

The Leavers



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LISA KO

Lisa Ko was born in the mid-1970s to parents of Chinese descent who immigrated to the United States from the Philippines. Raised in suburban New Jersey, she frequently went to New York City as a child to buy Chinese groceries with her parents. As one of the only children of color in her school district, she rarely found books featuring Asian-American protagonists, though she read voraciously. When she finally did come across such a novel in middle school, she was profoundly moved. Upon graduating high school, she attended Wesleyan University, where she majored in English and began reading more books by authors of color, all while writing herself. When she finished college, she moved to New York City and worked in publishing before going to California and working in film production. After her thirtieth birthday, she returned to New York and focused on finishing her debut novel, *The Leavers*, a draft of which won the 2016 PEN/Bellweather Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction. The novel was later named a finalist for the 2017 National Book Award.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

For centuries, China has used a household registration system known as “hukou,” in which citizens are given specific kinds of residency based on whether they live in urban or rural areas. Because the system tends to grant urban citizens more benefits than rural citizens, it has become a contentious structure that is rife with inequality. In the context of *The Leavers*, it’s important to note that someone with rural hukou can’t become a permanent resident in a city, which is why Polly is so excited to live in Fuzhou when she learns that she can move there with a temporary permit if she works in a factory. This demonstrates the extent to which hukou affects peoples’ lives, as does the fact that Polly is unable to get an abortion in Fuzhou because she doesn’t have permanent urban residency. On another note, it’s worth pointing out that *The Leavers* is an artistic exploration of the ongoing debate surrounding American immigration policy, and Polly’s separation from her son at the hands of ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) resembles the separation that many families have experienced after crossing the country’s southern border.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Because of its implicit critique of harsh immigration policies, *The Leavers* is similar to Mohsin Hamid’s novel [Exit West](#), which examines the downsides of strict border control. Furthermore,

The Leavers also recalls works of fiction like Imbolo Mbue’s [Behold the Dreamers](#) and Viet Thanh Nguyen’s [The Refugees](#), both of which explore the immigrant experience and the trials and tribulations of migration. Nicola Yoon’s [The Sun is Also a Star](#) is also set in New York City and follows its teenaged protagonists, both immigrants, as they grapple with their cultural identities.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Leavers*
- **When Published:** May 2, 2017
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Contemporary Fiction
- **Setting:** New York City; the (fictional) town of Ridgeborough, New York; and Fuzhou, China.
- **Climax:** After Peter and Kay catch Daniel playing online poker, they fight for the whole night, and Daniel decides to leave the country, buying a ticket to Fuzhou and planning to track down his birth mother.
- **Antagonist:** People who are biased against others based on skin color, culture, or nationality.
- **Point of View:** First and third person

EXTRA CREDIT

True Story. Lisa Ko was inspired to write *The Leavers* after reading about Xiu Ping Jiang, a mentally ill Chinese immigrant who was arrested in 2008 for living in the United States without a visa. Ko even repurposed the transcript of Jiang’s court hearing, recreating the conversation she had with the judge.

Hyphen. In the early 2000s, Ko helped launch *Hyphen*, a magazine that engages with the Asian-American experience. She was the publication’s first books editor.



PLOT SUMMARY

The day before she disappears, Polly Guo picks up her son, Deming, from school in the Bronx. On their walk home, she informs him that they’ll be moving to Florida because she’s found a new job. This troubles him because he doesn’t want to leave his friend Michael, with whom he and Polly live, along with Vivian (Michael’s mother) and her brother Leon (Polly’s boyfriend). Still, Polly tells him he has no say in the matter. That night, he tries to fall asleep next to Michael, but he hears Polly and Leon arguing on their bed across the room. “Go fuck

yourself," he hears his mother hiss. The next morning, Polly tells him they're not moving. That evening, she never returns from work.

Deming senses that Leon and Vivian are unsettled by Polly's sudden absence, but Leon tells him she's visiting friends, though this seems unlikely. Day after day, she doesn't come home, and Deming starts to blame himself, thinking he must have driven her away by not wanting to move to Florida.

Ten years later, Daniel Wilkinson drinks at a loft party in Manhattan, preparing to perform on guitar with his high school friend, Roland Fuentes. When the duo—who call their band *Psychic Hearts*—finally gets onstage, Daniel forgets the songs and runs off during one of the first numbers. Rushing outside, he walks to Chinatown, where he used to live as a young boy, back before he moved to the Bronx and before his mother abandoned him: Daniel Wilkinson, Ko reveals, is Deming Guo. Stopping on the sidewalk, he takes out his phone and looks at an email from Michael, who has tracked him down after all these years to tell him that he has news about Polly. Daniel doesn't respond, instead going back to Roland's apartment and going to bed before meeting Peter and Kay—his adoptive parents—for breakfast the following morning.

As they eat, Peter and Kay ask Daniel about his life in the city, asking if he's going to Gamblers Anonymous meetings. It has only been a few months since Daniel left SUNY Potsdam, where he was receiving failing grades and spending his time playing online poker. His addiction got so bad that he borrowed \$10,000 from Angel Hennings, whose parents, Jim and Elaine, are close friends with the Wilkinsons. Although he promised to pay Angel back, he ended up losing her money, and now she refuses to talk to him. He's devastated by this, since Angel is the only person who understands him, as she too is Chinese-American and has adoptive parents. At brunch, Peter and Kay tell Daniel that Jim Hennings is having a birthday party the following week and that Angel will be there. This makes him nervous, but he doesn't say anything, since Peter and Kay don't know that he lost Angel's money. All they know is that he has a gambling addiction. Peter and Kay also tell him that they've convinced the dean of Carlough College—where they both teach—to consider letting him into summer school so that he can get his studies back on track. He doesn't want to go back to school, but he agrees to fill out a **statement of purpose** and give it to them at Jim Hennings's party.

Returning to the period before Polly's disappearance, Ko explains how hard it is for Leon and Vivian to support both Michael and Deming. Several months after Polly vanishes, Leon moves to China. Shortly thereafter, Vivian places Deming in foster care. Before long, Peter and Kay take him to live with them in the suburb of Ridgeborough, New York, where he's one of the few people of color. They're nervous and timid, but they try to make him feel comfortable, though they change his name to Daniel Wilkinson and insist that he speak English. At school,

he stands out because none of his peers are used to being around people who aren't white like them. Thankfully, he meets Roland, a Mexican-American boy whose father died when he was young. The two boys grow close, and Deming feels more at ease with his new life, though he still thinks about his mother and feels as if he's losing touch with his past. To distract himself, he listens to Peter's record collection, developing a passion for music that he shares with Roland.

Around this time, Deming hears Peter and Kay talking in private about how hard it is to raise a Chinese boy in Ridgeborough, and he overhears them say that his mother went back to China, though he doesn't think this is accurate. One day, they bring him to New York City to meet Jim and Elaine, along with their adopted daughter, Angel. At first, Deming doesn't take to Angel, but he soon develops a fondness for her when she helps him sneak out at night, hail a cab, and visit his old apartment in the Bronx. When they arrive, though, they find strangers living there, so they return to Manhattan.

Ten years later—shortly after his failed show with *Psychic Hearts*—Daniel responds to Michael's email. They meet in Manhattan, and Michael (who's studying at Columbia and living with Vivian and her new husband in Brooklyn) tells him that he recently found documents in his mother's house showing that she willingly signed Daniel over to the foster care system. Michael also invites Daniel to dinner, and though Daniel says no at first, he later agrees. When he sees Vivian, she's extremely happy to reconnect with him, though he accuses her of ruining his life by putting him in foster care. In response, she says she had no choice. Apparently, Polly had a considerable amount of debt when she vanished, and Vivian had to pay it off. She says that Leon can tell him more about his mother's whereabouts, and she gives him his phone number.

At this point, Polly narrates her own story, explaining that she now lives in Fuzhou with her new husband, Yong, whom she met at World Top English, where she works as a teacher. She now leads a nice but boring life, and though she likes her existence, she still feels restless, constantly wanting to travel to places like Hong Kong. Yong, for his part, always says they'll go on vacation, but he never acts on these plans, too busy with his business to travel. One night, Polly receives a voicemail from Daniel, who gives her his number and tells her to call him.

Addressing her narration to Daniel himself, Polly explains that she grew up in a small village without her mother, who died when she was young. She stopped going to school in the eighth grade, at which point she met up with her neighbor—Haifeng—on a daily basis. This relationship became romantic, but Polly wasn't invested in their romance. When she heard she could live in the city of Fuzhou if she worked in the factories, she left home, promising to send her wages to her father. Soon enough, Haifeng came to Fuzhou, too, and on the suggestion of her friends Xuan and Qi—who talk about sex quite frequently—she met him at a motel and had sex for the

first time. The next month, she realized she was pregnant, but she kept this from Haifeng, knowing he'd want her to marry him. Not wanting to settle down, she decided to travel to the United States, borrowing \$47,000 from a loan shark and undergoing a rough journey before finally arriving in New York City, where she learned at a free clinic that she was too far along in her pregnancy to have an abortion. As such, she gave birth to Deming while living in an apartment with a group of fellow Chinese immigrants, and though she often felt restless and stifled by her parental duties, she also came to love Deming quite fiercely. However, she couldn't support him, so she sent him to live with her father in China.

Returning to the present, Ko explains that Daniel calls Leon, who gives him Polly's number. The following day, he goes to Jim Hennings's birthday party, where he sees Angel and her new boyfriend, Charles. Angel largely ignores him, though she explains to Kay and Peter that she was recently robbed of a lot of money. Soon, Angel and Charles go to find their dinner seats, and Daniel presents his adoptive parents with his statement of purpose. Later, he sees Charles as he's leaving the restaurant, and Charles tells him that he doesn't agree with Angel's decision not to press charges, but Daniel runs off before they can finish the conversation. As he walks away, Peter calls him on his phone and yells at him because Daniel accidentally gave him a rough draft of the statement of purpose—a draft that he wrote as a joke to himself, outlining the reasons he *doesn't* want to go to Carlough. Stepping into a bar, he orders a whiskey and uses his phone to bring up the address of an underground poker club. Deleting the address, he leaves the bar and goes to an ATM, where he withdraws \$500. He then makes his way to the club and gambles for the entire night, losing all of his cash. Sitting on a bench the next morning feeling oddly "euphor[ic]," he calls Polly and leaves her a message

After a show several nights later, Daniel calls Polly again, and this time she answers. They have a short conversation, and though Daniel wanted to yell at her for disappearing, he enjoys making small talk with her. Two days later, they talk again, and she tells him that she tried to find him after leaving, though she doesn't specify how she tried to do this, nor why she left in the first place.

Once again narrating the years leading up to her disappearance, Polly says that Deming returned to the city as a five-year-old after his grandfather died. This was around the time that Polly met Leon, so she and Deming moved in with him, Vivian, and Michael, living happily—if frugally—for six years while Polly worked at a nail salon. One day, though, immigration enforcement authorities came to the salon and rounded up the undocumented workers. Polly was allowed one telephone call, but she couldn't remember Leon's number. She was then taken to a prison-like camp in Texas, where she suffered inhumane conditions for fourteen months before getting deported. Arriving in China, she got a job as a teacher at World Top

English and decided to put her past behind her, justifying this decision by telling herself she couldn't track down Deming because he'd already been adopted.

Back in the present, Roland kicks Daniel out of Psychic Hearts because he's not dependable. As such, Daniel moves back in with Peter and Kay and attends summer school. One night, he uses Peter's computer to access an online poker account, racking up several hundred dollars before Peter catches him. This—combined with the fact that Kay has just heard about Angel's \$10,000—creates a seemingly unnavigable rift between Daniel and his adoptive parents, so he buys a ticket to Fuzhou and goes to find his mother. When he finally tracks her down in Beijing at a work conference, she's happy to see him, and he forces her to explain why she disappeared. After this conversation, he stays with her and Yong for several months, working as an English teacher and sending money to Angel to chip away at what he owes her. However, he doesn't feel like he fully fits in, and he misses New York City, so he decides to move back. When he leaves, Polly also decides to move on, abandoning Yong and moving to Hong Kong—a decision that makes her feel alive and exhilarated. Back in New York, Daniel rents an apartment with Michael, feeling as if the city is his "best home," at least "for now."



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Deming Guo / Daniel Wilkinson – One of two protagonists in *The Leavers*. Deming is born in New York City to Polly Guo, a Chinese immigrant. He spends his first years in the city, but Polly soon sends him to live with her father in China. When his grandfather dies several years later, Deming returns to the city as a five-year-old, and lives with Polly; her boyfriend, Leon; Leon's sister, Vivian; and Vivian's son, Michael. One day, Polly never comes home from work, and Deming believes that she abandoned him so that she could begin a new life. After six months, Leon abruptly moves back to China, and Vivian puts Deming into foster care, leading to his eventual adoption by a white couple named Peter and Kay Wilkinson, who change his name to Daniel and whisk him away to upstate New York. This series of events leads Deming to believe that he must earn love and care from the adults and parental figures in his life—something he grapples with even in young adulthood. Struggling to fit in at his new majority-white school, Deming befriends a Mexican-American boy named Roland Fuentes. He also becomes friends with Angel Hennings, a Chinese-American girl who was adopted by his parents' friends. However, both relationships falter over the years due to Deming's missteps: he fails to fully commit to the band with Roland, and loses \$10,000 of Angel's money due to his gambling addiction. His relationship with his adoptive parents grows increasingly tense, too, as he repeatedly fails to meet

their rigid expectations. Meanwhile, he finally gets in touch with Polly after ten years, and when Peter and Kay catch him playing online poker, he gathers his things and flies to Fuzhou, China, where he tracks her down and lives with her and her new husband, Yong, for several months. At the end of the novel, Deming decides to move to New York—a multicultural hub—to live with Michael, finally feeling at peace with his rich multicultural identity.

Peilan Guo / Polly Guo – Deming’s mother, and the second protagonist in *The Leavers*. From a village outside Fuzhou, China, Polly is an independent young woman who covets freedom, yearning to leave her village. When she discovers that she’s pregnant, she decides not to tell her boyfriend, Haifeng, knowing he’ll expect her to marry him. Unable to get an abortion in China, she borrows \$47,000 from a loan shark and makes an arduous journey to New York City, where she learns that she can’t get an abortion because she’s in her third trimester. As such, she gives birth to Deming in the United States. Shortly thereafter, she falls in love with a fellow Chinese immigrant named Leon and moves in with him, his sister Vivian, and Vivian’s son, Michael. For six years, she works at a nail salon and spends time with Deming, constantly wondering what she could be doing with her life if she didn’t have to care for a son. One day, she hears about a job opportunity in Florida and tells Deming they’re going to move, but Leon refuses to go. Eventually, she agrees not to move, but then she disappears. Although Deming thinks his mother has abandoned him, she is actually captured by immigration authorities and held in a prison-like camp for 14 months before getting deported. Back in China, she teaches English at a foreign language school, where she meets her future husband, Yong. When Deming finally tracks her down after ten years, Polly is living in an expensive apartment in Fuzhou. Deming stays with her and Yong, and she insists that she didn’t know how to find him after she was deported, and though this is true, it’s obvious that this is just something she tells herself so she doesn’t feel bad about having embraced her new life. When Deming returns to America, Polly decides to leave Yong and go to Hong Kong, feeling as if she’s only herself when she’s free to go where she wants.

Michael – Deming’s close childhood friend. When Deming is five, he and Polly move in with Michael, his mother Vivian, and his uncle Leon. Michael is a studious boy who looks up to Deming, spending all of his free time with him. As a result, he’s devastated when Deming is placed into foster care in the aftermath of Polly’s disappearance. Ten years later, Michael finds papers in his mother’s house showing that she voluntarily signed away caretaking responsibilities and officially approved of Deming’s placement with Peter and Kay Wilkinson. He then finds Peter and Kay online and discovers that they have an adopted son named Daniel who goes to SUNY Potsdam. After finding out the formula for SUNY Potsdam email addresses,

Michael sends Daniel a message, and though Daniel ignores it at first, he eventually agrees to meet up. At their first meeting, Daniel learns that Michael goes to Columbia and lives with Vivian and her new husband, Timothy, in Brooklyn. And though he’s initially hesitant to see Vivian, Daniel accepts Michael’s invitation to come over for dinner, which is when Vivian gives him Leon’s phone number. This, in turn, enables him to find Polly in Fuzhou, where he stays for several months before returning to New York City and moving into a shared apartment with Michael.

Vivian – Michael’s mother, and the person who—along with her brother, Leon—cares for Deming when Polly disappears. Vivian is a devoted parent who spends the majority of her free time cooking meals and providing for Michael and Leon. When Polly and Deming move in, she becomes friends with Polly, though unlike Vivian, Polly resents having to do so much work to care for other people. When Polly disappears, Vivian and Leon don’t know what has happened, but they keep what little information they do have from Deming, simply telling him that Polly isn’t in danger and that everything will be fine. However, when Leon decides to return to China months after Polly’s disappearance, Vivian isn’t able to provide for Deming, so she takes him to social services and puts him into the foster system. Michael later finds out that she went to court shortly after this and approved of Deming’s placement with Peter and Kay Wilkinson. After this, Vivian marries a man named Timothy and moves to Brooklyn. When Michael gets in touch with Deming (who now goes by Daniel) and invites him to dinner, Vivian is overjoyed to see him. Daniel, on the other hand, resents her for putting him into the foster care system. Insisting that she had no choice, Vivian reveals to him that she paid off the large amount of debt that Polly left behind after she was taken by immigration authorities. She also gives him Leon’s number, which helps him find Polly in China.

Leon – Polly’s boyfriend, and Vivian’s brother. Leon is a good-natured man who works in a slaughterhouse and enjoys playing cards. He and Polly fall in love shortly before Deming returns as a five-year-old to the United States after having lived in China for several years with Polly’s father. Unbothered that Polly has a son, Leon suggests that she and Deming move in with him, Vivian, and Michael, and they enjoy six happy years together before Polly disappears. In the months after Polly vanishes, Leon tries his best to care for Deming, but he has trouble making enough money because he has a back injury that gets in the way of his ability to work. After six months, he moves back to China without saying farewell to Deming. Ten years later, Vivian gives Deming (who now goes by Daniel) Leon’s number. When Daniel calls, he learns that Leon has a wife and a daughter, and Leon gives him Polly’s current information. Not long after this conversation, Daniel travels to Fuzhou, and when he can’t find his mother, he reaches out to Leon, who helps him find Polly’s apartment.

Roland Fuentes – Daniel’s best friend from Ridgeborough. Roland is Mexican-American, and like Daniel, is missing a parent, since his father died when he was young. As one of the only other people of color in Ridgeborough, he finds it easy to relate to Daniel, and the two become fast friends, listening to music and eventually forming a number of bands together. Outgoing and likable, Roland is a good front man. When he and Daniel are 21, they establish a band called Psychic Hearts. Roland, for his part, becomes obsessed with writing music that will impress a booker named Hutch, and though the songs he pens are trendy and popular, Daniel finds them uninteresting. Nevertheless, he moves to New York after leaving SUNY Potsdam, crashing on Roland’s couch and playing in Psychic Hearts. Before long, people start to talk about the band, but Daniel is too preoccupied with his personal life to devote himself to the project, so Roland kicks him out, replacing him with another guitarist. Despite this falling out, though, he later reaches out to Daniel and tells him that he misses him.

Angel Hennings – A Chinese-American girl whose adoptive parents are Elaine and Jim Hennings, Peter and Kay’s best friends. Angel grows up in New York City, and though her parents make an effort to help her connect with Chinese culture, she can’t speak the language like Daniel. Nonetheless, she understands what it’s like to not have a relationship with one’s birth parents, which is why she helps Daniel try to track down his mother when they first meet as eleven-year-olds. This connection develops into a strong friendship that bears certain romantic traces, as Angel and Daniel talk on the phone every night when Daniel’s a student at SUNY Potsdam and Angel is a student in Iowa. However, their friendship suffers a brutal blow when Angel lends Daniel \$10,000 to help him repay his poker debt. This is money that she saved to study abroad in Nepal, so he promises to promptly repay her, but he gambles it all away. As such, she tells Peter and Kay about his gambling addiction (but not about the \$10,000) and stops talking to him. Still, Daniel continues to text her on a regular basis, constantly promising to pay her back. When Jim Hennings has a birthday party in the city, Angel and her new boyfriend, Charles, tell Peter and Kay that she was robbed, though they don’t specify what, exactly, happened. Later, Angel finally tells her parents the entire story, and they pass the message to Kay and Peter. When Daniel goes to China and works as a teacher at the school where Polly works, he starts repaying Angel, who finally starts talking to him again.

Elaine Hennings – Angel’s adoptive mother, and Jim Hennings’s wife. Elaine is one of Peter and Kay Wilkinson’s best friends. She lives in New York City and is adamant about helping Angel connect to Chinese culture. Despite her worldly posturing, though, Deming finds her phony and annoying when she takes him and the Wilkinsons to a Chinese restaurant she claims is quite good. Deming can tell the food is very bad, but he nevertheless decides to order for the table in Fuzhounese.

When he does this, Elaine makes a remark about his fluency in Mandarin, and Deming corrects her, eventually calling her stupid for misidentifying the language.

Jim Hennings – Angel’s adoptive father, and Elaine Hennings’s husband. Jim is one of Peter and Kay Wilkinson’s best friends. Along with Elaine and Angel, he lives in New York City, and—much like Peter—is often insensitive when it comes to cultural differences. For instance, when Deming orders the meal in Fuzhounese and Elaine mistakenly refers to it as Mandarin, Jim callously says, “It’s all Chinese to us dumb-dumbs,” as if he can’t be bothered to learn the nuances of Chinese culture.

Hutch – A promoter and booker for a popular music club called Jupiter. Roland wants to impress Hutch, so he often invites him to shows, putting pressure on Daniel to give a good performance so that Psychic Hearts will be invited to play at Jupiter. Because he cares so much about what Hutch thinks, Roland alters the way he writes songs, pandering to Hutch’s preferences in a way that annoys Daniel.

Didi – A Chinese immigrant with whom Polly lives when she first moves to the United States. Like some of Polly’s other roommates, Didi is enamored of Deming when he’s a baby, making so much time for him that Polly worries why she herself doesn’t have the energy to devote herself to Deming with the same kind of selflessness as Didi. Later, Didi gets Polly a job at the nail salon where she works. Fortunately for her, though, she’s not there when the immigration authorities raid the shop.

Kyle – A student at SUNY Potsdam who—like Daniel—plays online poker. When Daniel learns how much money Kyle plays with, he starts gambling larger amounts, eventually plunging himself into debt. When this happens, he asks Kyle for a loan of \$2,000, and when he loses this, he’s unable to repay it. As such, Kyle and several of his burly friends start visiting him on a regular basis to scare him into repaying what he owes. This intimidation tactic is one of the reasons that Daniel eventually borrows \$10,000 from Angel.

Polly’s Father – Deming’s grandfather, who lives in the Chinese village in which Polly grew up. When Deming is still quite young, Polly sends him to live with her father because she can’t afford to pay a babysitter to watch him while she’s at work. Several years later, her father dies, so Deming returns to New York as a five-year-old.

Haifeng – Polly’s neighbor in the Chinese village in which she grows up. Shortly after she leaves school for good in the eighth grade, Polly starts meeting Haifeng on a daily basis. In a secluded area by a river, they kiss for the first time, beginning a secretive relationship that ends abruptly when Polly moves to Fuzhou to work in the factories. Not long after she leaves, though, Haifeng also goes to the city to work, so they meet in a motel and have sex for the first time. Polly gets pregnant after this, but she doesn’t tell Haifeng because she knows he’ll want

to marry her and settle down in their village—a future she does not want for herself. Keeping her pregnancy a secret, then, she travels to the United States.

Qing – One of Polly’s friends in the factories of Fuzhou. Along with Xuan, Qing talks extensively about sex with Polly, ultimately encouraging her to meet Haifeng at a motel, where they make love for the first time. Years later, Polly thinks she runs into Qing in New York. Having just met a woman who claimed to be moving from New York to San Francisco simply because she heard California was nice, Polly suddenly believes that the woman was Qing, and the entire interaction makes her feel restless and tied down by her life as a mother.

Charles – Angel’s boyfriend, whom Daniel meets at Jim Hennings’s birthday party. A confident young man studying to be a lawyer, Charles threatens Daniel outside the party, telling him that he doesn’t approve of Angel’s decision not to sue him for taking her \$10,000. Not long after this encounter, Charles calls Kay and tells her that Daniel owes Angel money, urging her to talk to Daniel herself about the specifics, though Daniel simply lies to his adoptive mother by saying that Angel covered him for dinner one time when they got together in the city.

Haifeng’s Mother – Haifeng’s mother, who is the one to inform Polly that her father has died. When Polly returns to China after being deported from the United States, she discovers that Haifeng’s mother has moved into her father’s old house, and though Polly later learns that she could have asked for a lot more money, she accepts the 5,000 yuan that the old woman offers her to keep the house.

Peter Wilkinson Daniel’s adoptive father. A professor of Economics at Carlough College in Ridgeborough, New York, Peter is a serious man with high expectations. When he and his wife Kay first adopt eleven-year-old Daniel, Peter is confident they’re giving him a better life than what Polly was able to provide. When Kay gets stressed out about the idea of raising a Chinese boy in a majority-white suburb, Peter tells her not to worry, saying that “kids of all races have struggles with belonging,” going on to say that such “issues” are “colorblind.” Despite his stern and unwavering approach to parenting, though, he and Daniel bond over music, as Peter introduces him to Jimi Hendrix and other musical artists, all of whom deeply impress Daniel, giving him something to distract himself from the fact that he’s been separated from everything he’s ever known. However, Peter is displeased when Daniel starts playing music himself, telling his adoptive son he shouldn’t let this “hobby” distract him from school. In keeping with this, Peter is quite frustrated when Daniel flunks out of SUNY Potsdam and moves to New York City to pursue a career in music. Along with Kay, he convinces the dean of Carlough to consider letting Daniel take summer classes, insisting that Daniel fill out a **statement of purpose** in order to capitalize on this opportunity. When Daniel notes that he doesn’t want to go to Carlough, Peter tells him that it’s not his “choice.” As such,

Daniel moves home and attends summer school, though Peter and Kay eventually kick him out of their house after Peter catches him playing online poker. As a result, Daniel goes to China to live with Polly, at which point Peter and Kay forgive him and try to convince him to come home.

Kay Wilkinson Daniel’s adoptive mother. A professor of Political Science at Carlough College, Kay tries hard to give Daniel the support he needs. Like her husband Peter, though, she has high expectations for him, wanting him to live a life that closely resembles her own. At the same time, she’s cognizant of the difficulties Daniel faces as a child of color in the white-majority community of Ridgeborough, New York. She frequently voices her concerns regarding this matter, telling Peter that she doesn’t know how to navigate the cultural differences between Daniel and herself. Suddenly, she becomes painfully aware of the acts of subtle racism that her fellow community members carry out on a daily basis, but she doesn’t know how to address these problems. As such, she lets Peter convince her that anything she does for Daniel is better than what the boy experienced before coming to live with them. A protective and attentive mother, she frets about the gambling addiction Daniel develops in college, constantly asking him if he’s attending Gamblers Anonymous after he flunks out of SUNY Potsdam. She also aligns with Peter’s insistence that Daniel fill out a **statement of purpose** in order to be admitted into Carlough’s summer program. When he obeys these orders and comes back to Ridgeborough to attend these classes, Kay receives a call from Charles, who tells her that Daniel borrowed money from Angel and never paid her back. Daniel evades her when she asks him about this, but she soon learns from Elaine that Daniel gambled away \$10,000 of Angel’s money. When Peter catches Daniel playing online poker late one evening at the end of the summer, Kay says nothing to stop him from leaving in the middle of the night, though she later asks him to come home when he goes to live with Polly in China.

Cody A bully at Daniel’s school in Ridgeborough, New York. On one of Daniel’s first days of school, Cody pushes over a small boy and calls him a “fag” before turning to Daniel and calling him a “Chinese retard.” In response, Daniel tackles Cody, taking him by surprise and sending him to the ground. Several months later, Cody is impressed by a band that Daniel and Roland have formed, and he and Daniel become friends. When Daniel returns to Ridgeborough to attend summer classes at Carlough, he hangs out with Cody, smoking marijuana and passing the time, though Cody’s underlying racism still occasionally brings itself to bear on their relationship. On the night that Peter and Kay catch Daniel playing online poker and send him out of the house, Daniel asks Cody to pick him up and drive him to the airport so he can fly to China. When Cody arrives, he gives him a bag of Vicodin as a “good-bye present.”

MINOR CHARACTERS

Timothy – Vivian’s husband, whom she meets after sending Deming into the foster care system.

Xuan – One of Polly’s friends in the factories of Fuzhou. Xuan has two boyfriends and frequently talks about her sex life with Polly and her other friend, Qing. These conversations inspire Polly to meet Haifeng at a motel and have sex for the first time, which results in her pregnancy.

Rocky – The manager of Hello Gorgeous, the nail salon where Polly works. Rocky likes Polly and acts like she’s going to promote her, but this never comes to fruition.

Travis Bhopa – A bully in Deming and Michael’s school. Because Travis makes fun of them, Deming trips him, though he later feels bad about this when he learns that Travis has family problems of his own.

Yong – Polly’s new husband, who is a successful businessman. Although the pair lead a comfortable, wealthy life, Polly eventually leaves Yong so that she can continue to experience the thrill and adventure of moving from place to place.



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.



CULTURAL IDENTITY AND BELONGING

In *The Leavers*, a novel about the mysterious disappearance of Deming Guo’s undocumented mother, Polly, Lisa Ko dissects what it’s like to have a multicultural identity. More specifically, she suggests that a person’s sense of cultural belonging is rarely straightforward or black-and-white, but nuanced and difficult to parse. This is true for Deming, who struggles to maintain his Chinese identity when he’s adopted by a white family in the wake of his mother’s vanishing. Living with Peter and Kay Wilkinson (who rename him Daniel), eleven-year-old Deming is isolated from Chinese culture, but he doesn’t completely leave behind who he was before. Rather than fully entrenching himself in the life of a white American family, he thinks of himself as living two different realities—one as Deming and one as Daniel. This duality means he doesn’t entirely reject his new identity, as he embraces certain aspects of his life with the Wilkinsons while simultaneously remembering his personal history. And though this multicultural existence often leaves him feeling like he doesn’t belong to *any* group, he eventually realizes he doesn’t need to commit to just one culture or identity. In turn, Ko advocates for a fluid approach to ethnic identification, one that allows people to create their own sense of belonging even when navigating the complex intersection of multiple cultures.

Ko understands that changes to a person’s cultural identity often manifest themselves in language. This is what happens to Deming when Peter and Kay first take him in and change his name to Daniel. After a week of living with them, Deming’s linguistic connection to Chinese culture shifts. “One week later, tucked into a double bed sheathed with red flannel, Deming Guo awoke with the crumbs of dialect on his tongue, smudges and smears of dissolving syllables, nouns and verbs washed out to sea,” Ko writes, suggesting that even just one week in this new environment has already had an effect on Deming, who’s forced to experience the slow dissolution of everything he’s known. “One language had outseeped another,” Ko adds, emphasizing the influence of cultural isolation on children like Deming. Without a linguistic connection to Chinese culture, Deming is adrift in a wash of unfamiliarity, challenged to make himself anew in a foreign context.

As Deming’s memory of Fuzhounese and his mother slip away, his new guardians act as if they want him to forget his Chinese identity. They change his name to Daniel, claiming that he’ll find school “easier with an American name.” When Deming does occasionally speak Fuzhounese, Peter chides him, insisting that he use English. Rather than focusing on how to help Deming preserve his original sense of self, Peter and Kay obsess about getting him to “adapt” to his new environment. And though Deming *does* acclimate to this white suburban-American lifestyle, he doesn’t forget his Chinese identity. “Ridgeborough had made Daniel an expert at juggling selves,” Ko writes, explaining what Deming is like ten years after moving to the suburbs. “[H]e used to see Deming and think himself into Daniel, a slideshow perpetually alternating between the same two slides.” In this moment, readers see that transitioning into a new cultural identity doesn’t necessarily mean erasing one’s original persona. Though Daniel “adapts” to the predominantly white culture of Ridgeborough, he maintains a connection to his Chinese roots, ultimately suggesting that assimilating into different cultures doesn’t necessarily mean giving up one’s foundational sense of self, though it’s worth noting that Deming hasn’t yet found a way to integrate his Chinese identity into his American identity (and vice versa).

Charting Deming’s experience in a white-majority suburb allows Ko to highlight the idea that identity is “formed as a function of family and culture,” an idea she expresses in the extra materials included in the 2017 Algonquin Paperback edition of the novel. Because Deming lives for ten years with a white American family, he develops an identity that has very little to do with his Chinese heritage. At the same time, he lived with his Chinese mother for eleven years before moving to Ridgeborough, meaning that his identity has been shaped by both Chinese and American cultural forces. This duality is something he struggles with throughout the novel, since he feels out of place amongst the white people in Ridgeborough but is also disconcerted when he visits China and can hardly

hold a conversation without someone sneering at his accent. “There was a comfort in belonging that he’d never felt before, yet somehow, he still stood out,” Ko writes, explaining what it feels like for Deming to travel in China as a young man. This kind of isolation from both cultures is why he’s become an “expert at juggling [his] selves,” which is something his mother—who goes by both Polly and Peilan—also does, since she too sees herself as leading two “parallel” existences: one as the Chinese woman Polly, and one as the immigrant Polly. Given that both Deming and Polly have segmented views of themselves suggests that this is simply part of what it means to have a multicultural identity.

Although developing a multifaceted identity can be complicated, Ko doesn’t see this divide as inherently problematic. When Deming is unsure at the end of the novel where he should live—whether he should stay in China or return to the United States—he has the liberating realization that his two cultural identities can coexist. He doesn’t *have* to choose between them. As such, he moves to New York City and lives with Michael, another Chinese-American. “For now, this was where his life would be,” Ko writes. “This city. His best home.” The fact that Ko refers to New York—a multicultural center—as Deming’s “best” home indicates that a person can belong to many different cultures. Furthermore, Ko says that this is the life Deming has chosen to lead “for now,” implying that he can always move to China in the future. As such, she frames Deming’s multicultural identity not as a hindrance to his happiness, but as an advantage, one that enables him to be whomever he wants. By spotlighting Deming’s eventual acceptance of both the Chinese and American elements of who he is, then, Ko celebrates the flexible nature of identity.



MIGRATION, CHANGE, AND HAPPINESS

A novel about migration and relocation, *The Leavers* provides an in-depth look at the human tendency to associate change with happiness. At first, Polly has

to emigrate from China to get what she wants, since she doesn’t make enough money in her rural hometown. In America, she makes better wages, but the journey requires her to borrow tens of thousands of dollars from loan sharks, plunging her into debt. Ko uses this situation to illustrate that although migration can lead to new opportunities, such changes often come with considerable personal costs. In fact, Polly’s debt makes it impossible for her to flourish in New York, so she fantasizes about leaving once more, seeing migration as the only way to find new opportunity and, thus, happiness. However, she never gets what she wants, even years later when she has lots of money, an expensive high-rise apartment with an ocean view, a good marriage, and a renewed relationship with Deming. In this manner, Ko highlights the grass-is-greener mentality that Polly has developed as a result of her original need to emigrate. Having grown used to coupling

the idea of change with the possibility of happiness, she now lives a restless life. In keeping with this, Ko suggests that although change is sometimes necessary, it isn’t always a path to contentment.

As a young woman in rural China, Polly is eager to transition into a more active life. Right from the beginning, then, she has a strong thirst for change. Unable to secure official residency in a Chinese city (known as “urban hukou”), she decides to travel to nearby Fuzhou to work in a factory. “Villagers couldn’t get permanent urban hukou, but they could buy temporary resident permits and find better jobs than fishing and farming,” she notes. Motivated by the possibility of upward mobility, she migrates for the first time, revealing her willingness—her *eagerness*—to drastically alter her life in pursuit of a more satisfying existence. In this section of the novel, readers come to understand Polly’s relationship with change, as she opens herself up to new possibilities because she thinks this is the only way to improve her life.

It is this mentality that eventually encourages Polly to travel to the United States. In search of happiness and financial prosperity, she puts herself into debt in order to experience something new. Eleven years later, she is still struggling to pay off the loan sharks and feels just as stagnant as she felt in China. “Once I might have become this woman, free to move across the country because she heard a city was beautiful,” she thinks to herself one day after meeting a stranger who tells her she’s moving to San Francisco simply because she’s heard nice things about it. In this moment, readers see the extent to which Polly has romanticized the idea of change, seeing it as something that might magically make her happy and cause her problems to disappear.

Since Polly is so committed to the idea that change and migration are tied to happiness, her experience in an immigration detention camp is especially traumatic. Captured by ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement), she is detained for fourteen months without trial. Not only is she kept from her family, but she also loses her ability to decide for herself where to go. Since Polly places so much importance on where she lives, it’s easy to see that her detainment and eventual deportation is a massive blow to her sense of mobility and freedom. For someone who sees change (and, thus, migration) as an opportunity to improve her life, it’s quite torturous to suddenly have no say about where she’s allowed to live.

Roughly a decade after Polly is deported to China, she finally manages to obtain the upwardly mobile life she has always wanted. Married to a successful businessman, she lives in a flashy urban apartment in Fuzhou. She even rekindles her relationship with Deming when he tracks her down and lives with her for a short period. When he returns to the United States, though, she once again decides to completely change her life. Her decision to leave her husband and move to Hong

Kong proves that the kind of happiness she's searching for is more existential than material, since she abandons the trappings of a wealthy existence in exchange for the freedom of the unknown. As she approaches Hong Kong on a ferry, she moves through fog and is "breathless with laughter," exhilarated by change. "How wrong I had been to assume this feeling had been lost forever. This lightheaded uncertainty, all my fear and joy—I could return here, punching the sky," she notes. "Because I had found her: Polly Guo. Wherever I went next, I would never let her go again." The fact that Polly (who also goes by Peilan) feels as if she has "found" herself simply by migrating once again indicates that sometimes upheaval can be satisfying in and of itself. Notably, Polly is happy while she's in the midst of her travels, not once she's settled into her new life. Given her track record, she'll likely tire of her existence in Hong Kong, meaning she'll have to move again. Once more, then, Ko suggests that change doesn't always result in happiness. At the same time, though, she subtly implies that the very process of migration itself can give one a sense of fulfillment and existential contentment. Or, to quote a well-known adage, life's a journey, not a destination.



RACISM, CULTURAL INSENSITIVITY, AND IMPLICIT BIAS

The Leavers shines a light on the ways in which people sometimes fail to hold themselves

accountable for their own racial and cultural insensitivities. Living in the predominantly white suburb of Ridgeborough as a Chinese-American teenager, Deming faces a number of microaggressions from his peers, educators, and even his adoptive parents. His classmates, for their part, don't seem to care if they subject him to discrimination, seeing their racially charged comments as harmless jokes without considering the effect they have on Deming. This is exacerbated by the fact that many of the adults in his life are apparently ill equipped to navigate conversations about race and ethnicity. Treating his Chinese background as something that ought to be ironed out, Peter and Kay can't fathom the idea that a person might be happy living a lifestyle that isn't that of the stereotypical white American. As a result, their efforts to Americanize him reveal their sense of inherent superiority, which betrays their condescending view of Chinese culture. Unfortunately for Deming, it's hard to address these biases because the people perpetuating them don't stop to examine their own prejudices. By showing readers the implicit nature of these racial and cultural insensitivities, then, Ko illustrates how important it is for people to recognize and challenge their own perspectives.

Some of the insensitivity Deming experiences during his first few weeks in Ridgeborough is rather subtle. One girl asks him where he's from, clearly not expecting him to say "The Bronx." Although this might seem like a harmless interaction, this girl makes an assumption about Deming based on the color of his

skin. This only emphasizes the extent to which he feels out of place in his new white-majority school. What he notes right away is that the kids around him have "never noticed the way they look to other people, because there [are] no other people present." Having never interacted with a person of color, students like this girl jump to conclusions about Deming and don't stop to think about what they say and how it might affect someone who already feels unwelcome or out of place.

In other cases, the racism Deming encounters is more obvious. For example, when a white bully named Cody calls Deming a "Chinese retard," it's quite evident that he has singled Deming out simply because he's Chinese. This bothers Deming, but he later becomes friends with Cody. This doesn't mean Cody is no longer racist, but that Deming learns to live with this kind of insensitivity, as if there's nothing he can possibly do to avoid it. In turn, readers see just how seemingly inescapable racial and cultural prejudices are in Ridgeborough.

Part of what makes it hard for Deming to escape or address the widespread cultural biases in his community has to do with the fact that nobody wants to acknowledge them. Even Peter and Kay—who present themselves as champions of diversity—perpetuate the notion of American superiority. When Deming overhears them talking about whether or not he'll be able to smoothly transition into a largely white school, Peter tells Kay that these kind of academic matters are "colorblind" "issues." Although it might seem this way to Peter, this isn't the case for Deming, who is in a very unique situation that has everything to do with race. Like the children at Deming's school, though, Peter has never experienced what it's like to be the only person of color in an entire community. As a result, he not only fails to empathize with Deming's situation, but automatically assumes that he—as a white man—knows what's best for his new adoptive son. "Whatever we do is going to be better than what he experienced before," Peter says confidently to Kay in a discussion about whether or not they'll effectively be able to raise Deming in such an undiverse context. When Deming overhears Peter say this, he comes to understand that his new guardians have little respect for his Chinese background, instinctually presuming that *anything* a white family does for a Chinese child will be "better" than what that child's actual parents could offer. Simply put, Peter believes that he's an objectively better caretaker than Deming's Chinese guardians simply because he's a white American.

When Deming moves away from Ridgeborough as a young man, he notes that Peter and Kay have always seen him as "someone who needed to be saved." This patronizing view inadvertently suggests that Deming's Chinese background is nothing but a disadvantage. "He recalled how [Kay] and Peter had insisted on English, his new name, the right education. How *better* and *more* hinged on their ideas of success, their plans," Ko writes. "[Polly], Chinese, the Bronx, Deming: they had never been enough." In this moment, readers see that, although Peter

and Kay truly want to help Deming, they have actually communicated a very destructive message—namely, that people who don't adhere to stereotypical notions of American success are subpar and thus need to be “saved” from themselves. And yet, Peter claims that such matters are “colorblind,” effectively shutting down any kind of productive conversation about race or inequality. Ko intimates that this unwillingness to address implicit biases is what keeps people of color in disenfranchised positions, as white-majority communities champion diversity without ever stopping to confront their unexamined prejudices.



SELF-DECEPTION AND RATIONALIZATION

Because many of the characters in *The Leavers* trick themselves into ignoring their own shortcomings, the novel itself showcases how eager people often are to delude themselves. In particular, Ko illuminates the process of self-deception that characters like Deming use to rationalize their actions, even when their justifications are quite obviously out of touch with reality. This dynamic is a large part of why Deming has such a hard time dealing with his gambling addiction. Even though he knows that “temptations can lead to relapses,” he consistently puts himself in situations that inevitably lead to gambling, though he tells himself every step of the way that he's not about to start betting again. Rather than acknowledging his path toward relapse, he focuses only on the present, since this makes it easier for him to deny the fact that he's about to do something he knows he shouldn't. Providing this portrait of self-deception, Ko proves that the most successful forms of denial occur when a person avoids looking at the broader narrative of his or her actions, instead adopting a shortsighted viewpoint that enables him or her to rationalize one thing at a time. In turn, the author suggests that self-deception is often comprised of little more than a series of small but consecutive rationalizations.

When Deming relapses for the first time since gambling away \$10,000 of borrowed money, his reversion is incremental. Having just gotten into an argument with his parents after a party in Manhattan, he walks to a bar and takes out his phone. Although he acts at first like he's just mindlessly scrolling, he soon pulls up information he once wrote down about an “underground” poker club with a \$200 buy-in. However, he deletes this note after looking at it, thereby convincing himself—in a superficial way—that he isn't about to succumb to his desires. Once he's outside the bar, he tells himself that he's going to walk to where his parents are staying. On the way, though, he stops at an ATM. “His finger hovered over the button that said \$50, but he hit \$500, the bulk of his account, and watched the bills shoot out,” Ko writes. At this point, he makes his way to the poker club, having finally given himself over to what he'd clearly decided to do when he first left his

parents. Calling attention to this step-by-step process of self-deception, Ko shows readers what it looks like to maintain a guise of ignorance (and even innocence) while straying from what one knows is right.

As Deming embarks on a downward spiral, he begins to feel as if he no longer has control over his actions. Having gotten this far, he doesn't even try to stop himself from gambling. “He was frightened by how much he was about to fuck up, by his lack of desire to stop himself, the rising anticipation at the prospect of falling down, failing harder, and going straight to the tilt; he'd known from the moment he left the bar exactly where he would end up,” Ko explains. This complete surrender to the whims of desire is exactly why Deming went out of his way to ignore his plan from the beginning, he would have had to grapple with the decision. By breaking his descent into manageable stages, though, he was able to more easily rationalize his behavior. And now, just before he sits down at the poker table and loses \$500, he makes one final rationalization, telling himself that he is powerless to turn away at this late juncture.

Ko makes sure to point out that people use various rationalizations to justify all kinds of things, not just relapses. By the end of the novel, even Deming recognizes the ways in which humans fixate on small matters that are easy to explain away. “Everyone had stories they told themselves to get through the days,” Ko writes. “Like Vivian's belief that she had helped [Deming], [Polly] insisting she had looked for him [after her deportation], that she could forget about him because he was okay.” Going through the people in his life, Deming thinks about Vivian, who put him in foster care after his mother disappeared. This then makes him think about his mother's attempt to justify the fact that she hardly tried to track him down after she was detained. These stories, Deming comes to understand, frequently fail to take into account the bigger picture. For instance, it's possible that his mother really did look for him, but it's rather obvious that her attempt to find him was half-hearted. Still, though, she ignores this fact in order to “get through” life without a guilty conscience. As such, readers witness the power of selective rationalization, which enables people to go on with their lives without holding themselves fully accountable for their own unflattering actions.



PARENTHOOD, SUPPORT, AND EXPECTATIONS

In *The Leavers*, Ko illustrates how feelings of obligation and “indebtedness” often hinder relationships between parents and children. For example, Polly feels a crushing sense of responsibility as Deming's mother, seeing parenthood as a sacrifice and a burden. Because his mother has this attitude, Deming later feels like he's nothing but an inconvenience. Of course, Polly's eventual disappearance has nothing to do with her parental discontent,

since the only reason she leaves Deming behind is because she's unexpectedly detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). However, Deming doesn't know this, so he assumes she has abandoned him. As such, he sees himself as a burden, carrying this self-image into his relationship with his adoptive parents, Peter and Kay, to whom he later feels "indebted" because they give him the support Polly failed to provide. In this regard, then, he views parental care not as something to which he's naturally entitled, but something he has to earn. By demonstrating the emotional toll this has on his relationships with Polly, Peter, and Kay, Ko implies that the healthiest bonds between parents and children are those built on unconditional love and support, not expectations or indebtedness.

Ko's portrait of Polly as a conflicted mother conveys her belief that parenthood is both rewarding and emotionally draining. When Deming is still a baby, Polly finds herself in awe of him even as she laments her lack of freedom. While her roommates dote over Deming, she worries about her future as an independent woman: "What if I would always be required to offer myself up, ready and willing, constantly available?" This thought process calls attention to the fact that Polly dislikes that she's suddenly expected to care for Deming at all times. Instead of focusing on the beauty of parenthood, she fixates on the sacrifices she has to make to be a good mother. Although this might seem rather callous, it's worth noting that becoming a parent—and especially a single parent living in poverty in a foreign country—is something of a sacrifice, since supporting a child often makes it impossible for a person to do anything else. As such, Polly's misgivings are somewhat understandable, though they eventually complicate her relationship with her son.

Although it's reasonable to note the sacrifices that come along with parenthood, Polly's approach to caretaking takes a dark turn. Having framed motherhood as a burden, she finds herself at odds with the expectation that she'll always care for Deming, and this outlook causes her to behave irresponsibly. "All I wanted was to be by myself in a silent, dark room," she notes. Feeling this way, she crouches and puts baby Deming beneath a public bench before slipping away. "When I [stood] up I was lighter, relieved," she admits. The language she uses in this moment is indicative of her belief that parenthood is a burdensome obligation. And though she only runs several blocks before returning to retrieve Deming, readers see that her habit of framing caretaking as a joyless sacrifice is dangerous, since it instills in her a desire to abandon her child.

When Polly is detained and deported by ICE, Deming thinks she has left to start a new life. As a result, he's suspicious of Peter and Kay when they adopt him, assuming that they, too, don't really want him. Even after they've supported him for ten years, his insecurities persist in this regard, though in a different manner. Rather than worrying that they're going to

abandon him, he feels beholden to them, thinking that he has to somehow repay them for taking him in. This anxiety stems from the fact that Polly left him, but it also reflects the unfortunate fact that Peter and Kay *do* expect something of him. When he fails out of college, they go out of their way to get him into Carlough, where they both teach. Without considering what Deming wants, they tell him he has no "choice" but to follow their orders, since they've put themselves "on the line" for him. After he insists that he wants to pursue his music career in Manhattan, Peter levels an "accusation of ingratitude" at him, one that makes Deming feel "torn" between "anger and indebtedness." "If only Peter and Kay knew how much he wanted their approval, how he feared disappointing them like he'd disappointed his mother," Ko writes. This dynamic creates a rift between Deming and his adoptive parents. Instead of presenting their support as something he can depend upon no matter what, they play into his long-held idea that he has to earn their love.

It becomes clear that expectations and "indebtedness" stifle familial relationships when Deming leaves Peter and Kay to go looking for Polly in China, defying their hope that he graduate from Carlough. Once he finds Polly, he settles into life in China, and things begin to shift in his relationship with both his birth mother and his adoptive parents. When Peter and Kay call him on his birthday and ask if he's going to come home, he realizes that they—along with Polly, who wants him to stay—love him regardless of what he does. "Mama—and Kay, and Peter—were trying to convince him that they were deserving of his love, not the other way around," Ko writes. By testing Kay and Peter's commitment to him (and by showing Polly that he might leave shortly after reconnecting), he suddenly sees that all of his parental figures actually do love him unconditionally, even if their various approaches to parenthood complicate this love. In turn, Ko intimates that unqualified love and support ought to be offered to children up front to avoid unnecessarily messy family dynamics.



SYMBOLS

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



THE STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The statement of purpose that Kay and Peter force Daniel to write for admission to Carlough College represents the rigid expectations they place upon him. Although Daniel doesn't want to pursue his academic career any further after failing out of SUNY Potsdam, his adoptive parents insist that he return to Ridgeborough and attend summer classes. "I would write the statement of purpose for you myself if it wasn't ethically wrong," Peter says. "Don't think I

haven't considered it. But do not mistake this for a choice." This is a perfect illustration of Peter and Kay's belief that Daniel must do exactly what they tell him. Ignoring what he wants for his life, they make decisions for him and act like he has to live up to their expectations in order to deserve their love and support. Of course, this is a common parenting style, but the Wilkinsons' focus on the statement of purpose comes to symbolize the ways in which they're overly fixated on controlling Daniel's life. That Peter would like to write the statement himself suggests that he not only wants to have control over his adoptive son, but also that he doesn't think Daniel is capable of doing it himself. In turn, the statement itself stands for both his domineering nature and his lack of faith in Daniel.



WALLS

Polly's fear of walls signifies her desire to be unrestricted and free. After she's taken from her family by U.S. immigration authorities, she's placed in a prison-like camp for fourteen months, a period during which she spends quite a lot of time in solitary confinement. Isolated from the rest of the camp, she feels as if the walls are contracting around her. Years later, she still thinks about this feeling of claustrophobia. She even tells Daniel that she goes on a walk to a lake nearby her house "when the walls start to come" for her, meaning that her memories of solitary confinement still haunt her years after her release. As such, walls themselves take on a metaphorical significance in *The Leavers*, ultimately representing the limitations Polly has endured while also helping readers understand why it's so important for her to feel liberated and uninhibited.

Related Characters: Peilan Guo / Polly Guo (speaker), Leon, Michael, Deming Guo / Daniel Wilkinson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ko details the extent of Polly's "restlessness." Given that the novel opens on the eve of her disappearance, it's significant that Ko goes out of her way to establish the fact that Polly can hardly sit still. Always wanting to leave the apartment, walk around, and speculate about the lives of others, Polly is someone who isn't necessarily at ease with her own daily routine. Ko uses this dynamic to infuse *The Leavers* with a sense of mystery, coaxing readers into assuming that Polly's eventual disappearance has something to do with her "restlessness." Throughout the narrative, Ko continues to build an image of Polly as someone with an unquenchable desire for change, thereby giving readers the impression that she purposefully abandoned Deming in order to lead a life of freedom and independence. By the end of the novel, though, it becomes clear that she was apprehended by immigration authorities, a fact that invites readers to reconsider the impulse to blame her for her disappearance.

☞ "Did you think that when I was growing up, a small girl your age, I thought: hey, one day, I'm going to come all the way to New York so I can pick gao gao out of a stranger's toe? That was not my plan."

Always be prepared, she liked to say. Never rely on anyone else to give you things you could get yourself.

Related Characters: Peilan Guo / Polly Guo (speaker), Deming Guo / Daniel Wilkinson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

As Polly walks Deming home from school the night before she disappears, she talks to him about what she expected when she came to the United States. Having made the long journey from China, she didn't "plan" on having to work long hours at a nail salon just to survive. The fact that she says this is one of the first indications that she sees change as something that should ideally bring about positivity and



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Algonquin Books edition of *The Leavers* published in 2018.



Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ There was a restlessness to her, an inability to be still or settled. She jiggled her legs, bounced her knees, cracked her knuckles, twirled her thumbs. She hated being cooped up in the apartment on a sunny day, paced the rooms from wall to wall to wall, a cigarette dangling from her mouth. "Who wants to go for a walk?" she would say. Her boyfriend Leon would tell her to relax, sit down. "Sit down? We've been sitting all day!" Deming would want to stay on the couch with Michael, but he couldn't say no to her and they'd go out, no family but each other. He would have her to himself, an ambling walk in the park or along the river, making up stories about who lived in the apartments they saw from the outside.

happiness. Instead, though, her migration to the United States has only presented her with new challenges, ultimately suggesting that change doesn't inherently lead to contentedness. It is perhaps due to the nature of this constant and laborious struggle to find happiness that she develops such a strong sense of independence, telling Deming that he shouldn't "rely on anyone else."

☛ If he hadn't gotten detention—if he had left school at the usual time—if he hadn't resisted Florida—if he'd intercepted the fight she had with Leon—she would still be here. Like a detective inspecting the same five seconds of surveillance video, he replayed last Wednesday afternoon, walking the blocks from school to home.

Related Characters: Vivian, Leon, Deming Guo / Daniel Wilkinson, Peilan Guo / Polly Guo

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5



Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Ko outlines the torturous thoughts Deming has in the aftermath of Polly's disappearance. Most troublingly, readers see that he feels responsible for what has happened, thinking that he drove her away by getting in trouble at school or by "resist[ing]" the idea of moving to Florida. As he tries to blame himself for his mother's sudden vanishing, readers see how badly he needs a trustworthy adult to help him work through his complicated emotions. Without anyone to tell him that he's done nothing wrong, he's free to make ghastly speculations about why, exactly, his mother left. This demonstrates how important it is for children to have stable and supportive adults in their lives, especially in times of hardship. Too distracted to pay attention to Deming's emotional state of mind, Leon and Vivian fail to give him the guidance he needs in order to see that what has happened to Polly has nothing to do with him. In the absence of this kind of levelheaded caretaking, then, he assumes the worst.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☛ Being surrounded by other Chinese people had become so strange. In high school, kids said they never thought of him as Asian or Roland as Mexican, like it was a compliment.

Related Characters: Roland Fuentes, Deming Guo / Daniel Wilkinson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

After Daniel runs offstage while playing music at a loft party with Roland, he runs into the streets of New York and makes his way to Chinatown. It has been a decade since he last lived in the city, but he recognizes street signs and hears other people speaking Fuzhounese. Though one might think this would lend him a sense of belonging, he actually feels "strange" when he's "surrounded by other Chinese people." This is because he has been living for such a long time in communities where he's one of the only people of color. When he was a high school student in Ridgeborough, he learned to downplay his multicultural identity, not wanting to stick out amongst his peers. As a result, "kids said they never thought of him as Asian." The fact that these students meant this as a "compliment" reveals the unexamined manifestations of racism that often run throughout white-majority communities. After all, to think of this sentiment as a "compliment" is to imply that it would be undesirable for Daniel to present as Asian, turning the comment into nothing more than a form of thinly veiled bigotry that reveals the implicit biases of the Ridgeborough community.

☛ Daniel's muscles contracted. So Angel hadn't gone to Nepal. If they were still friends, if she was still talking to him, he would tell her about Michael's e-mail, about Peter's accusation of ingratitude, how torn he felt between anger and indebtedness. If only Peter and Kay knew how much he wanted their approval, how he feared disappointing them like he'd disappointed his mother. Angel had once told him that she felt like she owed her parents. "But we can't make ourselves miserable because we think it'll make them happy," she had said. "That's a screwed up way to live."

Related Characters: Angel Hennings (speaker), Jim Hennings, Kay Wilkinson, Peter Wilkinson, Michael, Deming Guo / Daniel Wilkinson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs when Daniel is having brunch in the city

with his adoptive parents, Peter and Kay. As he eats, they tell him that their friend Jim Hennings is having a birthday party and that his adoptive daughter, Angel, will be there. Suddenly, Daniel freezes. He hasn't spoken to Angel since he lost \$10,000 of her money, which she had intended to use to study abroad in Nepal. As he thinks about the deterioration of their friendship, readers note how badly he needs somebody to talk to—somebody who might actually understand his problems. Because Angel was also adopted by a white couple, she's able to sympathize with Daniel's frustrations. Without her, he doesn't know how to talk about the fact that he feels "indebted" to Peter and Kay while also feeling "ang[ry]." This is a complicated dynamic, since he recognizes all that Peter and Kay have done for him while also having to put up with their rather domineering ways. Angel, for her part, understands that it's all right to "disappoint" one's parents sometimes, since it's impossible to always "make them happy." However, she isn't speaking to Daniel anymore, so he's left to navigate this emotionally intricate landscape on his own. As he does so, Ko illustrates the pressure Daniel feels to both earn his parents' love and remain true to himself.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☞ One week later, tucked into a double bed sheathed with red flannel, Deming Guo awoke with the crumbs of dialect on his tongue, smudges and smears of dissolving syllables, nouns and verbs washed out to sea. One language had outseeped another [...].

Related Characters: Kay Wilkinson, Peter Wilkinson, Deming Guo / Daniel Wilkinson

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Deming wakes up in Ridgeborough one week after having moved in with Peter and Kay. He has only been away from other Chinese people for seven days, but he has already registered the ways in which his linguistic habits are taking new shapes. As he adjusts to living with a white suburban family, his ability to speak Chinese slowly "dissolve[s]" to "smudges and smears," making up an abstract patchwork that only vaguely recalls his past life. This linguistic disintegration perfectly reflects the transformation Deming himself undergoes when he moves to Ridgeborough, as he takes a new name and is forced to

conduct all of his conversations in English. By spotlighting Deming's transition from Deming to Daniel, Ko suggests that identity is closely tied to language and naming. After all, identity is socially constructed, meaning that a person's sense of self depends largely on how she presents herself using language. In keeping with this, to change a person's name and the language he uses is to change the relationship he has with his own identity.

☞ "I'm not going to say it'll be easy," said Peter. "But white, black, purple, green, kids of all races have struggles with belonging. They're fat, or their parents don't have a lot of money."

"That's true," Kay said. "I was a bookworm with glasses. I never belonged in my hometown."

"Issues are colorblind."

Related Characters: Kay Wilkinson, Peter Wilkinson (speaker), Deming Guo / Daniel Wilkinson

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 57



Explanation and Analysis

When Deming is still new to Ridgeborough, he overhears Kay and Peter talking in their bedroom one night. Discussing the complexities that come along with bringing a child of color into a white-majority community like Ridgeborough, Kay worries that she and Peter aren't prepared to help Deming navigate his new environment. Peter, however, is confident about the job they have ahead of them. "I'm not going to say it'll be easy," he admits, but he goes on to declare that "kids of all races have struggles with belonging." While this might be true, it's worth noting that Peter himself has probably never thought about his race in any substantial way, since he has spent his life surrounded by other white people. As such, for him to say that all kids "struggle" to belong is something of an oversimplification, since there are a number of considerations that are unique to Deming's situation as the only Asian boy in a school of white students. And although Kay is perhaps more attuned to the challenges Deming may face as a result of Ridgeborough's lack of diversity, she too overlooks how complex it is to have a multicultural identity in a majority-white environment. She points out that she was "a bookworm with glasses" who "never belonged," but this is an entirely different kind of social isolation, one that isn't—like

Deming's—based on historical, sociological, and cultural biases. When Peter says, "Issues are colorblind," then, it becomes clear that both he and Kay have a hard time putting themselves in Deming's position.

☝ [...] but they were different, had never noticed the way they looked to other people, because there were no other people present. Here, they paid too much attention to him (at first) and later, they would pay no attention to him. It was that kind of mindfuck: to be too visible and invisible at the same time, in the ways it mattered the most. Too obvious to the boys who wanted to mock him, yet girls would only notice him when he was walking around with his fly down.

Related Characters: Deming Guo / Daniel Wilkinson

Related Themes:  



Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

This is a description of the white students Deming encounters when he goes to school in Ridgeborough. Having come from New York City—where he lived amongst Chinese and Chinese-American people—he's unused to standing out because of the color of his skin. Moreover, though, he realizes that none of his peers have ever "noticed the way they look to other people," since they've never actually *encountered* other people. Even when Deming was surrounded by people who looked like him in New York City, he was certainly aware of the fact that not everyone resembled him, since the city is full of people of all different races. As such, he finds it astounding that the white students at Ridgeborough are so unaware of the way they look to people of color. Furthermore, he feels singled out in the worst possible ways, simultaneously vulnerable and "invisible" because of the fact that he's the only Asian student in school. By examining what it feels like to be in this position, Ko invites readers to consider how wrong Peter was when he told Kay that "kids of all races" grapple with the same kind of "issues." Indeed, it becomes very clear in this moment that Deming's challenges in Ridgeborough aren't "colorblind," since they're directly related to his race and cultural identity.

☝ Peter finally said, "This might sound callous, but honestly, whatever we do is going to be better than what he experienced before. You remember what the agency said, how the mother and stepfather both went back to China. We're the first stable home he's ever had."

Related Characters: Peter Wilkinson (speaker), Deming Guo / Daniel Wilkinson, Kay Wilkinson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Deming listens to Peter and Kay as they discuss their parenting techniques in the privacy of their bedroom. As he lies quietly in his own room, he hears Peter say that "whatever" he and Kay do as his foster parents will "be better than what he experienced" before coming to Ridgeborough. This is an arrogant thing for Peter to say, since he and Kay have never had a child before. In fact, they've only been caring for Deming for a matter of weeks, whereas Polly successfully supported him for over a decade. Still, though, he thinks they are already better able to provide for him. What's more, when he points out that he and Kay are giving Deming "the first stable home he's ever had," he makes an unfounded assumption about the nature of Deming's home life before coming to Ridgeborough. Of course, it's true that the past six months of the boy's life (ever since Polly disappeared) have been turbulent and unstable, but he *has* experienced happiness, stability, and consistent parental support. The fact that Peter thinks Deming's new life will automatically be "better than what he experienced before" is evidence of his sense of superiority, which is based upon the notion that he is better qualified to raise a child than somebody who doesn't align with an American image of success—even if he's never actually done anything to prove his caretaking abilities.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☝ Daniel Wilkinson was two and a half feet taller, one hundred-fifty pounds heavier than Deming Guo had once been, with better English and shittier Chinese. Ridgeborough had made Daniel an expert at juggling selves; he used to see Deming and think himself into Daniel, a slideshow perpetually alternating between the same two slides.

Related Characters: Deming Guo / Daniel Wilkinson

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

After living in Ridgeborough for ten years, Daniel has become more or less comfortable with his new identity. However, he hasn't lost all ties to his Chinese background, and though he goes by Daniel, speaks English, and is rarely around other Chinese people, he still maintains a certain awareness of his multicultural identity. Indeed, he is now "an expert at juggling selves," meaning that he has adopted a multifaceted way of moving through the world. However, it's important to note that he hasn't yet figured out how to combine his two cultural identities. Rather than letting his American persona mingle with his Chinese persona, he sees himself as split into two different people, constantly "alternating" between the two. When he sees himself as Deming, he actively tries to "think himself into Daniel," apparently believing that he can't embody both Deming and Daniel at once. This is the result of the way he grew up, since he lived for eleven years as Deming and ten as Daniel. Unable or unwilling to embrace the complex overlap of his two identities, he partitions his cultural characteristics so that they remain separate, a practice that eventually makes it even more complicated for him to navigate the collision of his two lives when he finally finds Polly years after her disappearance.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ My life felt like a confection, something I had once yearned for, but sometimes I still wanted to torch it all over again, change my name again, move to another city again, rent a room in a building where nobody knew me.

Related Characters: Peilan Guo / Polly Guo (speaker), Deming Guo / Daniel Wilkinson

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis


This passage appears in one of the sections narrated by Polly, who explains to Deming that, though she leads an ostensibly happy life in Fuzhou, she still sometimes wants to run away from everything she's built. In the years since she was taken from her son, she has finally found the financial stability she's long been searching for, no longer limited by her lack of money or by her immigration status. However, she still "yearn[s]" for more, so she dreams about abandoning her new life. It's interesting that she says she

wants to "torch it all over again," since this implies that she intentionally gave up her life with Deming, which is not the case. Nonetheless, Ko leads readers to believe that Polly purposefully "torch[ed]" all that she had in the United States, thereby sustaining the mystery surrounding her disappearance and framing her as someone who doesn't care about abandoning her son. Of course, she later reveals that Polly was deported, but this desire to "move to another city" and "change [her] name" remains, regardless of why she left the United States. As such, this passage foreshadows her eventual decision to leave her husband, Yong, at the end of the novel, helping readers understand that her longing for change persists even when she's relatively happy with her current circumstances.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ Look how he wants his mama, my roommates would say, and a couple of them also got goo-goo-eyed, and a sliver of fear would present itself: what if I would always be required to offer myself up, ready and willing, constantly available? What had I done? And then: what was wrong with me?

Related Characters: Peilan Guo / Polly Guo (speaker), Deming Guo / Daniel Wilkinson

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 143


Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after moving to New York City, Polly gives birth to Deming. She's still living with a number of roommates, and because their lodgings are so cramped, the other women end up spending considerable amounts of time with Deming. Thankfully, they admire him, not hesitating to give him their attention. Of course, this is a good thing for Polly, since it means she doesn't have to worry about her baby bothering them. At the same time, though, their doting attention to little Deming unsettles Polly, since she isn't sure she wants to give up her entire life to be a mother. Thinking this way, she sees parenthood as a sacrifice of sorts, considering the possibility that she'll "always be required to offer [her]self up" to Deming, thereby relinquishing her independence and bidding farewell to the kind of personal freedom she covets most. In this way, Ko once again portrays Polly as the type of person who would voluntarily abandon her son, and though this isn't why she eventually disappears, it's quite clear that she has an emotionally complex way of approaching parenthood.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☛ On the corner of Grand and Lafayette, the address for the poker club reverberated in his mind. He headed south to where Howard Street crossed over to Hester. It wasn't too late, he could turn and go right to Roland's, go right past the building, which was narrow, no doorman, only an intercom. He checked his phone; no messages. He was frightened by how much he was about to fuck up, by his lack of desire to stop himself, the rising anticipation at the prospect of falling down, failing harder, and going straight to tilt; he'd known from the moment he left the bar exactly where he would end up. He pressed the intercom button.

Related Characters: Roland Fuentes, Kay Wilkinson, Peter Wilkinson, Deming Guo / Daniel Wilkinson

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 159



Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Daniel is on his way to an underground poker club, where he's about to gamble away \$500. Although it has been clear since he left Peter and Kay in the West Village (after a fight) that he would gamble, this is the first time that Daniel actually acknowledges to himself that he's about to relapse. First, he went to a bar and looked up the address of the club on his phone. Then he just happened to walk by an ATM, where instead of withdrawing \$50, he withdrew \$500. These baby steps have allowed him to rationalize his actions in manageable chunks, but now he finally has to face the fact that he's going to play poker. "It wasn't too late, he could turn and go right to Roland's, go right past the building," Ko writes. However, Daniel has already given himself over to his desire to gamble—so much so that he can't even pretend that he wants to "stop himself." In fact, he's seemingly in awe of "how much he [is] about to fuck up." In other words, he has cast aside all hesitation by rationalizing his actions every step of the way, and now that he's come this far, he finds it easier to surrender to his whims, even if he knows how destructive they are.

☛ He felt a savage euphoria. The night had confirmed his failures, and he'd freed himself from having to fight his inability to live up to Peter and Kay's hopes. He didn't want to go to Carlough, wasn't ever going to be the kind of guy Angel respected, some law-school-applying moral citizen. God, it was great to be himself again.

Related Characters: Angel Hennings, Kay Wilkinson, Peter

Wilkinson, Deming Guo / Daniel Wilkinson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Daniel thinks about the fact that he has just lost \$500 playing poker in an underground club. Until this point, he has been trying to please Peter and Kay by agreeing to move home and go to Carlough College. Now, though, he has given himself over to his impulses with reckless abandon, feeling a "savage euphoria" because he's finally stopped trying to make other people happy. This is self-destructive behavior, and his belief that his actions have "confirmed his failures" is little more than an excuse to do something he knows he shouldn't (gamble). At the same time, though, there's an important lesson in this moment—namely, that he can't spend his entire life trying to "live up to Peter and Kay's hopes." While he can certainly try to make them happy and proud, he doesn't need to do everything they want. As he tries to solidify his identity as an adult and figure who he wants to be, this is an informative experience, and though he gets a bit carried away with the image of himself as a complete failure, his ability to make decisions on his own (even bad ones) is an important part of his growing maturity.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☛ "But you're okay?" A hopeful note crept into her voice.

Daniel walked back to the living room. To acknowledge his mother's regret meant he had to think of what her leaving had done to him, the nights he'd woken up in Ridgeborough in such grief it felt like his lungs were seizing. Months, years, had passed like this, until he became adept at convincing himself it didn't matter.

"That doesn't excuse you going away," he said. "You have no idea what happened to me. You can't pretend you didn't mess up, that you did nothing wrong."

Related Characters: Deming Guo / Daniel Wilkinson, Peilan Guo / Polly Guo (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis



In this conversation, Daniel and Polly speak on the phone. It's one of their first conversations in ten years, which

means they're still getting to know one another again, slowly reacquainting themselves as they tell each other about their lives. At one point, Polly asks Daniel if he's all right, and he detects a "hopeful note" in her tone, as if she desperately needs him to tell her that her absence didn't ruin his life. Simply put, she wants him to let her off the hook for missing out on the past decade of his life. This is rather unfair, since absolving her guilt would essentially require Daniel to minimize the pain he's felt all these years while also doing the emotional heavy-lifting that she should be doing herself. What's more, he doesn't even want to think about how it felt to be abandoned, so he can't bring himself to "acknowledge his mother's regret." As such, he tells her that his wellbeing shouldn't change the way she feels about leaving him.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ Once I might have become this woman, free to move across the country because she heard a city was beautiful. Instead I had become a woman like Vivian, watching TV, cooking for you and Leon, making sure the dumplings were fried and not steamed, unsure if I should marry my boyfriend but not wanting to lose him either. An uneasiness settled into me. This October would be followed by another winter, another spring, until it was time for October again.

Related Characters: Peilan Guo / Polly Guo (speaker), Deming Guo / Daniel Wilkinson, Leon, Vivian

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 205

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Polly narrates an encounter she had with a stranger in a Chinese restaurant. After this stranger lent her a bottle of water, she told her that she was moving to California simply because she'd heard nice things about it. "Once I might have become this woman, free to move across the country because she heard a city was beautiful," Polly notes. This sentiment aligns with her view of parenthood as a burden or an obligation, something that weighs her down and makes it impossible for her to lead the life she'd like to have. Rather than traveling "across the country" at a moment's notice, she has to take care of Deming, which makes her feel a certain "uneasiness." This discomfort with the idea of caring for her own son comes from the fact that she can't simply pick up and leave. Indeed, she finds herself marooned in New York, her movement restricted and her duties clearly defined by her role as a caretaker. The fact

that this is so distressing once again shows readers that Polly firmly believes change brings happiness. Unable to change her circumstances, then, she becomes depressed.



Chapter 14 Quotes

☝☝ "We were so afraid of doing something wrong. We thought it would be better if you changed your name so you would feel like you belonged with us, with our family. That you had a family."

Daniel never knew if Kay wanted him to apologize or reassure her. Either way, he always felt implicated, like there was some expectation he wasn't meeting.

"Mom." He didn't want to see her cry, especially if it was on his behalf. "It's okay."

Related Characters: Deming Guo / Daniel Wilkinson, Kay Wilkinson (speaker), Peter Wilkinson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 256



Explanation and Analysis

This exchange takes place between Kay and Daniel when Daniel is living in Ridgeborough and going to summer school at Carlough College. One day, Kay speaks candidly to him about her experience as an adoptive mother, admitting that she and Peter were "afraid of doing something wrong" when they first adopted him. As she unloads this information, Daniel senses that she's doing so for her own sake, not his. As such, he doesn't know how to respond, wondering whether he should "apologize" or "reassure" her. Of course, *neither* of these options are things he should have to do, since Kay is supposed to be the one supporting him, but he can't help but feel guilty regarding how his presence has made Kay feel over the years. This is reminiscent of Polly's desire to hear that Daniel's life turned out fine without her, since in both cases an adult who's supposed serve the function of a caretaker turns to Daniel for emotional reassurance. Once again, then, the adults in Daniel's life fail to consider how their behavior and expectations affect his emotional state.

“Your great-great-grandfather owned that land once. He grew vegetables, he had horses. He was an enterprising man. Jacob Wilkinson.”

Daniel pressed his spoon into his soup again. There was a quiet sorrow about the weighted silver cutlery, the paintings of bygone people and places. He was the last of the Wilkinsons, the only grandchild. His only cousins were on Kay’s side of the family, and they had his Uncle Gary’s last name. The way Peter spoke about it, being the last of the line was a great responsibility; he had to do something special to live up to Jacob Wilkinson’s legacy. This man he looked nothing like, whom, if he had been alive, would probably never accept Daniel as a true Wilkinson.

Related Characters: Peter Wilkinson (speaker), Kay Wilkinson, Deming Guo / Daniel Wilkinson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 262

Explanation and Analysis

To celebrate Daniel’s passing grades in summer school, Peter and Kay take him to a fancy restaurant for dinner. While they eat, Peter points out old paintings of Ridgeborough, explaining that his great-grandfather used to own the depicted land. Talking about legacies makes Daniel think about his position in the Wilkinson family. Having come to live with Peter and Kay when he was eleven years old, he doesn’t feel like a complete part of the family, though he has certainly grown into his new identity as Daniel Wilkinson. Still, though, he can’t help but think that his great-great-grandfather would “probably never accept” him “as a true Wilkinson,” since it’s unlikely that a powerful patriarch in those days would take kindly to the idea of adoption. As Daniel considers this, readers see the complicated cognition that lurks beneath the surface of the Wilkinson family dynamic. Although this dinner is meant to be a celebration, it’s shot through with a certain tension, one that arises from the fact that Peter and Kay want to make Daniel into something with which he doesn’t fully identify: a Wilkinson. In turn, readers once again note the ways in which Daniel feels torn between multiple identities, always trying to embody some image of himself that doesn’t quite feel organic or natural.

Related Characters: Peilan Guo / Polly Guo, Roland Fuentes, Kay Wilkinson, Peter Wilkinson, Deming Guo / Daniel Wilkinson

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 270

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears when Daniel has traveled from Ridgeborough to Fuzhou in the hopes of finding his mother. After Peter and Kay catch him playing online poker, he packs up his things and leaves, impulsively buying a ticket to China. Now that he’s in Fuzhou, he thinks about what has happened and considers the fact that he hasn’t “been able to do what Peter and Kay” want him to do. Although he finished summer school, it’s clear that he won’t be continuing college at Carlough, nor will he go to graduate school. They want him to become an academic like them, since this is what they think it means to be successful. However, he feels unable to do this. Feeling bad about himself, then, he thinks about how he isn’t able to do what *anyone* wants, since he also couldn’t bring himself to “play the music Roland wanted him to play.” The fact that he thinks about his failure to meet Roland’s expectations is worth noting, for it suggests that Peter and Kay’s high standards and disapproving attitude have thrown him into self-doubt about other areas of his life. Indeed, their unyielding demands have made him feel like he’s incapable of ever satisfying anyone, a notion that works its way into how he sees himself and the way he moves through the world. By spotlighting this chain reaction, Ko shows readers the extent to which parental expectations can become burdensome and emotionally harmful.

Chapter 15 Quotes

“In the end, he hadn’t been able to do what Peter and Kay wanted. Three more semesters of classes, followed by graduate school. Staying upstate. He hadn’t been able to do what Roland wanted either, play the music Roland wanted him to play.”

Chapter 17 Quotes

“What is your name?” the judge asked in English.

“Guo Peilan,” I said. “Polly Guo.”

He slammed his hand down again. The woman in the suit spoke in Mandarin.

“You need to wait for my translation.”

“What is your name?” asked the judge again, and again I answered before the woman had spoken.

“You need to wait for my translation,” the woman repeated.

“You can’t answer his question until I translate it.”

“But what am I doing here?”


“They want to deport you, but they need to get the right documents first.”

“They can’t do that. Where’s my lawyer? I have a son here, he’s an American citizen.”

The judge said something I couldn’t hear.

“Dismissed,” the woman said. “You spoke out of turn. He’s going to issue an order of deportation that says you didn’t show up today because you spoke out of turn.”

Related Characters: Peilan Guo / Polly Guo (speaker), Deming Guo / Daniel Wilkinson

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 300

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange takes place during Polly’s deportation trial, when she’s brought to court from Ardsleyville. She hasn’t had access to any lawyers, and though it’s clear that she speaks English, the judge treats her like she can’t understand him. Of course, Polly is a strong-willed person who doesn’t hesitate to advocate for herself, so she addresses the judge directly, forgoing the formal translation. The fact that the judge uses this against her is a perfect example of the ways in which certain bureaucratic processes are often weaponized against immigrants. By punishing Polly for speaking “out of turn,” the judge penalizes her simply for cooperating. Her fluency in English should be a testament to the extent to which she has assimilated into the United States, but the judge ignores this, instead using his power to turn her knowledge of English into a reason to deport her. When he finally dismisses her case, readers see how powerless she is to do anything, despite the fact that she’s otherwise completely capable of fighting for her independence and freedom. In this regard, Ko illustrates the cultural insensitivity and bias that immigrants like Polly face when trying to advocate for

themselves in a system that is rigged against them.

Chapter 18 Quotes

“There wasn’t anything I could do,” I said. “I couldn’t go back to America after being deported. I couldn’t go anywhere. If I thought about you too much I wouldn’t be able to live.”

I knew how it must sound to you: I hadn’t tried hard enough, I didn’t love you enough. But I could have kept looking forever. I needed you to understand.

Related Characters: Peilan Guo / Polly Guo (speaker), Deming Guo / Daniel Wilkinson

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 310

Explanation and Analysis



This is a conversation between Polly and Deming that takes place in Polly’s hotel room in Beijing. Polly insists that it would have been impossible for her to find her son after she was deported, since she couldn’t regain entry to the United States. “I couldn’t go anywhere,” she says. She then adds that she “wouldn’t be able to live” if she “thought about [Daniel] too much.” This is perhaps the truth, since it really would have been hard for her to find him after his adoption and name change. At the same time, though, it’s worth keeping in mind that Michael was able to find Daniel simply by doing a bit of research, so it’s not unfathomable to think that Polly also could have tracked him down.

To her credit, Polly seems somewhat aware of this, admitting that her story probably sounds rather flimsy to Daniel. “I hadn’t tried hard enough, I didn’t love you enough,” she notes, outlining what she fears Daniel must think. However, she more or less writes this off by saying, “But I could have kept looking forever.” Although she tells herself this, it doesn’t seem all that true. Instead, this statement reads like something Polly needs to believe in order to feel good about herself. She says that she “needed” Daniel to “understand” how hard she tried to look for him, but she’s the one who really needs to believe this—otherwise, the guilt of effectively leaving behind her son will overwhelm her. In this sense, Ko highlights the lengths people will go to in order to deceive themselves, rationalizing their behavior so that they can avoid ever having to take full responsibility for their shortcomings.

Chapter 19 Quotes

☝☝ There was a comfort in belonging that he'd never felt before, yet somehow, he still stood out. The bus driver eyed him for a beat too long when he bought the ticket, as did the woman in the seat across the aisle, a bag of groceries on her lap. Yong and his mother assured him his Chinese sounded close to normal now and not as freakish as it had when he first arrived, but Daniel figured it was his clothes, his bearing, or the way he looked or walked or held himself, something that revealed he wasn't from here.

Related Characters: Yong, Peilan Guo / Polly Guo, Deming Guo / Daniel Wilkinson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 315

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ko examines what it means to fit in. After living in Fuzhou for several months, Daniel finally finds “a comfort in belonging that he[s] never felt before.” This “comfort” comes from the fact that he’s finally surrounded by people who look like him and who speak his first language. After ten years in a white-majority suburb in upstate New York, he’s gotten used to being constantly aware of the ways in which he differs from the people around him.

Now, he can finally blend into his environment, though he’s unsettled to learn that he still feels a sense of social isolation. As he goes about his everyday activities, he notices that people look at him “for a beat too long,” and he wonders what gives him away as an outsider. Once more, then, he tries to fit in and discovers that his multicultural identity makes it difficult for him to fully assimilate into just one group of people. This time, he realizes that the American elements of his identity are somehow bringing themselves to bear on his ability to present as Chinese. In turn, readers see the dual nature of his identity, witnessing the nuanced effect of Daniel’s combined cultural and ethnic associations. Whereas he has spent the majority of his life thinking about how his Chinese identity affects his American one, now he experiences the opposite result.

☝☝ Everyone had stories they told themselves to get through the days. Like Vivian’s belief that she had helped [Deming], his mother insisting she had looked for him, that she could forget about him because he was okay.

Related Characters: Kay Wilkinson, Peter Wilkinson, Peilan Guo / Polly Guo, Vivian, Deming Guo / Daniel Wilkinson

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 321

Explanation and Analysis

After Peter and Kay ask Daniel if he’s going to return to Ridgeborough from Fuzhou, he considers the fact that suddenly all of the adults in his life are vying for his love. In keeping with this, he worries that leaving Fuzhou will hurt Polly’s feelings, so he wonders how he can avoid making her feel guilty about never having tracked him down after getting deported. Thinking about this, he realizes that “everyone ha[s] stories they [tell] themselves to get through the days.” Polly, for her part, upholds that she “looked for him” when she got back to China, but it’s obvious that she put him out of her mind because she was excited to start a new life. Similarly, Vivian tells herself that she “helped” Daniel by putting him into foster care, though Daniel himself thinks otherwise (of course, it’s worth noting that her decision to do this was actually pretty levelheaded, since she genuinely didn’t have the means to support him).

This realization is an important one, since it helps Daniel understand that the people in his life haven’t turned their backs on him because they don’t love him, but because they’ve simply found ways to rationalize their behavior. This, he now understands, is a self-defense mechanism, as people tell themselves certain “stories” to “get through the days,” ultimately protecting themselves from the sorrow and torment that might arise if they weren’t able to justify their behavior. By framing Polly’s decision to stop looking for him in this way, then, Daniel manages to empathize with her rather than holding a grudge that would otherwise interfere with their renewed relationship.

Chapter 20 Quotes

☝☝ At the ferry terminal I bought a ticket, then found a place on the upper deck. The boat rocked in the waves, and as I saw the lights of Kowloon come through the fog, I held the railing, breathless with laughter. How wrong I had been to assume this feeling had been lost forever. This lightheaded uncertainty, all my fear and joy—I could return here, punching the sky. Because I had found her: Polly Guo. Wherever I went next, I would never let her go again.

Related Characters: Peilan Guo / Polly Guo (speaker), Yong, Deming Guo / Daniel Wilkinson

Related Themes:**Page Number:** 326**Explanation and Analysis**

After Daniel leaves Fuzhou to return to the United States, Polly decides to leave her life behind once again. Separating from Yong, she travels to Hong Kong to start anew. Whereas her initial disappearance was out of her control, this time she has made a conscious choice to leave, and the thrill of this decision dazzles her. As she approaches her new city on the ferry, she feels “breathless with laughter,” realizing that she was “wrong” to “assume” that this feeling of change and migration “had been lost forever.” When she says this, it becomes clear that she likes to feel the constant possibility of upheaval and “uncertainty.” A restless soul, she doesn’t want to settle into a single life. Instead, she wants to know that she can always pick up and leave. “I could return here, punching the sky,” she says, but the words “return here” don’t refer to any place in particular. Rather, she means to say that she can “return” to this state of mind, the “lightheaded uncertainty” that comes along with change. This, she upholds, is the feeling that helps her define her own identity. “Because I had found her: Polly Guo,” she notes, suggesting that migration, change, and “uncertainty” define her life. In turn, Ko shows readers just how much Polly values her ability to do whatever she wants—a liberating feeling that solidifies her sense of self.

Chapter 21 Quotes

●● She wasn’t listening to him. He recalled how she and Peter had insisted on English, his new name, the right education. How *better* and *more* hinged on their ideas of success, their plans. Mama, Chinese, the Bronx, Deming: they had never been enough. He shivered, and for a brief, horrible moment, he could see himself the way he realized they saw him—as someone who needed to be saved.

Related Characters: Peilan Guo / Polly Guo, Kay Wilkinson, Deming Guo / Daniel Wilkinson**Related Themes:****Page Number:** 332**Explanation and Analysis**

When Daniel comes back to the United States, he stays with Peter and Kay in Ridgeborough for several nights before moving to New York City again. While he’s there, he has a conversation with Kay about what it was like to see his mother. During this discussion, Kay talks rather patronizingly about Polly, saying that Chinese women like her would enjoy much more success if only they were given more opportunities. Daniel, for his part, tries to make her see that his mother is actually doing quite well, but Kay doesn’t listen. This makes him think about all of the expectations she and Peter have forced on him—expectations that “hinge” upon their rather narrow conception of what it means to be happy or successful. “He recalled how she and Peter had insisted on English, his new name, the right education,” Ko writes. In this moment, Daniel realizes that although his adoptive parents want the best for him, they have a limiting sense of what his life should look like.

Daniel also understands in this scene that Kay and Peter have always seen him “as someone who need[s] to be saved,” a viewpoint that discounts his Chinese identity. Rather than helping him become the person he wants to be—a person with a rich multicultural identity who embraces both American and Chinese ways of life—they want him to embody strictly American ideals. Once more, then, readers witness the stifling nature of Peter and Kay’s parenting methods. What’s more, the fact that their strict standards place such a strain on their relationship with Daniel demonstrates the harmful effects of imposing overly rigorous parental expectations.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

CHAPTER 1

On the eve of her disappearance, Polly Guo picks Deming up from school. He has just gotten out of detention, but Polly doesn't know this. Deming's good friend Michael—who, along with his mother, Vivian, lives with Polly and Deming—covered for him by saying that he stayed late to work on an assignment. Deming is in fifth grade, and his academic performance is quite bad. "I don't want you to be like me," his mother tells him, reminding him that she didn't finish eighth grade. Although he doesn't say anything in response, Deming knows he'll "barely" be able to make it through fifth grade, let alone eighth. As they walk home, Deming thinks about how his mother is a "restless" soul, and she complains about her day at the nail salon, saying she didn't come to New York to "pick gao gao out of a stranger's toe."

Polly insists that Deming has to work hard in school so he can have a better life than her. She asks him if he thinks Leon—her boyfriend—seems happy at his job at the slaughterhouse, and when Deming says Leon seems fine, she points out that his back hurts all the time because of the hard nature of his work. "You don't finish school, you end up cutting meat like Leon, arthritis by the time you're thirty-five," she says.

Winding through the snowy Bronx, Polly mumbles about how she was the first girl to leave her Chinese village. "I made it all the way to New York. I was supposed to travel the world," she says, and as Deming anticipates her next sentence, she cuts him off, saying, "But then I had you. Then I met Leon. You're my home now." Letting this settle for a moment, she tells Deming that they're moving to Florida, where she has found a job at a restaurant. Deming is taken aback and asks if Leon is coming, and when Polly assures him that he is, he asks if Michael and Vivian are also accompanying them. "They'll join us later," Polly says. Upset, Deming says he won't leave, but Polly says he has to because she's his mother and they must remain together.

Polly's conversation with Deming about the importance of schoolwork highlights Ko's interest in examining the expectations parents have of their children. Although Polly herself didn't make it past the eighth grade, she expects her son to concentrate on his studies. This is because she wants him to have a better life than she's had, knowing that a good education is a path to upward mobility. When she says she didn't come to New York to "pick gao gao out of a stranger's toe," she also calls attention to the ways in which she has failed to live up to her own expectations. Having believed that immigrating to America would improve her life, she's disappointed to find herself in an unrewarding job.



Again, Polly commits herself to the idea that education will save Deming from a life of grueling work. As she urges him to take his studies seriously, readers see the extent to which she's unhappy with her current existence. It's clear that she made a significant change in her life by immigrating to New York City, but this change apparently has yet to bring her true contentment, which is why she's so focused on helping her son ensure his own future success.



When Polly speaks wistfully about her life before Deming, she frames parenthood as an obligation that gets in the way of a person's ability to flourish. "I was supposed to travel the world," she says, insinuating that getting pregnant thwarted this plan. In fact, her use of the phrase "supposed to" suggests that she saw her independent future as some sort of destiny—a destiny that Deming ruined. At the same time, she also appears to love her son, admitting that he's her "home now." As such, she sends Deming mixed messages, underhandedly blaming him for her shortcomings while simultaneously stating how much he means to her.



Deming reminds Polly that they weren't together when he lived in China for several years with his grandfather. "I was working so I could save money to have you here," she says. Still, Deming remains unconvinced. Switching from Fuzhounese—which they've been speaking for the entire conversation—Deming says in English, "I'm not going. Leave me alone." Hearing this, his mother raises her hand, but when he flinches, she envelops him in a hug.

At dinner with Michael and Vivian, Deming and Polly say nothing about Florida. Later, Michael and Deming lounge on the couch, and Michael rehashes a scene from school, when Deming tripped a bully named Travis Bhopa, who constantly makes fun of him and Michael for being Chinese. "Badass, Deming!" Michael said in the moment. That night, Deming wakes up when Leon comes home from the slaughterhouse. Listening to his mother whisper to her boyfriend in the dark on their side of the room, he suddenly hears Polly say, "Go fuck yourself," but he falls asleep before he can discern what they're talking about. The next morning, he asks Polly when they're moving, and she says, "We're not. Now hurry or you'll be late for school."

That evening, Deming and Michael watch television and wait for Polly to come home, but she doesn't return from work. When Leon comes back from the slaughterhouse, he's puzzled by Polly's absence. Eventually, he receives a call, and when he gets off the phone, he tells Deming that his mother has gone away for several days to see some friends. When Deming presses him for details, Leon ushers him to bed.

The complexity of Deming and Polly's relationship comes to the forefront of the novel in this scene, as Polly's aggression turns into a tender embrace. Although she's focused on wanting to move to Florida—a sign that she's hungry for change—she also understands Deming's hesitations. Wanting to show him that she cares about him more than anything, then, she hugs him, overriding his request to be left alone.



Deming's encounter with Travis Bhopa alerts readers to the discrimination, racism, and cultural insensitivity he's forced to face on a daily basis. This is an important element of The Leavers, as Deming later encounters more entrenched forms of bigotry, meaning that he isn't always capable of addressing it as straightforwardly as he does in this moment. Unfortunately for him, though, his home life is so mired in drama (surrounding the possibility of moving to Florida) that he isn't able to look to his mother for emotional support in the aftermath of his incident with Travis.



Given that Ko begins The Leavers by acknowledging that Polly is about to disappear, it's not terribly surprising that she suddenly fails to come home after work. However, readers are left to guess why, exactly, she vanishes. It seems likely that she decided to move to Florida, but she's also just told Deming that this isn't happening. Plus, it would be rather surprising if she left Deming behind on purpose. On the one hand, it's clear she misses her independence, but on the other hand, her love of her son seems to outweigh that yearning for personal freedom. As such, Ko puts readers in a state of confusion regarding her disappearance—one that mirrors Deming's own perplexity.



A week goes by, and Polly doesn't return. Deming looks through the apartment and finds her hand lotion and toothbrush, her socks, a pair of jeans, a sweater. Everything is in its normal place. He thinks about the last words he said to her: "When are we moving?" He also considers the fact that maybe she wouldn't have disappeared if he hadn't gotten detention or if he'd been willing to move to Florida. Day after day, he waits to hear her opening the apartment door. He even thinks about all the things he'd do if she came home, like study, complete his homework, or stop talking in English just to confuse her. One evening, Vivian comes home, and Deming yells, "You need to find her, she's in danger." Vivian assures him that she isn't in danger, but when he asks where she is, she admits she doesn't know.

Winter turns to spring, and still Polly is missing. Deming walks in on Vivian and Leon having a hushed conversation in the kitchen one night, and when they see him, they stop talking. At school, Deming apologizes to Travis Bhopa, thinking that "by sacrificing his pride," he might be able to "guarantee" his mother's wellbeing. "The worse he felt, the more it would make her return," Ko writes. Thinking this way, he starts skipping meals and studying hard, hoping that getting an A in math will make his mother return. "She stayed gone," Ko writes.

CHAPTER 2

Ten years after Polly Guo's disappearance, Daniel Wilkinson huddles in the corner of a loft party in Lower Manhattan. His band, Psychic Hearts, is about to play a set to a crowd of hipsters, including the promoter for a revered club called Jupiter. As Daniel listens to the opening act, he thinks about his bandmate, Roland Fuentes. Roland has been his best friend since junior high and is a charismatic front man. The music he has written for Psychic Hearts is uninteresting to Daniel, who thinks the songs pander the latest trends, but this doesn't stop Roland from trying to build hype about the duo, telling everyone who will listen how amazing Daniel is at guitar. As Daniel waits to go on, he guzzles vodka and watches people fawn over Roland while ignoring him completely.

In this section, Deming blames himself for his mother's disappearance. Desperate to understand why she left, he overanalyzes his own actions, assuming that he failed to live up to her expectations and thus drove her away. Without a voice of reason, he holds himself accountable for something over which he clearly has no control. And though he still has Vivian and Leon, they are apparently too preoccupied to focus on his emotional health, as they make weak attempts to calm him down without actually stopping to queue him into what's happening. As a result, he's not only abandoned by his mother, but isolated from what the adults in his life know about her whereabouts.



Deming's self-critical behavior continues, as he blames himself for Polly's disappearance. Worse, he exhibits self-destructive behavior, thinking that he must make sacrifices because of what's happened to his mother. Again, this indicates that he feels responsible for what has taken place, and because none of the adults in his life are attuned to what he's feeling, they fail to give him the emotional support he would need in order to understand that he's not at fault.



It isn't immediately clear why Ko cuts from the story of Polly Guo's disappearance to this seemingly unrelated scene. However, this confusion mimics the lack of resolution that Deming must feel in the aftermath of losing his mother, since he's forced to simply go along with his life without ever knowing what, exactly, drove her away.



By the time *Psychic Hearts* goes on, Daniel is drunk and can't remember the songs. "Learn to play," an audience member shouts, and Daniel unplugs his guitar and walks offstage, darting out of the loft and onto the wintery streets. Making his way to Chinatown, he walks around and feels a sense of familiarity. "Being surrounded by other Chinese people had become so strange," Ko writes. "In high school, kids said they never thought of him as Asian or Roland as Mexican, like it was a compliment." Before Daniel went to SUNY Potsdam (which he isn't currently attending) and before he lived in the suburb of Ridgeborough, he was a "city kid who memorized the subway system by fourth grade." All the same, he doesn't feel like he "belong[s]" as he walks through Chinatown.

Having lived upstate for the past decade, Daniel hardly remembers how to speak Fuzhounese. When he went to SUNY Potsdam, he encountered several other Asian students, but they were mostly exchange students who stayed with one another, and he "avoided" them. And now the cultural breakdown of Potsdam doesn't matter to him anymore, since he's been sleeping on Roland's couch in the city. As he wanders through the streets after the show, Roland texts him and asks him if he's okay. Ignoring this message, Daniel pulls up an email he's been looking at periodically for two months, when he first received it. It's from Michael, who wants to know if Daniel's name used to be Deming Guo.

"You and your mom used to live with me and my mom and my Uncle Leon in the Bronx," Michael writes in his email to Daniel. "I know we haven't talked in years but if this is the right Daniel, can you write me or call me [...]? It's important. It's about your mother." Daniel closes the message, frustrated by the thought that Michael and Vivian and Leon could just come bursting back into his life after a full decade. "They'd let him go, given him away," Ko notes. "He couldn't think of anything Michael could tell him about his mother that he wanted to know. Wherever she was, she was long gone." Thinking this way, he puts away his phone and decides to go back to the apartment and apologize to Roland, resolving to learn the songs and commit himself to *Psychic Hearts*.

It's worth paying attention to Daniel's sudden awareness that he isn't the only Chinese person in the vicinity. That he thinks it's "strange" to be "surrounded by other Chinese people" suggests that he's accustomed to spending time in communities in which he's the only person of Chinese descent. When his high school peers used to try to compliment him by saying that "they never thought of him as Asian," Ko highlights the ways in which undiverse white communities often fail to examine their own implicit biases, since this sentiment suggests that it would be a bad thing if people saw Daniel as Asian.



When Daniel reads the email from Michael, readers understand how his story is connected to Deming's—Daniel is Deming. Whatever has happened in the past ten years, then, it's clear that Polly's disappearance had a profound effect on the trajectory of Deming's life, since he now goes by a different name and is unused to being around other Asian people. This, of course, stands in stark contrast to his life as a young child, when he lived in Chinatown surrounded by Chinese immigrants like his mother.



Daniel's assertion that Polly is "long gone" suggests that he has purposefully put the past behind him, wanting to avoid thinking about his mother's disappearance. This, it seems, is how he has become Daniel Wilkinson, an entirely different person. As such, he doesn't want to talk to Michael, since doing so would only bring up memories he's clearly worked hard to forget.



The next morning, Daniel meets Peter and Kay—his adoptive parents—for lunch. While Peter complains about the font on the menu, Kay tells Daniel that there’s “controversy” at Carlough College, where they both teach. “The minority students have been protesting,” Peter interjects. “They want the administration to establish an Ethnic Studies department.” When Daniel asks why this is a problem, Kay is quick to say that she and her husband “value diversity.” However, Peter adds, they take issue with “the level of vitriol” coming from the students. “All this focus on trigger warnings, political correctness. I’m afraid we’re breeding a generation of coddled children. I’d like to think that we’ve raised you to not have that sort of entitlement, Daniel,” Kay says, and Daniel assures her that this is the case.

Noticing how tired he looks, Kay asks Daniel if he was out late the night before, and he says he had a show with Roland. “Was it in a bar?” Kay asks. “Mom,” Daniel replies. “I haven’t been doing anything. A beer or two now and then.” In response, Kay reminds him that “temptations can lead to relapses,” insisting that he should be living at home with them in Ridgeborough in upstate New York. Going on, she says she wishes he would come home and go to Gamblers Anonymous, but Daniel lies and says he’s been attending meetings in the city.

Ko explains that Peter installed a “blocking software” on Daniel’s laptop after Daniel failed out of Potsdam. The blocker makes it impossible for Daniel to visit the poker websites that distracted him from his studies and emptied his bank account. At lunch, Daniel assures Peter and Kay that he’s doing well in the city. “I’m making decent money at my job, not using my credit card,” he lies. “It’s not like Potsdam, where there’s nothing to do. I’m too busy to get distracted by that stuff here.” This comment angers Peter, who says, “Nothing to do in Potsdam, he says. It’s school. You’re supposed to be studying.” Going on, he laments the fact that Daniel is working in a Mexican restaurant like “a common laborer,” and when Daniel tells him not to be racist, he denies that what he’s said is insensitive. “Call a spade a spade,” he says.

When Peter and Kay talk to Daniel about “entitlement,” they fail to recognize their own entitlement, which allows them to cast disparaging judgments on minority students who are simply advocating for equal representation. As an Asian young man who has been to school at a white-majority university, Daniel seems to understand why Peter and Kay’s students might protest, but Kay doesn’t give him an opportunity to voice this opinion, instead implying that anyone who questions such issues is entitled. As such, Daniel is forced to align with a perspective that doesn’t necessarily accord with his actual viewpoint.



At first, it seems as if Kay is saying that Daniel has a drinking problem, but it soon emerges that Daniel is addicted to gambling, not alcohol. Still, Kay’s assertion that “temptations can lead to relapses” is important to note, since it foreshadows the ways in which Daniel later rationalizes self-destructive behavior. In this moment, Kay articulates the fact that giving in to one impulse often encourages a person to give into another, ultimately creating a snowball effect.



Throughout Daniel’s conversation with his adoptive parents, it becomes rather obvious that Peter and Kay are quite worried about how he lives his life. Subjecting him to a number of expectations regarding his academic habits, they disapprove of the fact that he works in a Mexican restaurant. When Peter likens Daniel to a “common laborer,” readers see that he has an elitist perspective, one that disparages working-class people. What’s more, Daniel detects racist overtones when Peter says this, but Peter denies this. Rather ironically, he dismisses the idea of his own bigotry by saying, “Call a spade a spade,” a phrase that has in itself become a racially charged thing to say. In this way, Ko spotlights how unwilling Peter is to examine his own prejudices, which are so deeply engrained that he fails to even notice when he’s perpetuating culturally insensitive ideas.



Hearing Peter talk disparagingly about his job, Daniel challenges the idea that people who work in Mexican restaurants aren't responsible or intelligent. When he finishes, Kay tells him not to "talk to [his] father like that," and Peter tells him that they didn't come all the way to the city just to "listen to his sarcasm." At this point, Kay informs him that they've convinced the dean of Carlowh College to let him attend summer school and then continue as a full-time student. When Daniel says he doesn't want to do this, Peter says he and Kay have put themselves "on the line" for him. Still, Daniel says he's going to focus on his music instead, and this enrages Peter. Giving Daniel an application to fill out, Peter tells him to write a **statement of purpose**, saying, "Do not mistake this for a choice."

Before parting ways, Peter and Kay tell Daniel that they expect him to give them his **statement of purpose** the following weekend, since they'll be returning to the city to attend a birthday party for Jim Hennings, their close family friend. "Angel will be there. You'll join us, of course," Kay says. This information puts Daniel on edge, as he realizes that Angel—Jim and Elaine Hennings's adopted Chinese-American daughter—hasn't gone to Nepal, as she originally planned. Ko doesn't reveal why this information unsettles Daniel, but she does note that Angel and Daniel aren't talking anymore. This is upsetting to Daniel, since he wants to tell her about "Peter's accusation of ingratitude" and how he feels "torn" between "anger and indebtedness" in his relationship with Peter and Kay.

"We can't make ourselves miserable because we think it'll make [our parents] happy," Angel once told Daniel. Ever since childhood, Daniel has confided in her, and in college they started talking on the phone every night. Now Daniel deeply misses these conversations, but there's nothing he can do to get Angel to talk to him again. "We love you," Kay says, bringing Daniel back to the present. "We want the best for you. I know it doesn't seem like that right now, but we do." Hearing this, he feels guilty about everything Peter and Kay have done for him, so he promises he'll fill out the Carlowh application.

Peter and Kay's negative reaction to Daniel's comments demonstrates just how unwilling or incapable they are of holding themselves responsible for their own implicit biases. Rather than examining their prejudices and listening to Daniel—who, unlike them, actually knows what it's like to be discriminated against—they ignore his opinion, pushing on to make him feel as if he owes them something. When Peter says that he and Kay have put themselves "on the line" for him, he acts as if Daniel is beholden to them. As a result, Daniel's adoptive parents convey the message that he has to earn their love and support.



It's significant that Daniel wants to talk to Angel, since she is apparently one of the only people he knows who might understand what he's gone through as an adoptee. Now, he wishes he could commiserate with her, since he wants to talk about how he feels "indebted" to Peter and Kay. This feeling comes from the fact that his adoptive parents act as if he needs to earn their love and support. Given that Daniel's mother seemingly abandoned him, it makes sense that he feels undeserving of love, and Peter's "accusation of ingratitude" only exacerbates this dynamic.



Angel's advice to Daniel is worth bearing in mind, since it addresses Daniel's uncomfortable sense that he's "indebted" to his parents—a belief that curtails his ability to do what he wants with his life. "We want the best for you," Kay tells him, and though this is probably true, what she and Peter fail to recognize is that their conception of what's "best" for Daniel is quite narrow and might not align with what he wants.



That night, Daniel works on a new song and then tries to think of what to say in his **statement of purpose**. When Roland comes home, he apologizes for running offstage, but Roland doesn't hold it against him. Instead, he invites him into his room and shows him a recording he made, saying he wants to change the band's sound because Hutch—the guy who books bands at Jupiter—likes a specific kind of music. Daniel doesn't like the style of Roland's new writing, but he agrees to help work on an album in this vein, figuring that this is a good opportunity to do something with his music career. In passing, he tells Roland about Michael's email, but Roland warns him not to respond, saying that he'll "regret" finding out new information about his mother.

In many ways, The Leavers is a novel about the ways in which people struggle to find the person they want to be. For Daniel, this process involves navigating Peter and Kay's expectations while simultaneously pursuing his own desire to be a musician. In this scene, though, readers see that even working with Roland poses a challenge, as Daniel realizes that this project doesn't reflect his own musical preferences. In the same way that he agrees to do what Peter and Kay want, though, he tells Roland he'll help him record the Psychic Hearts album.



CHAPTER 3

Jumping back in time, Ko narrates an excursion Polly and Deming take when Deming is six years old. Having just returned to America after spending five years in China with his grandfather, Deming finds his mother unfamiliar and is entranced by the many sights and sounds of New York City. Each noise creates a stream of color in his mind, and he revels in what it's like to move through this hectic soundscape. When they have free time, he and his mother choose a subway line to ride, taking a train to Queens one day and spotting a mother and son who they decide are their lookalikes. When Deming runs up to them, they simply walk away. Turning to his real mother, he asks, "Are you going to leave me again?" "Never," she replies. "I promise I'll never leave you."

Unlike Deming, readers know that Polly actually will leave him. However, it's not yet clear why she eventually disappears, so her promise to "never leave" Deming is noteworthy, since this sentiment suggests that perhaps her departure was involuntary. At the same time, though, Ko has already established that Polly is a "restless" person, thereby inviting readers to wonder if she leaves in order to live an independent life unencumbered by the responsibilities of parenthood.



Resuming the story of what happens when Polly initially disappears, Ko explains that Deming still doesn't know what happened to his mother even five months after she leaves. It's July, and he has settled into a boring—if uneasy—life, waiting for Polly to come back and spending time in the stagnant city heat with Michael. Vivian and Leon do their best to care for him, but neither can replace his mother. Leon, for his part, looks worse and worse by the day, tired from his work at the slaughterhouse and overwhelmed by his new caretaking responsibilities. One night, Deming asks him if they can go to Florida to look for Polly, but he assures him that his mother isn't in "danger."

It's unclear how much Leon and Vivian know about Polly's whereabouts. Although they appear unable to tell Deming what happened to her, they also seem confident about certain details, like that she's not in harm's way. This, however, might just be an effort to soothe Deming, though Leon's vague answers are not only unconvincing, but somewhat unsettling because of their mysterious nature. Once again, then, readers see that Deming's caretakers aren't paying close attention to his emotional state—it seems that if they were, they would make an effort to speak more openly to him about the situation.



Angry that nobody will tell him what happened to Polly, Deming decides one night to go to Florida himself. Ever a loyal companion, Michael agrees to accompany him, and together they sneak out of the apartment. When they get to the train station, though, neither of them have MetroCards or money, and Deming calls off the plan, dejectedly saying, "Let's go home." That night, he watches Leon sleep and thinks about how badly he "need[s]" him. Shortly thereafter, Leon gets injured at work and is unable to go to his shifts. And though the landlord gives him and Vivian more time to come up with rent, Ko notes that "the loan shark's men [are] less understanding."

Ko describes Polly's initial disappearance, explaining that Vivian receives a call from her co-worker Didi, who's "screaming about the nail salon," saying that "the boss [is] involved in something shady." When Leon calls the restaurant in Florida where Polly planned to work, they tell him she never came. Trying to track her down, Didi calls the police and the immigration authorities, but they claim to have "no record of her." This leads Deming to believe that she's not in danger, since he thinks she simply "took off on her own."

One night, Leon doesn't come home until long after midnight. "You smell like a bar," Vivian says to her him. "Must be nice to stay out all night doing whatever you want. Wish I could do that." Only ten days later, Leon leaves for good in dead of night. Vivian tells Michael and Deming that he has taken a job in China. She also says he wanted to say goodbye but didn't because the boys were sleeping, but Deming knows this is a lie. "He hadn't said goodbye because he knew he shouldn't have left," Ko writes.

Three weeks after Leon leaves, Vivian tells Deming she wants to take him shopping. Michael is sad to be left behind, but Vivian claims she wants to spend one-on-one time with Deming. On the bus, she turns to him and says, "Face it. Your mother isn't coming back, and you need a good family. I can't provide for both you and Michael right now. I'm sorry, Deming." Promising that he can live with Leon when he returns from China, she says they'll see each other again soon. She then takes him into a building and a clerk brings him into an isolated room before going to talk to Vivian. When the clerk returns, she takes him to a Chinese family in Brooklyn, where he stays for several days before a white couple named Peter and Kay Wilkinson come and take him back to the suburban town of Ridgeborough, New York.

When Deming thinks about how much he "need[s]" Leon, he recognizes the precarious circumstances his mother has put him in. Without his primary caretaker, he realizes that he's dependent upon a man he who isn't even his father. Of course, he's close with Leon, but Leon technically has no legal obligation to look after him. On another note, Ko's reference to "the loan sharks" is the first time she mentions anything of the sort, ultimately heightening the mystery and suspense swirling in the aftermath of Polly's disappearance.



Although it might seem comforting to know that Polly isn't in danger, the idea that she "took off on her own" is surely quite devastating to Deming, since it implies that she willingly abandoned him to pursue a better life. As such, he's left feeling unwanted, as if he's not good enough for his mother's love.



Not only does Deming's mother abandon him, but now Leon does too. Deming sees this as something to be ashamed of, thinking that Leon must know he's done something wrong. Once again, then, Deming is put in a position in which he feels unwanted, and though he knows the adults in his life have let him down, this surely doesn't help him feel better about being abandoned.



Yet again, Deming is unable to depend upon the adults in his life. This time, at least, Vivian tells him why she's abandoning him, trying to explain that she simply can't afford to support him. This makes sense, since she has her own child to provide for, but Vivian's sound logic likely makes no difference to Deming, who once more has to face the fact that none of his caretakers are willing or able to give him what he needs.



CHAPTER 4

A week after arriving in Ridgeborough, Deming wakes one morning “with the crumbs of dialect on his tongue,” quickly losing the feeling of speaking Fuzhounese. “One language had outseeped another,” Ko writes. “*I am Daniel Wilkinson*,” he says to himself, thinking how strange it is to have been given a new name by his foster parents. At first, he doesn’t know what to call Peter and Kay, feeling uncomfortable using “Mom” and “Dad.” Kay, for her part, has taken Mandarin classes, but whenever she tries to speak to Deming, he can hardly understand what she says, so he responds by saying, “I don’t know who you are,” in Fuzhounese. When he speaks Fuzhounese in other circumstances, Peter chides him, saying, “English.”

In a meeting with Deming and Kay, the principal of Ridgeborough Middle School suggests that Deming should redo fifth grade because of his bad grades. When he asks Deming questions, he does so condescendingly, eventually turning to Kay and asking, “Where is he from? Originally?” Kay reminds him that she’s already told him that Deming is from New York City, but he says, “But originally?” He then suggests that Deming’s English needs work, though Kay thinks it’s “perfectly fine.” Circling back to his main point, the principal says that Deming should be put in the fifth grade so he doesn’t lose heart. “We don’t want to get him started off in his new country on the wrong foot,” he says. At this point, Kay loses her patience and talks about educational theory, dumbfounding the principal and successfully convincing him to place Deming in the sixth grade.

Kay takes Deming shopping for school clothes, and he sees how willing she is to spend large amounts of money on him. “Why am I here?” he asks while they’re eating lunch in a mall food court. “Because—we have room for a child in our family. And you needed a family to stay with.” That night, he hears Peter and Kay talking in their bedroom. Listening from his own room, he hears them worry about having taken him in. “I can’t figure out how to act around him sometimes,” Kay admits. She also asks Peter if he can spend more time at home, since he’s been at the university so much recently. Defensively, he reminds her that this is an “important semester” for him because he’s trying to become the chair of his department.

In this chapter, readers witness the abrupt transformation Deming undergoes when he’s taken in by Peter and Kay. Not only does he find himself living with strangers, but he’s taken away from everything he knows and given a new name. Suddenly, he’s supposed to think of himself as an entirely different person, someone whose name won’t stand out in an American suburb. Needless to say, this stands in stark contrast to his life in New York City, where he mainly spoke Fuzhounese and the majority of people he saw looked like him. As his grip on Fuzhounese diminishes, Ko illustrates just how much a person’s sense of cultural belonging and identity depends upon his or her environment.



The principal of Deming’s new school is a prime example of somebody who makes lazy assumptions about a person based on the color of their skin. Knowing that Deming is Chinese-American, he automatically thinks that he’s bad at English and that he’s not originally from the United States. When Kay stands up for him, it is the first time since Polly disappeared that an adult actually advocates for Deming, and though Kay later clings to her own unexamined stereotypes, in this moment she proves her desire to support her new son.



Despite Kay’s willingness to support Deming, she finds it difficult to connect with him because of the cultural differences that stand between them. Nonetheless, she is the only adult in the novel thus far who has committed herself to him, and this remains the case even if she doesn’t feel at ease around him yet. Peter, on the other hand, emerges as a somewhat challenging character, a man focused more on his career than on the immense responsibility of foster parenting that he and his wife have taken on.



Peter complains that there's no "work-life balance" in academia. "You of all people should know that," he says to Kay. "But it could be different for women. There aren't the same expectations, the same drive." This upsets Kay, but she goes back to talking about her concerns regarding Daniel, admitting that she's afraid of getting "too attached," since one of his real family members could return any day and collect him. She also asks Peter if they're "crazy" to try raising a young Asian boy in Ridgeborough, where there aren't any other Asian families. "[These] issues are colorblind," Peter says, insisting that "kids of all races have struggles with belonging."

The night before the beginning of school, Deming sneaks downstairs and tries to call Polly's cellphone. "This call cannot be completed at this time," an automated voice tells him. The next day, his teacher takes attendance and is surprised to see an Asian boy when she says "Daniel Wilkinson." While eating alone at lunch, he can't help but notice that everybody is white. The next day, he decides to think of himself as an alien who's been sent to Ridgeborough to collect information. What he realizes is that nobody around him thinks about "the way they look to other people, because there [are] no other people present." He, on the other hand, is simultaneously "too visible" and "invisible." During lunch on his third day, a girl asks him where he's from. When he asks her the same question, she says, "I'm from here."

On his fourth day of school, Deming watches as a large boy named Cody picks on a smaller kid, calling him a "fag" and pushing him over in the locker room. Cody then pushes Deming and calls him a "Chinese retard," so Deming tackles him. In the commotion, he realizes that the small boy who Cody originally bullied has jumped on him, attacking him instead of Cody. "Chinese retard," Cody repeats as he gets up and walks away.

When Peter says that "kids of all races have struggles with belonging," he reveals his naivety, since he fails to acknowledge that the "struggles" Deming faces as a Chinese-American in a predominantly white community are different than the everyday obstacles of childhood. His belief that such "issues are colorblind" arises not from an objective understanding of race, but from his own experience as someone who has never had to experience what it's like to be different than everyone else. In fact, whether or not Deming will have a hard time fitting into the Ridgeborough community has quite a lot to do with skin color, but Peter doesn't consider this because he himself has never had to think about such things.



In this section, Ko showcases the ways in which the white residents of Ridgeborough are unused to thinking about race. This is because they rarely encounter a person of color and thus never consider what "they look like to other people." Deming, on the other hand, has no choice but to recognize the fact that he stands out, since he's one of the only nonwhite people in the entire school. This, in turn, disproves Peter's theory that "kids of all races" face the same obstacles when trying to fit in.



Deming's encounter with Cody illustrates the racism he faces in Ridgeborough, where he's singled out for being Chinese. When the small boy attacks Deming in order to protect the same bully who just harassed him, readers see how eager this boy is to team up against Deming, essentially trying to prove himself by adopting Cody's racism. In this way, it becomes clear just how much Deming is on his own in this white-majority school.



On the way home from school that day, a boy named Roland Fuentes catches up to Deming and introduces himself. Roland—who's Mexican—is the only other person of color Deming has encountered in Ridgeborough. As they walk home, the two boys talk about their parents, and Roland says his dad died a long time ago. "Did your mom die, too? Your real mom," Roland asks, and before he can stop himself, Deming says, "Yeah." As the weeks pass, Deming and Roland become good friends, playing videogames and writing their initials on the virtual scoreboards. Though at first he writes DGUO, Deming starts to record his name as DWLK. Within several weeks, he stops finding it strange when people call him Daniel.

Alone after school one afternoon, Deming opens Peter's cabinet of vinyl records and looks at them. When Peter comes home and sees him sitting before the turntable, he tells him to choose a record, so he selects Jimi Hendrix's *Are You Experienced?* When Peter puts it on, the room "fill[s]" with "color," and Deming and Peter bond over their appreciation of Hendrix's guitar work. From that day on, Deming listens to Peter's record collection using headphones, immersing himself in Hendrix's catalogue and letting the chaotic sounds remind him of his life in New York City.

When Deming goes to Roland's house after school, they listen to Hendrix. Together, they create fake band names, eventually writing songs using these monikers. In school, they talk about these bands as if they're real, tricking their peers into believing them. "[I heard about the band you're in. Roland's band. Necro...mania](#)," Cody tells Deming one day. "That's my band, not Roland's," Deming says. "I started it." For his birthday, Deming asks for an electric guitar, but Peter and Kay give him a laptop instead. Still, this makes him happy, and he largely succeeds in his attempt to avoid thinking about Polly. On the way home from his birthday dinner, he asks Peter and Kay if they'll give him a guitar next year, and Peter says, "Let's not get carried away. Music is fine to listen to as a hobby, but you need to focus on school."

It's important to note that what helps Deming evolve into Daniel isn't his sudden immersion into the white culture of Ridgeborough, but the process of becoming friends with somebody who knows what it's like to be one of the only people of color in town. Finally, Deming has found someone with whom he can connect. And because Roland knows him as Daniel, Deming gradually comes to acknowledge and embrace his new name, since it's no longer quite as foreign. In other words, his friendship with Roland helps him establish his new cultural identity. On another note, when he says that his mother is dead, he reveals his desire to put his tumultuous family history behind him.



As Deming settles into life in Ridgeborough, he finds things to focus on that will take his mind off what happened to his mother. Slowly becoming Daniel Wilkinson, he distracts himself from his own personal history by developing this new interest in music, which feels simultaneously new and reminiscent of his past life in New York City, where he experienced a cacophony of sound that is otherwise nowhere to be found in Ridgeborough.



Deming's interest in music gives him something upon which he can build his new identity as Daniel Wilkinson. Before long, even Cody sees him not as someone to be picked on, but as a cool musician. However, Peter and Kay are reluctant to encourage his musical ambitions because they have strict ideas about what he should "focus" on. In this regard, Peter outlines their expectations, ultimately dismissing his primary passion, which is the only thing he's found that has helped ease the transition from his past life to his new existence in Ridgeborough. As such, readers see that his foster parents are fixated on how they want him to behave and what they want him to become, not on whether or not he's happy.



Deming hears Peter and Kay talking about him again in their bedroom one night. “Oh, God, sometimes I look at him and think, what are we doing with this twelve-year-old Chinese boy? In Ridgeborough?” he hears Kay say. “Jim and Elaine, at least they’re in New York City.” She goes on to explain that Deming told her someone said something racist to him in the grocery store the other day. “I was horrified,” she says. “And now, whenever we go out, I’m suspicious.” She wonders aloud if she should take more Mandarin classes or cook Chinese food. After a moment, Peter says, “This might sound callous, but honestly, whatever we do is going to be better than what he experienced before. You remember what the agency said, how the mother and stepfather both went back to China. We’re the first stable home he’s ever had.”

As Deming listens, Peter and Kay talk about starting the adoption process to make their guardianship permanent. Hardly able to keep up, Deming wonders why Peter said that Polly went back to China. Despite his confusion, he keeps trying to listen. He hears Kay saying she can’t stop thinking about Polly, wondering what she looks like. She also says it feels like Deming is scared of her and Peter, and when Peter assures her that this won’t always be the case, she says, “I hope so. We’ll love him so much we’ll make it all better.”

Shortly after hearing Peter and Kay’s conversation about starting the adoption process, Deming opens a file cabinet one afternoon and finds a folder labeled “ADOPTION/FOSTER.” Inside, he finds pictures of children and letters to social workers, and then he comes upon a report about his own case, which states that his mother abandoned him to return to China. “Foster parents plan to petition for termination of mother’s parental rights on grounds of abandonment,” the file reads. That night over dinner, he asks Peter and Kay if they’ve adopted him, and they explain that they have plans to do so. “But what happened to my real family?” he asks. “We are your real family,” Peter says. All of a sudden, Deming feels sick, so Peter carries him upstairs and puts him to bed.

Kay’s discomfort about how to navigate racism makes sense, since she herself has never faced discrimination based on the color of her skin. Now that she lives with a Chinese-American boy, though, she’s suddenly aware of the many manifestations of bigotry and cultural insensitivity that run throughout her community. This newfound awareness is a testament to the fact that many people (especially white Americans who have never had to think about race) aren’t aware of the many cultural and racial biases surrounding them. While Kay begins to recognize the strains of insensitivity all around her, though, Peter commits himself to the idea of American superiority, assuming that anything he and Kay do for Deming will be what’s best for him. Of course, it’s true that Deming hasn’t had a “stable home” in recent months, but Peter overlooks the fact that Deming actually has enjoyed a “stable home” for the first ten years of his life. Instead, Peter jumps to the conclusion that this isn’t the case, ultimately using this viewpoint to justify his rather complacent belief that he and Kay are unmatched caretakers simply because they can provide Deming with the life of a stereotypically successful white American family.



When Deming hears Peter say that Polly returned to China, it’s the first time he’s received any information whatsoever about his mother’s whereabouts. Although Peter and Kay are eager to give him the parental support he needs, they fail to see how reassuring it would be for him to know for sure what happened to Polly (or at least to know as much information as possible). Without this knowledge, he’s left in the dark, and though Kay insists that she and Peter will “love him so much” that he’ll feel “better” about his family situation, it seems unlikely that they’ll be able to do this without at least helping him process his mother’s disappearance.



Deming wants to know why his mother left him, and although Peter and Kay are likely unable to answer this question, it’s clear that they know more than they’re telling him. Instead of helping him understand—and thus process—what happened, though, they avoid the topic altogether. When Deming finally comes out and asks “what happened to [his] real family,” Peter sidesteps the question by saying, “We are your real family.” Of course, this is a nice sentiment, but Peter doesn’t recognize that Deming most likely doesn’t feel the same way about their connection. What this child needs, it seems, is a caretaker who’s willing to be honest with him. Instead, though, he has two people who want him to simply forget about his biological family, which is obviously easier said than done.



Peter, Kay, and Deming drive to New York City several days later to visit the Hennings. It's the first time Deming has returned to the city since he was taken to Ridgeborough, and he hatches a plan to sneak back to his old apartment in the Bronx so he can reconnect with Vivian and Michael. When they arrive at Jim and Elaine's house, they settle in, and Deming meets Angel, who is also of Chinese descent, though she has lived in the United States for her entire life and doesn't know how to respond when Deming addresses her in Chinese.

For dinner, Jim and Elaine take everyone to a Chinese restaurant they claim is fantastic, but Deming knows the food isn't very good. Still, it's nice to hear people speaking Fuzhounese around him. Taking control, he orders for the table in Fuzhounese, and when Elaine marvels at the fact that he's fluent in Mandarin, he corrects her, saying, "It's not Mandarin. It's Fuzhounese." Peter explains to Jim and Elaine that Fuzhounese is "the local slang," and when Kay tells Deming not to speak so directly to Elaine, he says, "But she's wrong. She's stupid." He also points out that Fuzhounese isn't "local slang," but Jim interjects and says, "It's all Chinese to us dumb-dumbs." Elaine, for her part, apologizes to Deming for getting confused, and Kay forces him to apologize.

When Deming gets up to go to the bathroom after the meal, he tries to slip away, but the group catches up to him just outside the door. "Were you looking for us?" Peter asks, and Deming lies, saying he was in the bathroom and couldn't find them. Back at the Hennings' apartment, Deming tells Angel that his birth mother, Polly, might be in the Bronx, and she decides to help him find her. When the adults fall asleep, they sneak out and hail a cab using money Angel has stolen from Jim. When they get to Deming's old apartment, though, they find strangers living there. Defeated, they return to the Hennings'.

CHAPTER 5

Ten years later, Daniel Wilkinson is taller and heavier than he was when he was Deming Guo. "Ridgeborough had made Daniel an expert at juggling selves; he used to see Deming and think himself into Daniel, a slideshow perpetually alternating between the same two slides," Ko writes. Sometimes Daniel thinks about what his life would have been like if Polly had never left, and he fantasizes about Deming carrying out an alternative existence. Shortly after bombing onstage at the loft party, Daniel responds to Michael's email, saying, "you've got the right guy. what's up?"

Finally, Deming finds someone who's in a similar situation to his own, since Angel is also a Chinese adoptee living with white parents. However, Angel is used to living with white American parents, and has little to no connection to her original culture. As such, Deming once again finds himself unable to recapture a sense of cultural belonging, though at least Angel can understand better than most people what he's going through.



Deming's frustration with Elaine stems from the fact that she claims to know so much about Chinese culture without actually knowing what she's talking about at all. When he corrects her, his adoptive parents are embarrassed, as if he doesn't have the right to point out Elaine's oversights. Furthermore, Peter's suggestion that Fuzhounese is nothing more than "slang" is rather condescending, as he effectively disparages Deming's first language. As such, Deming feels as if his cultural identity has been discounted by this group of white adults. Lastly, when Jim says, "It's all Chinese to us dumb-dumbs," he implies that he and the others don't care enough about Chinese culture to pay attention to its nuances.



Although Deming may not be able to fully connect with Angel because she doesn't know as much about Chinese culture, it's clear that these two children have bonded with one another. After all, Angel understands what it's like to wonder about the whereabouts of one's birth parents, which is why she agrees to help Deming track down his mother. When this fails, though, Deming likely feels that there's nothing he can do but embrace his new life as Daniel Wilkinson, since he has no way of reuniting with Polly.



It's worth noting that Daniel is now "an expert at juggling selves," since this suggests that a person can have multiple cultural identities. Unable to reconcile his Chinese self with his new American self, he divides his identity into two halves. Since he's been living for ten years in a white-majority suburb, though, he feels disconnected from Deming Guo, ultimately proving the extent to which a person's environment affects the way he or she identifies.



That evening, Daniel thinks about Jim Hennings's upcoming birthday party, where he'll have to see Angel for the first time since they had a falling out. Ko explains that Daniel started playing poker for fun in high school and realized he was talented. During his sophomore year at SUNY Potsdam, he started playing online poker, learning that he could recognize "patterns" in the way weak players bet. The next year, he met Kyle, another student who played for large sums online. Seeing Kyle's success, Deming started betting more money. The more he made, the more he played, and he once didn't leave his room for days at a time because he was too engrossed in gambling. He even built his online account up to \$80,000, but he never withdrew it, instead funneling it all back into poker.

Narrating Daniel's blossoming gambling addiction, Ko explains that he takes out a loan to pay his college tuition (since his poor grades disqualify him from receiving financial aid). The next day, he spends the entire amount on online poker. Hoping to rebound from this, he asks friends for money, eventually borrowing \$2,000 from Kyle and assuring him that he'll pay him back in two weeks. However, the more games he loses, the worse he gets at playing, and he's only able to give Kyle back \$200. As such, Kyle and two of his muscular friends start visiting his room on a daily basis and badgering him to repay his debt. Soon enough, he's \$10,000 "in the hole." Around this time, he starts talking to Angel on the phone. Going to college in Iowa, she's saving up to study abroad in Nepal, but she agrees to lend him \$10,000.

Daniel plans to use Angel's money to repay Kyle, at which point he'll take out another loan and give back Angel her \$10,000. However, his credit is so bad that the bank denies his request for a second loan, so he tries to make back the money by playing poker. Before long, he has lost all Angel's money, and though he promises to "make it up to her," she's furious. "You mess everything up," she says. "Don't call me again." Furious, she tells Peter and Kay about his gambling problem (though not about the \$10,000), and they force him to come home and attend Gamblers Anonymous.

In this section, Ko outlines how a person gets hooked on gambling. Little by little, Daniel's betting becomes increasingly serious. Rather than betting large sums of money right away, he plays for fun in high school. This leads to online poker, where the stakes are most likely higher than the games he played against friends in high school. From here, he begins playing with significant amounts of money, having gradually worked his way up to this point. By spotlighting this step-by-step progression, Ko calls attention to how easy it is to develop risky habits.



It's apparent that Daniel's gambling habit has interfered with his rationality. Rather than using money responsibly, he continues to make risky bets. But his descent into debt doesn't happen all at once, but little by little. Given that he's already lost his loan money and the amount he borrowed from Kyle, it's not hard to see that he'll probably lose Angel's money, too. However, he doesn't stop to recognize this pattern of self-destructive behavior, instead focusing only on the present, which is exactly how he justifies continuing to play poker even though doing so is obviously a bad idea.



Once again, readers see how unwilling Daniel is to recognize the overarching narrative of his gambling addiction. Instead of admitting that playing poker only leads him into more debt, he fixates on the possibility of winning just one big hand so he can pay back Angel and Kyle. In doing so, he refuses to acknowledge the fact that he's making reckless choices.



Thinking about what it'll be like to see Angel again after their falling out, Daniel remembers the long conversations they used to have on the phone, when he admitted to her that he feels like a disappointment to his parents. She also confided in him, telling him about the time she tried to overdose on sleeping pills and Jim and Elaine sent her to a therapist. Remembering these conversations, Daniel takes out his phone and texts her, "you going to your dad's party Saturday?" He then turns his attention to **the statement of purpose**, trying to come up with a good reason for why he would want to attend Carlowgh College.

Daniel and Michael make a plan over email to meet at a Starbucks in Manhattan. "Do you prefer Daniel or Deming?" Michael asks upon seeing him. "Daniel, I guess," Daniel replies. Michael says he attends Columbia and is applying to work on a "genetics research project" at the school, and Daniel says he's taking time off from college, adding that he plays in Psychic Hearts. "You still in touch with Leon?" Daniel asks, and Michael says that they talk sometimes. Apparently, Leon lives in Fuzhou, is married, and has a daughter. As for Vivian, she lives with her new husband, Timothy. Shortly after Daniel left, Vivian married Timothy, and the family moved to Queens, though now they all live in Brooklyn.

Getting to his point, Michael tells Daniel that he found old documents outlining the details of his placement into foster care. Apparently, Vivian purposefully put him under the care of "social services," having no intention of retrieving him. Several weeks after giving him up, she went to court and "approved" his placement with Peter and Kay. When Michael tells Daniel this, he apologizes, saying he just wanted to make sure he knew. He also tells Daniel that Vivian believes she "did the best thing" for him, adding that she wants to have him over for dinner. "Are you serious?" Daniel asks. "No fucking way."

Daniel and Angel's friendship emerges once more as one of the only genuine forms of support in Daniel's life. Angel is the only person he can talk to about feeling "indebted" to his parents, since she presumably has felt the same way. (As a side note, it's worth mentioning that Ko never specifies why Angel tries to end her own life, nor does she provide enough information about her to help readers understand why she might do such a thing.) On another note, Daniel's attempt to fill out a convincing statement of purpose represents his attempt to live up to his parents' expectations even though they don't necessarily align with what he wants.



It's worth keeping in mind that Daniel has had no connection to his previous life for the past ten years. This makes his meeting with Michael rather monumental, as his two cultural identities—Daniel and Deming—suddenly collide. Although seeing Michael might be nice, there's no denying the fact that this rekindled relationship will conjure up new dilemmas and considerations, like whether or not Daniel wants to be called Deming. As such, meeting up with Michael forces Daniel to once again reevaluate who he is and how he wants to present himself.



When Michael tells Daniel that Vivian purposefully gave him away, Daniel feels betrayed. Of course, he already felt like he'd been abandoned, but now he knows that Vivian sent him into the foster care system without any plans to reunite with him in the future. It's unsurprising, then, that he doesn't want to see her again, clearly resenting her for so willingly putting him in the permanent care of strangers.



Despite his initial hesitancy, Daniel goes to Vivian and Michael's house for dinner the following Friday. He's angry at Vivian, but he can't help but enjoy being at her house in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, which he recognizes as the same neighborhood he was taken to just before Peter and Kay brought him to Ridgeborough. Over dinner, Daniel meets Vivian's new husband, Timothy, and tries to keep up with the conversation, though his Fuzhounese is quite bad. After the meal, he follows Vivian to the kitchen and helps her clean, eventually asking, "Why did you do it?" When she pretends to not know what he's talking about, he says, "You made me think my mother abandoned me, that she didn't want me." In response, she says, "I didn't screw up anything. You wouldn't be in college, otherwise. You wouldn't be living in Manhattan and playing on your guitar."

Vivian tells Daniel that if she hadn't put him in foster care, he would be poor and living in Polly's old village. "That's where she is?" he asks, and Vivian immediately shuts down, saying she doesn't know. "Is she dead?" Daniel presses. Finally, Vivian looks at him and tells him that his mother is alive, which she knows because Leon told her.

Just before Daniel leaves, Michael hugs him and tells him he'll come to the next *Psychic Hearts* show. When Vivian says goodbye, she shoves an envelope in his hand. "I paid your mother's debt," she says. "When Leon left there was still money owed. Who do you think paid? If I hadn't paid, you'd be dead by now." On his way out, Daniel opens the envelope and finds \$100 and a piece of paper with a phone number and Leon's name written on it.

The fact that Daniel goes to Vivian's house after having so vehemently declined the invitation at first is a sign that he can't resist the opportunity to reconnect with his past. Though it's painful to see her, he finds it hard to turn away from Vivian. This is partially because he wants to learn more about what happened to his mother, but his inability to stay away is also an indication of his simple desire to recapture what it felt like to live amongst other Chinese people. In turn, Ko illustrates that—though he has embraced his identity as Daniel Wilkinson—he hasn't forgotten about his connection to Chinese culture.



Finally, Daniel knows for sure that his mother is alive. However, he still doesn't know the details surrounding her disappearance, and though this is the first time anyone actually tells him something about what happened, Vivian still doesn't speak straightforwardly about the situation, instead keeping him—and, in turn, the readers—in suspense.



Vivian demonstrates that she cares for Daniel by inviting him over, cooking him dinner, and finally giving him some information about what happened to Polly. However, she also acts as if he—or, at the very least, his mother—owes her, once again advancing the narrative that Daniel has to prove himself worthy of his caretakers' support.



CHAPTER 6

“The night you came back into my life I was walking down the same old street in Fuzhou,” Polly narrates. Coming from World Top English (where she works as a teacher), she walks to meet her husband, Yong, for dinner. Yong frequently has dinner with clients and always wants Polly to attend, though she’s exhausted by these boring engagements. This is why she chooses to walk to dinner, relishing the feeling of freedom that comes with winding through the chaos of Fuzhou, though she can’t help but feel somewhat trapped in her life, thinking, “I was forty years old and most of my choices had already been made. Made for me. Not so easy to veer off course now.”

Polly’s husband doesn’t understand why she likes to walk so much, saying that if he himself wanted an “adventure,” he would travel to Hong Kong, though she notes that he never actually travels. They originally met at World Top English, where Yong was one of her students. When they started dating, she told him she used to live in the United States, and he said, “You must have studied English in university.” She didn’t say anything in response, simply letting him think he wanted. After this, he developed an idea of her as a “brilliant, hardworking, and kind” person, and Polly soon became enamored of this new version of herself. Six months after starting to date, they got married, and Polly never told him about Deming. “The months passed and then it seemed too late and too significant to reveal,” she notes.

At the dinner with Yong and his clients, Polly struggles to keep herself entertained, hating the vapid way these business executives talk about money and labor. At one point, she looks at her phone and realizes she’s received a voicemail, so she excuses herself and listens to it. “Hello? This is a message for Polly Guo,” a voice says in wobbling Fuzhounese. “This is your son, Deming. I am good. New York is where I live. Leon your number gave me. Leon I found, Michael found me. You are good? I would like to talk to you.” Before the message ends, Deming gives Polly his phone number and tells her to call. Rattled, she puts the phone away and feels pain radiating through her arms. When she returns to the table, she says she was on a “business call.”

After five chapters of third-person narration, Polly’s voice appears to tell her own side of the story. What’s most notable is that she uses the second-person pronoun, “you,” addressing Deming as a way of explaining why she left. The mere fact that her sections are structured this way suggests that she feels guilty for having abandoned her son, apparently wanting to explain herself. When she complains that the majority of her decisions have been made for her, there are several different ways to interpret what she means. On the one hand, readers might see her discontent as a sign of restlessness, which might suggest that she’s the kind of person who would abandon her son simply to free herself of the duties of parenthood. On the other hand, it’s possible that her unhappiness has to do with the fact that she hasn’t been able to decide for herself how to live her life, meaning that she was forced to leave Deming behind. By presenting these two possibilities, Ko sustains the mystery surrounding Polly’s initial disappearance.



Like Deming’s dual identity as both Deming and Daniel, Polly adopts a new personality, embracing a reality in which she’s a university-educated woman who has never had a child. Although this is a lie, she falls into a new life, one built upon this new, alternate version of her identity. Given that readers don’t yet know why she abandoned Deming, the fact that she so eagerly develops this new persona suggests that she originally disappeared in order to create a new life. This, however, doesn’t seem to have brought her pure happiness, as she clearly still yearns for “adventure.”



In the same way that Daniel’s two identities collide when he visits Michael and Vivian after ten years, Polly’s past life comes crashing around her when she listens to Deming’s voicemail. After having worked for an entire decade to build this new life for herself, she can’t help but feel the emotional effects of hearing her son’s voice, which reminds her of all that she left behind.



“For so long I had wanted to find you,” Polly notes, referring to Deming. She explains that Leon told her Deming was adopted, and she goes out of her way to underline the fact that she would never have parted ways with him in the first place if she’d had a “choice.” Still, “the only way to keep going was to act as if” he were “totally gone,” so she told herself that both she and Deming were “better off” in their separate lives.

Ko still hasn't revealed why Polly returned to China, but readers learn in this section that she didn't have a "choice." Of course, it remains unclear what exactly this means, but the fact that she didn't voluntarily abandon Deming complicates the idea that she simply left him behind because she's a restless soul. Regardless of why she left, though, it's clear that she wants to make herself feel better about not tracking Deming down, ultimately telling herself that he's "totally gone" in order to make it easier to go on with her new life.



That night, Polly and Yong return to their fancy high-rise apartment, which has an ocean view. When she first moved in, she explains, she felt a sense of “relief,” loving that she was able to create a new life for herself. Lying in bed now, though, she tries to wrap her head around telling Yong that she has a 21-year-old son. “You couldn’t omit your own child from the story of your life, like it was no big deal,” she thinks. “If I called [Deming], and if Yong found out I had lied about having a child, he would be so angry, and then he would leave me, and I would have to give up being myself.” Exhausted by these thoughts, she takes a sleeping pill, which she uses every night because it’s the only way she can make sure she won’t have nightmares.

Polly has certainly built a new life, but the remnants of her past continue to haunt her. Although she has succeeded in fashioning a new identity for herself, all it takes is one phone call from Deming to completely unravel her, forcing her to think about how hard it would be to marry her two lives. The fact that she has such a hard time reconciling her separate existences with one another is an indication that although it's possible for a person to be many things at once, it's not necessarily possible to sequester certain aspects of one's life. Rather, the elements of identity and personal history are interlaced with one another, no matter how disparate they might seem.



CHAPTER 7

Polly narrates the story of her childhood, saying, “If you knew more about me, Deming, maybe you wouldn’t blame me so much, maybe you would understand me more.” Going on, she explains that her mother died of cancer. Polly was only a baby when this happened, so she doesn’t remember anything about her. As such, she often asked her father questions about her mother, though he rarely answered. Instead, he talked about how poor he was growing up, often complaining that people are too “soft and spoiled.” Overall, though, Polly describes her life as rather unrewarding. “Back then, leaving the village made you suspect,” she notes. “You might leave to marry a boy in another village and come home on holidays [...] but otherwise, you stayed put.”

Polly's attempt to avoid Deming's "blame" confirms that she feels guilty about leaving him. To assuage this guilt, she tries to explain herself, thinking that the only way Deming will understand what happened is by getting to know her—an idea that encourages her son (and readers) to empathize with her when she eventually reveals why, exactly, she left. Furthermore, the fact that it was considered "suspect" for somebody like Polly to leave her village provides insight into why she cares so much about her freedom. After all, her ability to go where she wants has apparently been curtailed since she was a young girl.



Still narrating her backstory, Polly explains that she stops going to school after her eighth-grade teacher humiliates her for smoking a cigarette. The next year, she doesn't return to class, instead listening to her father complain about "commercial fishing boats coming down the river from Fuzhou" and taking all the fish—a significant problem for him, since he's a local fisherman. When Polly (who at the time is known as Peilan) is fifteen, she starts spending time with her neighbor, a boy named Haifeng. Before long, she and Haifeng kiss on a secluded riverbank, and they start seeing each other every afternoon, though they try to keep their relationship a secret from their parents.

Around the time Peilan and Haifeng start seeing one another, news circulates throughout the village about the benefits of working in the factories of Fuzhou, the nearest city. Although people from rural areas are unable to get permanent residency in cities (known as "urban hukou"), they're allowed to purchase "temporary resident permits," giving them the chance to find jobs that pay more than the ones available to them in the countryside. As such, Peilan decides to go to Fuzhou to work as a seamstress in a garment factory, and though her father says factory work is something only boys should do, she pays no attention, telling him that there are dormitories full of girls and that she'll make 300 yuan every month.

In Fuzhou, Peilan works hard but enjoys her independence, sending so much money back to her father that soon other families let their daughters follow her to the city. Before long, Haifeng comes to Fuzhou and works in a nearby factory, and though he's eager to see Peilan, she doesn't make much time for him. Instead, she befriends Xuan and Qing, two girls who live in her dormitory. Xuan and Qing speak extensively about their sex lives, and Xuan—who has two lovers—shows her the fancy pieces of clothing one of her boyfriends gives her. Inspired by her friends' sexual maturity, Peilan makes plans to meet Haifeng at a motel, where she has sex for the first time.

From an early age, Polly dislikes being told what to do. When her teacher reprimands her, she simply decides to stop attending school, thereby rejecting the notion that anyone has control over her. This independent attitude foreshadows her eventual desire to lead her own life unencumbered by other peoples' expectations.



China's "hukou" system is a form of household registration that makes a distinction between rural and urban residency. Although the system was originally tied to the kind of work residents do (agricultural versus non-agricultural), it became a bastion of inequality, as people with urban hukou received benefits that those with rural hukou did not. Because Peilan doesn't have urban hukou, she and her family are unable to live in the city of Fuzhou, which is why she jumps at the opportunity to purchase a "temporary resident permit," which gives her the opportunity to pursue higher-paying jobs than she'd come across in her own village. The hukou system is worth noting because it's one of the first restrictions on Peilan's ability to live where she wants. All her life, it seems, people have been telling her where she can and cannot go, which is perhaps what has made her so averse to staying in one place.



Finally out of her village and able to make her own choices, Peilan explores the new world of adulthood. Admiring her friends and their grownup ways, she embraces the idea of change and the process of maturing, and though she hasn't necessarily shown an overwhelming amount of interest in Haifeng, she's happy to use him to see for herself what it's like to have the sexual experiences she has until now only heard about from Xuan and Qing.



Two months later, Peilan realizes she's pregnant, but she doesn't want to tell Haifeng because he'll expect her to marry him. When they were lying together in the motel, he talked about moving back to the village together and waxed poetic about what it would be like to be married—two topics that did nothing but drive Peilan away. "Until now, I had done anything I wanted to, without repercussions," she notes. At the urging of Qing and Xuan, she visits a hospital, but the doctors won't let her have an abortion because she doesn't have a proper ID, since she's not "registered as a city person." Defeated, Peilan goes back to the factories, where her work suffers because she's so distracted. Shortly thereafter, her boss fires her, at which point she decides to go back to her village to get an abortion at a rural hospital.

Even at the rural hospital she visits, Peilan isn't allowed to have an abortion. This time, it's because she isn't married. However, she also doesn't have a "birth permit," meaning she'll be fined for having a baby. Taking pity on her, the nurse at the hospital tells her to wait in the lobby, implying that she'll make an exception for her. As she sits and waits for the nurse to return, though, Peilan starts to fret, thinking about the times throughout her childhood when she watched previously pregnant women come home "smaller and subdued, but with no babies." What's more, she fears that she'll be fined even if the hospital allows her to have an abortion, and she knows she won't be able to pay. With nobody watching her, then, she gets up and leaves.

Peilan tells her father that she's home for a short vacation. Keeping her pregnancy a secret, she ruminates about the fact that she'll have to marry Haifeng once everyone finds out she's having his baby. During this period, she and her father go to a party for a fellow villager who went to America and has come back to visit. Although he incurred a sizable amount of debt to travel to the United States, he's now paid it off and is living prosperously. The next day, Peilan decides to go to America, too.

To get to America, Peilan pays a woman \$50,000 to make the arrangements. She borrows \$3,000 from relatives, but the rest comes from loan sharks, whom she has to pay twice a month via wired installments or else risk physical harm. After a series of connecting flights and train rides, she finally arrives in a wooden box, her clothing wet with urine and her tongue "raw" from having bitten it over and over. "In New York City, I changed," she explains. "For one thing, I was no longer Peilan." On the suggestion of a fellow immigrant, she changes her name to Polly, thinking of it as the English equivalent of her actual name. Right away, she starts working at a garment factory, sleeping on the floor of a multi-person apartment every night.

Peilan doesn't want to tell Haifeng that she's pregnant because she knows his expectations won't accord with what she wants. Because she doesn't want to marry him, she tries to make her own decision about her pregnancy, ultimately deciding to get an abortion. However, she once again finds her freedom curtailed by the hukou system, since the doctors refuse to give her an abortion because she isn't an official "city person." Experiences like this one—in which other people interfere with Peilan's autonomy—shed light on why she later reinvents herself as Polly, an act that proves she can do whatever she wants.



In this scene, Ko shows readers the profound power Peilan's government has over her. Because she only has rural hukou, her family isn't wealthy, and this means she can't afford to pay a fine for having a baby without a "birth permit." However, she also doesn't qualify for an abortion, putting her in an extremely difficult position. And though the nurse seemingly takes pity on her, she ends up deciding to go through with her pregnancy. She makes this decision, it seems, because she's afraid of having an abortion, though this is ultimately less of a choice than it is a surrender. Indeed, none of the options available to her in this moment are desirable. As such, this marks the first time that Peilan is unable to do what she wants.



It makes sense that Peilan decides to travel to America, since it's the only way she'll be able to avoid marrying Haifeng. By choosing to leave China, she effectively regains her autonomy, even if she's still going to have a baby she doesn't want.



It's worth noting how much of a sacrifice Peilan makes to reach America. Not only does she endure an extremely uncomfortable journey, she also throws herself into an astounding amount of debt, which will be very difficult for her to pay off. Nevertheless, she sees this as a new beginning, reveling in what it feels like to start anew with a different name and—thus—identity. The fact that she's willing to sacrifice so much in order to get away from her previous life in China underlines her belief in the power of change, as she clearly thinks that the transformations she undergoes in America will make up for the fact that she has accrued massive amounts of debt.



Polly enjoys living in New York City, often riding the subways and appreciating the commotion and noise. “My new life was unstable and unsure, but each new day was shot through with possibility,” she notes. She makes friends with one of her roommates, a woman named Didi who’s originally from a village close to her own. As time passes, Polly nears her due date, so she goes to a free gynecology clinic, where the doctor tells her she’s too far along (seven months) to get an abortion. After this appointment, she feels hopeless: “I had run out of choices; I was fucked.”

After talking to the doctor, Polly takes a train to the end of its route and gets off on the edge of Brooklyn, finding herself standing before the ocean. Thinking about her own powerlessness, she wades into the freezing water. “Standing in the Atlantic, it grew into a challenge,” she asserts. “For Polly, the girl who’d defy odds, the girl who could do anything. New York was a parallel gift of a life, and the unrealness of being here gave even the most frightening things a layer of surreal comedy.” As she feels the ocean water lap against her shins, she thinks about how Peilan is living out an alternative reality in China while Polly stands here on the shore. “Peilan would marry Haifeng or another village boy while Polly would walk the endless blocks of new cities,” she notes. “Polly could have a baby without being married.”

When Deming is born, Polly’s roommates don’t kick her out, though she agrees to pay extra rent. This proves difficult, though, since she has to quit her job, unable to bring herself to leave Deming with a babysitter. To make ends meet, she takes out another loan from the loan shark. Despite these financial troubles, she enters a period of bliss, marveling at how much she loves Deming. Meanwhile, Didi says she’ll get her a job at a nail salon whenever she’s ready. She also helps care for Deming, always willing to watch him when Polly wants to take a walk. And though Polly is floored by how much she loves Deming, she feels exhausted by her caretaking responsibilities. “What if I would always be required to offer myself up?” she fears, immediately feeling bad for thinking such thoughts.

At first, immigrating to America fills Polly with a sense of endless “possibility,” as she appreciates the fact that she can do seemingly anything she wants. However, this sense of freedom is cut short when she learns she can’t get an abortion. Although she has put herself in an entirely new context, she still lacks the feeling of uncompromised independence she so desperately wants, ultimately suggesting that change and migration don’t automatically bring about happiness.



When Polly thinks about having two “parallel” lives, readers once again see the duality that often accompanies a multicultural identity. Although Polly has left China, she hasn’t completely forgotten the woman she used to be. And though she is once again overwhelmed by the idea of losing her independence, she realizes that she still has much more personal freedom than she would have if she stayed in China, where she would have to marry Haifeng. This realization ultimately allows Polly to reframe her pregnancy, helping her see that she isn’t necessarily about to lose all of her personal freedom.



Polly has a complicated view of parenthood. On the one hand, she loves Deming and is happy to be his mother. On the other hand, though, she sees her parental role as a burden, something that interferes with her independence. Ko manipulates this ambivalence, using it to stoke readers’ curiosity regarding why Polly eventually disappears. After all, the fact that she worries about always having to “offer” herself to Deming frames her as the type of person who might willingly abandon her child, though it’s not yet clear whether or not this is what happens.



Some of Polly's roommates have children of their own and send them back to China so they can work. They tell Polly that it doesn't matter, since babies won't remember this period of their lives anyway. Still, Polly struggles with the idea of parting ways with Deming. When Deming is several months old, Polly goes back to work in a factory, but life proves quite difficult, and she eventually loses her job one day when she takes Deming to the factory with her. Placing him in a bag full of fabric, she implores him not to cry, but she can't quiet him. As she fumbles to calm him down, she spills a bottle of formula on herself and lets the bottle fall onto his legs, at which point her boss notices what's going on.

Keeping Deming in the bag of fabric, Polly picks him up and leaves work after her boss says she can return the next day without Deming. "You kicked me like you wanted to be freed," she explains. "I don't want to tell you what I did." Seeing a bench nearby, she places Deming beneath it, looks around, and rushes away, feeling "lighter" and "relieved." When she's only several blocks away, though, she turns back and retrieves Deming, feeling terrible. That night, she calls her father and tells her she's had a baby and that she needs to send him home.

In this section, Ko emphasizes just how hard it is to raise a child as a single parent with very little money. Unable to pay for a babysitter, Polly has no choice but to take Deming to work, but her job performance suffers as a result. In this way, readers see that having a child truly has put a strain on her life, making it significantly harder for her to succeed. As such, her worst fears about the burdens of parenthood seemingly come true.



Polly's impulse to abandon Deming aligns with her view of parenthood as an overwhelming burden. Wanting to regain control of her own life, she leaves him under a bench. That she quickly comes back, though, is representative of her conflicted feelings as a mother. While she wants to enjoy the freedom of a life unencumbered by a child, she also loves Deming. Once again, then, Ko toys with her readers, causing them to wonder whether or not Polly's eventual disappearance is purposeful.



CHAPTER 8

Ko resumes Daniel's story, explaining that he calls the number Vivian gave him for Leon and reaches him on the first attempt. Leon is excited to hear from him and says he didn't know Vivian gave him away to a foster family until he'd "been in China for a long time." He also tells him that he spoke with Polly on the phone seven years ago, confirming that she went to China after leaving New York. When Daniel asks if Polly ever went to Florida, Leon says he doesn't know. "But I know she would have never left you on purpose." This makes Daniel think about the fact that, though his mother may not have purposefully abandoned him, she also didn't try to reestablish contact. At the end of the conversation, Leon gives Daniel Polly's phone number.

Again, Daniel gains information about his mother without actually finding out why she left him. Of course, it's possible that Leon doesn't tell him exactly what happened because he thinks it should come from Polly herself, but this omission is also a way for Ko to sustain the narrative's mystery and intrigue. A generous reading of this storytelling technique might suggest that Ko's choice to keep readers in a state of suspense is an attempt to reflect Daniel's confusion and anticipation, both of which highlight the many uncertainties that arise when a person is abandoned by a loved one.



The next day, Daniel attends Jim Hennings's birthday party. When he hugs Angel, she "flinch[es]," then introduces him to Charles, her new boyfriend. As Daniel greets him, Angel immediately says they should go to their seats, but Kay delays her by saying, "How's school? We heard you were supposed to go to Nepal?" In response, Angel says, "I was, but I had money stolen from me." Peter and Kay are floored by this, finding it hard to believe she'd get robbed in Iowa, where she goes to school. "Thieves are everywhere," Charles says. "You don't need to be in the same place as someone to steal from them." When Kay asks for more details, Charles says, "What happened is that the thief knows exactly what he did." Looking at Daniel, Angel adds, "Oh, he does." Having said this, she and Charles leave to find their seats.

As Peter and Kay try to piece together what Angel was talking about, Daniel distracts them by giving them his **statement of purpose** for the Carlough forms. "Good," Peter says, and Kay can't hide her happiness. After the meal, Daniel sees Angel talking to a server across the room about when to bring out the birthday cake, so he goes over and asks if she received the text he sent several days before the party. When she pretends not to know what he's talking about, he says, "I'm sorry about everything." He then asks her not to tell Kay, Peter, Jim, or Elaine about the \$10,000, assuring her that he's "working on fixing things." Still angry, she says, "You need to figure your shit out, but don't expect me to do it for you."

Kay and Peter are staying at the Hennings' apartment after the party, but Daniel tells them he has to leave because he has work early the next morning, though this isn't true. Before he leaves, Peter tells him to come to Ridgeborough by the first week of May so he can get settled in before starting summer classes at Carlough. On his way out, Daniel finds Charles smoking at the end of the block. "I want to talk to you for a second," Charles says, adding, "I know what you did." When Daniel tries to avoid the subject, Charles pushes on, saying, "I respect Angel's decision not to take this to the courts to try to get her money back, although I don't agree with her. But you better not try to talk to her again." Hearing this, Daniel pushes past him and walks away, descending into a subway station.

This is the first time Daniel has seen Angel since losing her \$10,000, and it's quite clear that she's still angry. However, Daniel tries to act as if nothing has happened, hugging her and trying to make small talk. This is partially because he doesn't want Peter and Kay to know that she's mad at him. After all, Angel told them he had a gambling problem, but she still hasn't told them that he lost her money, so it's in Daniel's best interest to act like nothing bad has taken place. At the same time, his attempt to sweep the entire incident under the rug also aligns with his tendency to deceive himself in order to ignore his own shortcomings. Firmly believing that he'll be able to repay Angel, he makes light of the situation in order to avoid having to feel bad about his behavior.



Despite his attempt to downplay what he's done, Daniel feels guilty about losing Angel's \$10,000. However, he's not quite mature enough to own up to his mistakes, so he implores Angel to cover for him, essentially asking her to advocate for him when she's the one who has suffered because of his actions. This is why she tells him not to "expect" her to help him "figure [his] shit out," picking up on the fact that he's eager to sidestep taking responsibility for what he's done. Whereas Angel used to be one of the only people who could offer Daniel emotional support, she now turns away from him, unwilling to overextend herself for the very person who wronged her. It is perhaps because Daniel no longer has her as a source of support that he agrees to do what Peter and Kay want by completing the statement of purpose, since they are the only people still willing to help him.



Now that Daniel has agreed to do what Peter and Kay want, their domineering nature comes to the forefront of the novel. Not only do they want him to go to Carlough, but Peter insists that he come home early, thereby further interfering with Daniel's desire to live in New York City and pursue his music (even if only for a few more weeks). On another note, Charles's hostility outside the restaurant forces Daniel to face his guilt regarding what he's done. Unwilling to do this, he runs away.



When Daniel gets off the subway, he gets a call from Peter. “You mother and I looked at the forms,” Peter says. “What is wrong with you? You know we can’t submit that essay. *I don’t even want to go to Carlough so I don’t know why I’m writing this.* What is this garbage? We gave you another chance, which you clearly do not deserve, and this is how you repay us?” Right away, Daniel realizes he gave them the wrong page—the real version remains in his pocket, while the one he gave them was just a scrap he wrote while trying to come up with a legitimate essay. Trying to explain this to Peter, he says he’ll come deliver the real essay, but Peter doesn’t listen, saying, “Not to mention you were rude to Angel tonight at the party.”

When Daniel asks where to drop off the essay, Peter says, “Don’t bother. You have made your decision loud and clear.” Just before he hangs up, Peter adds, “This is the last straw. You have done enough.” Defeated, Daniel goes to a nearby bar and orders a whiskey. As he drinks, he absentmindedly scrolls through his phone, eventually bringing up a note he saved several months ago listing the address and name of an “underground poker club” where the minimum buy-in is \$200. Staring at it for a moment, he downs the remainder of his drink and deletes the note, leaving the bar and telling himself he’s going to Jim and Elaine’s apartment to deliver the correct essay to his parents, even though he doesn’t know Jim and Elaine’s address. On his way, he goes to an ATM and impulsively withdraws \$500 instead of \$50.

Daniel makes his way to the poker club. “It wasn’t too late, he could turn and go right to Roland’s, go right past the building,” Ko writes. “[...] He was frightened by how much he was about to fuck up, by his lack of desire to stop himself, the rising anticipation at the prospect of falling down, failing harder, and going straight to the tilt; he’d known from the moment he left the bar exactly where he would end up.” Reaching the club, he rings the buzzer and says the necessary password.

Peter is quick to give up on Daniel, apparently unwilling to hear his excuses. This is because Daniel has already failed to live up to Peter’s expectations, so this relatively minor hiccup seems like a bigger deal than it actually is. As Daniel tries to tell his adoptive father that he can give him the real statement of purpose, he undoubtedly recognizes how easily Peter writes him off, a fact that surely confirms any insecurities he might have about whether or not he deserves Peter and Kay’s support. In this moment, Peter acts as if Daniel needs to earn his love, ultimately implying that he has failed to do so.



Daniel’s conversation with Peter leaves him feeling like he’s nothing but a disappointment. As such, he subconsciously embraces this idea of himself as someone who can’t help but make mistakes. When he reads the address of the underground poker club, he takes the first step toward relapse, though he doesn’t tell himself this at the time. Rather, he convinces himself that he’s just idly scrolling through his phone, but it’s obvious that he’s leaning into the idea of himself as a bad person who constantly errs. When he takes \$500 out of the ATM, it’s even clearer that he’s planning on gambling, though he still hasn’t admitted this to himself. By putting this progression on display, Ko demonstrates that people can avoid taking responsibility for their actions simply by rationalizing their behavior one step at a time rather than all at once.



That Daniel has known from the “moment he left the bar” that he’d “end up” at the poker club proves that his step-by-step path toward relapse has enabled him to ignore the inevitable. By dividing his actions into small moments—looking at the club’s address, withdrawing \$500, walking toward the club—he has successfully avoided having to acknowledge what he’s doing. Finally, he allows himself to admit that he’s going to gamble, and though he certainly could turn away, he now feels as if he’s come too far. After all, he has already rationalized his actions up until this point, so his relapse comes to seem rather inescapable.



Hours later, Daniel sits near the East River. Over the course of the night, he lost his hat and his **statement of purpose**, along with all his money. “He’d known early on that he was in over his head, but kept playing [...],” Ko writes. Now, he feels a “savage euphoria” because his losses have “confirmed his failures.” He feels liberated from “having to fight his inability to live up to Peter and Kay’s hopes.” He then thinks about Polly and feels a sudden wash of anger. Taking out his phone, he dials her number so he can berate her, but she doesn’t pick up. Instead of yelling into the phone, he leaves a message listing his name and his number. “If she didn’t call him,” Ko notes, “it would be all the evidence he needed.”

After Daniel gambles, he feels at peace because he has “confirmed his failures.” In other words, he has made the external world accord with his internal feelings of failure and disappointment. Throughout his life, he has developed an image of himself as someone who doesn’t deserve what he has, a viewpoint informed by Polly’s disappearance and the feeling that he hasn’t earned Peter and Kay’s love. In a strange way, then, it feels good to fully embrace this idea of himself, since at least he no longer has to pretend that he thinks of himself in a different light.



CHAPTER 9

Daniel and Roland play another show, and this time it goes well. Hutch—the Jupiter booker—is there and likes their new sound, and people who normally overlook Daniel come up to congratulate him on his playing. That week, Psychic Hearts books a number of shows, including one on May 15th that Hutch promises to attend. If it goes well, he tells them, he’ll set up a show for them at Jupiter. During this period, Roland does an interview with an online music magazine, taking the majority of the credit for the band. He also sets up a photo shoot, and when the pictures come back, Daniel notices that he’s standing in the dark in the background, but he doesn’t say anything, happy just to be playing music. When they record an EP at their friend’s studio, though, he admits he doesn’t like the new sound.

The consequences of Daniel’s relapse aren’t necessarily clear. In the immediate aftermath of his most recent bout of gambling, he feels relieved to have finally “confirmed his failures,” ultimately granting himself permission to be the person he wants to be. In this chapter, though, he seems to have lost this sense of reckless abandon. Although he isn’t interested in the music Psychic Hearts makes, he complacently goes along with Roland’s various schemes, thereby conforming once again to the various expectations other people place upon him. One might argue that his post-gambling transformation fizzles to nothing because the thrill of relapse doesn’t lead to true happiness or independence, but to a short-lived and inauthentic sense of invigoration.



As Roland and Daniel argue in their friend’s recording studio about the direction of Psychic Hearts, Daniel realizes it’s Kay’s birthday, so he goes outside and calls her. She tells him that she talked the dean of Carlough into meeting with him, saying he might still be able to get in for the fall semester. The meeting, she tells him, will be on May 15th. “You need to be up here by that afternoon,” she tells him.

The last time Daniel interacted with Peter and Kay, Peter made it sound like they were done helping him. Now, though, Kay reveals that she hasn’t given up on him, and though this is a nice gesture and a vote of confidence, there’s no denying that she’s still trying to push him into the lifestyle she wants him to lead, not necessarily the one he’s interested in pursuing. This is emphasized by the fact that the meeting with the dean conflicts with Daniel’s plan to play a show with Psychic Hearts. Still, though, Kay’s concern at least shows she still cares about her adopted son.



Two weeks before their show on May 15th, Psychic Hearts plays a smaller gig that Michael attends. After their set, he comes over and congratulates Daniel and Roland, genuinely impressed by their musical talent. When Michael asks Daniel if he talked to Polly, Roland is surprised to hear he was even considering such a thing. "Sorry, I know it's your birth mom and all, but if she doesn't want to talk to you, it's her loss," he says. "I told you, if you called you'd regret it." This startles Michael, who thinks it's ridiculous for Roland to discourage Daniel from calling his own mother, but Roland doesn't let up, reminding Daniel that Polly didn't "raise" him. Wrapping up the conversation, Michael says he has to go, adding, "Seriously, you guys rocked. You were like a harder Maroon 5," which Daniel and Roland do *not* take as a compliment.

That night, Daniel goes home and calls Polly, expecting to get her voicemail. To his surprise, she answers. "Hello, Deming," she says. "I'm glad you called again." Although he originally wanted to yell at her, he finds himself unable to do anything but make small talk, telling her he lives in Manhattan, works at a restaurant, and plays guitar in a band. She, for her part, tells him she lives in an apartment in Fuzhou, is married to a man who owns a textile factory, and is the "assistant director of an English school." When she says this, all Daniel can think is that she has a "perfect" life without him. He then starts speaking in English, but she continues to use Fuzhounese after saying only one thickly accented sentence.

Daniel tells his mother that he no longer goes by Deming. "Daniel Wilkinson?" Polly asks when he tells her his name. Keeping the conversation going, Daniel tells her he saw Vivian and Michael, saying that he recently learned about Vivian's decision to "give [him] away to a foster family." After a long silence, Polly says, "That bitch. How could she do that?" Despite these words, Daniel senses that her response is "too measured and quiet, lacking the fire he remembered." For the rest of the conversation, they speak idly, describing their respective apartments until Polly suddenly says in a hushed tone that she has to go and that she'll call Daniel the following day.

As promised, Polly calls Daniel the next day, but he's at work, so she leaves a message saying they need to arrange specific times to talk. The next day, he misses her call again, and she leaves another message suggesting that they speak at 5:30 the next morning. Getting up early, he calls her, and they talk about when they used to live in New York together. Polly reveals that she was pregnant when she came to America, adding that she also had \$50,000 of debt. He, in turn, tells her that he grew up in Ridgeborough with Peter and Kay and that he's "taking a break from school." Finally, he asks why she never tried to find him, and she tells him she "looked for years," but Leon didn't know where he'd gone, so it was impossible.

In this scene, Daniel is once again torn between two worlds. Because Michael knows him as Deming and has spent time with Polly, he urges him to reach out to his mother. Roland, on the other hand, knows him as the teenage boy who grew up trying to forget about his mother, which is why he insists Daniel shouldn't get in touch with her. Caught between his friends, Daniel finds himself at the intersection of his dual identity, his past life suddenly invading the present.



After ten years apart, Daniel and Polly have a lot of catching up to do. As they talk, Daniel avoids asking her why she left, suddenly unable to hold her accountable or accuse her of abandoning him. However, this feeling of abandonment lurks just beneath the surface, as Daniel balks at how "perfect" Polly's life sounds. As if to punish her, then, he switches to English, thereby changing the power dynamics so that she's the one who has to strain to speak, not him. In this regard, he acts on his feelings of resentment.



Daniel wants his mother to be outraged when she hears that Vivian sent him into permanent foster care. Of course, it's unrealistic to think that she would be genuinely mad at Vivian, since she certainly knows that she is the one to blame for what happened to Daniel, not her friend. But Daniel has decided to give his mother the benefit of the doubt so that he can talk to her—after all, if he acknowledged how angry he is at her, he wouldn't be able to rekindle their relationship. As such, he directs his resentment at Vivian.



Daniel still doesn't ask Polly why she left in the first place, but he does ask why she never tried to track him down. When she tells him that she did make an attempt, he sees that she actually does care about him, though this doesn't change the fact that they've been apart for ten years.



Polly asks Daniel if he's all right, and Daniel can sense how desperate she is to hear him say his life turned out fine. "To acknowledge his mother's regret meant he had to think of what her leaving had done to him, the nights he'd woken up in Ridgeborough in such grief it felt like his lungs were seizing," Ko writes. As such, he points out that nothing he says will "excuse" her for leaving. "You can't pretend you didn't mess up, that you did nothing wrong." In response, Polly says there are a number of things Daniel doesn't understand, urging him to ask Leon for more details. He then hears a man's voice in the background, and Polly says, "My husband is home. I have to get off the phone. I'll call you." After the call, he realizes she hasn't told her husband about him.

When Polly tries to get Daniel to assure her that he's all right, she seeks absolution. In this moment, she wants him to "excuse" her, ultimately asking him to do the emotional heavy lifting that she should be doing herself. But Daniel is unwilling to grant her this kind of relief, and though he doesn't yet know why his mother left, he insinuates that she did something "wrong" and that it's not his job to forgive her. This would be a good time for Polly to explain why she left, but she doesn't want to do this, instead urging Daniel to talk to Leon, once more avoiding the difficult task of owning up to whatever happened.



CHAPTER 10

Polly narrates what it's like to live in New York City after sending Deming to China. Every week, she calls her father and talks to her child, who's now five. One day, Haifeng's mother answers the phone when Polly calls and tells her that her father has died. "He had a heart attack last night," she explains. Polly breaks down, and in the coming days, calls to talk to Deming every single night. Before long, she and Haifeng's mother make arrangements for Deming to return to America, and Polly incurs even more debt in order to pay for his ticket.

By the time Deming is five, he has already lived in more than one country. From the very beginning of his life, then, he has a multicultural identity, one informed by his time in China and his time in the United States. In this sense, his early years foreshadow the identity crisis he has later in life, when he goes from living amongst Chinese immigrants to living in the white-majority suburb of Ridgeborough.



Before Deming comes back to the United States, Polly goes to a party at Didi's boyfriend's house. While she's there, she meets Leon for the first time and is attracted to the way he shuffles cards during a poker game. That night, they kiss on the street, and fall in love shortly thereafter. Leon doesn't mind that Polly has a son, so he isn't put off when Deming arrives.

Readers know that Leon will later abandon Deming like the rest of the adults in the young boy's life. For now, though, he appears to be a gracious and kind man, the type of person who's perfectly willing to help support his lover's child.



Didi gets Polly a job at Hello Gorgeous, the nail salon where she works. Meanwhile, Polly tries to reacquaint herself with Deming, feeling as if he has "filled out into a new person." She finds that Didi is quite good with him, and though she appreciates her friend's willingness to pay attention to her son, she feels guilty for not having the same patience. "Perhaps there was something wrong with me because I didn't have an infinite amount of patience for children's games," she notes.

Having been separated from her child for so long, Polly doesn't naturally fall back into the life of a doting parent. What's more, it's worth noting that she was never terribly eager to give up her life for Deming in the first place, so it's unsurprising that she doesn't have an "infinite amount of patience for children's games," though this makes her feel guilty—a sign that she wishes she were a different kind of person.



Leon lives with Vivian (his sister) and Michael, and he invites Polly and Deming to move in, too. Although the apartment is too small for all of them, it's clear that Deming enjoys Michael's presence, and Polly likes living with her new lover. Leon, for his part, expresses his desire to marry Polly, but she avoids this conversation, putting it off by saying they should "wait and see" what happens. She knows that most Chinese immigrants try to marry people with American citizenship, but she doesn't want to wed a stranger just to get a green card, though neither is she ready to marry Leon.

As the years pass, Deming becomes increasingly comfortable in America. Before long, his English is better than Polly's, and she has to struggle to keep up with his and Michael's conversations. One day when he's ten, he tells her that his nickname at school is "Number Two Special," and when she doesn't understand, he explains that the name is based on what people order from Chinese restaurants. "You don't work in a takeout restaurant," she says. "Yeah," he replies, "but I'm Chinese." When she suggests that he should tell his classmates to stop calling him this name, he says, "It's a joke, Mama."

Polly takes out yet another loan, since she has to pay \$200 to train at the nail salon before she'll get paid, though she's allowed to keep her tips during this time. As she gets better and better at painting nails, she covets the approval of her boss, Rocky, who assures her that she's a "customer favorite." She even hears Rocky saying to another person, "I bet Polly could run this place as well as I could." This, combined with the rumor that Rocky might open a new salon, excites Polly, who dreams of managing a nail shop. One of the other workers tells her that Rocky married her husband because he was "illegal" and was "about to get busted by Immigration" and put in "immigration jail." "I thought her husband was Chinese mafia," Polly says, and her coworker agrees that this might be the case.

One afternoon, Rocky asks Polly to accompany her to her home on Long Island, since she forgot something. When they arrive, Polly sees Rocky's husband sitting before a TV and eating Cheetos straight from the bag. On the ride home, she asks Rocky what he does for a living, and she says he's between jobs. Rocky then reveals her plan to open a new nail salon in the Bronx, and when Polly says she'd be happy to manage a new location, Rocky replies, "Yes, I'll let you know, of course."

Even in her relationship with Leon, Polly carefully guards her autonomy. In this case, her desire for independence manifests itself in her reluctance to get married. If she marries Leon, she seems to think, she will be forever tied down. By putting off the conversation, then, she maintains a sense of freedom, as if she can pick up and leave whenever she wants, though there are still plenty of things that should convince her to stay.



Deming's acceptance of his racist nickname suggests that he's unwilling to challenge his classmates. Of course, this doesn't remain the case, as made evident by his willingness to stand up for himself in Ridgeborough when Cody calls him a "Chinese retard." For now, though, he tries to write such bigotry off as nothing more than a "joke." By downplaying the impact of this "joke," he tries to convince himself that his peers' insensitivity isn't a big deal.



The rumors about Rocky's husband being in the Chinese mafia add to the mystery surrounding Polly's eventual disappearance. Readers might remember that Didi said Rocky was involved in something "shady" in the initial aftermath of Polly's vanishing. As such, Ko continues to string suspense through the narrative, inviting readers to wonder if Polly's disappearance has to do with the Chinese mafia or—perhaps—something to do with "immigration jail."



The promise of a promotion hangs over Polly, making her feel as if she might actually be able to attain upward mobility. After ten years of living in New York with very little to show for her hard work, this prospect is surely quite tantalizing, as it plays to her natural thirst for perpetual change and personal improvement.



Leon's back starts bothering him so much that his performance suffers at work. During this time, he talks about wanting to have a child with Polly, but she avoids the discussion. Knowing Deming will soon be able to care for himself more substantially, she doesn't want to have yet another person to look after. "I could work more, get a better job, learn English," she notes. Still, this doesn't keep Leon from asking her to marry him, and because she's so taken aback, she says yes, though she urges him to wait until the spring to make it official.

Not long after Leon's proposal, Polly walks around on her day off and goes into a small Chinese restaurant for some water, but the server won't give her any. Seeing this, another woman offers Polly a sip from her own bottle, speaking to her in Fuzhounese and asking how long she's been in New York. When Polly tells her that it's been ten years since she first came to the city, the woman says she's only lived here for three years, though she's about to move to San Francisco because she heard it's nice. When Polly leaves, she thinks about how she could be like this woman if she didn't have so many responsibilities. "Once I might have become this woman, free to move across the country because she heard a city was beautiful," she thinks.

Thinking about her encounter with the woman in the Chinese restaurant, Polly suddenly becomes certain the stranger was her friend Qing from the Fuzhounese factories. "She hadn't recognized me, but perhaps I no longer resembled my younger self," she thinks. Not long after this, Polly and Leon take a trip to Atlantic City because Didi has a number of vouchers for free hotel stays, since her husband has a gambling problem and has spent absurd amounts of money in the casinos. Excited to be getting out, Polly gets drunk on the casino floor and is overcome when she wins at blackjack. She and Leon keep playing and keep winning, feeling like it's not "real money." "We're living in a game," Polly says to Leon. Drunk and giddy, she decides to lie down in the hotel room while Leon continues to gamble.

One of Polly's loan payments was due the day she left for Atlantic City, but she didn't have time to send the money. As a result, she came to Atlantic City with \$380. The next morning, she wakes to discover that Leon has spent it all. "First I won so much, you wouldn't believe it," he says. "Five thousand dollars!" However, he wasn't able to stop when he started losing, so he came back to the room and took Polly's money from her wallet, thinking "for sure" he'd "win it back." Furious, Polly hurls a pillow at the wall, saying, "How could you think we could win money for free? Nothing is free."

Again, Polly is excited to reestablish her freedom and independence. When Deming is more self-sufficient, some of the stressors of parenthood will abate, and she'll be able to focus a bit more on her own life, thereby easing some of the anxieties she has surrounding the burdens of being a caretaker. This is why she doesn't want to have another child, but because she loves Leon and doesn't know how to respond, she agrees to marry him, though this doesn't mean she'll also agree to have a baby with him.



Yet again, Polly sees her parental duty as a burden, something that has interfered with her ability to "move across the country" and roam unbridled by responsibility. In turn, Ko teases the idea that Polly's eventual disappearance has to do with her restlessness, though it remains unclear what actually happens. For now, readers simply witness her desire to be independent and unencumbered, believing that change will bring happiness.



It makes sense that Polly would enjoy gambling. Not only does this demonstrate how similar she and Daniel are, but it also aligns with her love of change. After all, winning money could open new doors for her. Since she believes that change creates happiness, then, gambling makes her feel full of possibility and contentment.



The phrase "nothing is free" is worth examining, since it perfectly addresses the fact that everything Polly has in her life has come at some kind of personal cost. Indeed, she accrued large amounts of debt just to come to the United States. Even the joys of parenthood have cost her, since she has sacrificed her personal freedom (at least according to her). For this reason, she sees the inherent folly of gambling, which tricks people into forgetting that everything comes at a price.



Several days after returning from Atlantic City, Polly hears about a job opportunity at a restaurant in Florida. That night, she tells Leon she wants to go, but he isn't convinced. She reminds him that he lost her money, saying this will be a good chance to make it back, but he points out that it was "only a couple hundred dollars," hardly enough to justify moving. Getting ready for bed, he tells her to forget about the entire idea, promising to make back the money he lost. The next day, Polly tells Didi about her plan, and even she thinks it's not a good idea. "I just think this isn't the best I can do," Polly insists, but she fails to convince her friend. "Stay in New York. Get married, have a baby," Didi counsels.

One day, Polly tells Deming that the family is moving, even though Leon hasn't agreed. That night, Leon comes home from his late-night shift, and Polly tries once more to convince him. "Don't you want to go with me?" she asks, but he says he can't leave Vivian, and when Polly says Vivian and Michael can come, too, Leon tells her that Vivian called him earlier. "[She] thought I was leaving without telling her," he says. "You told Deming we were moving to Florida. I didn't agree to that." Going on, he tells her she shouldn't uproot Deming, but she says, "Deming is a child, he doesn't get to decide." "A mother is supposed to sacrifice for her son, not the other way around," Leon says. "You think I don't love my son?" Polly erupts, slapping the mattress. "Go fuck yourself."

The next morning, Polly gets up and talks to Leon in the kitchen. "I'll think about Florida," he says, adding that it might be good to live outside the city if they have a baby. Despite this peace offering, he doesn't react when Polly hugs him. At work that day, Polly is concentrating so hard on applying polish to a customer's nail that she doesn't notice a group of policemen enter the shop. Suddenly, several of her Vietnamese coworkers jump up and start to run, and the authorities yell, "Down! Down!" As Polly tries to understand what's happening around her, a man pulls her hands behind her back, and all she can think about is Deming.

At this point in the novel, Polly's narration approaches the time period in which the first chapter takes place, when she tells Deming that they're moving to Florida. As she thinks about this new possibility, she considers it an opportunity to improve her life. "I just think this isn't the best I can do," she tells Didi, trying to explain that she's unhappy in her current life. Unfortunately for her, though, everyone around her doesn't understand why she wants so badly to leave, perhaps seeing that this kind of change won't bring about any kind of substantial improvements to her life.



Readers know from the first chapter that Deming hears Polly whisper, "Go fuck yourself," to Leon. That she's unable to contain her anger in this moment is a sign of how badly she wants to move to Florida. Thinking that migrating once more will bring her happiness, she tries as hard as she can to convince Leon that this is what's best for everyone, including Deming. However, Leon can see that the main reason she wants to move is to satisfy her own restlessness, not to give Deming a better life.



At last, Ko reveals why Polly never comes home from work the day after she tells Deming they're moving to Florida. Although the author has been hinting throughout the novel that Polly's reason for leaving might have to do with her restlessness, in this moment it becomes clear that this has nothing to do with her disappearance. Rather, she's plucked from her everyday life by authorities who are most likely trying to capture undocumented immigrants like her. Suddenly, then, the novel's engagement with the topic of migration takes on a new dimension, as Ko examines the ways in which immigration laws can profoundly affect families by breaking them apart.



CHAPTER 11

Back in the present, Polly watches as Yong prepares to deliver an acceptance speech at the Fuzhou Business Leaders Forum, where he'll be receiving an award that night. In his address, he talks about coming from "humble beginnings," but Polly finds this inauthentic, since Yong never truly suffered in poverty. When she points this out, he tells her that everybody always talks about coming from poverty when they receive business awards. While he practices, Polly receives a call from Deming, and she tells Yong that it's a business call. Stepping out, she goes into another room and locks the door. Several minutes later, Yong finds her and asks her if she'll listen to his speech, so she hangs up and emerges from the locked room, feeling guilty because Yong is so unsuspecting of her.

Polly saves Deming's name in her contacts. Each time they talk, they tell each other about their lives, though Deming never asks why she left. Polly likes it this way, since the only person she's talked to about why and how she left America is Leon. "Telling Yong would ruin everything," she notes in her narration. "There were still nights I would wake up thinking of the concrete floor, the Styrofoam bowls of lukewarm oatmeal—I couldn't look at oatmeal now; I'd never eat it again—and the din of hundreds of women talking in different languages." In her narration, Polly points out that—unlike Leon or Vivian—she's the only person who didn't purposefully abandon Deming. For this reason, she hates the idea of Deming calling Kay "Mama," though she knows she can't bring this up.

At the awards ceremony, Yong tells his colleagues that he and Polly are going to Hong Kong for vacation, though they don't actually have plans to do so. Afterwards, Deming calls while Polly is in the bathroom, and Yong sees his name on her phone. When she comes to bed, he asks, "So, who's Deming?" Quickly, Polly lies, claiming he's a colleague who's currently traveling in another time zone, which is why he's calling so late. When they turn off the lights, though, she decides to tell him the truth. "I have a son and I lost him," she says, explaining that she was deported. "I left him in America, because I couldn't take him back to China with me, and then he was adopted by an American family." At first, Yong can't believe that she would leave her own son, but then he takes her hand and—to her surprise—holds it tight.

Now that the novel is back in the narrative present, Ko explores the beginning of Polly and Daniel's rekindled relationship. Although they're finally talking again, it's clear that there are a number of factors keeping them from establishing a strong bond. Not only do they live across the world from one another, but Polly has built an entirely new identity, presenting herself as someone who has never had a child. As such, she has to keep the truth about Daniel from Yong, a secret that puts a strain on her relationship with her son, since it prevents her from talking to him whenever he calls. In turn, their correspondence becomes clandestine and all the more complicated, making it that much harder for them to reestablish a genuine connection.



As Polly and Deming speak on the phone, they both avoid discussing why she left. However, her narration in this section provides snapshots of what happened to her in the aftermath of her disappearance. The fact that she mentions "the din of hundreds of women talking in different languages" suggests that she was taken to some sort of detainment center. Given that this sounds like a traumatic experience, it makes sense that she's so hesitant to talk about what happened to her. Unfortunately, Deming doesn't know this yet, so he still thinks she abandoned him voluntarily.



In this scene, Polly finally tells Yong about Deming. At first, she tries to lie her way out of the conversation, thinking that telling him the truth will profoundly change the way he sees her. This would be devastating, since she has spent so much time building her new identity and putting the past behind her. However, she decides to take a risk, not wanting to continue hiding from her own husband. As such, she lets her two worlds collide.



CHAPTER 12

Two days before Psychic Hearts's important show, Daniel's phone rings. Hoping it might be Polly—whom he hasn't heard from in a week—he rushes to it, but it's only Kay, who leaves him a message making sure he won't forget about his meeting with the dean of Carlough in two days. "I might have to go upstate the day after tomorrow. For a meeting," Daniel tells Roland. "You're fucking with me, right? We have a show on Friday," Roland says. Angry with his friend's reaction, Daniel tells him to get another guitarist. "You know what? Don't bother coming to rehearsal tonight," Roland says, and Daniel rushes out of the apartment to go to work.

After his shift, Daniel goes to Psychic Hearts's rehearsal space and finds one of Roland's friends playing guitar instead of him. When he asks what's happening, Roland tells him he isn't "reliable" enough to be in the band. "I'm going to play the show tomorrow," Daniel says, but Roland doesn't relent, saying, "You'll change your mind again." Leaving the rehearsal space, Daniel goes back to Roland's apartment and takes only ten minutes to gather his belongings, leaving his electric guitar but bringing his acoustic. He then spends the night drinking coffee at a diner and composing tweets to Roland, though he doesn't end up sending him anything. He does, however, send Angel a text that says, "hi, hope you're well." This, apparently, is something he does "every few days," though she never responds.

In the morning, Daniel goes to Michael's house, but he isn't home, so he spends time with Vivian, finding relief in the process of cooking a Chinese meal with her. In the kitchen, Vivian tells him that Polly never would have left if she didn't have to. She also tells him that Leon talked to Didi after Polly disappeared. "Turned out someone ratted their boss out to ICE," she says. "Immigration. They came and arrested a lot of people at the salon." Going on, she explains that many undocumented immigrants are taken to jail-like camps, where they languish for long periods of time before getting deported. Now Daniel wonders if Polly was in jail while he was living his quiet life in Ridgeborough.

Daniel is pulled between people who want and expect something of him. On one side, he has Roland pressuring him to play the show on May 15th, despite the fact that he doesn't even like Psychic Hearts's music. On the other side, he has Kay pressuring him to come to Ridgeborough on May 15th to secure a place at a school he doesn't even want to attend. With so many expectations to be a certain way, he hardly has a chance to determine what he wants—a dilemma that in some ways resembles his struggle to navigate the complex intersection of his cultural identities.



Daniel's decision to go to the rehearsal space even though he explicitly told Roland to find another guitarist accentuates the fact that he doesn't know what he wants. Torn between the expectations other people have of him, he isn't sure what kind of life he himself wants to lead. By showcasing this dynamic, Ko demonstrates how difficult it can be for a person to be himself when other people pressure him to be something else.



Upon learning of his mother's imprisonment, Daniel's resentment abates. Instead of feeling angry at Polly for abandoning him, he feels guilty for the privileged life he led in Ridgeborough while she experienced such immense hardship. Worse, he has spent the past ten years either trying to forget her or blaming her for their separation.



CHAPTER 13

Daniel attends summer school at Carlough and lives with Peter and Kay in Ridgeborough. He dutifully attends class, but he can't escape the boredom lurking all around him. During one particularly slow lecture, he sits behind a student playing online poker on his laptop. The student is a bad player, and this irks Daniel so much that he leans over and says, "Don't do it." When the guy still places a bad bet, Daniel yells, "Damn it!", attracting the professor's attention. At home, Peter and Kay are cautious around him, trying to connect by talking about his classes. At one point, Peter invites him to his study and puts on a Hendrix song, and he and Daniel bond over the music. "I'm glad you're back in school. Glad you're back at home," Peter says. "How easy it was to make Peter proud, how hungry he was for Peter's approval," Ko notes.

One day, Daniel runs into Cody at the supermarket, where Cody works. That night, he goes with Cody to a secluded pond and they smoke marijuana together, talking all the while about inconsequential things. After, they go to a local bar, where there's an open mic. Although everybody seems to like the music, Daniel finds the band laughably bad, so he goes home early to work on an essay, which is due the next day. However, he gets distracted and ends up texting Angel, who finally replies by asking him to stop contacting her. "I wish you the best," she says at the end of the text. Encouraged by this sentiment, he sends her yet another message: "i'm going to do better for you."

CHAPTER 14

On Father's Day, Daniel talks to Kay in the kitchen while writing a card for Peter. Kay notes that she's always been "uncomfortable" about Mother's Day, since she used to think she didn't "deserve to celebrate the holiday." "I had those doubts a lot when you first came to live with us," she admits. Going on, she tells him that she and Peter were often "afraid of doing something wrong" when he was growing up. Daniel, for his part, doesn't know what to say, wondering if he should "apologize or reassure her." "Either way," Ko writes, "he [...] felt implicated, like there was some expectation he wasn't meeting."

Daniel's return to Ridgeborough goes well, but it's evident that he's simply going through the motions of what Peter and Kay want him to do. Trying to meet their expectations, he dutifully attends lectures, but his mind is elsewhere, as made clear by how engrossed he becomes in another student's online poker game. And yet, this existence is at least mildly rewarding, if only because Daniel is "hungry" for the approval of his adoptive parents. When he relishes the feeling of making Peter "proud," readers see how much he genuinely wants to live up to Peter and Kay's expectations. The problem, of course, is that their expectations don't align with what he actually wants, even if he himself isn't sure what that is.



Angel makes it clear that she doesn't want to hear from Daniel, but he chooses to ignore this message. In fact, he deceives himself by thinking that her well wishes outweigh her scorn. Once again, then, he focuses on only one part of a broader narrative in order to trick himself into doing what he wants, this time using Angel's phrase, "I wish you the best" to justify his decision to ignore the fact that she doesn't want to hear from him again.



Daniel's relationship with his adoptive parents is complex. It's understandable that Kay might feel uncomfortable on holidays like Mother's Day. However, by admitting her uneasiness regarding the process of adoption, she puts Daniel in a strange position, making him feel as if he has to soothe her. Simply put, she makes him feel guilty even though it's not his job to reassure her. After all, he's not the one who chose to come to Ridgeborough in the first place, so he shouldn't have to feel responsible for her complicated emotions.



Kay retrieves a folder containing Daniel's adoption information, saying that Peter didn't think she should show it to him. Finally, Daniel tells her he's spoken to Polly. Forcing a smile, Kay asks if he's going to talk to Polly again, and he says, "Maybe." Changing the subject, Kay says that Charles called her several days ago and told her that Daniel hasn't returned money he borrowed from Angel. When she asked Charles why he was telling her, he told her to ask Daniel. "So, I'm asking," she says. "She must have been talking about this one time we met up in the city," Daniel says. "I didn't have any cash on me and I had to borrow some to pay for dinner." Kay doesn't believe this, but Daniel simply thanks her for reminding him to repay Angel, saying, "I'm going to go do that now, on my computer."

Daniel passes his classes for the first term of summer school and begins the second term. Slowly, he begins to correspond with Roland, who has finally booked a show at Jupiter. He also starts recording some of his own music in the evenings. While hanging out at Cody's house one night, he plays Cody a sample of what he's been working on. "You've changed, Wilkinson," Cody says, and when Daniel asks him to explain, he says, "In high school, you were all like—*Reave me arone*. You barely spoke English! Now you're all American." Daniel points out that he spoke English in high school, but Cody continues to mock him. "Fuck off, Cody. Fuck you," he says, getting up to leave. "You need a drummer," Cody calls after him. "like those guys at the [...] Open Mic. They rocked."

Peter and Kay take Daniel to a fancy restaurant to celebrate his success in the second term of summer school. "To Daniel," Peter toasts, "for being back on the right path." There are old paintings of Ridgeborough hung around the restaurant, and Peter points them out and explains that the Wilkinsons used to own the majority of this land. Listening to Peter talk about the family legacy, Daniel thinks about how he's "the last of the Wilkinsons," pondering the fact that his great-great-grandfather probably wouldn't even have acknowledged him as Wilkinson.

Daniel's rekindled relationship with Polly poses a threat to Kay, who is hurt that he doesn't think of her as his real mother. At the same time, she knows she can't say anything about this, so she tries to hide her feelings by smiling and asking if he'll talk to Polly again. In this moment, readers sense the unspoken tension lurking in Daniel's relationship with his adoptive parents—a tension that also brings itself to bear on his and Kay's conversation about Angel, in which it's painfully obvious that Daniel is lying to Kay. And though Kay picks up on this deception, she and Daniel aren't close enough for her to draw the truth out of him.



The mere fact that Daniel has become friends with Cody—who subjected him to racist bullying when he first arrived in Ridgeborough—is a sign that Daniel has become accustomed to the entrenched bigotry and implicit biases that run rampant throughout his community. In this scene, though, Cody's insensitivity is too blatant to ignore, as he mimics a stereotypically Asian accent. Even though Daniel has perhaps gotten used to this kind of prejudice, he recognizes in this moment that he doesn't need to put up with such blatant racism, especially from people who are supposedly his friends.



Despite the fact that he has lived with Peter and Kay for ten years, Daniel still doesn't fully identify as a Wilkinson. Having retained (and recently reestablished) his connection to his Chinese identity, it feels strange to think of himself as the legacy of a white family that has never left Ridgeborough. Once again, then, he experiences the often unsettling overlap of his two cultural identities, wondering which one most accurately reflects who he is.



The night before Daniel begins the fall term at Carlough, he stays up late working on a song on Peter's computer. At a certain point, he gets up and walks by Peter and Kay's room to make sure they're sleeping. Returning to the study, he closes the door and types in the address for a poker website, telling himself that the site is probably blocked. However, the site comes up, and he logs into an account he never told Peter and Kay about, which still has \$50. "He would play just one game and log out, then cancel everything," Ko writes. Of course, this game leads to another, and another, and before long he has \$300, but then he feels Peter's hand on his shoulder. "I knocked," Peter says, and Daniel can't help but watch the screen, making sure he wins the round. "All right. That's enough now," Peter says.

At seven the next morning, Daniel packs his things and leaves his guitar. On his way out of the house, he looks at Kay, whose eyes are "puffy from crying." "You're not going to ask me to stay?" he says, and she shakes her head. "I got an e-mail from Elaine," she replies.

Again, Daniel breaks his relapse into a step-by-step progression that makes it easier for him to justify his actions. First, he simply walks by Peter and Kay's room to see if it would even be possible to play poker. This in and of itself isn't a transgression, but it is the first step on his path toward relapse. Next, he tells himself that he's only checking to see if Peter blocked the poker website. By the time he's finally on the website and logging in, he's already reached a point of no return.



Once again, the adults who are supposed to support Daniel fail to provide him with what he needs. It's understandable that Kay is disappointed in him, since she has just learned from Elaine that he lost \$10,000 of Angel's money. But the fact that this makes her willing to simply let him leave is rather startling, since what he really seems to need is her support. Instead, though, Kay and Peter effectively relinquish their parenting responsibilities because Daniel has failed to live up to their expectations, meaning that he once more finds himself navigating the world without any meaningful parental guidance.



CHAPTER 15

Daniel flies to Fuzhou. Once he's there, he tries to make his way through the city, but his Fuzhounese is bad and the commotion overwhelms him. Eventually, he makes his way to a low-quality hotel, getting scammed on his way by a man on a motorcycle who overcharges him for a ride. When he calls Polly, she doesn't answer, so he leaves a message telling her that he's in Fuzhou and wants to meet up. Venturing out again in the evening, he looks for a place to eat, feeling strange because the city—which he's never visited—feels "familiar," the sounds of Fuzhou whipping by him as he moves through the chaos.

Daniel returns to the hotel and thinks about his departure from Ridgeborough two days ago. After Peter caught him playing poker, they argued all night. At one point, he found time to sneak away and withdraw the money he'd won playing poker, which he used to buy a ticket to Fuzhou. The next morning, he called Cody and asked for a ride to the airport. When Cody picked him up, he gave Daniel a bag of Vicodin as a "good-bye present." In Fuzhou, Daniel looks up Polly Guo or Peilan Guo, but there are too many people with those names. Discouraged, he finally gets in touch with Leon, who picks him up from the hotel and insists that he stay with him while he's in China.

Fuzhou feels familiar to Daniel because he's now surrounded by Chinese people. Unlike in Ridgeborough, where he was the only Asian person around, he finds himself passing people who look like him and speak his first language. Even though he has never visited Fuzhou and his Fuzhounese is rusty, he experiences a sense of belonging that he's never felt in Ridgeborough.



Having run out of options, Daniel travels to Fuzhou in the aftermath of his fight with Peter and Kay. This decision resembles Polly's habit of assuming that change and migration will bring happiness. At first, this seems to work for Daniel, who relishes the feeling of being in Fuzhou, where he experiences a sense of belonging. Before long, though, the thrill dissipates, and he sees how difficult it will be to track down his mother. As such, readers see that change doesn't automatically bring contentment.



Daniel meets Leon's wife and daughter, who are both happy to host him. Leon, for his part, is ecstatic to see him, insisting on helping him find Polly the following day. Knowing his mother lives in a wealthy development called West Lake Park, Daniel and Leon walk around a neighborhood of fancy high-rise apartments, asking security guards if they know her. They're about to give up when Leon sees that one of the buildings has a view of the ocean. Knowing Polly would want to live in such a place, they ask the security guard if she's a resident, and he says she is. The guard calls up to the apartment, and moments later Yong appears, explaining that Polly is travelling in Beijing for work and that her phone was stolen in transit. He then gives Daniel the information he needs to meet up with her.

The fact that Polly's phone was stole is good news for Daniel, since it means she hasn't been ignoring him on purpose. With the information Yong gives him, then, he finally knows how to reach his mother, making his journey to Fuzhou worth it in the end.



CHAPTER 16

In Beijing, Daniel follows Yong's directions and sneaks into a conference in a hotel. Polly is one of the speakers onstage, and when the panel invites questions, he walks to the mic and asks her about her teaching methods. She can't see him from where she sits, but he can tell she recognizes his voice. Afterwards, she finds him and tells him he "scared the shit out of" her, but she's happy to see him, whisking him away and telling him she's going to skip the rest of the conference to spend time with him. After dinner that night, they go back to her hotel and continue talking. Finally, Daniel asks why she didn't try harder to find him after she left, and she says, "I didn't know if you wanted to speak to me, after everything I did."

It's strange that Polly says she didn't know if Daniel would want to talk to her "after everything" she did. After all, it wasn't her fault that she was detained by ICE and subsequently deported. As such, the fact that she says this underlines how guilty she feels about having left Daniel, even if it was out of her control.



Polly is about to take a sleeping pill, but Daniel asks her to tell him what happened when she disappeared. She goes about the room closing the blinds, since she can't have light when she sleeps. "In Ardsleyville, it was light all the time," she says. When Daniel asks what Ardsleyville is, she says, "The name of the camp, the detention camp." He's hungry to hear more, but she doesn't want to talk about it. "I want to know the truth," he says. "How did you get there? What happened to you when you went to work that day? Please, I deserve to know." Finally, she begins. "There were no phones [in Ardsleyville], no way to contact anyone," she says. "When I got out, they sent me to Fuzhou. I wasn't myself anymore." For a moment it seems she won't go on, but she eventually continues.

At long last, Daniel comes out and asks why his mother disappeared. Although readers know that she was deported, it's still unclear what exactly took place. In this way, Ko prepares to deliver the information that has been driving the plot of The Leavers ever since the first chapter, when the mystery of Polly's disappearance first takes hold. When Daniel says that he "deserve[s] to know," he reveals that he has certain expectations about what his mother owes him—a notable reversal, since he is normally the one trying to live up to others' expectations.



CHAPTER 17

Polly narrates the events that take place after she's taken by the immigration authorities. Shoved into a windowless van, she's driven to a small room with a phone, where she's allowed to make a single phone call. Because she can't remember anybody's number, she ends up calling a stranger's voicemail. At this point, she's taken to Ardsleyville, a camp in Texas, though she doesn't know where it is at the time. For fourteen months, she lives under a large tent with other undocumented immigrants, often waking up when the guards come around to do "bed checks." The living conditions in the camp are terrible, and the guards refuse to let her speak to a lawyer or to immigration authorities.

In the camp, Polly worries that Deming will forget her face. She itches her arms so much that her skin tears, but still she only thinks about what she's missing, wondering if Leon has taken another lover. One day, Polly and a group of detainees decide to protest by going outside and holding up a sign that says HELP, hoping the news helicopters that often circle the camp will glimpse their message. However, the only plane that goes by flies away after a moment, and the guards spray them with teargas and hit them with police batons. Afterwards, Polly is placed in solitary confinement, where she fantasizes about wrenching open the **walls** with her hands so she can rejoin the world. "Because I wasn't really here," she narrates, saying that she's living out the life of "another person." "I pushed at the walls with my head," she notes.

After Polly bangs her head against the **walls** of her cell, the guards take her out and bandage her wounds, at which point she finds herself sitting in front of a man in a suit who says the word "lawyer" in Mandarin, though she can't understand anything else he says. Not long after this, she's taken to court, and when she tries to answer questions on her own, the judge reprimands her for not waiting for her translator to translate. When she asks why she's in court, the judge gets fed up and dismisses the case, ordering her to be deported because she "spoke out of turn."

When Polly lands in Fuzhou again, she makes her way back to her childhood village, where she finds Haifeng's mother living in Polly's father's old house. "We've been using it," Haifeng's mother explains, saying that she didn't know how to get in touch with Polly. Annoyed, Polly walks past the woman and spends the night. The next day, Haifeng's mother gives her 5,000 yuan for the house, and Polly goes to Fuzhou and calls the loan shark, only to discover that the entirety of her debt has been paid. That night, she finds a job at a nail salon and rents a room populated by other out-of-town laborers.

It's worth noting that life inside Ardsleyville is grueling and strict, as if Polly has been put in prison. This is significant, since she hasn't even had a trial and isn't actually in prison. This provides a snapshot of what life is like inside US detention camps, where countless undocumented immigrants are sent for long periods of time without any indication of when they'll be let out or what will happen to them when they're finally released. Given that Polly places so much importance on the idea of being able to change her life according to what she wants for herself, it's easy to see that this kind of detainment would be quite torturous.



The prison-like quality of Ardsleyville wears on Polly, curtailing her freedom and disrupting her life. Throughout the entire novel, Ko has hinted that Polly left Deming behind on purpose, but now readers see the devastating truth, which is that she has been wrenched from her family and forced to endure inhumane conditions. As she thinks about what she's missing, she feels the walls closing in on her, a representation of her sudden inability to decide for herself where she goes.



The judge presiding over Polly's immigration case makes the unfair assumption that she doesn't understand English. When she disproves this, though, it becomes clear that he's eager to punish her, refusing to listen to her and ultimately dismissing her case simply because she tries to advocate for herself. In this way, readers see the role racism plays in the immigration system, as Polly's deportation is based not on the particulars of her case, but on the judge's cultural insensitivity.



Although Polly's time in Ardsleyville is quite traumatic, her deportation gives her a chance to start anew. Of course, she isn't necessarily happy about this, but it's hard to ignore the fact that she has been fantasizing about escaping her debt and caretaking responsibilities for quite some time. In turn, her new beginning in Fuzhou is a chance to build a better life, though this opportunity has come at a significant personal cost.



CHAPTER 18

Polly notes that Daniel looks troubled by her story, but he keeps asking questions. When she tells him that she saw Leon after returning to Fuzhou, he asks, "Didn't he tell you I was adopted?" As she tries to think of an answer, he says, "You knew, and didn't do anything?" Sidestepping this question, she narrates the moment she saw Leon for the first time since going to Ardsleyville. She was working in the nail salon, and he appeared and asked to speak with her, eventually telling her that Daniel was adopted by "a white couple." "I should have never left," he told Polly. "If I hadn't left, [Deming] would still be with me. It's my fault. I don't know how to get in touch with him."

Still narrating her reunification with Leon, Polly says he takes her to his friend's apartment, which is empty. He can't take her back to his own apartment because he's married, though this doesn't stop him from staying with her at his friend's place for a handful of nights, which they spend having sex and talking. Each night, Polly wakes up screaming, dreaming about Ardsleyville. Eventually, Leon goes out and brings back a bottle of sleeping pills, and her nightmares recede into the blank darkness of night. When Leon's friend is about to come back, Leon suggests that they could continue to "be together" in the outside world, but Polly says, "Go home to your wife." She says this because "being with Leon" makes only reminds her of losing Deming.

After her time with Leon, Polly takes a business class, and her teacher is so impressed that she lived in the United States that he invites her to be an English teacher at the new school he's opening. Planning to use her wages to return to New York to find Deming, she accepts the position. A year later, she meets Yong, who is one of her students. On the last day of class, he asks her on a date, and six months later, they get married, earning Polly "urban hukou" (permanent city residency).

In the Beijing hotel room with Daniel, Polly explains that she couldn't go back to look for him in the United States because she had been deported. "I couldn't go anywhere," she says. "If I thought about you too much I wouldn't be able to live." In response, Daniel accuses her of forgetting him, pointing out that she didn't even tell Yong about him. Ashamed, Polly admits that she thought Yong would leave her, though she notes that this is a lie. "I'd only told myself that," she narrates. "I had never believed it." Feeling bad, Polly says, "But you were safe, weren't you? With your adoptive parents?" Listening to herself, she registers the "pleading desperation" in her own voice, realizing just how much she wants to "believe" that she didn't ruin her son's life.

In this scene, Daniel learns how guilty Leon feels about having abandoned him. This makes sense, considering that Leon made an actual choice to leave him, whereas Polly was forced to do so. Of course, this doesn't excuse Leon's failure to support Daniel in his time of need, but perhaps hearing about his remorse will help Daniel see that the adults in his life actually do care about him after all.



Polly's nightmares are manifestations of the trauma she experienced in Ardsleyville. Not only was she deported, but she was also forced to endure psychological hardships that have followed her into her new life in China. Because of this, she tells Leon to go back to his wife, knowing that she can't forget about her tumultuous past if she continues to see him.



For the first time, Polly is legally allowed to live somewhere she actually wants to live. With urban hukou, she doesn't need to worry about her citizenship status, so she can finally focus on building the life she wants, though she tells herself she's only doing this to save money so she can eventually find Deming.



Having gotten used to her new life as a childless woman in Fuzhou, Polly decided not to tell Yong about Deming. In an attempt to separate her past life from her current existence, she tried not to think about him "too much," and though she told herself she was only doing this to survive, it's hard to deny that she also enjoyed her new lifestyle, having finally found the kind of independence for which she'd long been searching. At the same time, though, she felt guilty for not trying harder to find Deming, and when she asks in this passage if he was safe, she puts him in the position of once again having to console an adult who has let him down.



CHAPTER 19

Daniel stays in Fuzhou and teaches English at World Top, where Polly works. His students take to him, and he makes friends with the other teachers, though he often feels lonely. It has been three months since he came to China, and he hasn't spoken to Peter and Kay once. Financially stable for the first time in a long while, he starts to repay Angel. During his free time, he often looks up Psychic Hearts, which has been getting significant attention, though the band's recent shows have received bad reviews. Daniel is living with Polly and Yong, but Polly hasn't said anything about his birthday, which is today. When he asks his colleagues if they want to do something with him in the evening, they look at each other and say they can't. Similarly, Leon—whom Daniel sees a couple times a week—is busy.

After work on his birthday, Daniel takes the bus home and thinks about what it's like to live in Fuzhou. "There was a comfort in belonging that he'd never felt before, yet somehow, he still stood out," Ko writes. People often look at him strangely and notice his accented Chinese. As he exits the bus, he calls his mother, but she doesn't pick up, and he becomes frustrated that he's once more let her disappoint him. When he enters the apartment, though, Polly, Yong, and "a blur of other faces" jump out, yelling, "Surprise!" As he stands there looking at everyone he knows in Fuzhou, he realizes that his mother didn't forget his birthday after all.

At one point during his birthday party, Daniel goes into his bedroom and checks his computer, finding kind messages from people like Cody and Roland. He then receives a video call from Peter and Kay. "Where are you?" Peter asks, and Daniel says he's in China. He fills his adoptive parents in on what he's been doing, and Kay asks if he's going to come home, saying, "You know you're always welcome here." Peter also chimes in, suggesting that Daniel should come home for Christmas. Just then, Polly enters, and Daniel can see that Peter and Kay catch a glimpse of her in the background. As such, he says, "Kay and Peter? This is my mother, Polly." Peter and Kay are stiff and uncomfortable, but they're polite, noting that Daniel and Polly look alike. "Thank you for taking care of Daniel," Kay says.

Daniel has settled into life in Fuzhou, but this doesn't mean he's found happiness. Although he's doing well, it's clear that he misses elements of his American life, as evidenced by his desire to track Psychic Hearts. As such, readers see the dual nature of his cultural identity—he isn't solely Chinese, nor is he solely American; he's Chinese-American, so he finds it difficult to establish his multicultural identity when he's in Fuzhou, where few people are acquainted with American culture.



Throughout his life, Daniel has learned not to count on the adults in his life. Even Kay and Peter have—in their own way—failed to give him the support he needs. Now, though, he is overjoyed to realize that his mother actually cares about him and isn't going to let him down again, finally living up to what he expects of her as a parent.



When Kay thanks Polly for "taking care of Daniel," she subtly asserts her authority as Daniel's legal guardian, implying that Polly is only a temporary caretaker. Of course, readers know that Polly only left Daniel because she was forced to, but from Kay's perspective, she's a woman who abandoned her son and is now swooping back in after the work of raising him has already been completed. While this tense conversation plays out, Daniel is caught in the middle of his two lives, forced to reconcile his relationship with Polly with his relationship with Peter and Kay.



After Daniel ends the video call with Peter and Kay, he rejoins the party. Afterwards, he cleans up, hoping to distract Polly from asking about Peter and Kay. “He didn’t want to go [to] Carlough,” Ko writes. “He didn’t want to present papers at the Conference for English Educators. Peter and Kay had supported him, in their own way, so why did he feel angry with them?” Daniel also thinks about how he doesn’t want to make Polly feel bad by causing her to feel guilty for leaving him. “Everyone had stories they told themselves to get through the days,” Ko notes. “Like Vivian’s belief that she had helped him, his mother insisting she had looked for him, that she could forget about him because he was okay.”

While Daniel’s washing dishes, Polly enters and tells him she saw that he hasn’t yet filled out the forms he needs to complete in order to obtain a visa to stay in Fuzhou. Not wanting to talk about it, he says he’ll complete them the following day. “You’re going to New York for Christmas? To your adoptive family?” Polly asks, having overheard this discussion while he was talking to Peter and Kay. “No, of course not,” he replies. “So you’re going to stay?” she asks. When she says this, Daniel thinks about the nature of “forgiveness,” thinking about how “you could spend years being angry with someone and then realize you no longer felt the same, that your usual mode of thinking had slipped away when you weren’t noticing.”

Daniel realizes that he’s no longer vying for his mother’s love. Similarly, he doesn’t have to go out of his way to earn Peter and Kay’s affection. “He could see, in the flash of worry in his mother’s face as she waited for his reply, like he had heard in Kay and Peter’s shaking voices when they said good-bye to him earlier, that in the past few months, his fear of being unwanted had dissipated,” Ko writes. “Because Mama—and Kay, and Peter—were trying to convince him that they were deserving of his love, not the other way around.” Stepping away from the sink, he picks up a pen and signs the visa forms.

Ko’s assertion that “everyone [has] stories they [tell] themselves to get through the day” is worth considering, since it applies to many of the characters in The Leavers. Indeed, Polly tells herself that she tried to find Daniel even though she did very little to reunite with him once she settled into her life with Yong. Similarly, Vivian claims to have done everything she could to have “helped” Daniel in the aftermath of his mother’s disappearance, but the reality is that she simply gave him away (though, to be fair, she didn’t have any other way to provide for him). Even Daniel often deceives himself, finding creative ways to rationalize his gambling relapses. As such, Ko spotlights how easily people trick themselves into ignoring their shortcomings.



Yet again, Daniel finds himself torn between his birth mother and his adoptive parents. This time, he senses how badly Polly wants him to choose her over Peter and Kay. Rather than stressing him out, though, this sentiment appeals to him, since Polly’s concern proves that she cares about him. Indeed, he no longer has to question whether or not she wants him in her life, making it easier for him to forgive her for her absence.



For the majority of the novel, Daniel has been trying to earn the love of his caretakers. Seemingly unable to gain their support, he has felt unworthy and alone. Now, though, he recognizes how badly both sets of guardians want him in their lives, proving not only that he deserves to be loved, but that Peter, Kay, and Polly have finally realized that they need to show how much they appreciate him.



CHAPTER 20

Acting as narrator once again, Polly explains that she leaves Fuzhou four months after Daniel goes back to America. Not only does she leave the city, but she also leaves Yong and, really, her entire life. “I decided to move to Hong Kong,” she notes, saying that while Daniel was in Fuzhou she pretended as if they’d never been separated—as if she’d never been sent to Ardsleyville. When he left, though, she realized she “could also leave.” On a ferry approaching Hong Kong, she glides through fog and feels “breathless with laughter.” “How wrong I had been to assume this feeling had been lost forever,” she narrates. “This lightheaded uncertainty, all my fear and joy—I could return here, punching the sky. Because I had found her: Polly Guo. Wherever I went next, I would never let her go again.”

Once again, Polly’s belief in the power of change to bring happiness comes to the forefront of the novel, as she leaves in pursuit of yet another life. Interestingly enough, the very act of leaving is what gives her peace, not the destination itself. It’s likely that she will soon grow tired of Hong Kong, but this doesn’t matter because she’s finally realized that she feels best when she’s in transit. Honoring her restless spirit, she is at one with herself as she uproots her life, ultimately prioritizing her independence and making peace with the fact that she can be herself wherever she goes.



CHAPTER 21

Back in New York City, Daniel starts playing small clubs as a solo act, finally presenting his own music. Although he hates baring himself so publicly, he continues to pursue his musical goals. In general, he’s rather happy—Angel is talking to him again, and he’s teaching guitar lessons. A month after his surprise party in Fuzhou, he returned to the United States, and he told Polly that it wasn’t because of her or about Peter and Kay. He watched her cry, but it felt “incredible to decide something” for himself, as he realized that he’d “never allowed himself to fully trust his choices before.”

Like his mother, Daniel comes to see the value of independence. For his entire life, he’s been trying to live up to his parents’ expectations, but now he gives himself permission to do what he wants. Having fully explored the multifaceted nature of his identity, he realizes that he doesn’t need to be just one thing. Rather, he can lead a life that draws upon the many different aspects of who he is, meaning that he can “allow himself to fully trust his [own] choices.”



Ko describes Daniel’s return to America. In Ridgeborough, Kay asks him about China and talks about how “brave” Polly must be to “have the kind of career she does,” saying that she recently read an article about “how women in China are still second-class citizens.” She tells Daniel that it’s “a shame” to think how many Chinese women “might have flourished” if they had more opportunities, adding that such women could “be doing so much better, so much more.” As she says this, Daniel insists that his mother is doing quite well, but Kay doesn’t pay attention. “He recalled how [Kay] and Peter had insisted on English, his new name, the right education,” Ko writes. “Mama, Chinese, the Bronx, Deming: they had never been enough.” Thinking about this, he realizes that his adoptive parents have always seen him as “someone who needed to be saved.”

Kay and Peter mean well, but they have they naïve ideas about success—ideas built upon the assumption that stereotypically American forms of prosperity are “better” than anything else. Kay talks about Polly as if she’s disenfranchised, and Daniel realizes that his adoptive parents have a narrow idea of what it means to lead a good and happy life. This, it seems, is why they place such rigorous and unyielding expectations upon him, unable to fathom that he might want to fashion his own way of moving through the world, one that doesn’t necessarily perfectly reflect their values.



Despite his frustration with Kay and Peter, Daniel likes being home, feeling comfortable in the house he's spent so much time in. Still, he decides to go back to the city, where he moves in with Michael. "For now, this was where his life would be," Ko writes. "This apartment with Michael. This city. His best home."

Ko asserts that New York City is Daniel's home "for now," implying that he can move elsewhere whenever he wants. After all, he doesn't have to commit to just one lifestyle. Like his mother, perhaps he will be happiest if he remains in motion, embracing change on a regular basis. For now, though, New York City is his "best home," since the city itself brings all sorts of people, enabling him to stay in touch with both the Chinese and American elements of his identity. In turn, living in New York gives him a chance to explore his multicultural sense of self.





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