so far away from the place where his relatives are buried, in case his spirit can't reunite with them after death (according to Hmong beliefs). Kao continues noticing the barriers that keep her fenced in, like guards with guns, suggesting that the camp is similar to a prison.

Kao doesn't like school, which is in another cement building; she's scared. Dawb promises to stay by her side. Kao remembers a violent storm in Ban Vinai when she was nearly washed away by the mud. Dawb had limped over to her and pulled her out. At school, when the teacher starts talking, Kao falls asleep. The next day, Chue tries to get Kao to fall sleep earlier so that she'll stay awake in school and be ready to go to the United States, but it's no use. Eventually, the teacher suggests that Kao attend daycare instead, which is also held in a cement building. Kao longs for the bamboo huts in Ban Vinai, and for Youa.

Again, the camp is very prison-like: it's an endless row of cement buildings surrounded by a fence. Yang also highlights how poorly constructed such places are—Kao was nearly washed away in a storm at her last camp. As before, Yang thinks that it's unfair for refugees to be forced to live in such restrictive and unsafe conditions, as they can't be blamed for their situation.

The older children at daycare tell Kao to draw or write to pass the time. She doesn't know how to write, so she draws endless circles on pieces of paper, imagining all the stories she wants to tell about Ban Vinai. Time passes in a blur of heat and endless cement, and Kao is sad. The only escape from the sweltering heat is the medical building at the camp, which Kao hates even more than the daycare building. Here, nurses stick her with needles full of liquids that look like candy. Bee and Chue keep telling Kao to be good. Kao tries not to look angry so that the nurses won't hate her and will let her go to the United States.

It's mentally taxing it is to be so confined—even Kao, who's a young child, grows bored and depressed. Kao's response to the camp's nurses shows how strongly she feels her lack of freedom: she knows that her fate is in the hands of the strangers who are keeping her confined. Yang highlights the mental suffering that refugees endure—through confinement, boredom, and lack of autonomy—in order to question why human beings are subjected to such treatment in refugee camps.

The camps in Thailand are closing, so the Hmong people must either go to the transition camp or get sent back to Laos to die. Bee studies hard to pass the test that will allow the family to emigrate to the United States. He must memorize the names of many American soldiers; there are no questions about the 30,000 Hmong boys who died in the war for the Americans.

Yang reminds the reader that the only reason the Hmong people are in refugee camps is because of American intervention in their communities. The Hmong people are victims of war, which makes it even more cruel that they are imprisoned and forced to work for their freedom.

The family conspires to bring a reluctant Youa to the camp, so that she can follow them to the United States with Bee's cousin. Youa arrives, scowling and hurt, but Kao is thrilled—she runs into Youa's arms and hugs her belly tight. Youa feels like she turns into a child from the minute she arrives at Phanat Nikhom; there's nowhere to walk and no way for her to be useful. There are only endless cement buildings.

Kao has a deep, loving bond with Youa—their relationship seems much more meaningful that Bee and Chue's, which speaks to the idea that familial love is more substantive than romantic love. Youa's feeling of imprisonment underscores her lack of freedom in the camp, which negatively affects her mental state.

Kao is happy because she no longer has to go to daycare when she falls asleep in school. On those days, she meets Youa outside the classroom while other children learn to play and nap like American children do. Kao thinks that Youa will be happy to see mountains like the ones where Youa once lived, but they just make Youa sad. To Kao, the mountains seem like a magical, faraway place. Each day, she and Youa walk by the fence, and Kao is careful not to get cut by the barbed wire. Sometimes, Youa trades her coins for noodles with Thai vendors on the other side of the fence, and she and Kao sit and eat them in the hot sun.

Youa gets upset when she sees mountains, because they remind her that she's separation from her own ancestral lands in the mountains of Laos—which, in turn, worsens her anxiety about suffering after death if she dies far away from her ancestral home. The imagery of the fences around the camp remind the reader about how confined refugees feel, emphasizing how unfair it is for refugees to be confined in a prison-like space for events beyond their control—namely, the genocide that prompted the Hmong people to flee.

Meanwhile, one of Kao's uncles grows ill. Next to his bed in the medical station is a dying woman whose stomach is covered with plastic and flies; Kao learns that the old lady's intestines are falling out. Kao hates thinking about death—she doesn't want anyone in her family to die, and she begs them to live forever. They say that if she's good, they'll live with her for a long time. The old woman dies, and Kao's cousins dare one another to sneak into the funeral hut. Kao doesn't want to, but she agrees to hold Dawb's hand and be brave.

The refugee camps are places full of death and disease—it's unclear how the dying woman ended up with such a gruesome injury, but the flies covering her stomach emphasize the poor sanitation in the camp. Kao draws strength from her sister Dawb in facing this environment, emphasizing how family provides a source of strength and solidarity amid difficult circumstances. Again, this implies that familial bonds provide the strongest and most important form of love.

The dead woman's body is unremarkable. Suddenly, Kao hears someone calling her name, and she trips over. The Hmong believe that when a person falls in front of a dead body, the dead body takes their spirit away—indeed, Kao is sure that she can feel something leaving her body. Dawb urges her to get up, and they vow not to tell anyone what happened in the hut. That night, Kao swears that she can see the dead woman in the dark, coming for her spirit; she's terrified of the dark from that day on. She's also terrified of dying in Phanat Nikhom and being buried under pebbles next to the cement, stuck behind barbed wire forever, unable to meet her family's spirits in the mountains.

This traumatic exposure to death and suffering stresses how emotionally damaging the life in the camps can be, particularly for children. Kao's anxiety about the dead body taking her spirit away further stresses the Hmong's worry about dying far away from their homeland without access to proper funerals. They believe that these circumstances will trap their spirits and doom them to remain isolated from their ancestors' spirits, which adds to their mental burden.

Each day, Chue and Bee learn about life in the United States; they learn to make chicken sandwiches and practice fastening seat belts. Kao wishes that she could tell Youa about the dead woman, so that Youa can use her shaman skills to fight the dead woman and tell her not to take Kao's spirit—but Kao is too afraid to tell Youa what happened. Kao stops sleeping at night, and her parents worry. In the afternoons, Youa longs to be free from the barbed wire, and Kao longs to be free from the dead woman's clutches. Youa and Kao's spirits are lost, unsure of the way to freedom.

Despite her young age and limited understanding of her plight, Kao's childhood memories are bound up in the feeling of captivity. Yang likens the feeling of being trapped behind the walls of a refugee camp as similar to the feeling of being haunted, or mentally persecuted. This suffering is a cruel fate for victims of war who are essentially punished rather than protected and rehabilitated after traumatizing experiences.

The time Kao spends at Phanat Nikhom is full of fear. The last step to get out is passing the health examination—none of Kao's family members are worried about this. Kao does exactly as she's told, and she passes, but Dawb fails the test. The nurses say that Dawb's eyes are pink and must turn white by the end of the week, or none of them can leave. Dawb's eyes look white to everyone else, but Bee and Chue come up with a plan: a week later, Kao goes to the health examination Dawb's place. The nurses don't notice, and the family gets approved to leave. Kao can't wait to get out of Phanat Nikhom.

Dawb's ongoing health struggles show how children born in warzones often suffer lasting damage throughout their lives. Had Dawb not been born in such awful circumstances and experienced malnutrition and illness early on in life, she'd likely be healthier and happier. Kao's family's desperation to get out of Phanat Nikhom emphasizes how cruel and disheartening refugees' situation is.

Kao doesn't remember leaving Phanat Nikhom or saying goodbye to Youa. She thinks that perhaps this is because people don't remember places that teach them to be afraid. As the bus heads for Bangkok International Airport, Kao is happy that she's surrounded by other Hmong families. The bus is full of old people trying to blink away the past and focus on an unknown future; the saddest among them are those who have no family but are desperate to find people who care for them.

Kao is so overjoyed to finally be free that her happy memories about her release from the refugee camp override her sad memories about being separated from Youa. This shows how strong Kao's urge for freedom is, and how strongly her confinement as a refugee has impacted her—after all, her love for Youa normally trumps everything else.

CHAPTER 7: A RETURN TO THE CLOUDS

The Hmong refugees are in Tokyo airport, waiting for a plane to the United States. Kao looks around, taking it all in. The flushing toilet in the airplane mesmerized her, but she worried about urine falling onto people from the sky. Chue and Bee tell the children to stand still and to not stare too much; suddenly, Kao feels like she has to pee. Bee hands Chue the blue bag that the UN gave them, full of important papers saying that they're refugees of war, and he takes Kao to the bathroom. Kao asks, "What war?" Bee explains that the war was the time when everybody died, before Kao was born.

This chapter is called "A Return to the Clouds" because Kao imagines that moving to the United States will be like going to the clouds, which represent happiness, freedom, and empowerment. Already, however, it's clear that the immigration process is intimidating, and the family are out of their depth. In mentioning the war, Yang reminds the reader that the family's present struggles were thrust upon them by international events beyond their control.

Kao is happy to be with Bee in this clean, shiny place. She remembers when people came to Ban Vinai Refugee Camp to tell them to believe in God. Kao's family wasn't interested, because they have their own belief—in their ancestors. Kao doesn't understand why other people ask God for help instead of their ancestors. Kao decides that Bee is sort of like God to her.

Kao is mesmerized by the clean airport because it contrasts so sharply with the filthy refugee camps she's used to. Meanwhile, she reflects on how the Hmong treat their ancestors' spirits like deities, which reinforces the idea that moving so far away from their ancestral lands (where they believe their ancestors' spirits dwell) leaves the Hmong worried about their spiritual beliefs, and how they'll pan out in this new setting.

Bee can't find the bathroom. He says "excuse me" as politely as possible, just like he learned in the camp—but his voice seems to lose its strength when he speaks in English. Kao wonders if this happens to all Hmong voices. Bee is smaller than the other men in the airport, who just walk by. Eventually, a woman points out a sign with pictures of a man and woman. Bee says, "thank you," but the woman is already walking away. Bee's hand is hot, but he follows the signs and leads Kao to a room with flushing toilets. Kao's heart swells with pride—she feels confident that Bee can take care of her in the United States.

Bee is understandably anxious: he's in unfamiliar territory, he must speak a new language that he doesn't know very well, and he's experiencing culture shock. At the same time, he feels overwhelming pressure to be polite and grateful for the opportunity to emigrate. All of this takes a mental toll on Bee, and the emotional burden of managing new environments like the airport will deepen as he tries to adapt to a new life.

The family boards a plane from Tokyo to the United States. The officials made Chue and Bee sign a piece of paper that says they have to pay back the price of the tickets, $2,400 in total. Kao has never thought about money before, but she can tell that her parents are worried. Kao is hungry, but Bee says that she has to wait until the flight attendants give her some food. Kao's stomach growls, and she presses her face against the window, wondering if there are babies in the **clouds**.

Kao thinks that's she's travelling to the clouds—she assumes the United States will be a perfect, happy, empowering, and abundant place. But it's clear that the immigrant experience is full of challenges: Kao's family begin their new life massively in debt. The financial burdens that immigrants have to grapple with just to get started somewhere new are crippling, and they cause a lot of stress and hardship. Yang highlights this to encourage empathy for the difficult situations that immigrants—and particularly refugees—often face.

Bee explains that they're flying over an ocean. Kao wonders if it's the same size as the Mekong River that her family talks about all the time, when they discuss the endless crossing. Kao falls asleep until Chue wakes her up to eat some food: chicken with a sauce that looks like diarrhea. Kao doesn't want to eat it, but she copies Dawb, who's digging in. Bee and Chue whisper worriedly, and they don't eat. Kao thinks about how she and Dawb have short hair now. Their parents think that it will make them look progressive and help them fit in when they get to the United States.

Kao's parents worry about their children fitting in when they get to the United States. It's likely that constant, everyday efforts—like adjusting to different food, or trying to look different to fit in—will add up over time to increase the family's stress and anxiety. As before, Yang hints that the family's new immigrant life will be challenging and stressful.

The family lands in San Francisco. Kao notices a couple kissing intimately in the airport—she's never seen anything like that before. Chue pulls Kao aside and explains that they'll see many things they haven't seen before, but they must not stare. Chue scans the room carefully and looks a bit overwhelmed. The family boards another plane for Minnesota. Kao wants to know how long the plane ride will be, but Bee and Chue don't know. Chue wants to know where they'll live, and Bee tells her that they'll figure it out when they get off the plane. Kao tries to be patient, though she can't wait to get there and take a bath.

It's overwhelming for immigrants to arrive somewhere with completely different norms, values, and customs. The family must grapple with making sense of new ways of doing things and also police their own behavior (like staring) so that they don't offend others, which adds to their mental burden. Meanwhile, Kao's preoccupation with being clean stems from the filth she endured in refugee camps—much like Chue was fixated on bathing Dawb and Kao in the camps.

The plane lands in Minnesota on July 27, 1987. Kao can't remember all the details, but she remembers being exhausted, and how the cool wind blew around her face. Bee's brothers Nhia and Uncle Chue (who arrived a week ago), as well as Bee's best friend and their families, are at the airport. The adults cry and hug one another. Bee, Chue, Kao, and Dawb will live with Nhia. They drive off in a Subaru, and Kao feels safe and warm. She notices the wind and the lights at night, and she feels like she's arrived in a place beyond perfection.

As before, Yang continues to stress that familial love is of the utmost importance. Here, the family draws strength and comfort from one another, emphasizing how empowering and comforting family bonds can be. Kao continues to believe that she's arrived in a perfect place—like the clouds mentioned in the chapter's title, which represent freedom, happiness, and empowerment.

The floors were in Nhia's house are smooth and clean. The family talks for hours about the future, the past, and all the places in their lives: the camps, Laos, and the United States. Kao's cousin gives her a bath, and Kao is mesmerized by how clean the bathroom is, and by the beautiful smell of Head & Shoulders shampoo. She thinks that she'll take long baths for the rest of her life. Kao washes off the smell of Thailand and falls asleep cuddling Dawb, feeling that the clean smell is magical.

Kao is welcomed into a clean, sanitary environment for the first time in her life. Kao's feeling that cleanliness is magical highlights how squalid and inhumane her previous living situations were in comparison. With this, Yang subtly questions why people should have to endure unsanitary environments like refugee camps at all.

CHAPTER 8: BEFORE THE BABIES

Kao's family's apartment in Minnesota is at the McDonough townhouses, which were built for returning World War II soldiers. Now they house soldiers from a different war, who aren't returning to their families, but living as remnants of their families. The low-income house is small and faded but clean. Thrift store clothes hang on rods in the bedrooms; there's a black and white television in the living room. There's a rice cooker in the kitchen, one of the family's proud early purchases. Kao imagines that the grassy hills are the mountains where her ancestors are buried. Thailand—and the endless waiting—seems more and more like a dream.

Yang reminds the reader that her family is in their situation as new immigrants because of the war, reinforcing the idea that the challenges they will endure as immigrants (like they hardships they endured as refugees) have been thrust upon them because of events beyond their control. Yang also highlights the family's poverty in mentioning their thrift store clothes. In comparing the hills to Laos's mountains, Kao subtly reminds the reader about the Hmong people's spiritual concerns. The Hmong worry about dwelling in environments that are far away from their ancestral lands, from which they draw spiritual strength.

Kao's family are among a large wave of over 90,000 Hmong refugees who settled in the United States in the 1980s. Despite living in houses now, their lives haven't changed much—people vandalize their building and shout at them to go home. The family tries to be invisible and avoid Americans, but Chue and Bee know they must find work. Chue walks everywhere quickly and nervously. Youa lives in California now. Dawb and Kao desperately want to see her, and they cry when Chue and Bee tell them that they don't have enough money to see Youa. Youa cries too, but the adults promise to see each other one day. Looking back on this time, Kao remembers phone calls and salty tears.

This passage shows how immigrants often have to deal with hostility and prejudice from non-immigrants when they settle somewhere new. Their experience is also largely shaped by family separation and poverty, as captured by the fact that Yang's relatives are scattered across the United States and can't afford to reunite. All ofthese burdens place an immense mental strain on Yang's family.

Kao starts having vivid dreams about dollar bills—money feels like a wall that keeps her away from Youa. The family's welfare check is $605 every month. It goes toward rent, gas, soap, and community dinners, which the Hmong hold to plan for emergencies, knowing that they'll need to lean on one another if things get bad again. The days pass as the family watches soap operas on the television, trying to be invisible in the United States. At night, the adults talk about money, finding work, and surviving in the United States. The conversations make Kao drowsy.

For Kao, poverty becomes a new form of confinement—like the fences around refugee camps—that separates her from people she loves (like Youa). The family also continues to face from the local population; together, all of these burdens cause the family a lot of anxiety and stress.

Kao remembers her first summer in the United States as a time full of things she couldn't do because there was no money, intermingled with the smell of used clothes from church basements. Chue and Bee say that the clothes represent a path out of poverty and a happy future. Kao feels the weight of the journey ahead. Even though there's no money, Chue lets Kao and Dawb buy ice creams from the ice cream truck that passes by, because she can't stand to see them go without while they watch other children eat ice cream. Kao imagines her parents standing on a highway bridge with nowhere to go.

The family's poverty is deeply restrictive: Kao feels like her family must leap through huge hurdles to overcome their financial woes, just like they did when they were trying to escape life in refugee camps. Kao's image of her parents trapped on a highway bridge emphasizes that poverty is just as restrictive as walls and fences: it confines the family and prevents them from achieving the empowerment that Kao imagined they'd find in the United States.

As autumn approaches, Chue stops talking about money and starts talking about getting Kao and Dawb educated. She thinks that they must learn about being American and about the possibilities for their lives that lie ahead. A cousin takes them to register at Battle Creek Elementary School, where a woman asks Kao to recite the alphabet—but Kao only knows the first three letters. She just smiles politely when the woman asks her things she doesn't know. Dawb recites the full alphabet, but she can't count in English, so she offers to count in Hmong or Thai. The woman registers Kao for first grade and Dawb for second grade.

In addition to grappling with a new environment and their poverty, the whole family must start from scratch with their education and learn a new language. Kao and Dawb are behind in school, and Chue and Bee can't find work until they gain language skills and qualifications. All of this sets them back significantly in life, making it harder for them to achieve the stable footing they're striving for in their new home.

In their first week at school, a boy comes up to Kao at recess and pushes her to the ground. Before she can get up, Dawb jumps on him, yelling at him in Hmong to stop being mean. The teachers expel Kao and Dawb. They try to go to a few other schools, none of which will keep them, and they end up at North End Elementary School, in a classroom full of Hmong kids of all ages from the refugee camps. A Hmong man helps to translate what the teacher says. One day, the teacher reads aloud from the book *Mrs. Nelson is Missing*—it's the first book that makes Kao cry.

Hostility and prejudice toward immigrants, as expressed by the bully at school, can negatively affect immigrants' progress. The prejudices that the Hmong children face force them to be schooled separately from non-immigrant children, which only deepens the divide between them and their American peers. The fact that the other children in Kao and Dawb's class are also ex-refugees suggests that the hardships of being a refugee continues to affect people long after they attain freedom from refugee life—all of them are in the same boat, unable to fully integrate into an English-speaking culture.

One day, Dawb chews gum in class, and the teacher grabs Dawb's arm hard enough to leave a big bruise. Chue and Bee say that they can't do anything about this—the children must follow the rules if they want to survive in the United States. Dawb grows scared of school, but Kao takes Dawb's place when they have to recite numbers, and nobody notices. Meanwhile, Chue attends night school, and she urges Bee to try for community college. Bee convinces his social worker that he's not afraid of work, but he wants to study English and integrate into society better. Eventually, the social worker agrees. Bee goes outside and stares at the hills as if he's staring at the mountains in Laos, where his father is buried.

In addition to the hardships the family faces with language, education, and access to work, they must also constantly watch their own behavior. Bee feels immense pressure to constantly express gratitude for the chance to be living in the United States, and the children must tolerate abuse at school so as not to jeopardize their new immigrant status. Meanwhile, Bee searches for a connection with his homeland, and he worries about being far away from his relative's graves, which he believes connect him to his ancestors' spirits. In this way, immigrant life tests Bee's spirituality, which adds to his emotional burden.

Another summer passes. Chue and Bee miss Laos, which they talk of fondly. Kao thinks of Laos as their country, and Thailand as hers. The United States should be theirs, but they feel lonely, lost, and struggling for future happiness. Kao still misses Youa desperately, but she's getting used to the pain. Meanwhile, Dawb moves up to third grade, in a class with white students. The doctors give her special shoes that stops her limp, and she does well in school—things are looking up for Dawb in the United States. Kao struggles with speaking English, but she likes writing better. She writes lots of letters to Youa in California.

Although Kao anticipated that the United States would be a perfect place full of happiness, the family is struggling to feel at home in their new environment. This feeling of not fitting in, or not being at home yet, also adds to their mental burden as they attempt to assimilate. Despite these worries, the children are beginning to adapt, suggesting that their attempt to feel at home isn't unattainable—it's just harder than it initially seemed. It takes time, patience, and a lot of effort to fit in somewhere new.

At a parent-teacher conference, Kao's teachers worry that Kao rushes through all her work and doesn't talk much in class. Chue and Bee are surprised, since she talks a lot at home, but Kao explains that she doesn't have a voice in English. Kao's shyness when speaking English also makes it difficult for her to make friends at school. The whole family tries to help her with reading, and eventually, she starts writing short stories.

Although Kao's parents struggle more than their children with their language barrier, it still affects Kao and Dawb's progress at school and in their assimilation more generally. Kao's language barrier affects her confidence: it makes her anxious about participating in classes and speaking with other children.

Kao's first short story is called "The Watermelon Seed." It's about a watermelon seed that knows it will be eaten, so it tries to stop growing, but it can't. The watermelon makes a wish to the moon for one of its seed to fall out, so that when it dies, a part of it will remain. When the watermelon is cut open, all its seeds fall out and blow far and wide to live in the world, just as the watermelon wanted. When Kao's teacher grades the story, she writes that Kao isn't bad at English—she just won't speak it.

In emphasizing her writing aptitude, Yang (Kao) lets the reader know that she struggles primarily with speaking. This emphasizes how difficult it can be for shy or anxious people to gain confidence with communicating verbally in a new language—and how this struggle makes them even more anxious in turn. Kao's story about watermelon seeds scattering far and wide mirrors her family's experience as immigrants, scattering from their homelands to disparate places.

As time goes on, Kao's family eats more American-style food, and the Hmong families in the neighborhood start taking up hobbies like fishing or soccer. Kao's family starts watching wrestling matches on television—it becomes their family bonding activity. The extended family gathers for meals at Nhia's house on wrestling nights, because Nhia has a color television. One night, Bee tries to walk Kao and Dawb home from Nhia's house and gets lost in a snowstorm. Eventually, Chue opens the door to find him standing there, like a puddle of wet rags "on the doorstep of America."

An important part of immigrants feeling at home in a new culture entails adapting to new social habits and customs. As the Hmong families learn to socialize in ways that Americans would, they begin to feel more comfortable. But despite their progress, the imagery of Bee standing on America's "doorstep" stresses that Yang's family is still only in the beginning of their journey to assimilate into American culture.

Kao knows that her family escaped a terrible war to be in the United States—everyone says how lucky they are to be here. Kao, however, feels that life is hard in the United States: she watches her parents struggle, and she feels it. She tries to fit in at school, and she feels it. Sometimes, it feels sad to be a Hmong person in the United States.

Parents and children alike struggle with fitting in to a new culture, and this takes a toll on their mental health. The pressure to assimilate seems to be triggering sadness, loneliness, and anxiety in Kao—all of which could have serious effects on her mental health in the long term.

CHAPTER 9: COMING OF THE SON

Kao is nine years old, and she's thrilled because the family has finally saved enough money for Youa to visit them in Minnesota. Kao thinks that money is monstrous, like a wall, but she's proud of her family for battling it. The extended family heads to the airport to greet Youa in an excited babble. When Youa doesn't show up, they grow worried, knowing that Youa doesn't speak English. Eventually, a flight attendant explains that there was some confusion with Youa's layover, but she'll arrive in the evening. The day drags on, and finally, the plane lands. Kao can barely contain her excitement.

Contrary to what Kao's family believed immigrant life would be like, their scattering around the U.S., and the poverty that keeps them separated, are profoundly restrictive—like the walls that keep refugees fenced in and separated from their loved ones. Youa's inability to speak English makes her journey a difficult, showing once again how taxing a language barrier can be for adults (who generally don't pick up new languages as easily as children do). The excitement and anticipation that the family feels about Youa's arrival show how strongly they value family bonds.

Kao's family eagerly watches the passengers disembark—the last passenger is Youa in a wheelchair, looking unrecognizably old. The family crowds around, all trying to hug Youa. Kao cries like she never cried before and hugs Youa desperately through her tears. Youa has a string of index cards with English statements like "please give me some water" written on them, and Kao's tears stain them—but Youa doesn't mind. Youa says through her tears that she thought she would never see the family again.

Youa's index cards highlight how difficult it is for adults to navigate new environments when they can't speak the language (and are perhaps too old to learn a new language, like Youa may be). Kao's outpouring of love for Youa emphasizes how strongly she values this bond—it seems to be the most profound forms of love in Kao's life.

Youa doesn't like escalators because her skirt got caught in one once, so they take the elevator to the baggage hall. Kao is proud of Youa for trying new things that are too fast for her, like escalators. Youa stays in Minnesota for the summer, and Kao spends long summer nights holding Youa's hand and spelling out her name on it. Youa spends many summers in Minnesota. Her parents struggle and try to be American, but Youa only speaks Hmong, and she smells like home. One summer day, the family goes to Bee's college to see him get his certificate. In the meantime, Kao and Dawb play a game outside, pretending that the Vietnamese soldiers are chasing them.

Youa's experience shows how difficult it is for the elderly in particular to adapt to new environments and technologies. Youa faces these challenges bravely, showing how strong and adaptable she is. Meanwhile, Kao begins to grapple with juggling her bourgeoning American identity (reflected in her parents' struggle to fit in) and her Hmong identity (reflected in Youa's character). Struggling to fit into both cultures will likely become another layer of stress that Kao must cope with. In mentioning the game with Vietnamese soldiers, Yang reminds the reader that the family's struggles were caused by events that were forced upon them. This encourages the reader to feel compassion for the family's situation as they weather the ongoing difficulties of assimilating into their new life.

Chue becomes pregnant, and the whole family hopes for a boy. Kao knows that they long for one, but she doesn't like talking about it—she remembers all of Chue's miscarriages in Thailand. Kao is happy to be a girl, and she knows her parents love her just the way she is. Sometimes, though, she aches from wanting to help Bee carry heavy rice bags the way a son would.

Hmong culture has strong patriarchal values that rank sons more highly than daughters, and the whole family struggles with these values. Chue feels pressure to have a son, and Kao feels that having a boy in the family would ease her father's burden.

On September 19, 1989, Chue gives birth to her long-awaited son. That year, Kao gets moved up to a class with mostly American children, though she has to go to a different room with no widows for "ESL" reading each day. Those reading hours feel like being locked in a closet, but Kao tries not make a big deal about them. There's another, more popular Hmong girl in Kao's class who's better at English. They compete often, and they don't like each other.

Kao begins to adapt at school and make up lost ground in her education—but at the same time, her struggles with English make her feel isolated. She feels jealous and inadequate and compares herself to others (like the Hmong girl) who seem to be coping better with speaking a new language and integrating socially at school.

On September 19, Kao has a bad day in school. When Kao and Dawb get home, nobody's there. They know that the government takes children away from their parents if children stay at home alone, so they go to their aunt's house next door, who explains that Chue is in the hospital. Kao and Dawb wait for hours until their parents call. Dawb excitedly exclaims that they have a brother now. Kao is shocked: she had no idea that her mother was pregnant. Her mind is full of questions—she wonders why a brother would want to join them in such hard lives. She also wonders what having a brother will do to her life.

Kao and Dawb's fear about staying alone at home indicates that they feel stressed and fearful about breaking rules in their new environment. In this way, they seem to feel like their position is somewhat precarious. They also fear government authorities, which is likely a lasting effect of the trauma they experienced at the hands of various authorities from their time as refugees.

Kao isn't sure if she'll like her brother. Until now, she's been like the son her father didn't have. She wants Bee to know that she's not sure about this idea at all, but he tells her she's a big sister now, and that this is amazing. Their aunt makes a special Hmong herbal brew for new babies, and Chue and Bee arrive home from the hospital with the baby, named Xue, in tow. Kao wants to hate him, but there's no hate inside her. Chue treats the baby delicately and fusses over him, but Kao doesn't feel jealous. Kao concludes that having Xue around won't affect how much Chue and Bee love her.

Kao worries about the extent to which her parents will favor their new child simply because he's a boy, which again emphasizes the Hmong's patriarchal values. Despite longing for a boy, Bee is wary about letting the male superiority in Hmong culture disempower his daughters. Kao instantly feels a familial bond with her brother that helps her overcome her fears, stressing once more that family bonds are powerful and deeply important.

That year, many of Kao's aunts and uncles have babies too; they're proud to have American babies who don't have to live in refugee camps and are far from the tragedy of war. Kao, like the adults, feels a strong sense of duty to make sure that Xue experiences a better world than what she's known. Meanwhile, Kao improves at every subject in school, except she still struggles with speaking English because she prefers to listen. Kao feels angry at herself for being embarrassed to speak English—the other Hmong girl doesn't seem to feel embarrassed.

Amid the hardships of immigrant life, Kao's extended family is happy that their new babies aren't stateless, because they're acutely aware of the needless suffering that such a plight causes. Meanwhile, Yang continues to highlight how limiting a language barrier can be to a person's progress. She notes that immigrants often feel motivated to make the world better for people in similar situations, which subtly clues the reader in to her own motivations for writing this book.


Kao and Dawb have to do the talking whenever her parents need to speak to Americans—like when they look for things in Kmart—because it's harder for their parents to speak English. Dawb usually does the talking, but if she's not around, Kao has to do it. She does so happily, because she doesn't want to watch her parents struggle and feel embarrassed like children. Kao realizes that other Hmong kids do the same thing. Kao starts speaking more English whenever she's angry, because she doesn't know enough bad words in Hmong to express her anger.

Immigrant children often have to support their parents in a way that non-immigrant children may not—especially when it comes to navigating language barriers. This is an extra burden that immigrant children have to deal with, as it makes them take on somewhat of a parental role in their families. Here, Kao wants to protect her parents from feeling embarrassed or inadequate, a dynamic that one might normally expect to be reversed.

One day, Bee and Kao are in the grocery store looking for diapers. Kao decides to be brave and ask the sales assistant where they are, but she speaks too quietly for anyone to hear her, so Bee steps in and repeats the brand name loudly. The whole family struggles to trust themselves when they speak English. Some of her older cousins make friends, go out, and start speaking English at home. The adults hold meetings to remind the children to be good Hmong kids, to speak Hmong at home, to speak English outside, to seize opportunities that the adults never had, and to remember how lucky they are to be in the United States, away from the war.

The grocery store incident highlights, as before, how difficult it can be to accomplish ordinary tasks when facing a language barrier, which can profoundly affect a person's confidence in everyday life. Immigrant children like Kao also feel immense pressure to succeed, and to seize opportunities that their parents didn't have, which adds to their mental burden.

Kao knows that American families don't have family talks about how to be better Americans, but she doesn't mind the meetings. She likes it when the family is all together. Kao realizes that the adults aren't sad about their own lives—they're sad about how hard life is for the children in the United States. The adults praise one cousin who's graduated from high school and is about to start community college, calling him a role model. Dawb tells Kao to work hard so they can go to the University of Minnesota, where smart Americans go. Kao stays silent—she's not even in junior high yet, so college is the last thing on her mind.

In mentioning the family meetings, Kao acknowledges that she notices how much extra effort immigrant families put forth to fit in, which seems unfair to her. The adults in Kao's family feel bad for having to put so much pressure on their children—but at the same time, the children feel the pressure, and it's often overwhelming. This dynamic creates tension within family units, and it takes a toll on parents and children alike.

Kao realizes that the family meetings expose the adults' dreams, and she feels heavy when she has to thank the adults for reminding her to be good. She knows that the meetings are more for the boys than the girls. Bee tells Kao and Dawb that it makes no difference if his children are boys or girls, but Kao wants to protect Xue from the pressure that she knows he'll face as a boy. Youa visits, and she's unemotional about meeting Xue. A year later, Chue gives birth to a girl named Sheelue, a name that nobody in Laos or Thailand would give to their child. Youa is also unemotional about meeting Sheelue—Kao wonders if it bothers Youa that she's not the one naming new babies anymore.

Kao feels "heavy," which implies that she feels stifled by the pressure her family members put on her to work hard and succeed. The Hmong culture's patriarchal values also mean that immigrant sons face the most pressure to succeed, an idea that Kao reinforces when she thinks about protecting her brother. In stressing Youa's unemotional response to her new grandchild, Yang also shows that being separated—as immigrant families often are—weakens family bonds.

The family has been in the United States for four years. Bee now has his community college certificate in operating machines, and Chue has passed her high school equivalency test. They start looking for jobs, so Dawb helps Chue works on her resume. Chue doesn't know how to describe her years in Laos and Thailand, where there was no work and no school. Chue and Bee are desperate for any work—the welfare lady makes them feel ashamed that they're still on welfare. They both get jobs in a factory in St. Paul; the work is tough, long, and loud. They miss working in a garden, and they worry about getting in trouble for leaving young children alone at home.

Chue's struggles with her resume is an example of how shows that the family's experiences as refugees continue to have lasting effects on their day-to-day lives. Despite the family's dogged efforts to overcome their language barrier, gain qualifications, and find work, they also have to deal with people shaming them for their low socioeconomic status. Dawb helping Chue get a job shows how immigrant children often step in to offer support with language and professional issues, which adds to their daily workload on top of school and trying to assimilate and socialize. And after years of effort, the only work that Bee and Chue can find are grim factory jobs, which highlights how grim and demoralizing immigrant life can be.

Dawb and Kao try hard to help around the house. Kao likes cooking, but she hates bathing Sheelue—she's always afraid that she'll drop her. The adults struggle with factory work, especially because many of them have shrapnel in their bodies from the war. They do "under the table" jobs to make ends meet. Meanwhile, they have nightmares about the war and dreams about being in Laos and meeting people they've lost. They get stomach ulcers and headaches. Despite all of this, they always say they're lucky to be in the United States—but Kao isn't convinced. Nevertheless, she sees how hard her adult family members work, and she can't bear to tell them that this isn't the life she wants.

Immigrant parents often have to work exhausting, underpaid jobs, and children often have to step in to support their parents with domestic chores. In addition to the demanding physical labor, many immigrants (particularly those from war-torn countries) have to grapple with the painful traumas of leaving their homeland and losing their loved ones. At the same time, they feel compelled to express gratitude for the opportunities they have, even if their lives are taxing and laborious. All of this adds up to a heavy physical and emotional burden.

CHAPTER 10: THE HAUNTED SECTION-8 HOUSE

Kao's family has moved to a small, government-subsidized house in St. Paul, in an English-speaking neighborhood. Kao has another sister now, named Shoually (an Americanized version of Youa). She came down from the **clouds** later than expected, on July 16, 1993. Dawb and Kao pay for their school lunches now, and Chue and Bee are paying off their debt to the airlines. When Youa visits that summer. Kao helps her with new things that she's not used to, like turning on the hot water and reaching for things on high shelves. Youa is happier to meet Shoually because this baby is named after her.

Although Yang has spent much of the book describing the hardships of immigrant life, she starts this chapter on a more optimistic note: the family is beginning to find their footing, though it's taken several years, and they're still in debt. Having recognized that life in the United States is harder than she imagined, Kao no longer equates her current life with "the clouds," which represent happiness, perfection, and empowerment. Instead, she imagines her baby sister falling from the clouds—from a place of perfection—to the reality of life in the United States.

Before the family moved into the house, Chue and Bee found an envelope under the attic stairs with a $100 bill inside. They didn't know why it's there. Kao isn't superstitious because she doesn't think are any ghosts in the United States like there were in Thailand—there's only church and science. But one day, she sees a little boy in her parents' room, running after her in a blur. Soon after, Dawb sees him too, and she chases him into a closet—but he disappears. Chue and Bee tell the girls that there's nothing to worry about—the ancestor's spirits are protecting them, and they're not intruders in this house. But then, Uncle Chue and Bee see him standing in the shadows. The boy grabs Bee and disappears; pain shoots through Bee's arm, and it feels like it'll break.

The fact that the family moves into a haunted house to reinforces the idea that Hmong people believe their ancestors' spirits protect them. In their belief system, their ancestors' spirits act like deities or gods—and this spiritual protection is strongest where their ancestors are buried, in Laos's mountains. Since Kao's family is far away from their ancestral lands, they assume that their ancestors' spirits can't protect them as effectively against the ghost.

Kao's family learns that a little boy died in the house. He didn't show up when Youa was there because her spirit had kept him away—now that Youa is gone, the family leaves money out to appease his spirit and burn incense. The next few months are uneventful, except for Dawb becoming a teenager and getting pimples. She tries to go out with friends and gets angry when she has to stay home and look after her siblings. Chue learns that her mother has died in Laos, and the stressful energy in the home is replaced by grief.

Yang's family believes that as the eldest family member and a shaman, Youa has the closest connection to their ancestral home and traditions, which makes them feel protected in her presence.

Dawb is the one who answers the phone when a family member phones to tell them that Chue's mother died. Dawb and Kao worry about how Chue will react, so they don't tell her. Later that night, Dawb whispers the news to Bee, who tells Chue. Chue tries to call her family in Laos but can't get through, so she just cries and screams for her mother into the telephone's dial tone. Kao feels sorry for the tough decisions that Chue had to make in wartime—loving Bee meant leaving her own family. Kao starts to understand why Chue and Bee work so hard to give them this life and its freedoms.

Chue's has an emotional crisis in the wake of her mother's death—she even questions why she left her mother to be with her husband, suggesting that familial love (and maternal love in particular) is much deeper and stronger than romantic love. Meanwhile, Kao still feels a lot of pressure to succeed, knowing that her parents sacrifice a lot as immigrants. She also suggests that her parents make these sacrifices out of love for their children, reinforcing the idea that familial love is incredibly powerful.

Chue cries every day, thinking about the last time she saw her mother, walking away into the jungle in Laos to fetch water. Chue feels that she has nothing left in Laos now. Eventually, another pregnancy distracts her from her loss. One night, while Chue and Bee are at work, the dead little boy emerges again. Dawb and Kao don't know what to do, so they bundle up the family and head outside into the snow until Chue and Bee come home to find them shivering outside. That night, Bee starts looking for another place to live.

Chue's profound anguish underscores how deep her love for her mother is—and her grief for her mother is also mixed up with grieving her homeland, which she feels more separated from every day. In this way, difficult experiences like grief are amplified for immigrants who live in exile, because they already feel a sense of loss in their day-to-day lives.

The family leaves the house without looking back. For Chue, it's a place of sadness, wrapped up in her mother's death. The others just want to get away from the dead boy. Kao tries to forget the haunted house, but she realizes that leaving doesn't mean forgetting—memories always live on in people's dreams.

Chue's grief is so profound that she wants to leave the place where she heard the news about her mother's death—again underscoring how strongly she feels familial love.

CHAPTER 11: OUR OLD MOLDY HOUSE

Kao's family has been in the United States for 10 years; Kao is 14, and Dawb just got her driver's license. They've been living in an apartment for some time, and it's bursting at the seams, so they look for a cheap house to buy. Dawb manages to negotiate the price down to $36,500. It's old and dilapidated, but they still marvel at owning a home—it feels like a miracle. The homes they owned in Laos are only fragments of memories now, which are disrupted by Hmong movies about Laos, memories of Thailand, and old legends like the story of Yer and the tiger.

The journey to financial independence is often long and arduous for immigrant families: it's taken 10 long years for Kao's family to become financially self-reliant. Immigrant children like Dawb often take on extra burdens in managing family affairs (like negotiating a house sale) that are challenging for immigrant parents with language barriers.

The house is small, but it has a living room, kitchen, den, and two and a half bedrooms. The paint is chipping, and it smells like mold. Chue wanted something better, but Bee, Dawb, and Kao think that it's a good house. Kao is excited because this house will live in future memories as the family's first piece of the United States. Bee says that someday they'll do better, when Dawb and Kao are educated and have good jobs—they're all waiting for that day to come.

The house is far too small for the family of seven, and the mold indicates that it's somewhat unsanitary. This underscores how, despite all their hard work, the family still have a low economic status. Bee's comment reinforces the idea that immigrant children face a lot of pressure to help their families succeed.

Dawb and Kao attend Harding High School, a multicultural inner-city school with many Hmong students. Kao has figured out a way to do well in school: she does her homework every day and always looks at the teacher in class, so that it looks like she's paying attention. Kao's body is changing, and she feels an urge to reinvent herself; high school feels like a time to glimpse into different worlds. This idea doesn't resonate so well with Chue and Bee.

As Kao enters her teenage years, she begins to feel the pressure of living in two cultures at once. Kao wants to assert her independence, like her American peers—but her Hmong parents feel uncomfortable with this, despite having urged her to try and fit it for years. In this way, Kao's adolescence is a delicate and taxing balancing act between managing the cultural norms in her school environment and the contrasting cultural norms she must adhere to at home.

Dawb and Kao dream about going the University of Minnesota and helping not just themselves, but all poor children. Dawb is a natural at school, but Kao struggles more because she's quiet. But in ninth grade, her literature teacher, Mrs. Gallentin, makes her feel like she's special. Kao realizes that she understands literature. She has to write an essay on whether Romeo and Juliet were in love or lust, and she writes about the love that she's seen—of people sticking together through hard times, through war, loss, and hardship. Kao decides that Romeo and Juliet never had the chance to get that far, and that love is hard to capture in literature, because real life is always more complex.

Even after a decade in the United States, Kao still feels shy about speaking English, showing that the language barrier continue to plague her. Meanwhile, the essay about Romeo and Juliet explicitly articulates Yang's argument about love, which is very different from the blind romantic infatuation that Romeo and Juliet feel. Instead, genuine love grows over time, and it evolves through commitment and mutual support.

Mrs. Gallentin tells Kao that the essay is beautiful, and she has a gift for writing. It's the first time Kao starts to believe what Bee always told her: that education can open up horizons beyond anything she's ever imagined. Kao is excited to tell Youa about this feeling of possibility, but that summer, in 1996, everything comes crashing down. The welfare program to help Hmong people is shutting down, and Youa doesn't have American citizenship. The situation reminds them all that the United States is not really their country—they're still refugees.

Kao is excited to tell Youa about her successful essay for two reasons: first, she loves Youa more than anyone else (emphasizing the importance of familial love). She looks up to Youa and seeks her approval, which suggests that despite Hmong culture's patriarchal norms, Youa is the true head of the family. Meanwhile, despite working for years to settle in the United States, the family's residency status is still uncertain—in this way, immigrant life is often precarious and anxiety-ridden.

Uncle Chue's family and Youa move to Minnesota when California shuts down their welfare program. They all study to take the exam for American citizenship but fail, so they keep trying. Bee and Chue worry about trying to become American and failing. They have no home to go back to in Thailand or Laos. Meanwhile, Kao learns about the Vietnam War in school, and she notices there is no mention of the Hmong people—it's as if they don't exist to American eyes. She burns with a desire to change the world so that the Hmong can belong somewhere without war, loss, and poverty. Bee understands: he tells Kao that patience will bring about change.

Yang continues to underscore the family's precarious residency status: even though they've already established themselves in the United States and they contribute to the economy, they're still not seen as legitimate citizens. Kao's school curriculum about the Vietnam War hearkens back to the American intervention in Hmong communities that her family experienced decades ago. This is the very situation that has caused the family's current hardships and precarious residency status, all of which Yang finds deeply unfair.

There isn't enough space for everyone, so Youa bounces around her sons' homes, sharing people's beds. Kao grows stressed and angry. She gets stomach cramps and can't eat, and she feels her chest tighten. Her heart feels divided—as if she has a Hmong heart and an American heart. One night, she starts shaking and feels like she's dying. She cries out, thinking that she's having a heart attack, but then it passes. The doctors say that her body is fine, but Kao feels like she's breaking.

In this passage, it's implied that Kao is having a panic attack. The pressure of trying to navigate bi-cultural identity is extremely stressful for immigrant youths like Kao, and it can cause lasting mental trauma and anxiety. Meanwhile, the fact that Youa doesn't have a bed of her own highlights the ongoing financial hardships that immigrant families face.

Youa grows worried, so she conducts shaman rituals and brews herbal concoctions to ease Kao's mind. One day, Youa gives Kao a silver charm bracelet with tiny elephants on it to protect her. Kao feels reassured and she starts to eat again. She decides that she can't change having a divided heart, so she decides to live with it. She decides that the two sides of her heart—the Hmong and the American—can help each other. The bracelet eventually breaks, but Kao keeps it in her purse. Even though she was a war child, she understands for the first time that her body is fallible and that she'll die one day, but she makes peace with this.

Kao's anxiety—from trying to be both American and Hmong at the same time—is truly debilitating. As before, her experience shows how immigrant youths face immense psychological hurdles as they're forced to balance two sets of cultural values—especially if they conflict, like Hmong values (which center on community and family) and American ones (which center on cultivating individual freedom).

Other Hmong families who work in factories buy small houses in Kao's neighborhood. They often drive by the mansions that Americans live in. They feel like they don't belong in big houses, but they're proud of where they are in their own journeys. Meanwhile, Youa's hair turns from grey to white. One day, she tells Kao the story of her scariest encounter: it was with a tiger in the jungle in Laos. In the story, Youa was gathering bamboo shoots when the jungle goes eerily quiet. Suddenly, she heard a growl and ran for her life, terrified of being eaten by the tiger—or carried off to be its bride, like in the story of Yer and the tiger.

The economic disparity between immigrant families and non-immigrant families implies that the poverty many immigrants may be inescapable—and that the boundless opportunity that immigrants dream about is unrealistic. It's unfathomable to the Hmong immigrants that they'll ever be able to attain the wealth of their non-immigrant neighbors. They continue to straddle an uneasy line between fitting in (by establishing themselves in a neighborhood) and feeling like outsiders (when they compare themselves to non-immigrant Americans).

Youa ran through the jungle in a panic. A blur of bamboo, dense foliage, and dirt flew all around her. Eventually, she came to a stop, covered in blood and sweat. She realized that her earlobe was gushing blood: it got caught on a branch and as torn in two. When Youa finishes her story, Kao reaches out and holds Youa's split earlobe together, thinking about how Youa outran a tiger to come to the United States. Another fall passes, and Kao emerges from the old, moldy house as a young woman who wants to be a writer. Inside the house, the mold continues to grow in the pattern of blood and tears.

Here, Yang shifts to focus on Kao and Youa's relationship. She wants to emphasize how strong their bond is, reinforcing that familial bonds are powerful and important—particularly for immigrants, like Kao and her family, who feel unmoored in their environment. Meanwhile, the mold in the house symbolizes the family's ongoing hardships, which never quite go away and always linger in the background.

CHAPTER 12: WHEN THE TIGER COMES

In 1999, Kao graduates from high school. Dawb has ended up at Hamline University, because the parking is cheaper than at the University of Minnesota. Kao hears about the prestigious Carleton College and applies, not expecting anything. To her surprise, she gets in. When her family drop her off at the dorms, she feels an aching sadness, but she eventually gets used to it. She learns many things, and her life becomes punctuated by visits home. Eventually, Kao starts collecting Youa's stories; she realizes that documenting Hmong lives is important because their stories have gone unwritten. Kao wants the world to know what it was like to be Hmong in the past and what it's like to be a Hmong American in the 20th century.

Dawb has to pick the college with the cheapest parking despite getting into better ones, which is a testament to how poverty continues to restrict her choices. This also implies that Dawb is commuting to college, likely so that she can save money and keep supporting her parents through their language barrier. Dawb's trajectory shows that immigrant youths often have to make tremendous sacrifices to help their families.

Kao grows more and more attentive to Youa on her trips home. Youa likes to keep her hands busy: she often sits by the window and mends clothes or cuts plastic bags into strips and weave ropes. She thinks that ropes are always important for tying things together. Her feet are wide, leathery and cracked, their crevices caked with years of dust from Laos, Thailand, and the United States. Kao likes to sit with Youa's feet in her lap and clip Youa's toenails while Youa tells stories—it's become a ritual for them.

Kao's relationship with Youa is the central love story in Kao's life so far—it eclipses any of her romantic inclinations, which are notably absent from the story. Through this, Yang continues to emphasize the importance of familial bonds. Youa also sees rope as a symbol of keeping things together, which speaks to the importance she places on retaining familial and spiritual bonds.

Youa tells a story about the time when her older sister fell under a nearby witch's curse and died. In the story, Youa's sister was a magnificent beauty who visited a neighboring village for a festival. The young girls played catch coquettishly with Hmong boys. The witch, who was jealous of Youa's sister's beauty, brewed a liquid made of bitter tears and threw it at Youa's sister. She went pale and died that night. Kao asks lots of questions, trying to figure out the times and places Youa remembers and asking if the Hmong people really knew witches.

Youa's childhood stories to educate the reader about Hmong folklore. It's clear from the story of Youa's sister and the witch that beliefs about magic (like witchcraft) feature heavily in Hmong culture. It also suggests that Hmong people utilize concepts like witches, spirits, and magic to help them cope with and process death.

Youa tells another story about an old woman in her village who turned into a tiger. In the story, Youa was a little girl, living in her village of 20 or so homes, in a safe and peaceful time. The children in the village peered through the split bamboo walls of a strange, lonely old woman's home in her village. Youa saw the old woman jumping from to stool and curling her hands like tiger paws—she was practicing to go into the jungle. One day, the old lady disappeared. Youa really believes that the old woman turned into a tiger.

Again, Hmong stories weave in magical or spiritual elements to help their communities process death. In this story, Youa imagines the old woman turning into a tiger instead of dying. This is an example of how Hmong culture interweaves magic, spirituality, and day-to-day life into one seamless picture of reality.

There are also things that Youa doesn't tell Kao—like how Youa's parents and siblings died. Kao wonders if their deaths are too painful to think about. Youa's parents and elder siblings all died by the time she was 13 years old, so Youa had to take over the family—including a newborn baby sibling—at a young age. She chewed rice into a liquid and fed it to the newborn, the way parent birds feed their chicks. Kao asks Youa if she ever went hungry as an orphan, and Youa replies that a person doesn't think about hunger if they've never known what being full feels like.

In carving out a picture of Youa's early life, Yang emphasizes that Youa was thrust into a parental role at a young age. Even in her youth, Youa is the head of her family, and she takes this burden in her stride, feeding her siblings and protecting them from harm. Through such descriptions, Yang reinforces the idea that Youa is a true leader.

Youa tells Kao about her marriage: in this story, Youa was still young and looking after the newborn and her younger siblings. Youa's cousin agreed to marry Youa off to an old widower who was addicted to opium but wanted a strong young woman to bear him sons, as he had no children. Youa cried and cried when she found out about the match—the whole village heard her crying, but it was no use. She knew that if her parents were alive, they would not make her marry the old man.

Hmong culture is deeply patriarchal, meaning that it tends to view men as authority figures in Hmong communities. Youa doesn't have the freedom to choose her life partner—she's forced to marry against her wishes, suggesting that women had little autonomy in Youa's time. Youa also feels pressure to have sons, much like Chue has throughout the book, reaffirming the idea that Hmong culture values sons more highly than daughters.

Eventually, Youa grew to love her husband, even though he was 52 and she was only 20 when they get married. He was wealthy compared to other people in the village: he had a full stable of horses and pigs, and he was incredibly generous. He always shared whatever he owns with others, especially orphans, and he was also a shaman. Youa tended their home while her husband performed rituals around the village. Youa thinks that she learned the beauty of kindness from him.

Youa wasn't romantically infatuated with her husband at first, yet she grew to love him over time. Their relationship stresses the idea that real love grows gradually over the course of a lifetime—in Yang's estimation, it has nothing to do with romantic infatuation.

Youa and her husband were married for 30 years before he died. She still misses that period in her life, when she could lean on him. Youa's sister was not so lucky: she married a Hmong man who lived on the border of Vietnam and Laos, and they disappeared in the thick of the Vietnam War. Youa wanted to have many sons and build a large, stable family—she had 10 children altogether, though her first child died as an infant.

In explaining how much Youa missed her husband after he died, Yang reinforces the idea that Youa's love for her husband was deep and genuine, even though it grew gradually. Meanwhile, Youa was clearly influenced by patriarchal values, as she focused on having sons rather than daughters.


Youa recalls the day her baby daughter died at one month old. Youa's older children looked after the sleep baby while Youa went to weed the garden. Suddenly, she heard the children screaming and returned to find a blue pig where her baby should be. Youa believed that evil spirits took her baby away. She cuddled the blue pig and tried to bring it back to life, but it died in her arms.

Again, Youa processed death by weaving in magical or spiritual elements into her explanations for why people die. As before, belief in magic and spirituality are closely interwoven into the Hmong's depictions of day-to-day reality.

Youa made a vow that none of her children would die in her arms again; she was afraid of death and goodbyes. That's probably why she became an herbal healer. Youa's husband became a shaman when he got very sick one day. The villagers believed that the spirits were calling him, and they sedated him with opium over and over again. A famous shaman explained that Youa's husband was being called by the spirits to become a shaman; when Youa's husband agreed to become one, his illness disappeared. Later, the same thing happened to Youa, and she became a shaman too.

Youa is strong and resilient: she responded to her daughter's death by vowing to protect her children, showing that she thinks like a leader and protector, rather than a passive victim, in her family unit. Yang strengthens this idea by showing how Youa began training for a career as a shaman, instead of limiting herself to being a caregiver for her children.

Youa tried to keep her family safe with her shaman skills, but she couldn't keep old age away from her husband. When Youa's husband was on his deathbed, he kissed his two youngest sons goodbye and closes his eyes. His body looked restful after death took hold. Youa started pulling her hair out from grief. Her husband died before the turmoil of war takes hold. Youa struggled to support the family after this, but she never let her children go hungry.

Although the Hmong typically consider men and boys as leaders in their communities, Youa managed to establish herself as a leader. She took care of her husband and her children, and she supported the family herself after her husband's death, suggesting that she was the true head of the family.

Kao is sitting by the window in the afternoon sun, holding Youa's feet in her lap as Youa tells these stories about her life in Laos. Kao doesn't know Laos at all, but she cherishes the stories. She pictures Laos vividly, imagining lush green foliage, beautiful hills, buzzing insects, and golden sunshine. Kao imagines Youa's smiling face as she wandered through this landscape as a child; she imagines herself holding Youa's hand, wandering with her, and seeing a tiger. Kao wonders if tigers linger in the jungle, waiting for the Hmong to return.

Yang continues weaving in loving descriptions of Youa, showing that Kao's bond with her is deep and profound. Yang utilizes vivid imagery of Kao and Youa holding hands to emphasize the depth of their connection. This reinforces the idea that Kao's familial bond with Youa is the central and most important form of love that Kao experiences—far more so than any romantic interests.

In retrospect, Kao thinks about Youa's death: Youa was the only person in Kao's family who died of natural causes. It's what everybody in the family has been struggling for, through the war years and the refugee camps: the chance to grow old, die peacefully after living a full life, and return to the **clouds**.

Clouds represent happiness, perfection, empowerment, and lasting peace. The Hmong believe that their deceased can only achieve peace after death (or, return to the clouds) through a series of complex funeral rituals. Kao's family worries about people who died in wars and refugee camps, because their families couldn't administer those rituals. The pain of losing loved ones is thus compounded by anxieties about those loved ones not finding peace in their afterlives.

CHAPTER 13: PREPARATIONS

Kao tries to prepare for Youa's death—she's never lost anyone she loved before, and death scares her. She's still haunted by the cries of people grieving the camps. Youa is afraid of dying in the United States, as she worries that her spirit will not be able to find its way back to her ancestors' spirits in Laos. Kao worries about this too. She lays awake at night, listening to Youa breathe, to reassure herself that Youa is still alive. Kao knows that things will never be the same after Youa dies.

Kao's fear of Youa dying emphasizes how much she loves her grandmother. Furthermore, Youa's fears about death highlight that the Hmong people's belief that their spirits need to travel back to their ancestral homes to unite with their ancestors' spirits. With this in mind, being so far away from the places where their ancestors are buried causes them spiritual anxiety about failing in this post-death journey and suffering after death.

One night, Kao sneaks into Youa's bedroom and creeps up close; she can't hear Youa breathing. Eventually, Youa exhales, and Kao sighs in relief. Kao wants Youa to see her graduate in a few months—Kao imagines Youa at graduation saying that Kao is making Bee proud. Kao imagines asking if Youa is proud, and then she pictures Youa smiling and saying women can do anything in the United States—they can even be more powerful than men. Meanwhile, Kao can tell that Youa is getting weak. Her appetite is waning, and her skin has grown translucent in her old age.

Kao's anxiety over Youa's worsening health emphasizes the importance of familial bonds in Hmong culture and in Kao's life more personally. In caring more about whether Youa is proud of her than whether Bee is, Kao shows that she thinks of Youa as the family's true leader. In this way, she implicitly questions Hmong's culture's emphasis on viewing men as the authority figures in family units.

Youa tries to prepare the family for her death. She talks calmly with Kao and Dawb about how she doesn't want a big fuss after she dies: no animal sacrifices and no big funeral. She just wants a good bed to sleep in, because she never had one in life. Kao wishes that she could buy Youa a new bed. Youa has dreams about waking up in Laos, where her husband's spirit waits for her; she always tells him that she can't go with him yet, because she has to look after her sons. Kao and Dawb just tell Youa that they love her. Kao wishes that she could protect Youa the way Youa always protected her.

Youa's preoccupation with death centers on her belief that her spirit needs to travel very far to reunite with her relatives' spirits in Laos. This suggests that living so far away from her homeland causes her spiritual anxiety. Even when Youa is about to die, she still thinks about protecting her children, reinforcing the idea that she's the actual head of the family—even though she has adult sons who would normally assume that role in Hmong culture.

CHAPTER 14: GOOD-BYE TO GRANDMA

It's January 2003, and Kao is in her last semester at college. Youa falls ill, but Kao's family tells her to focus on school. They promise to come and get her next weekend to see Youa. When Kao arrives, she Youa is lying in bed, sweating and struggling to breathe. Kao leans in close and tells Youa that she loves her; she begs Youa not to leave her over and over again. Eventually, Youa puts her hand up to Kao's head and tells Kao not to cry.

Yang builds up to Youa's death, which is the climax of the story. In doing so, she continues to emphasize how important Youa is to Kao. Their relationship speaks to the idea familial love is far deeper and more substantive than romantic love, which seems relatively unimportant to Kao.

Over the following weeks, the house is full of family members who gather around Youa. The doctors say that there's nothing they can do—Youa's body is old. The family tries to give her medicine, but they know it won't help. On February 13, Youa's body temperature drops. She goes to the hospital in an ambulance, and surprisingly, she responds to the medicine. Kao and Dawb take flowers to Youa at the hospital. The doctors suggest that Youa go home to enjoy her final days with her family which upsets Bee—he thinks that the doctors can do more, but Kao knows they can't.

Familial bonds are central to Hmong culture, as evidenced by how the entire extended family rallies around Youa. When she falls ill, her health becomes her loved ones' central concern. This also suggests that Youa is a very important family member—despite being a woman, she's is the true head of the family.

Dawb searches for live chickens to heal Youa's spirit. Youa loves birthdays, so Dawb also gets a cake, and the family decides to celebrate Youa's birthday early. They load up the cake with candles and crowd around her. Youa tells the family to always remember who they are and where they came from. Kao talks to Youa all night, trying to keep her awake. Youa is soothed by Kao's voice, and she eventually falls asleep. The next morning, Youa is unconscious. Kao comforts herself with the thought that the whole family is together under one roof, just as Youa always wished.

As Youa's condition worsens, the family puts their lives on hold to care for her, further illustrating how important and powerful family bonds are to the Hmong people. Even when Youa is unconscious, Kao fixates on her wishes, showing that she loves Youa dearly. Youa's wishes about her family being together under one roof also stress the central importance of family bonds in Hmong culture.

That afternoon, Bee tells Kao that she must return to school—but Kao refuses, and Bee gets angry. He asks Kao not to make this decision harder for him, and with tears in his eyes, he yells at one of the cousins to drive Kao back to college. Kao tells Youa that they'll meet again. Over the next three days, Kao calls every day, but Youa is still unconscious. On the fourth day, Kao's cousin calls to see how Kao is doing. Kao asks about Youa, and her cousin is silent. Kao knows. She has no words—there's only silence inside her.

Kao's desperate longing to remain by Youa's side shows how important this relationship is in her life—it overrides everything else she cares about, including school. The intense, lengthy, and vivid focus on Youa's illness and death emphasizes that Kao's love for Youa is stronger than any other form of love she's experienced in her life.

Youa dies on February 18, 2003 in an uncomfortable metal bed in a shabby house with thin walls that block out the light, far away from her homeland. She loved the bamboo houses in Thailand and Laos because they let the light filter through. Nobody knows exactly when Youa was born, though they estimate that she lived to be over 100 years old. Kao knows that Youa is on her long journey back to the mountains of her youth.

Yang's descriptions of the house remind the reader of the family's poverty, which adds to their stress in this difficult time. Because Youa dies far from her homeland, the family believes that her spirit's post-death journey to unite with her ancestors' spirits in Laos will be arduous, which also adds to their grief.

CHAPTER 15: WALKING BACK ALONE

Youa's funeral is at Metro Funeral Home; her body is dressed in traditional Hmong funeral wear. Kao is scared when she sees the body—it doesn't look like Youa anymore. There hasn't been a formal funeral in the family for a long time: the community couldn't have proper funerals in the jungle or the camps. Kao's family killed nine cows and 300 chickens, which will feed the whole community. Food is a big part of Hmong funerals, and the women work hard to prepare many special meals to feed the community over several days of rituals.

Funerals are clearly very important in Hmong culture, which explains why not being able to bury their dead properly during the war and in refugee camps caused them so much emotional suffering. The extravagance surrounding Youa's funeral also shows that despite valuing men more highly than women, the community respected Youa and thought of her as a central pillar of their community.

Kao bows her head while holding incense, to honor Youa. Bee and his brothers have asked an old Hmong man (who knows the traditions) to be the funeral guide. There's a drum with a dead chicken tied to it. Before she died, Youa said it was important to for her family to know the places she'd been in her life—now, Kao understands why. The guide places Youa's Alien card into her hand (she never did pass the citizenship test) and he gives her spirit detailed instructions to visit all the places she's lived, based on what the family told him.

The funeral guide's actions more fully illustrate the Hmong's spiritual beliefs. In placing Youa's documents beside her body and explaining that Youa's spirit will need them in the afterlife, the guide shows that the Hmong believe personal possessions are important spiritual objects. Being parted from personal possessions (as many war victims and refugees were) thus causes the Hmong extra angst and worry, because they believe that such losses will make their afterlives more difficult.

The guide tells Youa to make her way to California, the camps in Thailand, and then the Mekong River. Knowing that Youa can't swim, the guide gives her directions to a bridge that will lead her across the river into Laos. The guide assures Youa that the soldiers in Laos will not harm her. Then, he apologizes for not knowing the places she lived in the jungle, but he hopes that she will find her way. Then, the guide tells her how to find her way back to her village and the exact spot where she was born, where the placenta from her birth is buried.

In giving very detailed instructions to Youa's body for its post-death journey home, the funeral guide reveals that the Hmong believe deceased people's spirits travel just like living people do. This explains why they have a lot of anxiety about dying far away from their homeland, as the post-death journey home will take a lot longer.

Kao imagines Youa opening the door to her childhood home and seeing her parents there—they'll ask Youa where she's been and tell her that they've missed her. The guide starts chanting and the coffin is brought in (the best one that Bee and his brothers could afford). The guide explains that Youa's coffin is her horse, and it will carry her on her journey home. After the ceremony, the funeral home buzzes with 300 or so community members, who eat a feast. The funeral is a success.

The Hmong believe that when a person's spirit returns to their ancestral lands, it can reunite with deceased relatives who are buried there. For this reason, a close connection to their ancestral home is very important to the Hmong.

The next day involves more visits from the Hmong community. They talk about Youa's how rare and uncommon it is in these times for one Hmong person to have so many descendants; Youa was always proud that she had over 250 grandchildren. Kao imagines Youa walking amongst the crowd, relaxed and happy. Kao's uncle Eng delivers a eulogy: he explains that Youa was good to them. She managed to ensure that they all survived the war, and she was a woman who taught them how to be men. Eng plays a video with imagery of Youa spliced with Vietnam War footage from a documentary.

The entire community shows up for Youa's death, showing that she's not only the head of her family, but also a leading pillar of the community. In this eulogy, Eng acknowledges what Yang has been hinting all along: that despite the Hmong's emphasis on men in their communities, it's often women (like Youa) who end up being their communities' strongest, most competent, and most important assets.

Kao imagines Youa walking away with a basket on her back, her flip flops kicking up dirt. Kao cries from somewhere deep inside her, and she stays up all night looking at Youa's body. The ceremonies continue for another day, and the community marvels at the family's ability to give Youa such a sendoff. They expect that it's because she has so many descendants who can split the cost of the festivities—Kao knows that they're right.

Kao's visceral grief reinforces the extent of her love for Youa—again, it suggests that familial love is much deeper and more profound than romantic love for Yang. Meanwhile, the days-long festivities are a testament to Youa's status as the head of the family and an important figure in the Hmong community.

The ceremony's final night ceremony is the most important: all of Youa's descendants must sit by her coffin while the guide sings Youa's final wishes. The adults tell the children to pay attention to the guide's words. The guide sings that Youa is on her long journey now, and that Youa loves her family but that she cannot return. The guide is in a trance, and Kao knows that Youa might be speaking through him. Bee sits next to Kao, with his head hanging low. His rough, factory-worn hands are in his lap. Bee's siblings are all there. His sister beats her hands into the carpet out of grief.

Bee's rough hands are a reminder that immigrants often have to work exhausting manual labor jobs to get by—even after having lived in their new country for many years. Meanwhile, the guide continues highlighting Hmong beliefs about spirits traveling to their homeland after death. The grief that Youa's children experience continue to build on the idea that familial love is a deep and powerful force in the Hmong community.

There are many community members present. They all used to call Youa mother, because they didn't have their own mothers anymore. The guide sings that Youa wants her children to stay together; she wants her descendants to know what she would have taught them herself, and she wants them to have lives full of more laughter and love than she had in her own life. Kao listens with rapt attention—she doesn't want the night to end. As dawn approaches, the guide tells Kao's family to say their final goodbye.

The fact that many people in the community view Youa as their mother indicates that the entire community really looks up to Youa and thinks of her as a matriarchal figurehead—even though their cultural values tend to privilege the authority of men. The funeral guide's final ritual echoes the story's emphasis on family bonds.

Kao's family buries the body at 10 a.m. It's chilly outside, and the wind blows the snow around. Kao touches Youa's forehead one last time, and then Dawb does the same. They warm dirt in their hands and throw it on the lowered coffin, knowing that Youa will need the warmth for her long journey. Kao tells Youa that she'll see her again, and she promises to always be Hmong. Kao also tells Youa to not be scared—she promises that Youa's new life will not be marred by war, sickness, or death. Kao knows that Youa will have the strength to complete the long journey home.

Kao's final promises to Youa speak to the Hmong's belief that Youa's spirit has a long and difficult post-death journey ahead of her, because she's so far away from home. Kao's strength in this moment (expressed through her parting words to Youa) show that she, too, is emerging as a strong and resilient figure in the story, despite her culture's tendency to favor men.

EPILOGUE: HMONG IN AMERICA

It's 2007. Kao and Bee are in the car, talking about the publication of Kao's first book. It's been a long road: since Kao started writing this book, her father has gotten old and sick with diabetes. Kao thinks about the violent deaths in wartime and the sorrowful but peaceful deaths like Youa's. Kao doesn't know Youa's shaman rituals and herbal recipes, but she vows to take care of Bee. Bee tells Kao to write about how other people have a homeland, but the Hmong don't have a place to belong. The United States is their chance at a home.

The Hmong came to the United States in 1976, and Kao knows that what happened to the Hmong will happen to others in the future. She wonders how many Hmong people will be buried as Americans. She believes the Hmong will find their dreams, even if they only find them in one another. Kao tells Youa that the three of them—Kao, Youa, and Bee—are embracing each other, even now.

After Youa's passing, Kao begins to take on Youa's role as the family's protector. In this way, despite Hmong culture's patriarchal values, women are the strongest and most resilient figures in Hmong communities. Even though 20 years have passed since they family arrived in the United States, they still don't feel like they belong yet. The hardships of immigrant life continue to affect the family, though they're still optimistic that they'll fit in one day.

Yang ends her story by showing that she still draws strength and inspiration from Youa—Kao's love for Youa is still the central force in her life, even though Youa died years ago. Yang closes the story by suggesting that family bonds are so important to the Hmong because it's the closest thing that communities in exile have to a sense of home.

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