Foreign Soil

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MAXINE BENEBA CLARKE

Maxine Beneba Clarke was born in Kellyville, a suburb of Sydney, Australia. She is of Afro-Caribbean descent: her mother was of Guyanese heritage, and her father was of Jamaican heritage. Her family's multicultural background and history of immigration have greatly influenced her writing, which examines topics of race, immigration, and loss of language and culture. Beneba Clarke went on to study creative writing and law the University of Wollongong. She participated in poetry slams in the 1990s and was a finalist in the Melbourne Writers' Festival Poetry Slam. In addition, her articles, poems, and reviews have been featured in numerous publications, including *The Sydney Observer*, *Kunapipi Academic Journal of Post-Colonial Literature*, and *Voiceworks*. *Foreign Soil* was published in 2014 to much critical acclaim—among other awards, it won the ABIA (Australian Book Industry Awards) for Literary Fiction Book of the Year in 2015, and it was shortlisted for the 2015 Stella Prize. The book's release earned Beneba Clarke recognition as the Sydney Morning Herald's Best Young Novelists of the Year in 2015. In addition to short fiction, Beneba Clarke has also published works of nonfiction, poetry, and children's literature. Her memoir, *The Hate Race*, won the NSW Premier's Literary Award Multicultural NSW Award 2017 and was shortlisted for numerous other awards. Beneba Clarke published *The Patchwork Bike*, a picture book with illustrations by Van Thanh Rudd, in 2016; the book received high critical praise and was included on School Library Journal's list of best picture books of 2018. Starting in 2023, Beneba Clarke will be the University of Melbourne's inaugural Peter Steele Poet in Residence. She currently lives in Melbourne, Australia.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The stories of *Foreign Soil* take place across a wide span of decades and continents, and the book grapples with domestic and global issues that have affected immigrants, refugees, and marginalized peoples throughout history. "David," the book's opening story, is about a woman who flees Sudan during the Second Sudanese Civil War, a conflict between the Sudanese government and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), which lasted from 1983 to 2005. The war began after the government's military regime attempted to impose sharia law on the country, which is roughly 70 percent Muslim. The SPLA responded with insurrections in the southern region of the country, which is largely populated by Animists and Christians. In total, about two million people died in conflict or as a result of famine and disease, and four million people in southern Sudan (where the conflict originated) were displaced. "The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa" is about a young boy who was forced to fight as a child soldier in the Sri Lankan Civil War, which lasted from 1983 to 2009. The war was waged between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tmail Eelam (also called the Tamil Tigers), a militant organization based in northeastern Sri Lanka. The Tamil Tigers wanted to form an independent Tamil state in response to the Sri Lankan government's long-spanning violent prosecution of Sri Lankan Tamils. The Tamil Tigers were condemned globally for its use of child soldiers and numerous human rights violations, including attacks on civilians and torture. "Aviation" examines the harassment that people of Middle Eastern and South Asian descent (or anyone who "looked" Middle Eastern) faced in the U.S. following the September 11 terrorist attacks. Sikhs, in particular, were a frequent target of such attacks because of the turbans that Sikh men wear, which are often erroneously associated with Islam.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In addition to *Foreign Soil*, Beneba Clarke has written a memoir, *The Hate Race*, about her experience growing up Black in Australia, a subject that appears throughout *Foreign Soil*. *Foreign Soil* is a short story collection that examines the experiences of immigrants and refugees living outside of their native land—on "foreign soil." *Behold the Dreamers* by Mbue Imbolo is topically related: it's about a West African man who moves to the U.S. to work as a high level executive. Set against the backdrop of the 2008 recession, the novel explores issues of family, race, and the American Dream. In addition, *The Free Life* by Ha Jin is about a family who moves to the U.S. following the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre in search of a better life. Given that parts of *Foreign Soil* specifically focus on racism in Australia, it's also similar to *Talking to My Country* by Stan Grant, a nonfiction book that examines the history of systemic racism against Indigenous people in Australia. *Growing Up African in Australia*, edited by Maxine Beneba Clarke, is a collection of stories that celebrate the often-underrepresented culture of Australians of African descent. *Common People* by Tony Birch is a collection of short stories about the everyday struggles of people who live at the margins of Australian society. Finally, *BlakWork* by Alison Whittaker is a multi-genre book of poetry, memoir, fiction, and social commentary that examines Whittaker's life and experiences as an Aboriginal Australian (Whittaker is Gomeroi) and queer person.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Foreign Soil
- **When Written:** 2010s
- **Where Written:** Australia
- **When Published:** 2014
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short Story Collection
- **Setting:** Varies from story to story (Australia, London, St. Thomas, Jamaica, Uganda, the United States, Sri Lanka)
- **Point of View:** Third Person; First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Stranger Than Fiction. Many of the stories of *Foreign Soil* end on an ambiguous note, with established conflicts left—sometimes frustratingly—unresolved. But in an interview with Booktopia (an Australian online bookstore), Beneba Clarke stated that this is what she finds so compelling about short fiction—that it "entice[s] the reader to engage long after the story has finished."

From Experience. In her fiction, Beneba Clarke undoubtedly draws from personal experience. The story "Shu Yi," for instance, is set in a suburban neighborhood called Kellyville Village and features a Black narrator who resents her Blackness. Beneba herself grew up in Kellyville, a suburb of Sydney, and has said that she wanted to be white as an adolescent, since "difference was frowned upon."

PLOT SUMMARY

In *Foreign Soil*'s opening story, "David," a young Sudanese woman is walking her new **bike** down the streets of Melbourne on her way to pick up her child, Nile, from daycare. She crosses paths with an older Sudanese woman, Asha. When Asha asks questions about the younger woman's bike, child, and marital status, the younger woman—a second-generation immigrant—assumes Asha is judging her for the same reasons her older, first-generation family members do: she's paying "strangers" to care for her child, she hasn't married her child's father, and she's not honoring her culture's traditions. In reality, Asha is only interested in the younger woman's bicycle. Through flashbacks, the reader learns that soldiers gunned down Asha's young son David as he was fleeing his burning village on his beloved bicycle. The younger woman's bike reminds Asha of David, and this is why she's asking so many questions about it. Even though the younger woman can't know or understand all Asha has experienced, she lets her try out the bike, and the two women experience a moment of unspoken connection.

"Harlem Jones" tells the story of a young Black man, Harlem Jones, who lives with his Trinidadian mother (Harlem's mum) in London. Harlem repeatedly finds himself in trouble with the police, much to his mother's frustration and disappointment. The story examines the disconnect between the older generation of Black Londoners, like Harlem's mother, and members of the younger generation, like Harlem. The older people think it's important to remain law-abiding and work one's way up in the world, even in an unjust system, while the younger people think violence is necessary if conditions are to improve for minorities. The story ends with Harlem and his friend Toby attending the infamous 2011 England Riots, where they ignite Molotov cocktails.

"Hope" tells the story of a young girl from St. Thomas named Millie Lucas, who comes from a rural farming community. Though Millie's family doesn't have much, Millie loves her life, family, and her hometown's native beauty. Her father (Mr. Lucas), however, wants a better life for his children. So, when Willemina, the elderly owner of a Kingston sewing shop, asks to take on Millie as an apprentice (and implies that she'll let Millie take over the shop once she's too old to run it herself), Millie's father eagerly accepts. He even plants extra **banana** crops to finance Millie's journey and future. Millie moves to Kingston and throws herself into her responsibilities at Willemina's shop, though she feels immensely homesick. She later meets a young cane cutter named Winston, and they fall in love. They have sex just before Winston has to return to his rural hometown, but he promises that he'll write to Millie and wants to have a future with her. Not long after, Millie discovers that she's pregnant. Willemina keeps Millie on, but she intercepts and doesn't tell Millie about the regular monthly letters and money Winston sends her. Millie assumes that Winston has broken his promise and abandoned her. Winston returns not long after the baby's (Eddison William) birth. When Willemina gives in and shows Millie the stack of unopened letters, Millie and Winston reconcile. Winston tells Millie he wishes to marry her and move to England. Then he notices the baby strapped to her chest, seemingly registering that it's his.

"Foreign Soil" tells the story of Ange, an Australian woman who follows her boyfriend Mukasa to his home country of Uganda. Ange loves Mukasa, but their relationship hasn't been without conflict: Ange's mum and Ange's dad aren't happy she's with dating a Black man and don't try to hide their feelings around Mukasa. Things get worse when Mukasa becomes abusive and controlling toward Ange in Uganda. Mukasa's abuse turns physical when he discovers that Ange is pregnant with their child and has been keeping the pregnancy from him. Alone and terrified, Ange wants to run away but realizes that in landlocked Uganda, she's surrounded by "foreign soil" on all sides.

"Shu Yi" is told from the perspective of Ava, a young Black girl growing up in the 1990s in a predominantly white Australian suburb. Being Black sets her apart from her peers, who bully her, and so she learns to reject and hate her Blackness. When a new student, a Chinese girl named Shu Yi, starts attending Ava's school, Ava is relieved that her peers stop bullying her and start bullying Shu Yi instead. Ava's mother, who works at the school, notices what's going on and urges Ava to make Shu Yi feel welcome, reminding Ava that Ava should know what it feels like to not be accepted. But Ava's life is easier now that her peers have begun to bully Shu Yi instead of her, and she has no interest in returning to the way things were. When Shu Yi approaches Ava during recess and asks to sit with her, Ava cruelly rejects Shu Yi and calls her a racial slur, eliciting the approval of her racist peers and causing Shu Yi to urinate out of shame.

"Railton Road" takes place in 1960s London and tells the story of Solomon, a young Black college graduate who teaches Black History classes at Railton Road, a squat house that the Black Panthers have taken over. Solomon is swept away with the movement. He's also excited about an opportunity to serve as Minister of Culture with the London Panthers—a position he might hold if he has a successful interview with De Frankie, an infamous leader within the movement. But De Frankie, though lauded by celebrities and other public figures, has a shady past, including accusations of rape and murder. And his views are more militant and less academic than Solomon's. Ultimately, De Frankie decides to test whether Solomon is loyal to the cause by recruiting him to participate in an attack on a Black woman (the kept woman) who's having a relationship with a white man. Solomon initially follows orders (albeit reluctantly), but he can't bring himself to go through with the mission and abandons the captured woman in an alleyway.

"Gaps in the Hickory" follows two linked storylines. In the first storyline, Delores is an older transgender woman living in New Orleans. She grieves the recent death of her friend and former wife, Izzy, and spends time with her neighbor, a young Black girl named Ella. The second storyline follows Izzy's family: her son, Jackson; her grandchildren, Carter and Lucy; and her daughter-in-law, Jeanie. A few years ago, Jackson became affiliated with the Ku Klux Klan. Izzy's husband, Denver (who is Jackson's father and Carter and Lucy's grandfather), supposedly ran off with an unnamed woman. In time, it's revealed that this isn't true: Delores *is* Denver. When Izzy discovered Denver's transgender identity, she urged Denver/Delores to flee Mississippi for New Orleans, where people wouldn't be as judgmental. Izzy and Delores remained friends afterward, and Izzy kept Delores's gender identity a secret from the rest of the family. Carter is also transgender but keeps it a secret due to his father's bigotry. Izzy, the only family member of Carter's who seems to fully know and accept him, repeatedly hints to Jeanie that it's not safe for Carter to stay in Mississippi and that Jeanie should take him to New Orleans to live with "Denver." After Izzy's death, Jeanie does this, and an overjoyed Ella and Delores welcome Carter with open arms.

"Big Islan" tells the story of Nathaniel Robinson, a Jamaican port worker who lives with his wife, Clarise, in Kingston. Clarise is interested in moving up in the world and enjoying the comforts of a middle-class lifestyle. For this reason, she's been teaching Nathaniel to read and write, hoping it will put him in the running for better employment opportunities. Though he's initially unenthusiastic about it, Nathanial is suddenly very interested when he spots a newspaper story about the West Indies cricket team's trip to Australia. He labors his way through the article and, with Clarise's help, learns of how the Australian people have accepted the players into their land. Reading the story shows Nathaniel how large and full of possibility the world is, and Kingston suddenly starts to feel small and stifling,

"The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa" tells the stories of Asanka and Loretta. Asanka is a Sri Lankan boy who, in the story's present, is detained at an Australian immigration detention center. Through flashbacks, the reader learns that Asanka is a former child soldier (the Tamil Tigers, a paramilitary group, forcibly recruited him) who traveled from Sri Lanka to seek asylum in Australia. He's still traumatized by everything he experienced during the war, and he hallucinates about the violence the Tigers inflicted on him and forced him to inflict on others. He also hallucinates stilt fishermen who offer him comfort and guidance. Asanka is haunted by the death of his friend Chaminda, who accompanied him on his journey to Australia but (it's implied) died by suicide at the detention center. Loretta is a volunteer (and former lawyer) with the center and meets with Asanka. But she's overwhelmed with guilt over her own privilege and her inability to do anything to improve Asanka's situation. During their meeting, Asanka secretly steals some hairpins and floss from Loretta's purse. After she leaves, he sews his lips shut with the floss and hairpins.

"Aviation" is about a young white woman, Mirabel, who lives in Oakland, California and is still grieving her husband, Michael, who died in the September 11 terrorist attacks. Mirabel and Michael were trying to have a baby before he died, and so Mirabel signs up to be a foster parent to honor Michael's memory. However, when she meets the boy who needs her care, a Sikh boy named Sunni, she struggles to reconcile her trauma-induced prejudice against Middle Eastern people with her desire to move forward from her grief and provide care to a child in need.

"The Sukiyaki Book Club" is told from the perspective of an unnamed writer and a young girl named Avery. In time, it's revealed that Avery is a character in a story the writer is working on. The story opens with Avery panicking while upside down on the monkey bars at her school playground, having realized she doesn't know how to get herself down. The writer of Avery's story, meanwhile, struggles to know how to "help Avery gently." She also meditates on the rejection letters she's received from publishers who want her to write happier stories about "everyday life." The writer struggles to focus on the cramped apartment she shares with her two children, and she feels bad she that can't provide her kids with better living conditions. Though her children's squabbles distract her, she relishes seeing them existing, if only momentarily, as happy, carefree Black children. The story ends with the writer giving Avery's story an unexpected, happy ending: Avery falls down from the monkey bars but miraculously lands upright.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Young Sudanese Woman – The young Sudanese woman is one of the two narrators of *Foreign Soil*'s opening story, "David." At the beginning of "David," she has just bought a **red bicycle** that bears the name "BARKLY STAR" and is walking it along the streets of Melbourne. The woman doesn't have a lot of money and struggles to get by as a single mother (she broke up with Ahmed, her son Nile's father, sometime before the story's present), but she thinks that being able to ride the bike alongside Nile as he rides his tricycle makes the purchase worth it. As the woman walks, she hears her elders' critical voices in her head. First-generation immigrants like Ahmed's mum believe that, as a second-generation immigrant, the woman doesn't adequately value and uphold important Sudanese traditions. Fixating on these criticisms primes the young woman to be defensive when Asha, an older Sudanese woman whom she crosses paths with, starts asking her questions about her bike, child, and marital status. In reality, Asha isn't trying to attack the younger woman—she's only curious about the bike because it reminds her of her son, David, who used to love riding a bike and who died tragically during the Sudanese Civil War. Though the young Sudanese woman doesn't know what Asha is going through, she pushes aside her own reservations about Asha and lets Asha ride the bike, and this leads the women to have an unspoken moment of understanding and connection that transcends their cultural, personal, and generational differences. At the very end of the story, the young woman reveals that she's renamed her new bike David, in honor of Asha's son.

Asha (The Older Sudanese Woman) – In "David," the older Sudanese woman, whose name is later revealed to be Asha, is a Sudanese refugee who moved to Australia to escape her country's violent civil war. In flashbacks, the reader gradually learns Asha's backstory. During the Sudanese Civil War, two years after enemy soldiers took Asha's husband, soldiers attacked her village, forcing Asha, her friend Amina, and their families to flee. Amid this chaos, Asha's young son, David, broke free from Asha to retrieve his beloved **bike**. Later, Asha watched as a group of soldiers shot and killed David as he David happily pedaled his bike away from his burning village. Though Asha has a new husband and a safe, stable life in Melbourne, she continues to grieve her son. When she crosses paths with a younger Sudanese woman walking a bike down the street, she starts asking the younger woman prying questions about the woman's bike and personal life. Though the younger woman takes Asha's questions as judgment—something she gets a lot of from her own immigrant elders—in reality, Asha is only interested in the bike, which makes her feel close to her dead son. Though the younger woman doesn't understand everything Asha has gone through, she pushes aside her skepticism and lets Asha ride the bike, a meaningful experience that lets Asha pay homage to David and work through her trauma. In the end, the women overcome their generational and cultural differences and have a moment of unspoken, mutual understanding, as evidenced by the younger woman's decision to rename her bike "David," in honor of Asha's son.

Harlem Jones – Harlem Jones is the eponymous main character of "Harlem Jones." Harlem lives in London with Harlem's mum, a first-generation Trinidadian immigrant, and with his older brother Lloyd (though Lloyd is in prison at the novel's present). Like many of London's Black youths, Harlem is fed up with the police brutality and racial injustices that disproportionately affect Black people in London. But he's also scared that he could be the next victim of this institutionalized violence. At the beginning of the story, Harlem can't stop thinking about Mark Duggan, a Black British man whom Tottenham police shot and killed in 2011 (and whose death caused protests and violence to break out across England in what came to be known as the 2011 England Riots). At the beginning of the story, the police confront Harlem at his home following a heated altercation between Harlem and a woman at the job office. Harlem's mum gets the police to leave, but she condemns Harlem's "delinquent" behavior and disapproves of Harlem's anger. She thinks that he (and the younger generation of Black youths in general) doesn't appreciate the sacrifices that she (and other immigrant parents like herself) has made to ensure that her children can have a better future. But Harlem, his friend Toby, and other Black youths are fed up with attitudes like this and feel that outrage and even physical violence may be the only ways to bring about real, lasting systemic change. The story's climax occurs after Harlem and Toby have made their way to Tottenham, where protests have broken out in response to Mark Duggan's death. They set off Molotov cocktails, at which point the formerly peaceful protest turns violent.

Millie Lucas – In "Hope," Millie Lucas is a 14-year-old girl from St. Thomas. She grows up in a rural village in the Cidar Valley with her family, including her mother Mrs. Lucas, her father Mr. Lucas, and her siblings. Millie is a talented seamstress. Though her family doesn't have much, and though opportunities are scarce in her home region, Millie loves her family and where she's from. Millie regularly accompanies her father on trips to Kingston, Jamaica to pick up supplies. She frequents the sewing shop of an old woman named Willemina who comes to respect Millie for her obvious knowledge about sewing. On one visit, Willemina asks to take on Millie as an apprentice, implying that she will train Millie to take over the store after she's too old to run it. Mr. Lucas eagerly plants extra **banana** crops to finance Millie's trip to Kingston, earning Millie the nickname "Banana Girl" around the village. Though Millie is grateful for the opportunities her apprenticeship gives her, she's not sure that running the sewing shop is what she wants out of life. Later that year, Millie meets a young cane cutter, Winston, and they fall in love. They have sex just before Winston is set to return to his home region, and after he leaves, Millie discovers that she's pregnant. Though Winston writes to Millie every month he's gone, Willemina, not wanting Millie to let boys and love distract her from her future, intercepts and hides the letters. Millie eventually gives birth to a boy, Eddison William. Not long after, Winston returns to Willemina's shop to find her. At first, Millie is furious with Winston, thinking he abandoned her. But then Willemina shows Millie the letters (and money) that Winston sent each month, and they seem to reconcile and plan a future together, though the story leaves things ambiguous (Winston expresses his desire for a future with Millie before she shows him their baby, and it's unclear if he still wants that future after discovering he has a child).

Willemina – In "Hope," Willemina is an elderly seamstress who owns a sewing shop in Kingston. The shop fell into her hands when her former lover, a wealthy, married Haitian man, bought her it in order to keep her on the island (and separate from his other, more important life in Haiti). Willemina knows firsthand the intoxicating effects of love, so when rumors spread that Millie, whom Willemina has taken on as an apprentice, is romantically involved with a cane cutter named Winston, she worries about Millie's future. Her worries prove warranted when Millie becomes pregnant with Winston's child. But rather than throw Millie out, Willemina keeps her on as an apprentice, allowing her to work throughout her pregnancy and after she gives birth to her child, Eddison William. Still, in her efforts to help Millie, Willemina ends up overstepping, as when she discreetly intercepts and withholds the monthly letters (and, unbeknownst to Willemina, money) that Winston sends Millie when he leaves Kingston to return to his rural home region. Willemina's meddling is another instance of the older generation misunderstanding the younger generation and (in this case, erroneously) doubting their ability to make decisions about their future.

Winston Gray – In "Hope," Winston Gray is Millie's lover. He's a young cane cutter from the rural region of Montego Bay, and he meets Millie toward the end of his work season when they cross baths on Kingston Beach. They fall in love and have sex just days before Winston is set to return home. Winston tells Millie he wants to have a future together and promises to write all the time, which he does—and he sends money, too. However, Willemina, having heard rumors about Millie and Winston's dalliances and wanting to ensure that Winston doesn't hold Millie back from building a better life for herself, intercepts the letters and hides them from Millie. In the meantime, Millie discovers she's pregnant with Winston's child and eventually gives birth to a baby boy, Eddison William. Winston, having not heard back from Millie, returns to Kingston after the baby's birth. Initially Millie, not knowing that Winston has been sending her letters and money all this time, is irate, and she Winston and berates him for being a "lyin' field bwoy." But when Willemina ultimately gives in and presents Millie with Winston's letters, the couple reconciles, and Winston expresses his desire to have a future with Millie in England. The story ends on an ambiguous note: just after Winston declares his desire for a future with Millie, he sees Eddison and recognizes that the baby is likely his. It's not clear whether this discovery reinvigorates Winston's desire to have a future with Millie—or whether, as Willemina seems to have feared, it will scare him off.

Ange – In "Foreign Soil," Ange is a white **hair** stylist who leaves her native Australia to accompany her boyfriend, Mukasa, to his home country of Uganda. Ange loves Mukasa and resents her parents (Ange's mum and Ange's dad) for disapproving of their relationship. Still, Ange isn't a wholly unproblematic character. As a white woman and a native-born Australian citizen, she doesn't experience the prejudice that Mukasa experiences and doesn't fully understand Mukasa's struggles. For instance, Ange falls short of calling her parents' rude treatment of Mukasa what it really is: racism. And Ange herself unwittingly objectifies and Mukasa, with her initial attraction to him stemming from her hope that being with him would make her life more interesting and exotic. But Ange and Mukasa's roles are reversed when Ange follows Mukasa to Uganda. In Uganda, it's now Ange who's on foreign soil, and her new inability to understand the local language and culture disempower and alienate her. The move also affects Ange's relationship with Mukasa. Mukasa works long hours, leaving Ange home alone all day, and he does little to ensure that Ange is comfortable and happy. For instance, he only speaks in Luganda, which Ange doesn't understand. Ange's troubles comes to a head when Mukasa becomes physically and emotionally abusive toward her. When he catches Ange chatting and laughing with Lucinda, a servant, he scolds them both and then fires Lucinda in retaliation. Later, he rapes Ange, who becomes pregnant. When Mukasa confronts Ange about the pregnancy, an argument ensues, and Mukasa strikes Ange. Ange seems caught off guard by Mukasa's abuse, and even as his treatment of her worsens—and despite the fact that he may have been this way even in when the couple was still living in Australia, she remains in denial about the abuse.

Mukasa – In "Foreign Soil," Mukasa is Ange's boyfriend; he's a doctor from Uganda. Ange's mum and Ange's dad disapprove of their relationship because Mukasa is Black and Ange is white. After Ange moves with Mukasa from Australia to his native Uganda, where he's in the process of opening a hospital, he spends long hours at work and becomes controlling, manipulative, and eventually physically abusive. At one point, he even rapes Ange. Later on, when Mukasa discovers Ange is pregnant, he's irate to the point that he insults and physically assaults her. In Ange's mind, Mukasa has changed completely. Yet the story hints that Ange may simply have been ignoring signs all along—or that she never knew Mukasa as well as she thought she did. Put differently, the story suggests that Ange's being on "foreign soil" in Uganda has empowered Mukasa and disempowered her (whereas their dynamic was reversed when they lived in Australia.)

Ava – Ava is the young narrator of the story "Shu Yi." She lives with her family in a predominantly white Australian suburb. Ava is Black but resents it—her Blackness sets her apart from her peers, who are mostly white, and it makes her a frequent target of their bullying. However, after Shu Yi, a Chinese student, starts attending Ava's school, Ava's peers stop bullying Ava and start bullying Shu Yi instead. Ava recognizes that the bullying is wrong, but at the same time, she's selfishly grateful that Shu Yi's arrival has made her own life much easier. When Ava's mum, who works at Ava's school, notices the other students bullying Shu Yi, she immediately recognizes the bullying as racially motivated and encourages Ava to defend Shu Yi and make her feel comfortable. Ava's mum is shocked when Ava doesn't seem interested in helping Shu Yi—she thinks Ava's own history of being bullied and knowing what it feels like to be an outsider should only make Ava more determined to be an ally to Shu Yi. Nevertheless, when Shu Yi turns to Ava for help after kids are harassing her during recess, Ava rejects Shu Yi and calls her a racial slur. Ava's failure to help Shu Yi shows how prejudice can perpetuate prejudice when people who have experienced discrimination themselves fail to act in solidarity with others experiencing discrimination.

Shu Yi – In "Shu Yi," Shu Yi is a young Chinese girl who is a new student at Ava's elementary school. The other kids, apparently parroting the racist, xenophobic rhetoric they've picked up from their parents, bully her mercilessly because she's Asian and an immigrant. Ava sees what's going on and recognizes that it's wrong, but she doesn't do anything to help Shu Yi. Before Shu Yi's arrival, Ava, one of the only Black kids in her suburb, was her racist peers' preferred target. Though Ava knows how bad it feels to be treated like an outsider, she is selfishly grateful that her peers are too busy bullying Shu Yi to bully her. One day, Ava's mother, realizing what's going on with Shu Yi and the other kids, meets with the girls' teacher Mr. Wilkinson (after an unsuccessful meeting with the school's unsympathizing principal, Mr. James) to bring the bullying to his attention and try to make things better for Shu Yi. Shu Yi looks happy for the first time ever when Mr. Wilkinson says that Ava will make her feel at home. When bullying resumes later that day, Shu Yi cautiously and desperately turns to Ava for help. But Ava, fearing that her peers will make her life miserable if she defends Shu Yi, chooses to reject Shu Yi, calling her a racial slur in front of all their classmates. Ava's cruel betrayal shocks and humiliates Shu Yi, and the story ends on an equally heartbreaking and pitiful note, with Ava (and likely all the other students) watching as Shu Yi urinates out of embarrassment.

Solomon – In "Railton Road," Solomon is a young college graduate whose been teaching Black History classes to young Black revolutionaries at Railton Road, a London squat house the Black Panthers have taken over. At first, Solomon is swept away by the cause and believes he's fully invested in seeing real social and systemic change. Yet Solomon's views and commitment to social change are decidedly more passive and academic than other members of the London Panthers, a fact that becomes clear after he meets De Frankie, an important and infamous leader from the Black House on Holiday Road. At the start of the story, Solomon is up for a job as Minister of Culture for the London Panthers—but only if he receives De Frankie's approval. De Frankie has more extreme, unnuanced views than Solomon and is more willing to resort to violence to make the revolution happen. He thus is skeptical of Solomon, whose university education, De Frankie claims, may have indoctrinated Solomon with the "lies of Babylon"—that is, mainstream views that uphold the status quo and white supremacy. When De Frankie tasks Solomon with helping to attack, apprehend, and punish a Black woman (the kept woman) who's in a relationship with a white man (De Frankie is vehemently opposed to interracial relationships), Solomon finds that he can't go through with the job. Solomon wants to be as merciless with the woman and as wholly committed to the revolution as De Frankie, but he finds himself wanting to let the woman go. He hates himself for thinking this way, as it reveals that he's not as invested in bringing forth radical change as he once thought he was.

Delores – In "Gaps in the Hickory," Delores is an old woman who lives in New Orleans. Delores is transgender—she used to live in rural Mississippi and identify as a man named Denver. Back in Mississippi, Denver lived with his wife Izzy, and their son, Jackson. When Izzy found out that Delores was transgender, she encouraged her to leave their rural town and move somewhere that would be more accepting. Izzy accepted Delores from the start and kept her gender identity a secret, telling others—including Jackson—that Denver ran away with another woman. Delores and Izzy remained good friends over the years, and Izzy frequently visited Delores in New Orleans. In the story's present, Delores is struggling to cope with Izzy's recent death. Besides this, she's struggling to know what to do about her young grandchild, Carter, who is also transgender—and whose father Jackson is bigoted, possibly violent, and could harm Carter if he ever found out about

Carter's gender identity. Delores spends much of her time with her young neighbor, Ella, who repeatedly tries to convince Delores to go and rescue Carter. But things are more complicated for Delores than Ella realizes: she only became herself when she moved to New Orleans, and returning to Mississippi would force her to return to a past she no longer relates to. At the same time, though, she knows from Izzy how dangerous and unhinged Jackson has become, and she worries what will happen to Carter if she doesn't help him. Delores also feels responsible for Jackson's present state: Jackson came to visit "Denver" unexpectedly a few years back, and when he realized the truth about his father, he left without a word. It was after seeing Delores that Jackson joined the KKK and began to act erratically and hatefully. Delores never told anyone—not even Izzy—about the encounter. Ultimately, Delores is able to help Carter and protect herself against her unwanted past, as Jeanie drives Carter to New Orleans to live with Delores.

De Frankie – In "Railton Road," De Frankie is a well-known leader with the London Panthers. He's a radical, controversial figure within the movement; though he's garnered support among celebrities and other public figures, he has a checkered past, including rape and murder charges. And though he's committed to bringing forth the revolution, some of his views are extreme. For instance, he's advocated for the lynching of Black women who have relationships with white men—despite clearly being biracial himself. When De Frankie comes to Railton Road to interview Solomon for the Minister of Culture position, it's clear that staunchly anti-establishment De Frankie is skeptical of Solomon's academic background. De Frankie suggests that Solomon's university studies have indoctrinated him with "Babylon's lies," and he wonders if he can trust Solomon not to corrupt the movement's culture with his establishment background. To test Solomon's allegiance to the cause, he enlists Solomon to help him apprehend a Black woman (the kept woman) who the Panthers have discovered is in a relationship with a white man. After capturing the woman, De Frankie places an iron collar around her neck to humiliate her (insinuating that she has made herself a slave by submitting to a white man), then he flees from the police and leaves Solomon to deal with the woman.

Izzy – In "Gaps in the Hickory," Izzy is Delores's former wife, Jeanie's mother-in-law, Jackson's mother, and Carter and Lucy's grandmother. She dies shortly before the story's present, and Carter and Delores take her death especially hard. When Jackson was a young boy, Izzy discovered that her husband Denver (now Delores) was transgender. She responded with compassion and insisted that Delores leave their rural Mississippi town for her own safety. She also kept Delores's gender identity a secret—not out of shame, but to protect Delores from friends and family (like Jackson) who would never accept her. Izzy would regularly visit Delores in New Orleans, and they remained good friends until Izzy's death. She leaves the family house in Mississippi to Delores in her will. It's Izzy who first recognizes that Carter, too, is transgender, and she's the only family member Carter knows who actively seems to accept him for who he is. Izzy brings Carter's transgender identity to Jeanie's attention and pleads with her to take Carter to live in New Orleans with "Denver" (now Delores), where Carter will be safe.

Nathanial Robinson – In "Big Islan," Nathanial Robinson is a port worker who lives in Kingston, Jamaica, with his wife, Clarise. At first, Nathanial is happy with his life and doesn't understand why Clarise is so determined to move up in the world. Nathanial is illiterate, and Clarise has been teaching him the alphabet with the hope that he can get a higher-paying job or a promotion. Nathanial, however, thinks that Clarise and other people are delusional to think that there would be more opportunities, and that life would be so much better somewhere like England. He cherishes Jamaica's natural beauty and vows never to leave. He loves working at the port because seeing the ships enter and leave the island makes him feel like he's part of global society. However, this changes when he sees a photo of the West Indies cricket team in Australia, where they've been playing the past few days. According to Clarise, who has read the feature story, the Australian people love the West Indies, and nobody in Australia cares what color your skin is. Inspired and intrigued, Nathanial, who is only starting to get the hang of reading, labors through the story, though he's never much cared about cricket or sports. When he finishes it, he feels a restlessness he never felt before. It seems the cricket team's acceptance in Australia, and the act of reading itself, have opened Nathanial's eyes to how small his island is, how big the broader world is, and what opportunities await him there.

Asanka – In "The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa," Asanka is a young Sri Lankan boy who, in the story's present, is being held at the Villawood Immigration Detention Center in Sydney. In flashbacks, the reader learns that Asanka fled war-torn Sri Lanka on a fishing boat after the Tamil Tigers, a paramilitary group, forced him to serve as a child soldier. The Tigers inflicted unspeakable acts of violence and torture on Asanka. As punishment for trying to run away, they locked Asanka and his friend Dinesh in a potato chest and nailed it shut. Though the story never makes it clear, it's insinuated that Dinesh dies in the chest and that Asanka abandons Dinesh's body, an act that haunts Asanka. When Asanka is on the fishing boat en route to Australia, he hallucinates a group of stilt fishermen who give him advice. Asanka continues to see the fishermen at the center, but by that point, he seems not to register that they're hallucinations. Asanka feels immensely guilty and responsible for the acts of violence the Tigers forced him to commit, and he frequently hallucinates that he's covered blood, not realizing that it's not real. While aboard the fishing boat fleeing Sri

Lanka, Asanka met a man, Chaminda, who protected him against the cruel boatmen, Mustache and Ponytail, who headed the journey. After Australian officials detained the asylum seekers and sent them to the center, Asanka and Chaminda became roommates. They considered each other family, and Asanka grows horribly depressed after Chaminda seemingly dies by suicide after his scheduled release from the center falls through. The lawyer Chaminda had been working with, Loretta, comes to visit Asanka after Chaminda dies. However, by this point, Loretta is only a volunteer, so she can't do much to help Asanka. While they talk, Asanka clandestinely removes hairpins and dental floss from Loretta's purse and uses them to sew his mouth shut, believing that the act will silence his bad thoughts once and for all.

Loretta – In "The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa," Loretta is a volunteer at the Villawood Immigration Detention Center in Sydney. She used to be a lawyer there and was passionate about her work, but she quit after her husband, Sam, told her the job paid too little and required her to work long hours—conditions that wouldn't work if they had kids (which Loretta desperately wants). Sam suggested she work for a high-paying firm instead for a years before going on maternity leave, and Loretta took his advice. However, Sam hasn't mentioned kids again since, and Loretta worries about their failing marriage. Adding to their marital tension, Sam doesn't understand Loretta's passion for her work at the center. For instance, when Sam came home and finds Loretta crying over Chaminda's death—Loretta had been working to have him released, but his release was halted due to lost paperwork and he died by suicide shortly after—he told her she was overreacting. Before his death, Chaminda told Loretta all about Asanka and made her promise to go see him. Loretta does, in the story's present, but since she's no longer a lawyer, there's little she can do to help him. And in fact, she (unintentionally and unknowingly) ends up harming him: Asanka swipes some hairpins and dental floss from Loretta's purse during the visit and later uses them to sew his own mouth shut. At the end of the story, Loretta leaves the center feeling angry and defeated over her inability to help Asanka (and people like him), yet she also remains ignorant to the role she played his gruesome fate.

Mirabel – In "Aviation," Mirabel is a young widow who is still grieving her husband Michael, who died a few years ago in the September 11 terrorist attacks. Mirabel struggles to work through the trauma of Michael's death. She suffers frequent panic attacks where she sees herself on one of the hijacked planes, listening to the terrorists who overtook it shouting in a language she can't understand, and watching as the plane crashes into the World Trade Center, where Michael worked. Before Michael's death, Mirabel and Michael had been trying for a baby, but Mirabel suffered multiple miscarriages. Now, perhaps to honor Michael's memory, Mirabel has decided to become a foster parent. But she hits a roadblock when her first potential foster child turns out to be a young Sikh boy named Sunni. Mirabel (erroneously) associates Sunni's hair covering (*patka*) with the Islamic terrorists who carried out the September 11 attacks and involuntarily slips into a panic attack. Though Antonio, the case worker who accompanies Sunni to Mirabel's house, pleads with Mirabel to remember that Sunni is a blameless child who needs her help, and though Mirabel recognizes that she's in the wrong, she struggles to overcome her trauma and prejudice to help Sunni.

Antonio – In "Aviation," Antonio is a caseworker assigned to find Sunni emergency foster care after Sunni's maa is taken into custody following an altercation with a woman she felt was discriminating against her. Antonio values the work he does, but his parents—at least his mother—isn't as supportive. She thinks that kids whose parents don't want to—or can't—take care of them themselves are "hopeless," and that her half-Black, half-Puerto Rican son isn't living up to his potential by trying to help them. Antonio's father, on the other hand, is more supportive of his son's work. As Sunni and Antonio wait on Mirabel's front porch for Mirabel to come to the door, Antonio hopes the person on the side of the door is as loving and supportive as his father. This isn't quite the case though—Antonio, seeing the September 11 mementos and photographs on Mirabel's wall, immediately understands that Mirabel's husband Michael died in the September 11 terrorist attacks, and he also understands that this will complicate Mirabel's ability to provide care for Sunni. He pleads with her to understand that Sunni is just a child and has nothing to do with the people who killed Michael, but the story ends on an open-ended note as Mirabel is too deep into a panic attack to fully digest and comprehend Antonio's pleas.

Sunni – In "Aviation," Sunni is a young Sikh boy who requires emergency foster care after Sunni's maa is taken into custody following an altercation with a woman at a store. Ever since the September 11 terrorist attacks, Sunni and his mother have faced anti-Middle Eastern discrimination. For instance, Bill and Susie, an elderly couple who lives next door to Sunni and his maa, used to watch Sunni when his maa was at work. But after the terrorist attacks, they started making up excuses not to watch him until they ultimately cut off contact altogether. In the story's present, Antonio, a case worker assigned to Sunni's case, takes Sunni to the house of Mirabel, a woman in the running to provide Sunni emergency foster care. Tension builds, though, as Mirabel struggles to reconcile her anti-Middle Eastern bias (at least in part a trauma response to her husband Michael's death) with her knowledge that Sunni is an innocent child who needs her care. The story ends on a note of uncertainty: Mirabel is in the middle of a panic attack, only half-hearing Antonio as he pleads with her to remember that Sunni is just a child and has nothing in common with the "bad men" who brought about her husband's death—other than the color of his skin.

The Unnamed Writer – In "The Sukiyaki Book Club," the unnamed writer is the author currently writing Avery's story. The book doesn't explicitly state this, but the unnamed writer seems to be a stand-in for Maxine Beneba Clarke, author of *Foreign Soil*, a fact the story alludes to in its brief reference to "Harlem Jones," another of the collection's stories and purportedly one the unnamed writer has written. The unnamed writer laments "not know[ing] how to rescue Avery gently" and fears that Avery's story can only end in tragedy. This seems to be a dismal nod to how systemic racism and inequality rob Black youths (like Avery, and like the unnamed narrator's children, Markie and Maryam) of the innocence that children with more privilege are free to enjoy. After the unnamed writer observes her own children's "small brown bodies" appear so carefree as they sing and dance in the shower, she ends Avery's story on an unexpectedly happy note: Avery lets go of the monkey bars and miraculously manages to land upright, unharmed. This suggests that though children like Avery and the unnamed writer's children may experience hardship and injustice, they can persevere and feel happiness and hope for a better, more just future.

Avery – In "The Sukiyaki Book Club," Avery is a young girl who gets stuck upside down on the monkey bars; she spends the entirety of the story panicking and trying to find a way to call for help or get herself safely to the ground. Avery's mother died recently in a car accident in which Avery was a passenger. Though Avery doesn't say so explicitly, she seems to struggle in the aftermath of her mother's death, notably due to Avery's father's inability to cope with death himself and provide adequate support to his young, grieving daughter. Eventually, the reader learns that "The Sukiyaki Book Club" is a framed narrative: in fact, Avery is a character in a story the unnamed writer (perhaps a stand-in for Beneba Clarke, Foreign Soil's author), whose story is told alongside Avery's, is currently working on. The unnamed writer laments "not know[ing] how to rescue Avery gently" and fears that Avery's story can only end in tragedy. This seems to be a dismal nod to the ways that systemic racism and inequality rob Black youths (like Avery, and like the unnamed narrator's children) of the innocence that children with more privilege are free to enjoy. After the unnamed writer observes her own children's "small brown bodies" appear so carefree as they sing and dance in the shower, she ends Avery's story on an unexpectedly happy note: Avery lets go of the monkey bars and miraculously manages to land upright, unharmed. This suggests that though children like Avery and the unnamed writer's children may experience hardship and injustice, they can persevere and feel happiness and hope for a better, more just future.

Ava's Mum – Ava's mum is the mother of Ava, the narrator of the story "Shu Yi." As a Black mother raising Black children in a predominantly white Australian suburb, Ava's mum has worked hard to ingratiate herself in the community, ensuring that her family is as accepted in the community as possible. She works at Ava's school, which is how she finds out about the bullying that Shu Yi is experiencing. She tries to broach the subject with Ava and is appalled when Ava doesn't seem interested in helping Shu Yi feel safe and welcomed at school—she thinks that Ava, who knows what it's like to be bullied for being different, should be especially empathetic to Shu Yi's situation and want to help her. When Ava's mum goes to the school principal, Mr. James, to ask him to interfere in the bullying, he not only refuses to help Shu Yi, but he also angrily denies Ava's mum's accusation that the children's bullying of Shu Yi is racially motivated (though Ava's mum insists that he knows what's going on, and that he is just racist himself and doesn't want to help). Failing to get through to Mr. James, Ava's mum doubles down on her insistence that Ava be a friend to Shu Yi. However, Ava ultimately goes against her mother's wishes, calling Shu Yi a racial slur in front of all their classmates when Shu Yi comes to her for help during recess.

Carter – In "Gaps in the Hickory," Carter is Jeanie and Jackson's child, Izzy and Delores's grandchild, and Lucy's older sibling. He presents as a young boy but is transgender and seems to identify as a girl (though the story doesn't say so explicitly). He feels most himself when he has long hair and wears his sister's clothing, but he has to be secretive about it, since a lot of people who live in his rural Mississippi town—especially his father—hold bigoted views. In the story's present, Carter is grieving the recent death of Izzy, the only person who really accepted him for who he was. For much of the story, Carter (like the rest of his family, minus Izzy) believes that his grandpa Denver ran off with another woman before he was born. Because of this, he has no idea that he really has another grandmother, Delores, who not only would accept him as he is, but who would also empathize with his struggles with identity. At the end of the story, Jeanie, fearing for Carter's safety, takes Carter to live with Delores in New Orleans.

Ahmed's Mum – In "David," Ahmed's mum is the mother of Ahmed, the young Sudanese woman's former partner. She's also the grandmother of Nile, who is the woman and Ahmed's child. Throughout the story, Ahmed's mother's criticisms float through the young Sudanese woman's head. Ahmed's mum (and the young Sudanese woman's other immigrant elders) frequently berate the woman for her parenting decisions, and for her failure to value and uphold important Sudanese traditions.

Nile – In "David," Nile is the young Sudanese woman and Ahmed's young son. At the beginning of the story, the young Sudanese woman has just bought a **bicycle** and is looking forward to taking rides with Nile. The story implicitly contrasts Nile with Asha's young son, David, who was killed during the Sudanese Civil War.

David – In "David," David is Asha's son. In the story, Asha recalls how Masud, a man from Asha's village in Sudan, made David a

bike from metal scraps. David loved the bike and rode it everywhere. Through flashbacks, the reader learns that enemy soldiers shot and killed David, who had gone back to his burning village to retrieve his beloved bike. It's for this reason that Asha is so interested and asks so many questions about the young Sudanese woman's bike, though the young woman erroneously assumes Asha (like the woman's elders, who are also Sudanese immigrants) is criticizing her for being unladylike and not upholding traditional Sudanese values.

Masud – In "David," Masud is a man from Asha's village in Sudan. Through flashbacks, the reader learns that Masud made Asha's young son, David, a **bike** from bike from scrap metal. David loved the bike and rode it everywhere, and Masud joyfully promised David that one day, he'd have a bicycle race named after him (like the Tour de France). This didn't happen, though, as enemy soldiers shot and killed David during the Sudanese Civil War. When the young Sudanese woman chooses to name her new bicycle "David" to honor Asha's late son, it offers a moment of closure, symbolically fulfilling Masud's promise to David that he'd have a race named after him one day.

Amina – In "David," Amina is Asha's friend in Sudan—they live in the same village. Amina is also Masud's daughter. It's Amina who informs Asha that enemy soldiers have invaded their village and that she, Asha, and their children must flee. Amina comforts Asha after David runs back to their burning village to retrieve his beloved **bicycle**.

Lloyd – In "Harlem Jones," Lloyd is Harlem Jones's brother. He's in prison for beating his girlfriend, a fact that Harlem's mum can't bring herself to accept—so she lies and tells people he's working with relatives back in Trinidad. Though Harlem condemns the Metropolitan Police's mistreatment of Black people, he admits that Lloyd deserves to see justice for what he did to his girlfriend.

Harlem's Mum – In "Harlem Jones," Harlem's mum is a first-generation Trinidadian immigrant. She's a fierce and protective woman. When the police come to the Jones residence to interrogate Harlem about threats he made against a job office worker, Harlem predicts—correctly—that his mother will put the police officers in their place and send them on their way. But the problem is that she's just as harsh and critical with Harlem, whom she thinks is taking for granted all she's sacrificed to give him a better life in London. Harlem's father left the family years ago, and Harlem's mother always tells Harlem he'll end up like his "good-fe-nothin' dadda" if he doesn't get his act together—an accusation that infuriates Harlem.

Toby – In "Harlem Jones," Toby is Harlem Jones's friend. They attend a rally over the officer-involved shooting of Mark Duggan and throw Molotov cocktails, at which point the peaceful protest turns violent. Toby and Harlem, along with other Black youths, often clash with their elders, who do not see violent resistance as a productive means of addressing systemic injustices like police brutality.

Mr. Lucas – In "Hope," Mr. Lucas is Millie Lucas's father. He lives with his family in a rural village and supports them with his **banana** crops. He plants extra crops in order to raise enough money to send Millie to Kingston, but they die during the wet season when a fungus infects them, symbolizing how the family's poverty makes Millie's future shaky and uncertain. Still, Mr. Lucas believes in Millie and wants better for her, so he manages to scrounge up enough resources to get her to Kingston, where she apprentices for an elderly seamstress, Willemina.

Mrs. Lucas – In "Hope," Mrs. Lucas is Millie's mother. She raises Millie and Millie's siblings. After Millie gives birth to her son, Eddison William, Millie's father offers to take the baby back to Cidar Valley and have Mrs. Lucas raise it, but Willemina contends that if Millie is old enough to become pregnant, she should be old enough to raise the resultant baby.

Eddison William – In "Hope," Eddison William is Millie and Winston's baby. Millie loves her baby immediately and doesn't seem to consider how he will hamper her ability to make a better life for herself. Winston's reaction to the realization that he and Millie have a child together at the end of the story is ambiguous. Though he's just told Millie he wants to marry her and move to England, it's not clear if he still wants to do this after finding out about the baby.

Lucinda – In "Foreign Soil," Lucinda is a domestic servant who has worked for Mukasa's family for years. At first, she and Ange don't interact much, as whenever Mukasa is there, he speaks to Lucinda in Luganda, which Ange can't understand. But when Mukasa is at work one day, Ange connects with Lucinda, and the women chat and drink together. Lucinda admits that she's surprised Ange accompanied Mukasa to Uganda and that she chooses to stay in a place where she's so unhappy, given Ange's status as a white woman of means. Lucinda also seems to hint to Ange that Mukasa has controlling or abusive tendencies, but Ange ignores or fails to understand Lucinda's meaning. When Mukasa comes home that evening, catching the women off guard, he scolds Lucinda for not working and Ange for interacting with a servant. He then fires Lucinda, something he relishes telling Ange.

Ange's Mum – In "Foreign Soil," Ange's mum disapproves of Ange being in a relationship with Mukasa, who is Black. She and Ange's dad don't hide their feelings on the matter, which creates tension in Ange and Mukasa's relationship. Though Ange resents her parents' treatment of Mukasa, she insists they're not racist, which perhaps demonstrates how Ange's privilege blinds her to the inequality and discrimination Mukasa experiences as a Ugandan man living in Australia.

Ange's Dad – In "Foreign Soil," Ange's dad disapproves of Ange being in a relationship with Mukasa, who is Black. he and Ange's mother don't hide their feelings on the matter, which creates tension in Ange and Mukasa's relationship. Still, Ange insists they're not racist. Her attitude shows how being in Australia, where she feels like an insider, blinds Ange to the inequality and discrimination Mukasa experiences as an outsider on "foreign soil."

Mr. James – In "Shu Yi," Mr. James is the principal of Ava's elementary school. The students nickname him "Jailhouse James" because he's so strict. Yet, when Ava's mum goes to Mr. James to tell him about students' racist bullying of Shu Yi, Mr. James exhibits none of his usual strictness. He resents Ava's mum's accusation and claims that Shu Yi—and immigrants in general—need to toughen up and not expect everyone to make them feel comfortable. Ava's mum sees Mr. James's stubborn refusal to help Shu Yi as evidence of Mr. James's own racism.

Mr. Wilkinson – In "Shu Yi," Mr. Wilkinson is Ava and Shu Yi's teacher. He wears band T-shirts instead of dress clothes and has long hair. He has considerably more progressive views than many of the people he lives among, and people in Ava's suburb consider him something of a hippie. When Ava's mum tells Mr. Wilkinson about the other students bullying Shu Yi, Mr. Wilkinson's response is the opposite of Mr. James's: he's horrified to hear about what's been going on and stresses to Ava the importance of being an alley to Shu Yi and helping her to feel like less of an outsider at her new school.

The Kept Woman – In "Railton Road," De Frankie tasks Solomon with helping him apprehend a Black woman that De Frankie's people have been monitoring for the past year—they know she's seeing a white man, something De Frankie feels undermines efforts to liberate Black people (though he himself is biracial). As the woman is walking past the train station, Solomon helps De Frankie capture the woman and move her to alley, where De Frankie locks the woman in an iron collar. After De Frankie leaves, the woman calls De Frankie "insane." Solomon wishes he had the keys to unlock the woman's collar but hates himself for thinking this way, since it suggests that he's weak and not as invested in radical revolution as he thought.

Ella – In "Gaps in the Hickory," Ella is Delores's neighbor in New Orleans. She's a young Black girl whose family isn't all that well off. Delores sends her home with food when it seems the family doesn't have enough to eat, but she tries to act nonchalant about it so that Ella isn't embarrassed. Ella acts out sometimes and can be snarky with Delores, but they care about each other and make a good, if rather unusual pair. They often have "beauty days," where they paint their nails and do their hair. Though Delores doesn't realize it for much of the story, Ella knows that Delores is transgender, but she accepts her completely and assures her that everyone else in their building does too. Ella also knows about Carter's situation in Mississippi (Carter is transgender, and his father Jackson is bigoted and potentially violent) and pleads with Delores to rescue Carter and bring him back to Mississippi. When Carter's mother, Jeanie, drops off Carter at Delores's building at the end of the story, Ella eagerly welcomes him home.

Jeanie – In "Gaps in the Hickory," Jeanie is Jackson's wife, Izzy's daughter-in-law, and Carter and Lucy's mother. She loves her son Carter and knows about Carter's transgender identity. She doesn't openly reject Carter's identity but fears for his safety, given Jackson's increasingly bigoted views and unhinged behavior. She knows it's only a matter of time before Jackson discovers the truth about Carter, and she worries that he'll hurt Carter when he does. In the end, Jeanie makes the difficult decision to take Carter to live with Delores in New Orleans, where Izzy told Jeanie Carter would be safe.

Jackson – In "Gaps in the Hickory," Jackson is Izzy and Delores's son, Jeanie's husband, and Carter and Lucy's father. When he was young, his father Denver left the family. Jackson was told that Denver ran off with another woman. In reality, Denver was a transgender woman who now lives in New Orleans and goes by Delores. When Izzy found out about her spouse's gender identity, she kept it a secret and convinced Delores to go to New Orleans, where she would be safer and more accepted. Some years before the story's present, Jackson went to New Orleans to see his father and accidentally found out about that his father was a transgender woman. Unable to cope with his shock and unable to accept his father as Delores, Jackson became bitter, violent, and bigoted. In the story's present, he belongs to the local KKK group and tries to involve Carter in it too. His family is afraid of him and his increasingly unhinged behavior. Before Izzy died, she warned Jeanie that Jackson would never accept his son Carter's transgender identity and would likely hurt Carter when he finds out, and it's for this reason that Izzy pleads with Jeanie to take Carter to live with Delores in New Orleans before it's too late.

Lucy – In "Gaps in the Hickory," Lucy is Izzy and Delores's grandchild, Jackson and Jeanie's child, and Carter's younger sister. Carter likes to try on Lucy's clothing, a behavior that alerts Izzy to Carter's transgender identity early on. Lucy is young and has yet to internalize the bigotry common among people in her small Mississippi town, so she just loves her brother and says he looks pretty in his clothing.

Clarise – In "Big Islan," Clarise is Nathanial's wife. They live in Kingston, Jamaica, but Clarise wants more out of life. She's been teaching Nathanial the alphabet with the hope that he'll get a promotion or a higher-paying job if he's literate. She prefers "uncalloused" men, that is, men who work in offices rather than with their hands, like Nathanial does. Like many people on the island, Clarise dreams of moving to England, where there are supposedly more opportunities. At first, Nathanial can't understand why Clarise wants more when their life is perfectly fine and they're surrounded by so much natural beauty on the island. But as Nathanial learns to read, it opens him up to new ideas. Gradually, Clarise's dissatisfaction with their life starts to make more sense to him—it makes their life in Jamaica seem impossibly small and stifling.

Dinesh – In "The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa," Dinesh was Asanka's friend in Sri Lanka. They were both forced to serve as child soldiers with the Tamil Tigers. As punishment for running away, the Tigers locked Dinesh and Asanka in a potato chest and nailed it shut. It's not totally clear what happened to Dinesh, as Asanka is too traumatized to think about his friend directly, but it seems that Dinesh died in the chest, and Asanka left his body behind—an act that continues to haunt Asanka.

The Stilt Fishermen – In "The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa," the story's main character, Asanka, sees a group of stilt fishermen when he and the other asylum seekers are fleeing war-torn Sri Lanka on a fishing boat. The practice of stilt fishing in Sri Lanka began during World War II, when the presence of British troops led to overfishing, forcing Sri Lankan fishermen out of their fishing spots. In response, fishermen built stilts on coral reefs. Asanka didn't think any stilt fishermen existed anymore, so he initially wonders if he's hallucinating them (he is, though he never quite grasps this). Throughout the story, the fishermen seem to give Asanka advice, such as when they point him in the direction of a boat and land.

Sam – In "The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa," Sam is Loretta's husband. Their marriage is in poor shape, though. Loretta wants children and Sam doesn't. He urged her to quit her job as a social worker with the Villawood Immigration Detention Center—a job she was passionate about—arguing that its hours and pay weren't conducive to having children (insinuating that children would be in their future as a couple). Then, he never mentioned having children again. In addition, Sam doesn't understand why Loretta's work at the center is so important to her—why the immigrants she works with affect her on such a personal level.

Chaminda – In "The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa," Chaminda is a Sri Lankan man who befriends Asanka when they're both passengers on a fishing boat full of people seeking asylum. During the journey, and after, when they're detained and sent to the Villawood Immigration Detention Center, Chaminda acts as Asanka's protector. Loretta, who was previously a lawyer at the center, arranged for Chaminda's release, but his case fell through the cracks, stalling his release. In response, Chaminda seemingly poisoned himself and died, leaving Asanka to navigate things alone. It's Chaminda who told Loretta to visit Asanka and try to help him, but by the time Loretta sees Asanka, she's only a volunteer and so can't do anything to really help Asanka.

Viv – In "The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa," Viv is Loretta's former colleague at the center. It's Viv who calls Loretta to tell her that Chaminda died. The story also hints that Viv played an indirect (and unintentional) role in Chaminda's implied suicide: a note that Loretta left on Viv's computer got misplaced and forgotten, delaying Chaminda's release from the detention center indefinitely, which then motivated him to poison himself.

Michael – In "Aviation," Michael is Mirabel's late husband; he died in the September 11 terrorist attacks, and Mirabel is still working through her grief in the aftermath of his death. Before he died, Michael and Mirabel were trying to have a baby, though they'd already suffered several miscarriages. Mirabel's interest in providing foster care stems in part from her desire to honor Michael's memory.

Sunni's Maa – In "Aviation," Sunni's maa is taken into custody after supposedly threatening a woman at the store who she accused of staring at her. Following the September 11 terrorist attacks, Sunni and his mother, who are Sikh, face rampant racial discrimination, and Sunni's maa's attack on the woman was her breaking point. With Sunni's maa in custody, Sunni is placed with child protective services and is in the process of being placed in emergency foster care. It's these circumstances that lead to the story's present, with Antonio, a caseworker, and Sunni meeting with Mirabel to see if she'll provide Sunni with emergency care.

Bill and Susie – In "Aviation," Bill and Susie are an elderly couple who live next door to Sunni and Sunni's maa. They used to watch Sunni while his mom was at work, but after the September 11 terrorist attacks, they make excuses to cut off contact; in reality, prejudice against Middle Eastern people motivates their actions. They're just one example of the rampant discrimination and unfair judgment Sunni and his mother receive following the terrorist attacks.

Maryam – In "The Sukiyaki Book Club," Maryam is the unnamed writer's young daughter. She lives with her mother and brother, Markie, in a cramped apartment next to the train station. She's been having nightmares about "a fire-breathing dragon" that appears outside her window every morning, but it's really just a Metro train. This contributes to the unnamed writer's guilt over the ways her family's unideal living conditions are harming her children. At the end of the story, the unnamed writer looks on from down the hallway as her children sing and dance along to Duke Ellington's "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)," and she feels happy to see "their small brown bodies" looking so carefree as they "go unashamedly ragtime."

Markie – In "The Sukiyaki Book Club," Markie is the unnamed writer's young son. He lives with his mother and younger sister, Maryam, in a cramped apartment next to the train station. Recently, a teacher at school has suggested that Markie needs to have his hearing tested. This contributes to the unnamed writer's guilt over the ways her unideal living conditions are harming her children.

Mustache – In "The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa," Mustache is the name Asanka gives one of two boatmen in charge of a group of asylum seekers fleeing Sri Lanka aboard a fishing boat. He and his fellow boatman, Ponytail, are cruel and violent, but

Asanka luckily befriends Chaminda, another asylum seeker, who acts as his protector.

Ponytail – In "The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa," Ponytail is the name Asanka gives one of two boatmen in charge of a group of asylum seekers fleeing Sri Lanka aboard a fishing boat. He and his fellow boatman, Mustache, are cruel and violent. But Asanka luckily befriends Chaminda, another asylum seeker, who acts as his protector.

Liv – In "Railton Road," Liv is a young Black woman staying at Railton Road, a squat house the Black Panthers have taken over. When De Frankie visits Railton Road to interview Solomon to be the Minister of Culture for the London Panthers, De Frankie ogles Liv, angering Solomon. Solomon's angry reaction to De Frankie's objectification of Liv foreshadows his ultimate alienation from De Frankie and the London Panthers.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Ahmed – In "David," Ahmed is the young Sudanese woman's former partner and the father of their child, Nile. She doesn't think much of him now but is grateful that he at least taught her a lot about **bicycles**.

The Goods Driver – In "Hope," the goods driver delivers sewing supplies to Willemina's sewing shop when they arrive at the port. He visits the sewing shop and attempts to sexually assault Millie, but Willemina interferes just in time, attacking and disarming him.

Melinda Meyer – In "Shu Yi," Melinda Meyer is one of Ava and Shu Yi's classmates. She's apparently adopted her family's racist views of immigrants and, along with her other classmates, bullies Shu Yi. When

Avery's Dad – In "The Sukiyaki Book Club," Avery's dad is struggling to support his young daughter Avery in the aftermath of Avery's mother's sudden death in a car accident. According to a neighbor, he can't bring himself to look at Avery because she so resembles her mother.

Avery's Mum – In "The Sukiyaki Book Club," Avery's mum has recently died in a car crash; Avery was a passenger in the car but survived. In the aftermath of her death, Avery's father struggles to support Avery while coping with his own grief.

The Goods Driver – In "Hope," The goods driver delivers sewing supplies to Willemina's sewing shop when they arrive at the port. He visits the sewing shop and attempts to sexually assault Millie, but Willemina interferes just in time, attacking and disarming him.

Dean – In "Foreign Soil," Dean is Ange's coworker at the salon she worked at in Australia before following Mukasa to Uganda.

Penelope – In "Foreign Soil," Penelope is Ange's boss at the salon she worked at in Australia before following Mukasa to Uganda.

Big Ted – In "Aviation," Big Ted is Mirabel and Michael's dog. He lives with Mirabel and still seems to miss Michael.

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.

PLACE

At its core, *Foreign Soil* is a book about place; as such, its stories examine how where a person is from influences their identity, the trajectory of their life, and their views of the world. For many characters, living in a place where they're considered an outsider has a major impact on their identity. In "Shu Yi," a young Black girl named Ava tries to hide the parts of herself that highlight her Blackness, like her natural **hair**. Growing up in a predominately white Australian suburb, Ava's Blackness made her the target of ridicule for her racist peers, and she learns to hate and suppress this part of her identity in order to fit in. "Aviation" tells the story of a young Sikh boy named Sunni living in the U.S. who experiences bigotry following the September 11 terrorist attacks. In "Hope," a young girl named Millie moves from her rural village in Saint Thomas to the bustling city of Kingston, Jamaica to apprentice with a seamstress in order to make a better life for herself. Though Millie is grateful for the opportunity to improve her circumstances, she feels homesick for her family and village, and she frequently daydreams about the **banana** crops her father grows back home. In "David," a second-generation Sudanese immigrant living in Melbourne struggles to navigate life in the Western world while facing criticism from her elders for not respecting the culture and customs of the homeland they left behind. Though its characters come from different countries and economic backgrounds. *Foreign Soil* thus shows the multitude of ways that place impacts a person's sense of self, the opportunities available to them, and the broader way in which they navigate the world.

THE LIMITATIONS OF HOPE

Many of *Foreign Soil*'s stories feature displaced characters coming to grips with past and present traumas. The opening story, "David," tells the story of a Sudanese woman (Asha) who watched soldiers shoot down her young son during a period of civil conflict. "The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa" tells the story of Asanka, a young Sri Lankan boy forced to join the Liberation Tigers, a paramilitary group that made him commit unspeakable acts of violence.

Asanka suffers doubly when Australian government officials intercept his boat as he tries to flee the Tigers and holds him in an immigration center indefinitely. But Asanka doesn't get a happy ending: he's repeatedly let down by systems meant to help him, and he continues to suffer from hallucinations and unresolved trauma from his time as a child soldier. *Foreign Soil* underscores the lasting impact of trauma while also celebrating the strength and vigor of people who have maintained a hope for the future in the face of unspeakable trauma and hardship. It examines immigrant characters' ability to push forward in the face of hardship, as well as the endless hurdles that marginalized people, and in particular immigrants and refugees, endure to do so. *Foreign Soil* thus presents an account of the immigrant story, conveying not only the hope and optimism that propels people into the scary unknown, but also the immense suffering and struggle involved in that quest for a better life. The collection doesn't suggest that having a positive attitude will fix larger scale issues like institutionalized racism, class disparity, and other roadblocks that make it hard for immigrants to succeed in their new homes. Instead, it underscores the foundation of hope that lies at the base of all immigrant stories while also examining its limitations. While hope can compel characters to abandon everything they've known for the chance to improve their life, the collection suggests that it's not enough to mitigate the hardship immigrants, minorities, and other people living at the margins of society endure due to underlying, issues like systemic racism, unjust immigration policies, and prejudice.

COMMUNICATION AND MISUNDERSTANDING

Though the characters of *Foreign Soil* come from different countries, class backgrounds, and time periods, they all experience conflicts that arise from a failure to communicate effectively with others—and the misunderstandings that result from these lapses in communication. People misunderstand people for many reasons. Sometimes, it's a language barrier: a character literally can't understand what the other person is trying to tell them. Other times, characters choose to make assumptions about others instead of communicating with them and trying to understand where they're coming from. In the collection's opening story, "David," a young Sudanese woman thinks an older Sudanese woman (Asha) is judging her for riding a **bicycle** and for putting her young son in daycare, insinuating that being born in Melbourne (as opposed to Sudan) has degraded the younger woman's morals and sense of responsibility. In reality, the older woman is more interested in the younger woman's bike: in flashbacks to the woman's past in war-torn Sudan, the story reveals that the woman's son David, who used to love riding his bike, was shot down while trying to flee his village during the Sudanese civil war. In making assumptions about the older woman, the younger one fails to understand the grief and unresolved trauma that is actually motivating the older woman to ask so many questions about the younger woman's bike and child. But when the younger woman takes a step back and lets the older woman ride her bike, they experience a moment of unspoken understanding that allows them both to alleviate some of their hardship, if only for that moment. *Foreign Soil* thus frames misunderstanding as a "universal" conflict that is part of the fundamental human experience. The collection suggests that no matter where a person is from or what kind of cultural background they grew up with, everyone has a history and inner life that others might not necessarily know about. And this, in turn, means that rather than making snap judgments and perpetuating stereotypes, people should practice empathy and understanding to engage in effective communication.

SOLIDARITY VS. PREJUDICE

Many of the characters in *Foreign Soil*'s stories experience prejudice or ridicule, whether due to their race, class, gender, age, or immigration status. But the collection shows that all characters, even those who have themselves experienced prejudice, can hold—and act on—prejudices against others. In "Shu Yi," a young Black girl named Ava refuses to stick up for Shu Yi, a Chinese student new to their majority-white, suburban Australian elementary school. Prior to Shu Yi's arrival, Ava was often the target of her white classmates' ridicule. Though Ava's mother insists that Ava do the right thing and stick up for Shu Yi—especially since Ava can empathize with what Shu Yi is going through—Ava wants to maintain the relative peace she's enjoyed since her classmates have stopped bullying her to bully Shu Yi. So, Ava refuses to look out for Shu Yi, reasoning that "Shu Yi [isn't] a problem [she] want[s] to take on." When Shu Yi tries to sit next to Ava during recess, Ava responds with malice, refusing to let Shu Yi sit with her and calling her a racial slur—much to the approval of her racist classmates. Ava, in other words, uses her relative privilege to hurt rather than empower someone less privileged than herself, thus perpetuating the very bigotry that used to hurt her.

"Aviation" is about a young woman named Mirabel whose husband died in the September 11 terrorist attacks. The trauma and grief Mirabel experiences in the aftermath of her husband's recent death causes her to form prejudiced views of Muslim people (and anyone who "looks" Muslim—i.e., people of Middle Eastern origin). So, when Mirabel is asked to provide emergency foster care to a young Sikh boy named Sunni, she struggles to move beyond her prejudiced view of Middle Eastern people to provide care for a blameless, innocent child. In other words, Mirabel's own trauma and hurt propels her to hurt rather than help someone who has himself experienced trauma and hurt. In these stories and in others, *Foreign Soil* shows how prejudice perpetuates prejudice. Determined to maintain (or increase) the relative privilege they've achieved within an unjust society or community, characters opt to look out for themselves rather than those with less privilege; in other words, they side with—and therefore strengthen—the very systems that once oppressed them. And while seeking solidarity with other marginalized people is, as some characters suggest, the morally correct thing to do, *Foreign Soil* nevertheless shows how easy it is to instead choose to look out for oneself.

SYMBOLS

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

THE RED BICYCLE

The red bicycle that the young Sudanese woman buys at the beginning of *Foreign Soil*'s opening story, "David," represents the misunderstanding and conflict that can develop when people make assumptions about others instead of treating them with empathy and compassion. After the young woman buys a bright red bicycle that she plans to ride alongside her young son, Nile, she runs into an older Sudanese woman, Asha, who immediately begins to ask her intrusive and judgmental questions—or so the young woman thinks. The young woman is a second-generation immigrant, and she's used to her elders (and Nile's grandmother, Ahmed's mum, in particular) criticizing her for her parenting decisions, for not respecting Sudanese culture enough, and for taking for granted everything they sacrificed to give her and other young people of her generation an easier, more privileged life in Australia. So, without really knowing why Asha is so interested in the bicycle, the young woman assumes that Asha is trying to criticize her like her elders do, and she responds brusquely and defensively. However, unbeknownst to the young woman, Asha is really interested in the bike because it reminds her of her late son, David. David had a bicycle made of scrap metal that he loved and rode everywhere; through flashbacks, the reader learns that Asha witnessed enemy fighters shoot and kill David as he rode his bike away from Asha's burning village.

Eventually, though she still doesn't understand why Asha is so curious, the young woman relents and lets Asha ride the bike after she asks to try it. Afterward, Asha tells the young woman about David and his bike, though she leaves out the part about his death. Though the young woman doesn't fully grasp the full extent of Asha's trauma or the bike's significance to her, allowing her to ride the bike and listening to what few details Asha feels comfortable sharing about David leads to a moment of connection and healing between the two women. Indeed, at the end of the story, it's revealed that the young woman named her bike David, after Asha's son. Thus, though linguistic and cultural barriers prevent the women from fully understanding each other, their mutual effort of putting differences aside and treating the other with compassion lessens the distance between them and allows them both to heal and grow.

HAIR

Hair mostly appears in the story "Foreign Soil," where it symbolizes how place affects the power dynamic in Ange and Mukasa's relationship. Hairdresser Ange, a white Australian woman, meets her future boyfriend, Mukasa, when he walks into her salon for a haircut. Mukasa is a Black man from Uganda, and he admits to Ange that day that her salon is the first place where he's managed to find anyone who will agree to cut his hair—everywhere else hasn't doesn't have the skill or experience to cut Black hair. Mukasa's hair thus symbolizes how, from very beginning of the relationship, Mukasa and Ange do not interact on a level playing field. In Australia, society accepts Ange and sees Mukasa as an outsider. Though Ange doesn't consider herself prejudiced in the way her parents (Ange's mum and Ange's dad) are, she is complicit in that she benefits from living in a place where being white and native-born gives her certain privileges—privileges that Mukasa, as a Black outsider—does not have. Ange is generally happy in her relationship when she and Mukasa are living in Australia together, but this changes when she follows him to Uganda.

In Uganda, the tables are turned: suddenly, Mukasa has the privileges that come with being Black and native-born, and Ange is the outsider on "foreign soil," and therefore totally reliant on Mukasa to navigate the social landscape of a strange, unfamiliar place. Before she left Australia, her coworkers at the salon gave her a special farewell haircut, but due to humidity, it quickly deflates into an unfashionable, sorry mess. Ange's flattened haircut symbolizes how the power dynamic in her relationship has reversed; indeed, the longer Ange spends in Uganda, the stranger Mukasa becomes to her (he begins to belittle and abuse her), and the unhappier she becomes in her relationship. Though at first Ange thinks that it's Mukasa who has changed, she finally understands that they've never been on equal footing in their relationship, since they've only ever lived in a place where one of them is an insider and one is an outsider—where society accepts and empowers one of them while ostracizing and disempowering the other.

BANANAS

Bananas appear in *Foreign Soil*'s third story, "Hope," and symbolize the limits of hope. After Willemina offers Millie Lucas an apprenticeship at her sewing shop in Kingston, Millie's father, Mr. Lucas, plants extra bananas so that he can afford to send Millie from their rural village in Cidar

Valley, St. Thomas, to Kingston, Jamaica. Like most everyone else in their village, the Lucas family doesn't have a lot of money, and Mr. Lucas has always wanted Millie to have the opportunity to make a better life for herself, so he does everything he can to ensure that he can make his hopes become reality. At first, the bananas grow fat and ripe, and it seems that Mr. Lucas's hopes for Millie's future haven't been in vain. But a bad wet season results in a fungus infecting and killing the banana crops, and though Mr. Lucas eventually finds another way to secure the funds for Millie's journey, the failed banana crops show just how tenuous Millie's future is. Though Mr. Lucas might work hard and hope that he can give his daughter a better future, the poverty and unforgiving natural elements of his family's village in the Cidar Valley create a great distance between hope and reality, severely limiting Millie's access to opportunity. Though Millie and her father can dream of a better, brighter future, the bananas suggest that whatever future that awaits them is more often a consequence of chance than of hard work and personal ambition.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the 37 Ink edition of *Foreign Soil* published in 2017.

David Quotes

These children, born in this country, do you think they feed their babies the aseeda for breakfast? Do they drop it on the little one's tongue to show them where is it they come from? Do you think they have learned to cook shorba soup? I tell you: no! They feeding them all kinds of rubbish. McDonald's, even. They spit on their grandmothers' ways. They spit in our bowls, in our kitchens.

Related Characters: Ahmed's Mum (speaker), The Young Sudanese Woman, Ahmed, Nile

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

As a young Sudanese woman walks down the streets of Melbourne to pick up her young son, Nile, from daycare, she hears the voice of Ahmed's mum (the mother of her ex-partner and Nile's father, Ahmed) in her head, criticizing her for the various ways she's supposedly underperforming as a mother and as a Sudanese woman. On the surface, Ahmed's mum criticizes the younger woman for feeding Nile "rubbish." When she accuses the young woman of feeding her child McDonalds specifically, she is criticizing the young woman for abandoning the traditional foods of her ancestors (here, *aseeda*, a wheat-based dough) in favor of the westernized foods commonly eaten in Australia. Ahmed's mum suggests that feeding the younger generations traditional foods is the primary way parents can "*show them where [...] they come from.*" Put differently, it's a way to uphold one's cultural traditions, even while living on "foreign soil," a situation that so many of the book's characters find themselves in.

In feeding her child McDonalds instead of Sudanese foods, Ahmed's mum suggests, the young woman is actively ensuring that her child abandons the traditions that her ancestors held dear. Symbolically, it's a slap in the face to the older generations who emigrated from a violent, war-torn country, who gave up so much so that the younger generations could have a chance at a better life.

Finally, this quote also illustrates the theme of miscommunication—in this case, a miscommunication across generations. While the younger woman seems to interpret Ahmed's mum's words as an attack on the young woman's parenting in particular, it's really more than this: it's about the grief that comes with loss of culture as physical distance and time put each new generation of immigrations further and further away from the traditions of their ancestors.

I felt awkward, had no idea what she was talking about, but felt like I was somehow supposed to. Auntie took up her grocery bag from the ground, smoothed some dirt from her skirt, walked away slowly, down toward West Footscray Station.

I stood there for a minute, staring after her. The rain had stopped. A small puddle of water had settled in the baby seat. Nile would be getting testy. It was half an hour past when I usually collected him. I threw my leg over the bike, started pedaling down the street. The Barkly Star was a dream to maneuver—smooth gliding, killer suspension, sharp brakes. Felt like I was hovering above the wet tar, flying. Like there was nothing else in the world except me and my wheels. David. I slowly rolled her brand-new name around in my mouth.

Related Characters: The Young Sudanese Woman (speaker), Asha (The Older Sudanese Woman), Nile , David

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

The young Sudanese woman has just parted ways with Asha, an older Sudanese immigrant, after letting Asha ride her new bike; before parting ways, Asha explained to the young woman, in vague terms, that riding the bike made her feel closer to her son, David, who was always riding his bike around their village in Sudan. Though Asha doesn't disclose David's tragic death to the young woman (enemy soldiers in Sudan shot down David as he was riding his bike back to Asha), the young woman can sense that there was something more to what Asha told her—that riding the bike and remembering David were important in ways the young woman couldn't begin to understand.

Still, even though Asha and the young woman don't explicitly convey their true thoughts to each other—generational, linguistic, and cultural barriers prevent this from happening—their willingness to treat each other with compassion and give weight and meaning to each other's respective histories and present hardships allows them to share in a moment of empathy and understanding. The young woman's decision to rename her new bike David, in honor of Asha's son, reflects the extent to which the woman's interaction with Asha affected her, even if the young woman will never fully understand Asha's story. In short, this passage (and the entire story) demonstrates how even when there are barriers in place that make communication between people difficult, it's still possible to relate to others if one approaches every human interaction with empathy, patience, and compassion.

Harlem Jones Quotes

Harlem can't look at her. She makes him too fuckin' irate. She always dumps on his dad whenever Harlem does anything wrong. Ten years since the man pissed off, and she still can't stop slagging on him. Harlem flexes his trembling fingers. He wants to fuckin' strangle her, his own mother, who gave birth to him. *Really* strangle the woman. He wants to wrap his fingers firmly around that fat neck and squeeze until her face goes purple.

Related Characters: Harlem Jones, Harlem's Mum

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

After the police show up at Harlem's house to confront him about his altercation with the job office worker earlier that day, Harlem's mum scolds Harlem for throwing his life away, comparing him to his absent father who ran away a decade ago. The comparison infuriates Harlem—he thinks it's unfair of her to project her frustrations over Harlem's father onto Harlem any time he messes up. At the same time, though, Harlem's strong reaction to his mother's criticisms also comes from a place of misplaced rage: Harlem feels so upset he could "strangle her, his own mother, who gave birth to him." But though Harlem can't register it consciously, it's not really his mother he's so upset at; rather, his rage is a response to a culmination of broader issues. He's frustrated, for instance, that people of Harlem's mum's generation put so much pressure on Harlem's generation to behave a certain way—to take whatever punches the dominant, white culture throws their way and stay out of trouble, even if that means subjecting themselves to daily acts of prejudice and injustice.

In this way, Harlem and his mother misdirect anger at each other that the story suggests they ought to direct toward the parties who are really to blame. In so doing, they prevent themselves from acting in solidarity with each other and being a support to each other. More broadly, then, the story shows how different approaches to dealing with discrimination and systemic racism between generations shuts down communication and prevents mutually oppressed people from banding together to overcome a common foe.

Harlem flicks the lighter on with his thumb, holds the flame up in front of his face. "My name," he says, "is not *son*. My name, my fuckin' *name*, is Harlem fuckin' Jones." Holding the neck of the Molotov, he touches the flame to it and quickly pulls back his arm.

Related Characters: Harlem Jones (speaker), Toby

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

These are the closing lines of "Harlem Jones." Harlem and his friend Toby are at a protest over the officer-involved death of Mark Duggan, a Black man. They've brought Molotov cocktails (a type of crude bomb), and Harlem ignites one now, his anger fueled by a police officer's decision to refer to Harlem, patronizingly, as "son." When Harlem tells the officer that "[his] fuckin' *name*, is Harlem fuckin' Jones," he reclaims the identity and agency the officer—and systemic racism in a broader sense—symbolically took from him when the officer called him "son." In rejecting the designation "son," Harlem is telling the officer that he's not just another nameless Black man or boy the officer can transform into the latest officer-involved casualty. Along these lines, Harlem also reclaims his identity and agency from protestors who have been chanting, "we are all Mark Duggan" (meaning that in a society whose police force is corrupt and discriminatory, any young Black man could be the next Mark Duggan).

In ending "Harlem Jones" with Harlem speaking aloud his name as he readies to perform the violent act of igniting a Molotov cocktail, the story equates the power of having a voice—a stable, dependable identity—with physical force, thus suggesting the power of being heard, humanized, and understood. So many characters throughout the book don't have a voice, whether it be due to linguistic barriers or lack of economic opportunities, and this only exacerbates their inability to shape the trajectory of their life and improve their circumstances. This closing scene of "Harlem Jones" thus reaffirms the relationship between having a voice, being understood, and having power.

Hope Quotes

> Mr. Lucas, crooning to his daughter's future-crop with a deep, velvety calypso as he tended the plot after the rains, noticed the disease when, starting at the outer edges, the jade-green leaves started to yellow. Within two weeks the tiny Panama freckles expanded to dark pockmarks, and the man knew his daughter's dreams were in trouble.

Related Characters: Millie Lucas, Willemina, Mr. Lucas

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 35-36

Explanation and Analysis

After a seamstress who owns a sewing shop, Willemina, offers to take on Millie as an apprentice, Mr. Lucas eagerly tends to the extra banana crops he planted to cover the expense of getting Millie to Kingston, a move he believes is vital to her having a successful future. While the crops get off to a promising start, an extreme wet season immediately causes them to grow sick and die. Thus, though Mr. Lucas tried to plan for Millie's future and do everything in his power to ensure that she has every opportunity to succeed, he, his family, and other people living in their rural, impoverished community are often subject to elements beyond their ability to control. The banana crop thus becomes an important symbol in the story of how tenuous and unstable Millie's future is, and how greatly where a person is from—be it the geographic location, their economic situation, or the sociopolitical conditions in which they were brought up—affects the type of opportunities to which they have access. Mr. Lucas wants his daughter to have more than she grew up having, and yet there's only so much he can do to ensure that this happens.

> Millie had heard stories about the root of Aunt Willemina's wealth. About the wealthy Haitian man with a wife and children who had set her up on the strip with her own sewing shop in her own name when she had been feisty and beautiful. She took the older woman's speech for half a lifetime of regret.

Related Characters: Millie Lucas, Willemina, Winston Gray

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Millie and Willemina are fighting after rumors get back to Willemina that Millie has been seeing a young cane cutter, Winston, romantically. After Willemina scolds Millie for her romance, Millie reflects on the real reason that Willemina is yelling at her. One of the book's central themes is how lapses in communication can lead to misunderstanding. In this case specifically, that misunderstanding arises from someone from an older generation (Willemina) projecting her own failures onto Millie and what she thinks Millie's future will look like. Here, Millie meditates on rumors she's heard about Willemina's past—how she came to own her sewing shop after her lover, a married, wealthy Haitian man, bought it for her (in order to keep Willemina away from his family and maintain control of his own life).

Willemina's situation is one in which she dove headfirst after love. And though her love affair indirectly gave her financial freedom in the form of a sewing shop, ultimately it also robbed her of agency to control her own destiny. Millie here suggests that Willemina's efforts to scold Millie for her choices (Millie is now pregnant with Winston's child) aren't really about Millie at all—they're about the "half a lifetime of regret" that Willemina has suffered and thinks Millie will repeat herself. But in fact, while Willemina's instinct to protect Millie is admirable, it effectively robs Millie of the very agency that Willemina seems to want to preserve. Just as the wealthy Haitian lover dictated the course of young Willemina's life, so too is Willemina dictating the course of *Millie's* life by assuming that Millie will make the same mistakes that Willemina made and isn't capable of forging her own destiny.

> ❝ As Willemina's health deteriorated, it became clear that the young girl was being groomed to take over the sewing shop. Staffing the shop by day and working on alterations in the early evenings, baby Eddison slung tightly around her chest, Millie never had time to stop and think about whether the shop was the good fortune she had wanted for herself. At least, not until the day Winston turned up again.

Related Characters: Millie Lucas, Willemina, Winston Gray, Eddison William

Related Themes: 📍 🤞

Page Number: 50-51

Explanation and Analysis

Millie has just given birth to her child, Eddison William, and life once more becomes mundane and routine. With Willemina's health rapidly growing worse, it's assumed that Millie will assume full responsibility of the sewing shop. But in this new mundanity, Millie is left to wonder: is this really what she wants for herself? Millie's thoughts here unpack one of the book's central themes: that where a person is from influences what opportunities they have and, in a broader sense, the course of their life. Millie has had the great fortune to perhaps inherit a lucrative business, despite coming from a rural community and growing up poor—yet this great, unlikely stroke of luck doesn't change the basic fact that Millie's background doesn't afford her a whole lot of choice. Because she comes from such humble beginnings and doesn't have a lot of opportunities for advancement, owning the sewing shop is really all that's available to her—it's not as though she can realistically pursue some other means of making a worthwhile, stable life for herself. Instead, she must work with what fate has thrust upon her, even if it's not exactly what she'd like for herself.

Foreign Soil Quotes

> ❝ All her life, Ange had felt she didn't belong to the drudgery around her, to her ordinary world. But here, right in front of her, was a chance at something remarkable.

Related Characters: Ange, Mukasa

Related Themes: 📍 🤞 💬

Page Number: 57-58

Explanation and Analysis

Ange thinks back to the day she met Mukasa, who would become her boyfriend, at the hair salon where she worked. They hit things off right away, and she began to dream of the "chance at something remarkable" that a romance with Mukasa could mean for her. Ange's language is vague here, but it subtly reveals how Ange has never really seen Mukasa for who he really is—she has instead objectified him. In fact, she sees his Ugandan heritage as something that could make her own life exotic and interesting instead of seeing it as a central part of Mukasa's identity and something that affects (most often negatively) how he's treated in Australia as a Black man and immigrant. Ange's status as a white Australian woman, by contrast, affords her privileges that Mukasa doesn't have and prevents her from thinking critically about how Mukasa's heritage and race affect his experiences.

When Ange later follows Mukasa to Uganda, she's completely caught off guard when he suddenly becomes physically and emotionally abusive toward her. She reasons that this isn't the Mukasa she knew back in Australia, completely failing to recognize how her various privileges have blinded her to the realities of Mukasa's character and experiences.

> ❝ She began to wonder if the real Mukasa Kiteki was another country entirely, whether what happened between them had always been carried out with the choreographed care and watchfulness brought on by foreign soil.

Related Characters: Ange, Mukasa

Related Themes: 📍 🤞 💬

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

Ange reflects on the abuse Mukasa has inflicted on her since their arrival in Uganda, Mukasa's home country. This abusive Mukasa, Ange feels, can't possibly be the same gentle Mukasa she knew in Australia. She reasons that, perhaps, "the real Mukasa Kiteki [was] another country entirely," that the Mukasa she knew in Australia wasn't an accurate depiction of who Mukasa really is. Rather, the Mukasa that Ange knew in Australia was the calculated, highly intentional persona Mukasa created in order to get by as a Black, Ugandan man living amongst a predominantly white, Australian population.

The story uses Mukasa's dual personality as a metaphor for the ways that existing on "foreign soil" (a place where one's culture, history, and race put them at odds with the rest of society) has a significant impact on how a person interacts with their surroundings, often causing the "foreigner" to suppress essential parts of themselves in order to gain the broader community's acceptance. Ange, here, is realizing this with new frightening clarity: that Mukasa hasn't changed since returning to Uganda. Rather, he has changed how much of himself (in this case, his abusiveness) he feels comfortable putting out in the open. Here, in his native country, where his racial, cultural, and economic power exceeds Ange's, he's comfortable letting his true personality shine through. In contrast, in Australia, where Ange had more power than he had, he was relegated to the "choreographed care and watchfulness" that the passage suggests comes with being a guest in an unfamiliar land.

Shu Yi Quotes

> ❝ My blackness was the hulking beast crouched in the corner of every room, and absolutely nothing was going to make it seem cool.

Related Characters: Ava (speaker), Shu Yi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

Ava, the young narrator of "Shu Yi," talks about her experience growing up Black in a majority-white Australian suburb. She describes her Blackness as a "hulking beast crouched in the corner of every room," establishing that her racial identity is not something she celebrates. Instead, it's something she considers shameful and threatening, and certainly not "cool." Thus, the passage shows how Ava has internalized the racism directed at her by her white peers, aligning her sense of self with the negative way her peers view her.

The shame Ava attaches to her Blackness foreshadows the story's closing scene, in which Ava rejects Shu Yi, who has come to Ava to defend her in the face of her tormenters, and calls Shu Yi a racial slur. In this brutal closing scene, Ava, as an attempt at self-preservation, sides with her tormenters—just as, up to this point, she has tried to suppress her Blackness to try to fit in. This passage thus establishes the phenomenon of oppressed, persecuted peoples modifying the things about themselves that the dominant culture rejects (in this case, Ava's Blackness) to try to gain the dominant culture's acceptance. It's this coping mechanism that Ava employs when she joins in her classmates' bullying of Shu Yi rather than do the right thing and defend her. When oppressed people don't act in solidarity with people who are more oppressed than them, the collection suggests, their oppressors win.

> ❝ Wondrous as she seemed, Shu Yi wasn't a problem I wanted to take on. Besides, with her arrival my own life had become easier: Melinda and the others hadn't come looking for me in months. At home, my thankful mother had finally taken the plastic undersheet off my bed.

Related Characters: Ava (speaker), Shu Yi, Ava's Mum, Melinda Meyer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

Ava meditates on the possible consequences of following her mother's suggestion and defending Shu Yi against her bullies. Ava's inner thoughts make clear that she feels no animosity toward Shu Yi—in fact, she seems rather taken with the girl's shiny, dark black hair and her quiet shyness. However, she decides now that "Shu Yi [i]sn't a problem [she] want[s] to take on," meaning the costs of defending Shu Yi outweigh the benefits, as far as Ava is concerned. Before Shu Yi's arrival, Ava—the only Black girl in her predominantly white class—was the subject of her peers' ridicule.

But ever since Shu Yi arrived, Ava's peers have shifted their attention to Shu Yi, and so "[Ava's] own life ha[s] become easier." Put differently, Shu Yi has replaced Ava as the lowest minority on the food chain, thereby increasing Ava's relative privilege. Ava knows that defending Shu Yi against her bullies, even if it's the right thing to do, would likely result in them shifting their attention *back* to Ava—and Ava doesn't want to willingly bring more suffering upon herself by defending Shu Yi. Thus, Ava actively chooses not to make Shu Yi her "problem," to act in solidarity with Shu Yi, in order to maintain her current level of relative privilege.

Finally, note the last line of the passage, where Ava notes that her mother has finally removed "the plastic undersheet off [Ava's] bed," which implies that Ava has stopped bedwetting since Shu Yi came to town and Ava's bullies stopped bullying her. This foreshadows the final scene, where Shu Yi wets herself in response to Ava's betrayal. More broadly, it foreshadows the story's ultimate conclusion: that not acting in solidarity with others out of self-preservation doesn't necessarily improve one's own status and serves only to create pain for the more oppressed.

Railton Road Quotes

The other girl had offered him a lift home in the car her father had bought her, the leather seats cold under his furious hands as she batted those long brown eyelashes at him. They'd parked behind the Tech. He'd gone at her gentle, not like the other one, but it soon became clear it was all an experiment. *Egyptian eyes*, she'd called them, *Medusan hair*. Until Solomon had felt dissected, scalpel-carved on the ethnographer's table and no more than the sum of his African-originated parts. He had been a foreign country she was apprehensive about visiting but itching to explore. He'd felt her filing the fuck away to reminisce about when times were dull, postcard snippets of the exotic.

Related Characters: Solomon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

Solomon thinks back to two white women he had sex with while at college in England. "He had been a foreign country she was apprehensive about visiting but itching to explore," Solomon observes, speculating on what one of the women must have thought of him, based on her actions and the things she said while they were intimate with each other. He compares this woman to the first white woman he had sex with. The first woman had expected and wanted Solomon to be rough with her, seemingly buying into a racist stereotype that as a Black man, Solomon would be especially aggressive and sexually wild. This woman similarly fetishizes Solomon when evokes exotic language to describe parts of his body, calling his eyes "*Egyptian*," and his hair, "*Medusan*." Note that this scene utilizes hair as a symbol of racial inequality, specifically in an interracial relationship, which comes up most prevalently in the story "Foreign Soil." In reducing his identity to his foreignness and "the sum of his African-originated parts," the woman exoticizes Solomon, robbing him of his individuality and rendering him an object rather than a person—an ancient, archeological specimen an ethnographer might study.

Solomon hated her, and he hated himself. He wanted that key in his pocket. De Frankie was right about him. Much as the thirst kept rising in him, it lulled and peaked, dipped and climbed. And when Solomon's commitment wavered, Babylon came a-calling.

Related Characters: Solomon, De Frankie, The Kept Woman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

These are the final lines of "Railton Road." Solomon looks down at the Black woman whom De Frankie and his group of Panther followers have targeted for being in a relationship with a white man, something De Frankie regards as an act of race betrayal and a threat to Black liberation. It's only a matter of time before the police arrive, and so De Frankie has just fled, leaving Solomon alone with the woman. As Solomon and the woman stare at each other, Solomon "hate[s] her, and he hate[s] himself." This hatred comes from the sympathy Solomon can't help but feel for the woman—even though, in being in an interracial relationship, she's not adhering to the radical politics that De Frankie and his men believe must be upheld if Black liberation is to happen.

Earlier, when De Frankie interviewed Solomon to be the new Minister of Culture for the London Panthers, he accused Solomon, who was educated at an English university, of not being radical enough—of being too accepting of "Babylon's lies." By this, De Frankie meant the worldviews and values and truths Solomon was taught in college, which come from a white, western colonial perspective and are therefore fundamentally racist. Put differently, De Frankie thinks that Solomon is too accepting of—and comfortable existing within—the status quo to be a real instigator of change.

Here, as Solomon feels shameful sympathy for the woman he's just helped De Frankie to apprehend, he recognizes that De Frankie has been right about him all along: his "thirst" for progress "lull[s] and peak[s], dip[s] and climb[s]," as evidenced by Solomon's inability to separate his sympathy for the woman from his steadfast commitment to the London Panthers' mission. The story ends rather ambiguously and implores the reader to ask themselves what level of commitment or solidarity is necessary to bring about lasting, meaningful social, racial, and political change. Is it more important to stand steadfastly behind an unnuanced radical platform as De Frankie does—in other words, to be in solidarity with a cause or philosophy. Alternatively, is it more important to compromise one's belief in a cause in order to prioritize extending one's solidarity and compassion to others, as Solomon seems tempted to do here as he gazes upon the woman? The story, however, leaves these questions unanswered.

Gaps in the Hickory Quotes

Denver ain't her no more. He jus the man her best friend Izzy married then split from. He jus somebody she used-a know, long time ago. The real her was born when she came to Orleans. Real her is Delores.

Related Characters: Asha (The Older Sudanese Woman), Millie Lucas, Delores, Izzy, Jackson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 136

Explanation and Analysis

Delores recounts her past life, in which she lived in rural Mississippi with her wife, Izzy, and was still—to the outside world—Denver: husband to Izzy, father to Jackson, and the archetypal Southern man. In reality, Delores is transgender. She identifies as a woman and did long before she moved from Mississippi to New Orleans. When she observes, "The real her was born when she came to Orleans," she's getting at the complex relationship between identity and place—how being in a place where one feels accepted and at ease can allow a person to ease into themselves and be a whole, unadulterated version of their true self. On the other hand, being in a place that feels hostile, unwelcoming, and prejudiced can have the opposite effect: it can cause a person to move away from their true self and to suppress aspects of their personality that the people they live among would reject and condemn. Just as people living outside of their native lands—as with Asha, the Sudanese refugee in the story "David," or Millie in "Hope"—can feel out of touch with the cultures and familiar surroundings they've internalized over the course of their lives, so too does it take moving to a more progressive and accepting place like New Orleans to allow Delores to be "born" anew.

When Carter wriggle into the top, his whole body get to singin'. He stand up straight, look in the mirror. His mind unfog itself.

Related Characters: Ange, Mukasa, Carter, Jackson, Lucy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 148

Explanation and Analysis

Carter has just snuck into his younger sister Lucy's room to try on her (conventionally) girlish clothing and look at himself wearing it in the mirror. Carter feels that he is a girl and feels like an imposter in his boy's body. Yet because of the judgmental attitudes many people in his rural Mississippi town hold, especially Jackson, Carter's bigoted father, Carter must suppress his true self. Now, standing before the mirror wearing Lucy's clothing, he can see himself in a clearer light.

Just as being on "foreign soil" distances a person from themselves, so too does living in a place where most people condemn or don't acknowledge a person's true self. Just as Ange realizes she couldn't truly know Mukasa until she experienced what he was like in his home country, Carter acknowledges that he's incapable of feeling like his true, full self in rural Mississippi, where the dominant culture would condemn his gender identity. As he stands before the mirror and looks at himself wearing Lucy's clothing, "He stand up straight" and "His mind unfog itself," and he finally feels himself—like the person he could be, if the place he lived in would only accept him as he is. So, just as things like race and nationality can affect how people see a person and how a person sees themselves, so too do things like gender identity and sexual orientation.

> Delores put a hand on Ella's shoulder, pull her back into the living room. "Quiet, chile. You gon scare him away! That pickney don't know us from Adam." But even as Delores say it, she know it ain't true. Minute that chile an her lay eyes on each other, they gon know they kin. It's gon feel like they finally home.

Related Characters: Delores (speaker), Carter, Ella, Jeanie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

These are the final lines of "Gaps in the Hickory." Jeanie has just made the difficult decision to bring Carter to live with Delores in New Orleans, as Carter's transgender identity puts him in danger in his rural Mississippi hometown; now, Carter has just arrived, and Ella and Delores prepare to meet him. Though Delores is initially anxious about her first meeting with Carter (they've never met before as Delores left Mississippi before Carter was born to live openly as a transgender woman in New Orleans), she realizes that as soon as she and Carter "lay eyes on each other, they gon know they kin. It's gon feel like they finally home." Delores's thoughts here raise a few ideas. In predicting that she and Carter will "know they kin," not only does Delores suggest that she and Carter will recognize that they're biologically related, but she's also suggesting that they're alike in another critical way—that is, they are both people who have experienced hardship, alienation, and a lack of acceptance due to their gender identity.

Beyond this, when Delores says, "It's gon feel like they finally home," she's alluding to the idea that home is more than the physical, geographic place a person is from—it's where they have the support and solidarity of a community and are surrounded by people who share the same histories or values. Though Carter has never been to New Orleans before, Delores's acceptance of him for who he is and the backdrop of a more open-minded place will ensure that New Orleans *feels* like home. By contrast, though Carter has lived his entire life in Mississippi, the absence of a supportive community and the necessity to conceal who he really is make it feel more like "foreign soil," as it were.

Big Islan Quotes

> Same everytin but yet, somehow, it nyah de same anymore at all. It big-big change. Since *J fe Jamaica*, everytin aroun Nathanial seem like it nyah quite de same. Since *J fe Jamaica*, de ocean bin callin', nyah calmin', de young man.

Related Characters: Nathanial Robinson, Clarise

Related Themes:

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

Nathanial Robinson sits at Kingston Port after getting off work one day and stares out at the ocean. Though everything *looks* the same, he finds that "somehow, it nyah de same anymore at all. It big-big change." Ever since "*J fe Jamaica*," a phrase that Nathanial uses as shorthand for his reading and writing lessons with his wife, Clarise, the ocean that was once "calmin'" to Nathanial is now "callin'" him. What exactly Nathanial means by this becomes clearer to the reader—and to Nathanial himself—as the story unfolds. But at this early point in the story, it's only clear that though Nathanial loves his life and home, he's starting to realize that there's a whole world out there he hadn't known existed.

Ever since Clarise began teaching Nathanial to read, he's become more curious and aware of the how small and limiting Jamaica is. He's always looked down on people like Clarise who are obsessed with upward mobility—who would run at the opportunity to leave Jamaica behind for somewhere like England, where there are supposedly more opportunities. But now, that's starting to change—and Nathanial isn't sure what to make of it. These early ruminations of Nathanial's foreshadow his more significant revelation that occurs at the end of the story, when he reads about the West Indies cricket team's trip to Australia and acknowledges to himself that he feels "restless[]" in Jamaica and wants more out of life.

> It a usual Saturday mornin'. Nuttin' odd or outta place. De city below fidgetin' no more an no less dan usual. But dis mornin', somehow, someway, fe some reason, wen Nathanial Robinson gaze ovah de city im grow te love so-so dear, Kingston feel insignificant small. *R. R is fe restlessness.*

Related Characters: Nathanial Robinson, Clarise

Related Themes:

Page Number: 170

Explanation and Analysis

These are the final lines of the "Big Islan." Nathanial wakes up Saturday morning after reading a newspaper article about the West Indies cricket team's trip to Australia—a task that took Nathanial, who is still getting the hang of reading, quite a lot of hard work and determination to complete. As Nathanial looks out the window at the city of Kingston going about its typical Saturday activities, he observes that "De city below fidgetin' no more an no less dan usual." In other words, just as the ocean Nathanial looked out on at the beginning of the story looked the same as it's always looked, the streets of Kingston are similarly unchanged.

But something is different, and Nathanial finally realizes it's nothing about the island that's changed—it's his perspective on the place. Having not lived anywhere other than Kingston, and before that, his rural village, Nathanial had a limited perspective on how big and full of possibility the world was. All he knew of the outside world came from people's hyped-up imaginations about England, and the cargo ships that travel to and from the port he works at. But learning to read and, in particular, reading a newspaper story about the Australian people's acceptance of the West Indies cricket time makes Nathaniel realize that even if the places that lie beyond Jamaica don't offer all the opportunities he hopes they will, his "restlessness" will persist if he stays here and doesn't find out for himself.

The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa Quotes

> The head doctor said there was no blood, that he would never be locked in a chest or a fish hold again. But then the head doctor had walked out of here, left him behind, in the chest.

Related Characters: Asanka, Dinesh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

At the Villawood Immigration Detention Center, Asanka suffers hallucinations of blood and other things related to the traumas he endured and witnessed while serving as a child soldier with the Liberation Tigers in Sri Lanka. Asanka believes the blood is real, even though the "head doctor" at the center who treats Asanka tries to tell him it's all in his head—that Asanka "would never be locked in a chest or a fish hold again." But while the doctor is right in a literal sense—the blood isn't real, and Asanka is technically safe from the horrors he was subjected to in his native Sri Lanka—metaphorically, Asanka remains "locked in a chest," just a different kind of chest. For the reader soon learns that Asanka has been detained at the center for over a year, and there's no indication that anybody is working on getting him released.

The center thus becomes a metaphorical chest from which Asanka can't escape, just like the potato chest the Tigers locked Asanka and his friend Dinesh in before leaving him for dead. This is what Asanka is suggesting when he describes how the doctor "walked out of there, left him behind, in the chest." Though the doctor doesn't (or doesn't want to) see it this way, to Asanka, it's clear that he's escaped one chest back in Sri Lanka only to have Australian officials place him inside another chest—and nobody seems able or willing to help him.

> In this country, you look at a person and you know them. It is the inside-out way the people of this country wear their soul. In their eyes you can find civilizations of honesty or sweeping fields of lies. It's taken some getting used to but now Asanka likes it—this casual unguardedness that comes from never really knowing fear.

Related Characters: Asanka, Loretta

Related Themes:

Page Number: 202-203

Explanation and Analysis

In the Villawood Immigration Detention Center in Sydney, Australia, where Asanka has been detained for over a year, Asanka meets Loretta, a white Australian woman who is a volunteer (and former lawyer) with the center. As he assesses Loretta, he considers the difference between Australian people and Sri Lankan people. All the Australian people he's met so far are easily knowable: they wear their hearts on their sleeves, and so just by looking at them, Asanka "can find civilizations of honesty or sweeping fields of lies." Asanka's observation about Australian people implies that, by contrast, Sri Lankan people are more reserved and guarded: they've learned not to give anything away about what they're really thinking or how they're really feeling.

Asanka attributes this difference to "knowing fear." He suggests that Sri Lankan people are literally guarded: that they conceal their inner thoughts out of self-preservation, having grown up in a violent environment where self-preservation, discretion, and caution are essential if a person wants to survive. Asanka just barely escaped Sri

Lanka after being forced to serve with the Liberation Tigers, a paramilitary group, as a child soldier. The Tigers subjected him to torture and forced him to witness and commit acts of unspeakable violence during this time, so his observation comes from a place of experience.

Australian people by contrast, like Loretta, have grown up in a safer and more privileged environment, where their lives aren't endangered on a day-to-day basis and no such precautionary measures are necessary. Asanka's observation about Australian people's forthcomingness reaffirms *Foreign Soil*'s central theme that while the idea of borders themselves are arbitrary, the environment in which a person grows up plays a central role in a person's character and the way they interact with the world.

Tears stream down her face as she watches the cameras flashing and microphones jostling at the other end of the parking lot, where the razor-wire fence adjoins the visiting area. The Mazda windows are closed, but she can still get the gist of the press conference spin. Hopelessness burrows into her chest again, its fingernails digging into her lungs, slowly squeezing the air out.

Fuck Sam, fuck having a baby, fuck her new job, and fuck this stupid fucking car. Loretta doesn't even know who her husband is anymore. She's even more uncertain of why she's sitting here, crying about her *husband*, in this of all places.

Related Characters: Asanka, Loretta, Sam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 215-216

Explanation and Analysis

This passage takes place just before the end of the story—Loretta is sitting in her car in the Villawood Immigration Detention Center after Asanka abruptly walked off, ending their brief meeting. Now, Loretta sits in her car and cries about how badly her meeting with Asanka went.

Though Loretta's heart is in the right place—she started working with immigrants and asylum seekers like Asanka in the first place because she recognized the hopelessness of their situation and wanted to help—the cruel reality is that there's not much she can do for Asanka and for other asylum seekers like him when up against an overburdened, uncaring system. So, on the one hand, her tears are valid: she's crying at having failed Asanka. And further, she's crying and over the broader issue that standing in solidarity with people like Asanka is perhaps not even an effective way to do any good for asylum seekers.

Loretta's tears and feelings of "hopelessness" also implicitly contrast her situation and relative privilege with Asanka's. She feels a "hopelessness" due to her inability to help Asanka, and this opens up the floodgates for her to feel hopeless about the other struggles of her life, like a husband who isn't supportive of her work and doesn't want to have children with her. She recognizes the irony of crying over such things, though, when she wonders why she's crying in the center parking lot, "of all places." For Loretta's problems are mild and solvable compared to the people detained at the center. Loretta, for example, can divorce Sam and find someone else who's more supportive of her work and wants children. But the things that make Asanka feel hopeless—being away from his home country and loved ones, unresolved trauma from his days as a child soldier, and being locked in what's effectively a prison with no real hope for release—are far worse and have no real solutions.

Aviation Quotes

The kid's bottom lip is quivering. He raises his hand to the front rim of the faded blue Knicks cap, slowly removes it from his head, and rests it in his lap. His face is cherubic: cheeks rounder than Mirabel's ever seen on a child his age. Wound tightly over his head is a piece of black, stretchy material. The material conceals the boy's hair and twists around at the top to form a kind of covered-up bun.

Mirabel takes a sharp breath in, fear rising in her throat.

Related Characters: Antonio (speaker), Mirabel, Sunni

Related Themes:

Page Number: 228-229

Explanation and Analysis

Mirabel has just had an adverse reaction to seeing a bit of Sunni's *patka*, a hair covering that Sikh boys traditionally wear, poking out from underneath his baseball camp. Antonio registers Mirabel's unease and, seeming to think it best to get it over with right away, asks Sunni to remove his cap—he needs to know if Sunni being Sikh will be an issue that prevents Mirabel from providing foster care to Sunni.

Now, Sunni, visibly terrified of how Mirabel will respond, removes his Knicks cap, revealing the "piece of black, stretchy material" underneath. This passage underscores the unfoundedness and frank absurdity of Mirabel's prejudice against Sunni. Her fear stems from seeing Sunni dressed in something she associates with the terrorists who caused her husband's death (Michael, Mirabel's husband, was working at the World Trade Center the day of the terrorist attacks), yet she completely ignores the Knicks cap that Sunni is also wearing—an object that evokes baseball, the archetypal all-American sport, and thus highlights just how *American* Sunni is.

Further, in drawing attention to Sunni's "cherubic" face and plump cheeks, the narrative emphasizes Sunni's youth and innocence. Mirabel, it seems, is well aware that she's unjustly placing blame on the extreme actions of a few bad men on an innocent child, yet in her traumatized state, she's unable to set aside her prejudices to tap into her logical, compassionate instincts.

> Sunni used to climb over from their apartment's balcony to the balcony of Bill and Susie's place. It was a cheeky thing he did: surprising them with a visit, sneaking in through the sliding balcony door to leave a drawing he'd done of them, or some cookies he and his maa had baked. After the bad men in planes, Bill and Susie had stopped looking after him, stopped looking at him with kindness in their old-person eyes. [...]
>
> The next week, old Bill and Susie had put plants up against the concrete divide where their balconies joined Sunni's place. Sunni pointed the beautiful pink flowers out to his mother.
>
> "You can't climb over and visit anymore," she'd said, her voice shaking. "They're poisonous flowers. That's oleander."

Related Characters: Sunni's Maa (speaker), Sunni, Bill and Susie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 230-231

Explanation and Analysis

Sunni reflects on how drastically his mother's and his lives changed in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks. Before, Sunni would always stop by Bill and Susie's apartment, an elderly couple who lived next door to Sunni and his maa who cared for Sunni while his mom was at work. After the terrorist attacks, though, the U.S. experienced a hike in harassment against Middle Eastern people (and anyone who "looked" Middle Eastern to ignorant, Western eyes). Because of this, Sunni and his mother, who are Sikh, experienced rejection from people they'd previously thought cared about them, including Bill and Susie.

This passage underscores the cruelty of Bill and Susie's decision to cut ties with Sunni. The ways that Sunni used to interact with Bill and Susie—leaving them plates of cookies and drawings he made for them—underscore his young age and his innocence. Bill and Susie's cruel treatment of Sunni—constructing a physical border made of poisonous plants is an especially cruel touch—is especially awful because Sunni is just a kid. He's done nothing wrong, and as adults, Bill and Susie should know that. Nonetheless, they instead act on unfounded fears and sever their relationship with Sunni and his maa rather than do the difficult work of working through their prejudices and acting in solidarity with people who used to be their friends—and who, given the new wave of anti-Middle Eastern sentiment that has enveloped the country, need their help and support now more than ever.

The Sukiyaki Book Club Quotes

> *Markie's prep class performed the song for their school assembly item last year. The teacher taught them to sing it jovially, with an upbeat tempo, swaying with joy. "Sukiyaki," his teacher had called it, the easier name the song was given when it reached Western shores. Even after we did the research on the history of the song and Markie presented it for Tuesday Show and Tell, the teacher still insisted on having the kids smile through it, as if they were singing "Happy Birthday": a song about a man overwhelmed with despair.*

Related Characters: The Unnamed Writer (speaker), Markie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 239-240

Explanation and Analysis

The unnamed writer, the narrator of "The Sukiyaki Book Club," recalls when her young son, Markie, sang a Japanese song in school with his class. The song was originally titled "Ue o Muite Arukou," but the teacher referred to the song by its Westernized title, "Sukiyaki." The teacher also had the kids sing it happily—despite the fact that the song is about despair—and even after Markie and the unnamed writer researched the song and reported their findings to the teacher.

In meditating on this particular memory, the unnamed writer draws attention to the shortcomings of white, Western efforts to act in solidarity with minority cultures. While the teacher's motivations for teaching the children the song clearly was to expand their horizons and teach them about Japanese culture and musical traditions, the teacher fell short of actually respecting that culture by failing to educate themselves and their students about the culture. Adding insult to injury, when Markie presented them with evidence showing that their interpretation was wrong—that the song is about despair and should be sung mournfully, not jovially—they refused to adjust their interpretation to fit Markie's findings. Thus, even though the teacher's heart is in the right place (wanting to provide students with a global, multicultural education), they end up reaffirming the superiority of white, Western culture by valuing their interpretation of the song above the song's traditional, real meaning.

> This story is not going to be sent out, in any case. Most likely never even completed. Certainly not published and read. Because Avery is hanging upside down, and it will all end in tragedy. The only way down is for a scared little girl to hurt herself. I do not know how to rescue Avery gently.

Related Characters: The Unnamed Writer (speaker), Harlem Jones, Asanka, Avery, Markie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 246

Explanation and Analysis

The unnamed writer stares at her computer screen and laments both her inability to complete her story, and the unlikely possibility that the story would be "published and read," even if she were able to finish it. Just before this passage, the writer explains that publishers often reject her stories for being too depressing and hopeless. Publishers, she's found, want stories about people having everyday, low-stakes experiences—not about people for whom hardship is the default state and whose stories end in tragedy. At this point in Avery's story (the story the unnamed writer is working on right now) Avery is hanging upside down on the monkey bars and nobody is around to help her—and the writer can't fathom a way that such a story ends well. "The only way down is for a scared little girl to hurt herself. I do not know how to rescue Avery gently," observes the writer.

While this observation pertains to Avery's situation specifically, in a broader sense, the writer is commenting on her inability to write the happy stories her publishers want her to write. Though her publishers (and the audiences they're catering to) might prefer stories with solvable problems and happy endings, the reality is that many of the writer's characters (that is, the characters of *Foreign Soil*) are dealing with issues that don't have any neat, "gentl[e]" solutions, like Avery with her grief, or Harlem with his justified rage, or Asanka as he deals with his traumatic past while detained inside a horrific immigration detention center.

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.

DAVID

The narrator (the young Sudanese woman) sees a beautiful **red bike** in the Ted’s Cycle’s window display. When she and Ahmed were still together—and before they had Nile—she used to watch Ahmed and the other boys at the bike dump put together different parts of old bikes to make mismatched new ones; Ahmed’s mum used to get so frustrated with Ahmed for getting grease on his school clothes. The young Sudanese woman knows what Ahmed’s mum would say now: that children “born in this country” have no respect—that in Sudan, the mother of her son’s child would have married her son—and stayed with him.

Foreign Soil*’s opening story introduces the collection’s most important themes: immigrant stories, the issue of preserving the traditions of one’s home country in a strange land (i.e., on “foreign soil,”), communication and misunderstanding, among others. Ahmed’s mother’s gripe about children “born in this country” implies that the young Sudanese woman (unlike Ahmed’s mother and the young woman’s other elders) was born in Australia, not Sudan. As such, elders like Ahmed’s mum feel the young people born in Australia lack empathy, understanding, and respect for the hardships the older generation endured on their behalf—and the rich cultural traditions they had to behind in the process.*

The young Sudanese woman buys the **bike**, which has BARKLY STAR engraved on a bronze sticker along its side. There’s a baby seat strapped to the bike’s back rack. The clouds in the sky grow dark as the young Sudanese woman walks the bike out of the shop and down the street—the Melbourne rain is about to start. The woman pulls the hood of her sweatshirt over her head. She thinks about how much this bike will change things for the better: now, she’ll be able to keep up with Nile when he rides his tricycle. The woman decides it was worth the half of her welfare check it cost her—even if it means she’ll have to eat nothing but porridge and potatoes for the foreseeable future. In her head, she hears Ahmed’s mum criticize Australian-born children who feed their babies junk food.

Contrary to Ahmed’s mum’s criticisms, the young Sudanese woman does seem to have her child’s best interests at heart. She’s bought a baby seat for the bicycle to ensure his safety, and she bought the bike itself with happy outings with her son in mind. And though the woman is clearing struggling financially (as evidenced by the mention of a welfare check), she makes sacrifices to ensure that her son has a happy and fulfilled life. In failing to set aside their differences to communicate, the two generations prevent themselves from seeing the other’s point of view, instead making snap judgments and perpetuating conflict.

As the young Sudanese woman walks the **bike** down the street, an older Sudanese woman (Asha) stares at her in disbelief and asks the narrator if the bike is hers. The narrative switches to the older Sudanese woman’s perspective. The Sudanese woman can’t believe this young woman is walking around with a bike—after all, she looks like she’s “a grown mother too.” Also, the young woman reminds her of her son David. Back when David was seven, Masud, a mechanical engineer from her village, made David a bike from metal scraps. David loved the bike and rode it everywhere. Masud told him about “the Tour of France,” a famous bike race. He promised David that one day, David would become a famous bike rider and have a race named after him.

Having just had Ahmed’s mother’s criticisms floating through her head, the young Sudanese woman is primed to be on the defense when the older Sudanese woman asks vague but seemingly critical questions about the young woman’s bike. The older woman become a stand-in for Ahmed’s mum and all the other elders in the young woman’s life who have made snap judgments about her, her lifestyle, and her respect—or lack thereof—for Sudanese culture. Already, though, the reader can sense that the older Sudanese woman’s remarks are more complex than the younger woman might think. Her comments are linked with her son David in some way that has deep meaning for the older woman.

The older Sudanese woman (Asha) again asks the young Sudanese woman if the **bike** is hers. The young woman recognizes the older woman as Sudanese, interprets the older woman's question as a "judgment," and ignores her. But then she hears Ahmed's mum's voice criticizing Australian-born Sudanese children for disrespecting their elders, so she turns to the older woman and says yes, the bike is hers. When the older woman, aghast, asks what the young woman's husband will think, the young woman wants to laugh at the older woman. But instead, she fakes a smile and says her husband won't mind. The older woman retorts that the young woman probably doesn't even have a husband.

That the young Sudanese woman hears Ahmed's mum's criticisms in her head just after her interaction with the older Sudanese woman confirms that she's equating the two older women: they're both first-generation immigrants who have a gripe with her for the simple fact that she was born in Australia, not Sudan. In addition, this scene further examines how heavily place—that is, where a person is from—affects their character, values, and how they experience the world and judge others.

The narrative switches to the older Sudanese woman's (Asha) perspective as she recalls how the army destroyed her village, which she feared they'd do ever since they took her husband two year prior. At first, everyone thought the Janjaweed might leave them alone. But one day, Amina, the woman's friend (and Masud's daughter) runs to the woman (whom she calls Asha) to tell her the army has just destroyed Haskanita and is headed to their village next. Terrified, the villagers prepare to flee. Amina asks where Asha's children are—but Asha can't find them.

The pervasiveness of violence in Asha's native Sudan further establishes how significantly place shapes a person's perspective. It helps to explain why she—and other first-generation immigrants like her—have such trouble connecting with the younger generation: they come from such different backgrounds and have experienced traumas the younger generations can't begin to fathom.

The narrative switches to the young Sudanese woman's perspective. Inwardly, she berates Asha—and older Sudanese women in general—for judging her for being unmarried. But Asha follows the young woman and continues to criticize her, asking where the narrator's baby is. The young Sudanese woman hears a voice inside her head criticizing her for putting her baby in daycare and letting strangers care for him. Before she can stop herself, she offers to let Asha ride her **bike** down a side street, where nobody can see them. Asha calls the young woman "wicked."

Note how much of this story consists of inner thoughts, not spoken dialogue. The young Sudanese woman and the old Sudanese woman are each bringing their own emotional burdens to their interaction with each other, yet each are keeping these emotional burdens to themselves—opening the door for more tension and misunderstanding.

The narrative switches to Asha's perspective as she and Amina hurriedly prepare to flee their village. They stumble into Amina's house and find David playing with Clement and Djoni. When Asha tells the boys it's time to flee, David runs outside to find his beloved **bike**. Masud runs after David. Asha tries to follow him, but Amina won't let her. The army has reached their village by this point, and Asha and Amina watch as their village goes up in flames. The women and the boys go to some bushes to hide. A couple hours pass. The boys fall asleep. Amina holds her hand over Asha's mouth to muffle her crying.

The prevalence of David's bike in Asha's memories further suggests that her reasons for commenting on the young Sudanese woman's bike aren't really criticisms directed at the young woman at all—in fact, it seems that the bike has caused a traumatic memory involving her young son to surface, and this is why she's so interested in the bike. It's yet unclear what has happened to David, but his continued absence and the burning village strongly suggest that this memory doesn't have a happy ending.

The narrative returns to the young Sudanese woman's perspective. As the rain grows heavier, she plays back Asha's insults in her head. She's about to part ways with Asha to pick up Nile from kindergarten, but before she can leave, Asha grips the young woman's wrist and tells that she has a second husband and is lucky—her first husband died back home. Now, she has five children. Though a good man, her second husband wouldn't approve of her riding a **bike**—but he's not here to see her now. Asha asks the young woman to hold her bag so she can ride the bike. The young woman laughs, assuming that Asha is joking, especially after Asha admits that she's never ridden a bike before. But the young woman lets Asha ride the bike anyway.

Though Asha is only revealing the trauma of her past in vague bits and pieces, the young woman seems to sense that the bike is important to her in some way, so she lets Asha ride it. Asha's efforts to communicate with the younger woman rather than criticize her, combined with the young woman's decision to set aside her defensiveness, and feel empathy for Asha, helps to mitigate conflict between them.

The narrative returns to Asha's perspective as she awaits David's return. Suddenly, Asha hears the sound of David's **bike** speeding toward her. She turns and sees three men chasing him, but he's too fast, and eventually they give up. David smiles and laughs as he rides toward his mother.

Asha's memory interrupts the main story taking place in the present with increasing frequency, highlighting just how significantly everything she went through in Sudan continues to affect her life to this day.

The narrative returns to the present. Asha is heavy, and it's difficult for the young Sudanese woman to keep her steady on the **bike**'s seat, but they manage. Asha eventually catches on and takes off, pedaling fast until she's hundreds of meters away from the narrator.

This scene mirrors the flashback scene just before it, where Asha watches David rapidly pedaling his bike toward her. These parallel scenes reinforce how Asha's past traumas affect her present experiences.

The narrative returns to Asha's flashback to war-torn Sudan. As David is pedaling toward her, a "red roar like fire" bursts from David's mouth. He stops pedaling and falls to the ground; dark red seeps out underneath him. The soldiers who were chasing David cheer in the background. Asha sees that they are boys themselves.

The "red roar like fire" that bursts from David's mouth is the blood that erupted after he was shot. Just as disturbing is the fact that young boys shot him. Growing up in a violent, war-ravaged place forces young people to grow up fast and engage in violence themselves.

The narrative returns to the present. The young Sudanese woman watches in horror as Asha suddenly loses her balance and falls to the ground. She runs to Asha; when she reaches her, she sees that Asha is crying. Asha tells the young woman about David and how he used to have a **bike**, though she leaves out the part about his death. Asha's admission makes narrator feel awkward—she thinks she's supposed to know the significance of Asha's story. She and Asha stare at each other as it continues to rain. After a while, the narrator hops on her bike to retrieve Nile from daycare. As she rides, she considers the bike's new name: David.

Asha falling to the ground mirrors her memory of David falling to the ground when he was shot. Again, these parallel scenes illustrate how the traumas Asha experienced in Sudan inform her experiences in Australia. Immigrants like Asha might leave their culture and loved ones behind when they seek refuge in a new country, but their traumas follow them across oceans and borders. Though the young woman can't understand the depth of Asha's sorrow, she chooses to empathize with the woman anyway, and as a result, they share a moment of healing and connection. And in naming her bike "David," after Asha's son, the young woman shows respect and empathy for the hardships and traumas the older generation endured before her, thus symbolically resolving the conflict that opened the story.

HARLEM JONES

Harlem sprints out of the job shop just as the woman is about to call security. Usually, he zones out when he runs, but today is different. Today, he's thinking about Mark Duggan's mug shot-like photo from the newspaper: in it, Duggan looks "hard" and "angry." The paper always includes a photo like this whenever the police shoot a Black person.

Harlem's fixation on Mark Duggan (a real person who was shot by police in 2011) implies that he's Black, like Duggan. The fact that he modifies his behavior to be alert and cautious as he runs, apparently in order to evade any altercations with police, highlights how place and environment affect a person's life and how they navigate the world. In this case, the prejudice that Black people experience at the hands of London's police makes Harlem more wary of police.

When Harlem reaches Finsbury Park flats, he's not even out of breath. He walks inside his flat, showers, and trades his sweaty Tesco's uniform for normal clothes. He finds leftover jerk chicken and sweet potato in the fridge and devours it. Harlem fills his backpack with spray paint cans, puts on his new hoodie, and starts to leave the flat—but when he opens the front door, a police offer is there. Harlem curses to himself; he should've known they'd find him. This might even be the same officer who got his brother Lloyd a few weeks ago (though Lloyd deserved to be locked up for beating his girlfriend, Janelle).

It's still unclear what exactly happened at the job office, but apparently police feel it necessary to get involved. Whether not their targeting Harlem is warranted or prejudiced remains unknown. Still, this scene builds tension, as the story opened with Harlem meditating on the officer-involved shooting of a Black man, Mark Duggan.

The Black officer accuses Harlem of "making death threats" to the women at the job office. Harlem scoffs at this. Earlier that day, he went to the office to try to quit his Tesco's job, which doesn't pay nearly enough for him to get by. But the "stuck-up" office woman told him he wouldn't get benefits for three months if he quit. Then before he could stop himself, he lost his temper with her.

It's still not totally clear what happened at the job office—whether Harlem made actual death threats against the woman or merely lost his temper at her isn't clear. In the book, Harlem uses harsh language to describe the woman, so the reader can assume he's not totally in the clear—he probably did lose his temper in a rather extreme way. Regardless, that police would automatically go to his house seems a bit extreme and may be the book commenting on the over-policing of Black people and communities.

Just then, Harlem's mum returns. Harlem goes to the curb to smoke a cigarette as his ma spars with officers. After a few minutes, they leave. But Ma stops Harlem before he can flee. She tells him he needs to get his act together—she and Harlem's father didn't move here "te raise delinquent children." And if he keeps this up, he's going to end up like one of those Black boys on the news.

Harlem's mum's angry remark that she didn't move here "te raise delinquent children" mirrors the criticism the young Sudanese women's elders directed toward her. Throughout the book, there are instances of parents, often immigrants, who want better for their children and have sacrificed much to make that happen—and then, when the children fail to live up their parents' expectations of what they think a better life should look like, it creates conflict.

Harlem wants to remind Harlem's mum about Lloyd, but he stops himself. Ma still can't admit that Lloyd is "inside," and so she lies and tells people that he's working in Trinidad. Ma orders Harlem to look her in the eye, but he can't. Though it's been 10 years since Harlem's father left, Ma still compares Harlem to his no-good father anytime Harlem does something bad. In that moment, Harlem is so angry he could strangle his mum.

Harlem's behavior is no doubt infuriating and stressful to his mother, but it's not quite fair of her to compare him to his father. It's possible that—consciously or unconsciously—she's making the comparison out of her own misdirected, lingering anger toward Harlem's father.

Despite his run-in with the police, Harlem still manages to reach Tottenham before Toby. Harlem sits down on the station steps and smokes as he waits for Toby, but he can't stop thinking about Duggan. He suddenly feels anxious about Toby and texts him to see where he is. Toby responds immediately that he's running behind but is now on his way. Harlem is annoyed; he's going to "miss the action" if he waits for Toby any longer, so he gets up and walks down Woodgreen.

Tottenham is a neighborhood in London. In 2011, when this story takes place, it was the starting location of the 2011 England Riots (also called the London Riots), a protest in response in Mark Duggan's death (and police brutality in general) that became violent. The reader can assume that this is where Harlem and his friend Toby are headed.

Toby runs up behind Harlem just then and apologizes for being late. They debate which way to go; Harlem suggests that take the back way, and Toby agrees, gesturing toward his packed backpack. Harlem discreetly unzips the backpack and sees Molotovs inside. He and Toby continue to walk. They pass a crowd of older African men outside the library; the men tell them to be careful. Harlem thinks it's the men's way of giving them "full permission to burn London to the fricken ground." Toby laughs.

The Molotov cocktails (explosives) in Toby's backpack build tension, perhaps foreshadowing the violence that will erupt at the protest Harlem and Toby are headed to. Foreign Soil *features many stories where the younger generations are at odds with their elders, who disapprove of the ways they try to bring about change or simply carve out futures for themselves. In this scene, though, with the recent death of Mark Duggan on everyone's brain, there seems to be a rare moment of agreeance and understanding between Harlem and Toby and the older African men gathered outside the library.*

They stop as they catch sight of the massive crowd. There are people holding handmade signs demanding an end to police brutality. Harlem and Toby push their way to the front of the crowd. They see lots of police wearing riot gear. The crowd chants, "We are all Mark Duggan." Harlem wishes they wouldn't; none of them, and especially not Harlem, are Mark Duggan.

"We are all Mark Duggan" is an expression of solidarity, but Harlem takes issue with it, perhaps because to say that he is Mark Duggan is to accept the inevitability of his own subjugation under an unjust system. Harlem doesn't want to have to be part of a tragic, unjust statistic to make lasting change happen—he wants to create the change himself.

Harlem notices the police officers listening intently to their radios and knows that something is going on. Toby disappears into the crowd, and then Harlem hears the smashing sound of the Molotov exploding. The crowd erupts and the police move in, trying to find the source of the explosion. Harlem feels Toby pass him a kerosene-soaked rag wrapped around a glass bottle, followed by a lighter. A police officer, addressing Harlem as "son," advises him not to do something stupid—but Harlem just smiles. All around London, people like Harlem and Toby are fed up and ready to fight back. As Harlem flicks the lighter, he tells the officer that his name "is not son"—it's "Harlem fuckin' Jones." Then he lights the Molotov.

Toby's disappearance followed by the sound of the Molotov exploding strongly suggests that Toby was responsible for the explosion—and for causing the initially peaceful protest to erupt with violence. As with most of the stories in this collection, "Harlem Jones" ends ambiguously, and the reader is left to wonder whether or not Harlem will throw the Molotov he's just lit. Harlem's defiant response to the officer who patronizingly calls him "son" is significant. Earlier, he took issue with the protestors' chant, "We are all Mark Duggan." Now, he puts his words into action, speaking aloud his name and thus asserting his personal agency and power. Harlem doesn't want to be a victim of police brutality and systemic racism like Mark Duggan—he wants to be an actor in its demise.

HOPE

Millie Lucas in almost 14. She was born and raised in Cidar Valley, Saint Thomas, in a small cabin at the base of the Blue Mountains. Most people who live in Cidar Valley work in the coffee industry: in a field, a factory, or a processing plant. Millie loves her home's natural beauty. Her family's cabin is small—Millie shares a bed with her 12-year-old sister, and there are other siblings, too.

From the start, "Hope" reaffirms Foreign Soil*'s central theme of place and how where a person is from shapes their life. Millie comes from a rural area where there are few job opportunities other than farming or working in the coffee industry (both controlled by the British, who controlled Saint Thomas as a colonial territory in the 1940s, when the story takes place), and there's not much money to go around.*

The Pentecostal church runs Cidar Valley's one-room school. It's a fine school, though it only offers the basic, mandatory classes. Kids often skip class to help with work around home, so attendance is a big problem. But to these kids, "loosening hardened ground soil to dig a yam bed" is far more important than "Learning the King's English."

The Pentecostal church further illustrates Britain's presence in Saint Thomas, Jamaica. Still, though colonial rule might control many aspects of the economy and day-to-day life of people indigenous to Saint Thomas, their connection to the land itself is stronger than colonizers' efforts to assimilate them to Western culture, as evidenced by the children's disinterest in "Learning the King's English."

Mr. Lucas knows Millie is special. He's watched her do math problems and pluck feathers from freshly killed chickens. And ever since she turned eight, Millie has been responsible for all the sewing. For a year, Millie's dad anguishes over what to do with beautiful, special Millie. Then he figures it out: he will send her to Kingston. He proposes this to his wife (Mrs. Lucas) as they lie in bed one night, but she pretends to be asleep. Mr. Lucas trusts the Lord to guide him in the right direction. After all, he knows that using what little you have to make something of yourself "was the legacy of the city[.]"

Mr. Lucas believes that Millie is capable and skillful enough to really go places and make a life that's better than what she grew up with. He's willing to sacrifice being near his daughter (and the additional income her sewing work provides the family) to send Millie to Kingston, the only way he thinks he can make his dreams for Millie a reality. The story thus underscores the elements of hope and sacrifice that are so common to many immigrant stories, something Mr. Lucas himself alludes to with his acknowledgment that using all one's resources to invest in a better future is "the legacy of the city[.]"

To afford to send Millie to Kingston, Mr. Lucas plants extra **bananas** in his garden. They grow beautifully. Millie's siblings know the plants are meant to pay for her future, so they nickname her "Banana Girl." Soon, the other children of Cidar Valley call her this too. The village's young men and women are more skeptical and believe that Millie won't leave—she'll end up working at a coffee factory like everyone else. Yet Millie still dreams of the life she could have in the big city.

The village children's silly nickname for Millie, "Banana Girl," perhaps childishly conveys the adults' skepticism that Millie will ever leave Cidar Valley. That villagers young and old place doubt that Millie will ever leave suggests that it's rare for anyone to leave the valley and make a better life for themselves—for the most part, simply being born there limits one's opportunities to improve their circumstances.

Millie has been accompanying Mr. Lucas to Kingston to buy tools and other goods since she was nine. On each visit, they go to Willemina's sewing shop. Willemina is 65 years old. Though she was skeptical of Millie at first, thinking she was just a child, she soon came to respect Millie for her courteousness and sewing knowledge. The year Millie turns 14, Willemina watches Millie as she shops for sewing supplies and thinks about all the grueling domestic labor—caring for her siblings, cooking, and cleaning—that awaits Millie back home. When Mr. Lucas comes by to get Millie, Willemina explains that she's getting older and is looking for a girl to help around the shop; she asks Mr. Lucas if Millie could apprentice for her, explaining that she'd cover Millie's room and board, food, and teach her to use a sewing machine. Mr. Lucas agrees.

Willemina might own her own shop, but she doesn't seem particularly well-off—at least, not compared to the wealthy British people who have gotten rich in the exploitative coffee industry, for instance. Still, she uses what little economic privilege she has to help Millie, a young girl in a far worse position than herself, and in so doing gives Millie the opportunity to have a better life than the impoverished existence she's destined for if she remains in Cidar Valley.

At first, the **bananas** Mr. Lucas planted grow full and fat. But that October brings an especially severe wet season, and a bad fungus attacks the banana crops. Soon, it's clear to Mr. Lucas that "his daughter's dreams [are] in trouble." But Mr. Lucas is a resourceful man. He fetches a ride to Kingston and purchases as much pig meat and marshmallow as he can. Then, back home, Millie's family makes a giant bonfire out of the ruined banana crops; Millie and Mrs. Lucas sell sticks of skewered marshmallows and meat to the other villagers.

Though Mr. Lucas works hard to provide for Millie and invest in her future, he doesn't have many resources to work with. All he has are his crops and his hope, both of which are easily and swiftly crushed by one poor growing season. This further establishes that the land and conditions in which Millie grows up are the primary forces that shape her future. No matter how hard her father works, there are larger, uncontrollable forces at play that easily thwart his efforts. Still, despite this initial setback, Mr. Lucas comes up with a second plan that works out, paying homage to the determination and sacrifice that are elements of so many immigrant stories.

It's not long before Millie moves to Kingston to work in Willemina's shop. Millie works hard and impresses Willemina. Willemina runs the only sewing store in Kingston, so it's always busy. Millie attends Willemina's sewing class on weeknights. There are five local girls in the class; the youngest is 10, and the oldest is 18. Dressmakers are in high demand in Kingston, so it's a big deal to be enrolled in the class, and enrollment goes to the highest bidder. The local girls don't seem to understand how lucky they are, though, and they often complain about the tediousness of the class. Millie feels lucky to be there, but she feels homesick for Cidar Valley.

Millie grew up surrounded by a level of poverty the local girls she attends class with can't even imagine—a poverty that few manage to escape. Growing up in a place with few opportunities for economic advancement makes Millie well aware of how lucky she is to be enrolled in Willemina's class. By contrast, the local girls' relative privilege allows them to take more things for granted.

Millie spends her free mornings walking along Kingston Beach. She's lived in the mountains her whole life, and so the beach is unfamiliar and exciting to her. On one of her early morning walks, she meets Winston Gray, a young man from a rural town called Montego Bay. He cuts cane, the only work available to a 17-year-old with no education. Winston meets Millie near the end of this off-season in 1949. He falls in love with her the moment he sees her walking along the beach. They eventually have sex; it's full of passion and longing, and Millie trusts Winston. Winston tells her he has to leave for Montego Bay in two days, but he promises to write her at the shop.

Winston, like Millie, has also left his rural hometown behind in search of opportunity. Though both characters are clearly hardworking and hope to create better lives for themselves, growing up in rural, poor villages creates added challenges. And this passage also shows how place can affect a person's personal life: though Millie's trust for Winston suggests that their relationship is communicative and healthy, it remains to be seen whether that's enough to overcome the physical distance that will separate them once Winston returns to his hometown.

Gossip about Millie's courtship spreads around town, and Willemina isn't surprised when she hears it. Before, only women entered her shop. But now, their husbands accompany them, eager to catch a glimpse of Millie's curvy, maturing body. Afraid for Millie, Willemina sits her down and tells her to focus on her studies and work—if she gets pregnant, she'll be stuck in the valley forever. Willemina finishes her talk, which Millie brushes off, and watches as Millie leaves the shop. The girl reminds Willemina of herself at that age: she, too, met a man who made lots of promises but kept none of them. The man was Haitian. He was wealthy and married, and he bought Willemina the sewing shop to keep her on the island.

Willemina is trying to be a good mentor to Millie and teach her to not let her current romance distract her from her future. As a poor girl from a rural village, Millie doesn't have the privilege of starting over if she makes a mistake. Though Willemina is trying to be helpful, she doesn't communicate with Millie the real reason she knows the dangers of romance—she fell victim to its distracting allure herself and now regrets it. Willemina's path to economic freedom—through a wealthy former lover—also illustrates how place and circumstance shapes a person's destiny. With few opportunities to improve her circumstances on her own, Willemina had to rely on her lover's help—and he bought her the shop not to help her but to entrap her. Thus, Willemina's economic freedom isn't entirely freeing.

Millie has seen Mrs. Lucas pregnant and knows exactly what's going on when her breasts begin to swell and she feels nauseous all the time. She waits for Winston to call for five months, but he never does. Willemina pretends not to notice at first, but Millie can tell that she knows. Millie doesn't know anyone in Kingston and has nobody to confide in; the other girls in her sewing class think she's "a hick from the hills" and want nothing to do with her. Millie writes home often, but she can't bring herself to tell her family about her pregnancy. Anyway, they have no money to visit her since losing her sewing income.

Willemina's worst fear has come true: Millie's dalliances with Winston have led to a pregnancy that could totally destroy Millie's hopes for a better future for herself. Worse—and also as Willemina likely predicted—Winston appears to have broken his promise to Millie and written her off. Still, Willemina's ignoring the pregnancy is a promising sign that Willemina will keep Millie on as long as she can, standing in solidarity with her even though she went against her wishes and made a mistake.

Unbeknownst to Millie, Winston's first letter arrived just five weeks after he left Kingston. Willemina received it. But, deciding that Millie had enough to deal with, she hid the unopened letter from Millie—and she hid all the ones that came after it, too. Willemina continues not to mention Millie's pregnancy. But by the time Millie is six months pregnant, customers are gossiping all the time, and so Willemina gently suggests that Millie work on alterations in the back room instead of running things up front. Millie is grateful to be out of the spotlight. She apologizes to Willemina for getting herself into trouble and starts to cry, believing that Willemina will fire her now. But Willemina promises Millie that she'll keep her on; Millie is grateful.

Millie thinks that Winston has abandoned her because Willemina, unbeknownst to Millie, has taken it upon herself to hide Winston's letters, thinking she knows what's best for Millie's future. Though Willemina thinks she's helping Millie by hiding the letters, she's only further limiting Millie's already limited ability to control her future. Millie's poverty already deprives her of so many opportunities, and now Willemina is preventing Millie from deciding whether it's in her best interest to seek a future with Winston.

Millie is nearing the end of her pregnancy when a white man enters the store looking for Millie. Willemina recognizes the man as the goods driver who delivers her sewing supplies when they arrive at the port. Willemina lies and says Millie isn't there, and eventually the man leaves. Meanwhile, Millie is practicing backstitching out in the back shed but can't focus due to the oppressive heat. Suddenly, the goods driver sneaks up behind her squeezes her breast. Millie is terrified and confused. Just then, Millie groans and slumps forward. Willemina appears in the doorway and barks at the man to leave. Angrily, he insinuates that he'll bribe the police to take away Willemina's shop's license if Willemina doesn't leave him alone with Millie. Willemina grabs a meter stick and strikes the man over the head with it, and the man falls forward onto Millie.

The goods driver's attempt to sexually assault Millie underscores how much trauma and suffering are inherent in the stories of immigrants, minorities, and other people living at the margins of society. Her story isn't one where a hardworking girl with a dream travels to the big city and eventually gets a happy ending—it has many bumps and setbacks along the way. Willemina comes through as one of Millie's most important sources of support in this scene. Though Willemina has a lot to risk in not giving in to the man's demands, she puts Millie's welfare above her own, attacking the goods driver instead of giving in to his threat and leaving him alone with Millie.

Millie screams at Willemina that the baby is going to come. Summoning a strength she didn't know she still had, Willemina drags the goods driver's body out of the shed. Then she returns to Millie. The birth is over in 15 minutes. Millie falls in love with her baby instantly and names him Eddison William; she decides that "no-good Winston" doesn't matter anymore—all that matters is her beautiful baby.

If "no-good Winston" represents Millie's past, then Eddison Winston represents Millie's future. Instead of pining over Winston, who has abandoned her (at least, that's what Millie thinks, as Willemina has been hiding Winston's letters), Millie redirects her focus to her baby and the hope that she can make a good life for him.

Things go back to normal after Millie gives birth. Mr. Lucas finds out about the baby and offers to bring it back and have Mrs. Lucas raise it as their own, but Willemina tells him that if Millie is old enough to make a baby, she's old enough to raise one. Willemina's health is declining rapidly now, and it's clear that she's training Millie to take over the shop when Willemina can no longer run it. Millie feels immensely grateful, and she works all day with Eddison strapped to her chest. She never pauses to think whether running the shop is what she wants in life—but that changes the day Winston returns.

Despite her unexpected pregnancy, Millie remains in a good position to build the better future that her father envisioned she'd have. Still, even if taking over Willemina's shop will allow Millie to become economically independent, it's a future that was thrust upon her—not one she sought out and worked for because she wanted to. Even as Millie improves herself, being born into poverty in a place without many opportunities vastly limits her ability to control her own fate. Finally, the detail that Winston will arrive builds tension—it seems inevitable that the truth about his letters will come to light, and that Millie will find out about Willemina's deception.

Millie is upstairs when she hears shouting coming from the shop. She rushes downstairs, Eddison strapped to her chest, and sees Willemina hitting Winston with a carboard meter roll. Millie runs to him and starts hitting him herself, screaming that he's a liar.

This scene makes clear the serious consequences of Willemina's decision to hide Winston's letters: Millie believes that Winston is a liar, when in fact it's Willemina *who has been deceiving Millie all these months.*

Winston walks to the shop's front steps and screams that it's really Millie who has wronged him: she made him think she wanted to be with him, and he sent her letters and money every month, and then she never even responded. At first, Millie doesn't believe him. Realizing that Millie will soon learn the truth, Willemina slowly retreats to the register and removes a stack of unopened envelopes from a locked cupboard. She hands them to Millie, who angrily takes them and then sits down beside Winston on the shop's front steps. Slowly, she reads through all the letters. Winston smiles at her, explaining that he wrote the letters to lay out his hopes for the better life they'd build together. He asks her to marry him.

As is the case in many of Foreign Soil*'s stories, Willemina's decision to keep Winston's letters from Millie has led to conflict and misunderstanding. And her intentions have backfired, too: she hid the letters so that Millie wouldn't let Winston distract her, yet Winston has returned all the same—and now Millie is angry with Willemina on top of this. And, if Millie accepts Winston's offer of marriage, it's possible that Willemina once more will be without someone to take over the shop, just like she was before Millie came to apprentice with her.*

Millie is touched and begins to cry. Then she pauses and tells Winston she has something to confess. It's only then that Winston sees the baby strapped to Millie's nightgown. He freezes—can it be his? Millie tells Winston, "tentatively," that the baby is Eddison.

Like most of Foreign Soil*'s stories, "Hope" ends ambiguously. It's not clear whether Winston is happy or unhappy to discover that he and Millie have a son together—and how this news will affect his plans for their future. Though "Hope" doesn't end tragically, necessarily, it certainly leaves Millie and Winston's future together up in the air. While hope can be a powerful motivator, the story's ending suggests that unexpected setbacks can arise that have more powerful, concrete effects on one's future.*

FOREIGN SOIL

While Ange's boyfriend Mukasa speaks in Luganda to the woman at the customs desk, Ange walks off to find a bathroom. A man wearing an Entebbe International Airport uniform approaches her. The man orders her to pay him. Ange doesn't know what she's paying for, and she only has Australian currency on her, but she takes a five-dollar note from her purse and gives it to the man. Then he leaves.

Luganda is a Bantu language native to Uganda, and Entebbe International Airport is located in central Uganda. It's fishy that the man in the uniform is ordering Ange to pay him, and it seems that he's trying to scam her. That Ange has only Australian currency on her suggests that she's Australian—and thus, that she's a foreigner in a strange land. She further demonstrates her unfamiliarity and unease with her surroundings when she fails to recognize the man's scam for what it is and gives in to his demands readily.

Ange finds a bathroom. When she exits, a second uniformed man approaches her. He heard that Ange gave his friend money, and now he wants some too. Just then, the driver sees what's going on and calls for Ange, claiming that Ange's "husband" wants her. When she corrects him—Mukasa is her boyfriend—he gives her a judgmental look. Ange begs the driver not to tell Mukasa that she gave the men money.

The second man's approach makes it clear that he and his associate have identified Ange as a clueless and scared foreigner who will be easy to scam and manipulate. Ange further betrays her unfamiliarity with her current surroundings when she reveals that Mukasa is her boyfriend, not her husband—based on the driver's judgmental look, it's probable that traveling with a man who isn't one's family or husband is unacceptable in this culture.

The narrative flashes back to the day Ange met Mukasa, when Mukasa he came into her **hair** salon. Penelope, Ange's coworker, doesn't want to cut Mukasa's hair, since she's never worked on Black hair before, so Dean, another coworker, makes Ange do it. Ange is nervous as she leads the large, six-foot man into a seat. He laughs and tells her to just use a three blade all around. He speaks in perfect English but has a mild accent. Normally Ange doesn't like to chat with customers, but with Mukasa, she does: she longs to hear his melodic, beautiful voice.

Not only are Ange and Mukasa from different places, but they're also of different racial backgrounds: Mukasa is Black, and Ange seems to be white. And already, Ange seems to be hyper-aware of their differences, fixating on Mukasa's accent, physical evidence of the "foreign soil" from which he hails.

Ange asks Mukasa where he's from—then immediately feels like an idiot for calling attention to his Blackness. Mukasa seems lightly annoyed, and Ange hurriedly apologizes and says he doesn't need to answer. After a few beats, he laughs and tells her to ask him something else. Ange giggles and asks Mukasa why he chose this salon, and Mukasa explains that it's the first place that would even agree to cut his Black **hair**. After Ange finishes Mukasa's buzzcut, which was actually quite an easy job, he asks her to have dinner with him that night. Ange is elated; she's always felt out of place her in her boring life, and now, she has "a chance at something remarkable."

The narrative portrays Ange as a well-meaning but ignorant character. On the one hand, her embarrassment at rudely calling attention to Mukasa's Blackness shows that she understands how alienated and othered Mukasa must feel as a Ugandan Black man living in Australia—and that she doesn't want to contribute to those negative feelings. At the same time, though, her thought that Mukasa can give her "a chance at something remarkable" exoticizes and objectifies Mukasa. In effect, she is once more reducing Mukasa to his race and culture, failing to see the person who exists separate of these things.

Back in the present, it's miserably hot and humid at the airport, and Ange's trendy **haircut**, a "farewell present" from her coworkers at the salon, has fallen flat. Ange and Mukasa are waiting in line at the customs desk. Mukasa is annoyed—he doesn't like to wait—not "for anything."

Symbolically, the flattened "farewell" haircut represents Ange's deflated power and agency. In Australia, her home country, her familiarity with the local culture and her network of supportive friends empowered her. Here, she's out of the loop, deflated, and vulnerable. Ange's cryptic remark about Mukasa not liking to wait "for anything" hints that there's perhaps more tension in their relationship than she's yet to let on.

Ange recalls how upset Mukasa was when they stopped by her parents' (Ange's mum and Ange's dad) house the night they left Australia. He stayed in the car while Ange said goodbye. Afterward, he complained about having to wait 35 minutes. When Ange said he could've just come inside with her, he replied, "What for? So I could listen to your parents weep about me abducting you to the end of civilization?" Ange was dumfounded; Mukasa was usually so gentle and nice. She told herself he was just stressed out: he hadn't been home for four years, he'd been working nonstop to ensure that the hospital opened on time, and his parents died in a car crash when he was a teenager.

Note that it's important to remember that she's an unreliable narrator—readers only get her perspective, unlike in other stories with multiple narrators (like "David"). Based on the details that Ange has provided, Mukasa's anger at having to wait for Ange to say goodbye to her parents—and his refusal to see them in the first place—seems totally blown out of proportion. But Mukasa's defensive remark suggests he has real reasons for being upset—reasons that Ange doesn't quite seem to grasp. He's implying that Ange's parents see his country—and by extension him—as uncivilized and unsuitable for their daughter.

At the airport, Ange and Mukasa have finally reached the customs desk. Mukasa snaps at Ange to check her suitcase. Ange removes the contents of her suitcase and finds that her jewelry and the souvenirs she got for Mukasa's family are missing. Mukasa angrily removes his wallet and hands the officer a wad of cash. The officer takes the suitcase to a backroom. Mukasa grumbles about the country "going to the dogs." Ange feels guilty about it, but she's happy to hear Mukasa talk this way; she's been worried that he'll want to stay in his country forever. Though she loves Mukasa and wants to be with him, she doesn't want to give up her old life to live in a strange place. The customs officer returns just then with Ange's fully packed suitcase.

Ange is delighted to hear Mukasa's disparaging remarks about having to bribe the customs workers to return Ange's valuables because it suggests that he, like Ange, would prefer to return to Australia. Ange's anxieties about not wanting to live in a strange place are understandable, of course, but note that she never even considers that Mukasa might feel the same way about Australia. This passage not only reveals more of Ange's subtle prejudices (she takes for granted that a person would rather engage with her native culture than Mukasa's), and it also gives yet another hint that Ange doesn't know Mukasa as well as she thinks she does.

Once Ange's parents (Ange's mum and Ange's dad) learned Mukasa was African, they didn't want anything to do with him. Ange doesn't think they're racist—it's just that they expected their only daughter to end up with someone different. She remembers how, after she and Mukasa had been dating for two years, Ange's dad randomly called her to invite her and Mukasa to dinner. At dinner, Ange's parents put on a show of being nice. But then her father got drunk and made a comment about families wanting to have children "that look like them."

Ange's experiences bar her from empathizing with Mukasa. In rejecting Mukasa on the basis of his being African, Ange's parents are being racist. And her father's comment about wanting grandchildren "that look like them" is further evidence of this. Ange's refusal to admit that her parents are prejudiced is troubling. Perhaps her familiarity with them—her experiences of them being loving and kind with her—blind her to the ugly realities of their prejudices.

Ange apologized to Mukasa as she walked him out to his car, but he told her things went about as well as he expected. When Ange went back inside, Ange's mum asked how Mukasa could afford such a nice car. When Ange snapped back that Mukasa is a doctor, her parents couldn't believe it.

It's telling that Ange's parents' behavior seems to have shocked Ange—meanwhile Mukasa expected the scene to go the way it did. Living as an outsider has taught Mukasa to expect ostracization and prejudice from others.

Back in the present, it's been about a month since Ange first arrived in Uganda, and she still struggles to find her way around and is afraid of getting lost. All the beggars and hawkers that roam the city streets disgust her—and then she feels bad about feeling bad. Mukasa scoffs at Ange, stating that this is what real poverty looks like. Ange doesn't know why Mukasa acts as though she's the privileged one when in fact he's the one who grew up rich: even now, he has many servants in Makerere, though it's just the two of them living there. Ange thinks it's silly to hire help, but Mukasa says that people will judge him for not hiring enough servants. He tells her she'll understand how life works here one day.

Mukasa seems to take pleasure in pointing out Ange's ignorance about Uganda. Increasingly, it seems that their different ethnic, racial, and national backgrounds have made their relationship fundamentally unequal. And because they've spent most of their time together living in Ange's home country, she's only now experiencing what it's like to be the partner whose outsider status makes them feel perpetually disoriented, alienated, and alone.

Mukasa leaves for work first thing in the morning and doesn't return until eight at night. He tells Ange that things will get better once the hospital is open, but it's been three months now, and nothing has changed. When Ange calls Ange's mum, Penelope, and Dean, she lies and says she's having a great time. Alone with her thoughts all day, she realizes that she and Mukasa haven't ever spent long periods of time together. Even when they were living together in Australia, he was always busy with work. Now, she's wondering if she really knows him—"if the real Mukasa Kiteki was another country entirely," and if their relationship has simply "been carried out with the choreographed care and watchfulness brought on by foreign soil."

When Ange wonders "if the real Mukasa Kiteki [is] another country entirely," she's consciously meditating on how geography has shaped Mukasa's character and their relationship. She's suggesting that the person he was in Australia wasn't his natural self but rather a person he constructed "with the choreographed care and watchfulness brought on by foreign soil." Put differently, she's suggesting that Mukasa, in wanting to experience as little discrimination as possible, created an alter ego to assimilate into Australian culture—and this ego bled into his relationship with Ange, too. She's wondering if not knowing Mukasa in his home country means she's never even known him at all.

Ange looks at a *Bukedde* newspaper. She struggles to learn Luganda, but it's practically all Mukasa has spoken since returning to Uganda. Whenever Mukasa has long, drawn-out conversations with her in Luganda, Lucinda, the housekeeper, sometimes shoots Ange timid, apologetic looks. Now, Ange gets out of bed and walks into the kitchen; Lucinda is there cutting meat. Ange, speaking English, asks Lucinda if she needs any help. Lucinda says no, explaining, "The Doctor would not like it." Angie shrugs and retorts that "the Doctor" can be "a pompous arsehole sometimes." Lucinda freezes. But then her eyes meet Ange's, and the two of them laugh. Ange invites Lucinda to drink *waragi* with her later. Lucinda looks afraid, but Ange tells her Mukasa has a late meeting.

Ange's struggle is understandable—a tonal language, Luganda is especially difficult for speakers unfamiliar with tonal languages to learn. At the same time, though, she still fails to relate her present alienation to the alienation Mukasa must have experienced while they were living in Australia. Also, while this friendly interaction with Lucinda seems like a positive turning point in Ange's story, Lucinda's intense fear at the thought of Mukasa catching her for doing something wrong is concerning—it further suggests that Ange's reading of Mukasa as kind and gentle is far from the truth.

Later, Lucinda and Ange chat and drink *waragi*. Lucinda has removed her headscarf and looks much younger. Lucinda, loosened by the alcohol, admits that she's surprised that Ange has stayed: she doesn't seem happy here, and she's not married to Mukasa, so nothing is keeping her here. Lucinda explains that her family has worked for Mukasa's family for a long time, and she knows from experience how "very persuasive" the Doctor can be.

Waragi *refers to a type of distilled beverage. Lucinda's remark about Mukasa being "very persuasive" is troubling—it implies that he is manipulative and perhaps even abusive. Meanwhile, Lucinda's surprise at Ange having stayed implicitly ties Ange's racial and national background with opportunity: as a white, Australian woman of some means, she's afforded the freedom to make decisions about her life that perhaps Lucinda is not.*

Just then, Mukasa walks through the front door. In English, he berates Lucinda for not doing the work he's paying her to do. Lucinda's fear seems to please him. Ange realizes Mukasa yelled in English so that she could understand what he was saying. Lucinda hurries out to finish cooking dinner, and Mukasa quietly tells Ange not to interact with the servants. Ange feels sick to her stomach.

That Lucinda's fear pleases Mukasa is further evidence of his abusive, manipulative nature. It's also striking that he scolds her in English, which he's never done before, so that Ange can understand him—he seems to want Ange to feel bad about the pain and trouble she's caused Lucinda by encouraging Lucinda to break Mukasa's rules for servants.

When Mukasa, drunk, joins Ange in bed later that night, Ange pretends to be asleep; she's been crying for hours. He gets close and touches her under the sheets. When Ange tells him she's not in the mood and tries to push him away, he rapes her. Ange realizes it's not Mukasa before her—it's "a masked man, nothing behind his face but urge."

Ange continues to be in denial about Mukasa's abusive tendencies. She thinks the Mukasa who rapes her is "a masked man," as in, a false Mukasa. But it's becoming increasingly clear that this abusive, violent man is who Mukasa really is—and Ange was too at-home in her native Australia, and Mukasa, too disempowered, to make this clear.

Ange remembers the first time she saw Mukasa naked. They'd been dating for six months and still hadn't had sex. Penelope had been teasing Ange with stereotypes about Black men having large penises. Though Penelope's joking had once amused Ange, she eventually grew tired of it. Mukasa was always polite with her, never trying to initiate sex, but she worried that the real reason was that he wasn't attracted to her thin, white body—the African women she'd met through Mukasa, by contrast, were "bult like *real* women." Then one day, Ange got tipsy and found the courage to initiate sex herself. They had sex, and it was so good, it rendered Ange speechless.

Racial stereotypes and differences have dominated Mukasa and Ange's relationship from the start. Mukasa, perhaps wary of playing into Penelope's suggested stereotype of Black men being more satisfying sexual partners, has held off on initiating sex. Meanwhile, Ange's sexualization of Black women's bodies renders her too insecure to initiate sex either. When they finally do have sex and it apparently renders Ange speechless, it's a metaphor for the way the couple leave unspoken the racial differences that harm their relationship.

Back in the present, the morning after Mukasa forced himself on Ange, Mukasa tells Ange that he fired Lucinda—now, it's Ange's job to do the cooking and cleaning. Then he kisses her on the cheek and leaves. Ange is horrified and fantasizes about taking a cab to the airport and jumping on the first plane home. But she can't leave: she loves Mukasa and is determined to make things work. She feels sick to her stomach when she remembers what Mukasa did to her last night, but she tells herself that man wasn't Mukasa. She just needs to dig beneath the surface and find the kind man she fell in love with.

Mukasa is being undeniably abusive at this point. Not only has he sexually assaulted Ange, but in firing Lucinda and ordering Ange to do domestic labor, he's further alienating Ange from the outside world and taking advantage of her. As a victim of abuse, Ange is obviously a sympathetic character. And while her deluded belief this abusive Mukasa isn't the real Mukasa may be viewed as a response to trauma, metaphorically, it underscores how Ange has objectified and dehumanized Mukasa for the entirety of their relationship: in Australia, he was a docile, subdued foreign man she could use as an accessory to make her life more exotic and interesting. Here, now that Ange is the one who is on "foreign soil" and Mukasa is the empowered one, Ange's deluded view of Mukasa starts to crumble.

Ange gets dressed in an outfit that Mukasa loves, and then she trims her **hair**; she'd asked Mukasa to find a salon that does Western cuts, but he says they're hard to come by. She realizes that she hasn't made herself up like this in a long time—she never leaves the house these days—and reasons that this must be why Mukasa has started to take her for granted.

In the story, hair represents the intersection between race, nationality, and power. In Australia, Mukasa, as a Black man, struggled to find a hair salon that would cut his Black hair, just one example of the ways in which his outsider status subjected him to prejudice and alienation. Now, in Uganda, it's Ange who can't find a place that caters to Western (white) cuts, and it's also Ange who feels alienated, alone, and disempowered.

Ange's breasts have swollen and become rounder, and her stomach is starting to show, too. She estimates that she's about four months pregnant now—which means she can't put off telling Mukasa for much longer. She plans to tell him in two weeks, once they've booked their tickets for their first trip back to Australia. Ange likes having this secret—it makes her feel empowered, which is rare these days. Mukasa is at work all day. She's been in Kampala for eight months and hasn't met anyone besides Mukasa's colleagues and family. When she mentions this to Mukasa, he regards her "suspiciously."

That Ange is waiting to tell Mukasa about the pregnancy until they return to Australia symbolizes their shifting power dynamics. Australia empowers her: she's not a racial minority, and she's surrounded by supportive friends and family and a familiar culture that comforts her there. In Uganda, though, she has none of this; here, Mukasa holds all the power, and Ange has no means to defend or protect herself if he reacts to the news negatively—which is likely, given his "suspicious[]" response to her simple request to socialize.

Ange's passport went missing from the bedside drawer three weeks ago. She reasoned that Mukasa must have taken it to his safe at work and told herself there was nothing to worry about. She hasn't mentioned the passport to Mukasa because she doesn't want to argue. Plus, she's sure that Mukasa didn't take it for nefarious reasons—he loves her. And besides, not asking about it will prove to Mukasa that she's happy where she is and doesn't want to go anywhere.

Not only has Mukasa cut off Ange socially, but in stealing her passport, he's also ensured that she has no way to leave Uganda. Still, Ange continues to delude herself, reasoning that there must be a benign, non-abusive explanation for Mukasa taking her passport. But in a way, Ange's powerlessness leaves her with no choice but to make excuses for Mukasa: he might be abusive, but he's the most familiar face in a foreign land full of unfamiliar (and thus, threatening) people and social practices. Just as being on "foreign soil" made Mukasa submissive to Ange in Australia, being an outsider in Uganda makes Ange beholden to Mukasa.

Mukasa returns home for dinner at seven—early, for him. After multiple failures, Ange has successfully baked millet bread from an old African cookbook she found in the back of the pantry. Ange never cooked much before, but now she spends all day cooking special meals for Mukasa.

Once more, being in Mukasa's home country have inverted the power dynamic of Ange and Mukasa's relationship. Now, it's Ange who takes on a gentle, subservient role and must assimilate to an unfamiliar culture, as evidenced by Ange's desperate attempts to cook African meals.

Mukasa and Ange are seated at the table. Mukasa eats the stew, and Ange "wait[s] for his nod of approval." But instead, he asks if she's been keeping the pregnancy from him—or if she's so stupid that she hasn't even realized it herself. "That's what I get for marrying a fucking hairdresser," he snaps. Ange loses it; she tells him they aren't married—and even if they were, he still wouldn't have a right to treat her this way.

In Australia, Ange's power relative to Mukasa had nothing to do with her profession: though she was a hairdresser and he, a doctor, her status as an Australian citizen and white woman was enough to grant her special privileges. Mukasa's slip about he and Ange being married is striking but vague in its implications. It could be that his new power over Ange makes him feel that he owns her, in a way—that she's his *wife.*

Mukasa stands, his face a contorted, angry mess. Before Ange has time to react, he throws his bowl of stew across the room, then he throws her to the floor and grabs her by her **hair**. Ange is frozen with terror, and she struggles to breathe. Mukasa moves close to her face and growls at her to know her place. After he gets up, Ange remains on the floor, terrified that he'll attack her again. She hears the door slam shut, followed by the car starting up.

Hair, in this scene, returns as a symbol of power. In Australia, Mukasa's Black hair—which nobody else would work on—placed him under Ange's control. Now, cut off from the people, culture, and land that are familiar to her, Ange is under Mukasa's thumb, and he reminds her of this when he grips her hair and demands that she remember her place.

Ange closes her eyes and sees the African continent. She imagines the borders of landlocked Uganda. She realizes that there's nowhere to run to: "Every escape would be ever more foreign soil."

Visualizing landlocked Uganda underscores Ange's powerlessness—no matter which direction she runs, she'll be an outsider, unable to turn to the familiar for comfort or security.

SHU YI

Kellyville Village is a small, idyllic place where everyone knows everyone else's business, nobody locks their doors, and the "white-picket-fence dream" persists. This year, 1992, boasts the hottest summer ever recorded—at least, it's the hottest summer since the narrator (Ava) has been alive. Everyone is listening to Salt-N-Pepa—but not the narrator. And she hates her brother's MC Hammer-inspired flattop **hairstyle**. Instead, she longs for hair extensions and "straightening goo." She wants to look like a "real Aussie girl[]" and resents her Afro and dark skin. She knows she'll never be Madonna or Kylie Minogue, but she just wants to be less like herself—and she hates that nobody understands this.

Just as experiencing prejudice can turn oppressed people against each other (rather than against their oppressors), it can also cause people to internalize their oppressors' derogatory views. Growing up in a mostly white, suburban town where the "white-picket-fence dream" persists has taught Ava to reject her Blackness. Her peers and the broader culture have taught her that her Blackness is something to be ashamed of, and so she's ashamed of it. Also telling is the way she thinks having an Afro and dark skin makes her less a "real Aussie girl[]" than other (white) girls.

In the present, the principal, Mr. James, knocks on the classroom door. The narrator (Ava) wonders if her grade-three teacher, Mr. Wilkinson, is in trouble. People consider him "a renegade" because he wears his long hair in a ponytail, lives in a caravan on the edge of town, and wears band T-shirts instead of dress shirts. Mr. Wilkinson smiles as Mr. James enters the classroom, a fake smile on Mr. James's face. It's rumored that he was in Vietnam and that "something evil had happened there." Melinda's mom guesses that the Viet Cong captured and tortured him. A skinny, trembling girl with shiny black hair steps out from behind Mr. James. Mr. Wilkinson announces that the girl's name is Shu Yi. The narrator has never seen someone as beautiful as Shu Yi; she's what the narrator would look like if she "were a little less me."

There are traces of anti-Asian sentiments in this scene, from the rumors that "something evil had happened" to Mr. James in Vietnam to Melinda's mother's guess that the Viet Cong captured and tortured Mr. James. Both details create a narrative in which Vietnamese people—and to ignorant, undiscerning Westerners, Asian people in general—are violent, monstrous, and subhuman. With this in mind, Shu Yi's new classmates' willingness to accept her into their classroom and community seems unlikely. Meanwhile, the narrator's comment on Shu Yi's beauty suggests that she doesn't hold her peers' prejudiced views.

Shu Yi is quiet; she keeps her head down and sits alone at recess. The next day, Melinda Meyer announces that her family is thinking of moving out to Windsor, since "even Baulkham Hills is starting to look like another fucken country." When Glenn Hopkins asks Melinda what country Australia is starting to look like, Melinda shrugs and says, "Maybe Africa or something." From that day forth, the students make Shu Yi's life miserable; people spit in her hair, and she always returns from snack time looking like she's just been crying. But the narrator (Ava) just occupies herself with her Hans Christian Andersen book, as she doesn't "want[] to take on" Shu Yi's case—since Shu Yi's arrival, the other students have left her alone, and Ava's mum has finally "taken the plastic undersheet off [Ava's] bed."

Melinda Meyer's comment about her community "starting to look like another fucken country" is rather cruel and pointed—it doesn't seem like something a young child could come up with on their own. It's clear that Melinda's parents are directly or indirectly teaching her to look down on immigrants and regard non-white people as inferior. And that the other students take her lead suggests that they—either at home, or from Melinda—have been taught to think this way too. Ava takes a morally ambiguous position. While she clearly recognizes that it's wrong to bully and dehumanize Shu Yi, she's grateful that Shu Yi's suffering has alleviated hers—notably, she's relieved that her mother can finally remove her bed's "plastic undersheet," suggesting that she wet the bed when her peers bullied her and hasn't done so since Shu Yi's arrival. Still, though she doesn't participate in the bullying, her failure to act in solidarity with Shu Yi means that the bullying can continue, so her lack of involvement doesn't help anyone but herself.

One night, after dinner, the narrator's (Ava) mother (Ava's mum) clears the dinner plates in silence—a clear sign she wants to talk to one of the kids about something important. The narrator, whose mother calls her Ava, asks Ava how the new girl, Shu Yi, is doing at school. Ava's mum has noticed that Shu Yi is always alone, doesn't speak much English, and seems sad. Ava's mum reminds Ava that it's hard to be the new kid at school—especially "if you're different[.]" When Ava responds, "Whatever," her mum is stunned.

Ava's mother is trying to teach Ava that acting in solidarity with others who are less fortunate than oneself (in this case, Shu Yi) is always the right thing to do. In failing to challenge Shu Yi's (and Ava's, formerly) oppressors, Ava is indirectly supporting the very systemic racism and prejudice that led her peers to bully her.

Ava reflects on Ava's mum's role in the community. Ava's mum works as a cafeteria worker and office holder for the local Babysitting Club to ensure that white suburbia accepts her Black family. Sometimes Ava "see[s] another side of [her mum]," though, on the rare occasions that her mum spots another Black woman and excitedly runs toward her. Now, Ava's mum suggests that she and Ava talk to Mr. James about what's going on with Shu Yi. Annoyed, Ava says it's not their problem if Shu Yi has trouble fitting in. But Ava's mum holds firm; she and Ava will see Mr. James tomorrow morning.

Ava's mum has put in a lot of hard work to ensure that her predominantly white community accepts her Black kids. Foreign Soil *has already shown how being an immigrant can make a person feel like an outsider and affect their sense of self and how they navigate the world. Here, it expands that idea to show how being a racial minority has similar effects.*

At school the next morning, Ava eavesdrops outside Mr. James's partially open office door as Ava's mum and Mr. James argue. Mr. James is furious with Ava's mum for suggesting that his students have been harassing Shu Yi. He asks her if Ava or Shu Yi has reported this. Ava's mum lowers her voice and speaks calmly, trying to reason with Mr. James. She says it's clear what's going on. But Mr. James won't budge; he tells Ava's mum that Shu Yi will just have to learn to fit in—immigrants can't move here "and expect everyone to bend over backward so [they] feel comfortable." Ava's mum leaves Mr. James's office, calling him a "racist prick" under her breath.

Mr. James's snide remark that immigrants like Shu Yi need to toughen up, as nobody in their new home is obligated to make them "feel comfortable" is rather ironic—after all, Mr. James's anger seems to be a response to Ava's mum's accusation making him feel uncomfortable. His unhelpful response to Ava's mum's concern also underscores the importance of people who experience discrimination and racism to act in solidarity with each other.

Ava's mum leads Ava into the classroom. Ava's classmates stare at Ava as Mum leads Mr. Wilkinson into the cloakroom to speak in private. Moments later, Mr. Wilkinson motions for Ava and Shu Yi to join them. Ava stares at the students' red schoolbags hanging from the hooks on the walls; each backpack has a black kookaburra embroidered on the front pocket, as well as the school's motto: "PLAY THE GAME." Ava stays silent, and so does Shu Yi. Mr. Wilkinson gently assures Ava that he knows he can count on her to help Shu Yi feel at home here. Hearing this, Shu Yi raises her head to look at Ava; there's a hopeful expression on her face.

The school motto embroidered on Ava's peers' backpacks applies to Ava's present predicament. On the one hand, she can "play the game" and stand by as her racist peers bully Shu Yi—which is the morally wrong thing to do, but which means her peers will likely continue to leave her alone. Or she can stop playing the game, reject the status quo, and stand up for Shu Yi. While this second option is clearly the morally right, socially responsible thing to do, not playing along generally creates backlash for the rule-breaker, and this isn't something Ava wants for herself.

Ava runs out of the classroom once it's lunchtime. She can sense Shu Yi behind her but doesn't turn around. Ava heads to the Fairy-tale Corner of the library and considers how Shu Yi doesn't know any fairy tales—in fact, she probably thinks it's good manners to drop breadcrumbs outside like Hansel and Gretel.

Already, readers can see how Ava's initial admiration for Shu Yi is starting to crumble. Under social pressure to conform to her peers' racist views, she starts to regard Shu Yi with disdain, insinuating Shu Yi is uncivilized because she's from another country.

Ava tries to bury her face in her book of fairy tales, but Shu Yi approaches and stands before her. In "stilted but sure" English, Shu Yi asks to sit with Ava today. Ava thinks it sounds like Shu Yi practiced saying this at home. Shu Yi looks behind her at Melinda and her friends, then she turns back around and looks at Ava "pleadingly." But Ava just slams her book shut, and in a loud, audible whisper sneers, "Fuck off, you filthy Chink." Melinda hears this and laughs. Shu Yi stares at Ava as a thin stream of urine drips down the inside of her legs and slowly soaks "her frilly white socks."

Ava's mistreatment of Shu Yi reaches a climactic high. Before, Ava indirectly enabled her racist peers by refusing to condemn their actions and defend Shu Yi. Now, she actively participates in their bullying, calling Shu Yi a racist slur. The urine that drips down Shu Yi's leg is significant. Earlier, Ava noted that Shu Yi's arrival corresponded with Ava's mum removing the undersheet from her bed, insinuating that when Shu Yi arrived and the kids stopped bullying Ava, Ava stopped bedwetting (which was implied to be a shame response to being bullied). Now, as Shu Yi urinates, it's clear that Ava has passed along that shame to Shu Yi.

RAILTON ROAD

Railton Road is a squatting place for England's rebellious Black youths, the Railton Road Panthers. There's a shop downstairs whose printing press runs day and night. Police repeatedly harass and threaten to evict the youths who live at Railton Road. They repeatedly arrest Railton Road Panthers for squatting, yet the squatters always make their way back to the place when they get out of jail.

The British Black Panthers were inspired by the U.S. Black Panther Party and fought to achieve rights for Black people and other minorities. From the start, it's clear that Railton Road is an underground oasis for those who mainstream society has deemed outsiders.

One day, the BBC records Railton Road's landlord outside the building as he angrily complains about "attending court to get these hooligans evicted." In the middle of filming, a young Black woman, Liv, pokes her head out an upstairs window to heckle the landlord. Solomon, who is in the middle of teaching a Black History lesson, urges her to stay inside.

The landlord's use of the word "hooligans" might be compared to contemporary usage of the word "thugs" to describe people of color (that is, it's derogatory and racist). Regardless, the landlord's incensed language further positions Railton Road's inhabitants as outsiders who exist at the margins of society.

Solomon muses about "the Railton Road rebel women," who have a "fire" that comes through in their velour T-shirts, African jewelry, and demeanor. But Olivia—Liv—is beautiful: she has a "cheeky sass," and she's physically stunning too. Solomon writes the chapter number of the sermon he's been teaching on the board (Genesis nine, 20-27) and puts his chalk down. Then he turns to face his students. The class falls silent as Solomon begins to read about Noah "[standing] on the fertile African soil of the border between Libya and Algeria." Solomon then describes Noah looking across the Egyptian desert at Afghanistan, Jordan, and Iran.

Not much is known of the story's main character, Solomon, at this point, but that he values Liv's daring personality at least as much as her physical beauty suggests that he's deeply invested in the Panther movement and the changes it strives to bring about. In addition, Solomon's lesson, with its focus on "the fertile African soil of the border between Libya and Algeria," brings ideas of place and borders at the forefront of the story. In particular, Solomon's lesson emphasizes the central role that Africa plays in biblical stories, thus recasting himself, his students, and other people of color at the center of such influential cultural/religious works as the Bible. In contemporary life, they might exist at the margins of society, but the implication is that it shouldn't be that way.

As Solomon expected, the students love the sermon, which is so unlike everything they've heard at church with their families. "Dis man im prophet, praised de *Lawd*!" a Bajan girl cries approvingly. Now that Solomon has the class's attention, he plows forward. He describes Noah as he is about to place a "voodoo hex on his son Ham, through his grandson Canaan." Solomon asks the class what Noah said to Ham, and the young Bajan woman delivers Ham's answer for all to hear: "Let your bloodline be cursed with servitude, for you betrayed me, son." Solomon repeats the line, but with a slight change: "Let your bloodline be cursed with slavery…" He explains that these are the words that antiabolitionists forced on them.

Solomon's sermon goes over so well because it recasts people of color as central players in biblical lore rather than ancillary supporting characters. He also takes away the euphemistic term, "servitude," that his students have most likely heard in Bible translations their churches use, replacing it with the harsher—but more brutally honest—term "slavery." He then places the biblical story in a modern context, comparing Noah to pro-slavery authority figures of the modern era.

Solomon's lecture has clearly excited his students, but he has more pressing concerns on his mind: De Frankie from the Black House on Holiday Road is paying Railton Road a visit. Solomon has held a job teaching Black History classes at Railton Road for 20 months now, thanks to his modern history degree. But there are rumors that De Frankie is coming to see if Solomon would be a good candidate for Minister for Culture for the London Panthers. De Frankie is from "the Old World," from Port of Spain, Trinidad. He's been in prison for a lot of serious crimes, including drug charges, attempted murder, and rape—though it's not clear how legitimate all these charges are. He's crossed paths with Malcolm X and boasts John Lennon and Yoko Ono among his avowed supporters.

De Frankie exists at the margins of society in ways that Solomon does not. Though it's not totally clear where Solomon is from, he was educated at a British university and thus has grown up within the system—he's upheld the status quo of completing school, finding a job, and staying out of legal trouble. De Frankie, by contrast, is from Trinidad, which was a British colony until it was granted independence in 1962, and he has some serious charges on his record. De Frankie seems steadfastly to believe that real change for people of color won't happen by playing by the rules—it will take brute force.

Solomon ends his lecture and dismisses his class. He thinks about De Frankie, who he's convinced will "bring the revolution[.]" He thinks that his peers—children of immigrants born in "the New World"—grew up watching the older generations of immigrants and people of color give in to a "fear and wariness[.]" He thinks his parents' generation is too permissive with the British forces that have colonized, enslaved, and otherwise exploited their ancestors. Solomon knows that England can sense "Black discontent." And he can sense white opposition to it. He notices it in subtle ways, such as how "National Fronters" who pass him on the street will straighten their posture as they pass him.

Solomon may have grown up upholding the status quo, and certainly he learned this from his parents, but his admiration for De Frankie, and his belief that De Frankie will "bring the revolution" suggests that he's no longer willing to stand on the sidelines and let white supremacy continue to exploit Black people and other people of color. "National Fronters" refers to followers of the National Front, a far-right political party. It was founded in 1967, around the time when this story takes place.

Solomon knows it's just a matter of time before the Fronters "come for them[.]" All the rebels know it. But Solomon is sick of all "the sit-ins, the placards, the letter writing." It feels like the world—"the brown world at least"—supports their cause. It's even happening across the ocean in America, with people like King. Yet the anger persists—the air "fe[els] electric with it."

Solomon is sick of peaceful protest—he thinks it's not powerful enough to bring about lasting change when people of color are up against fringe groups like the National Front who are gearing up to "come for [Black rebels]." Put differently, he's tired of people who hope for change and equality but aren't willing to put their words to action. And "King" almost certainly refers to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., an instrumental figure in the fight for civil rights in the U.S.

Sometime later, Solomon is sitting across the table from De Frankie. They drink whiskey as De Frankie interviews Solomon. Solomon notes a "wildness" in De Frankie's eyes and knows the man is "dangerous." De Frankie looks over Solomon's resume, noting his three years studying "white history." Such an education, De Frankie muses, means that Solomon has been educated with "Babylon's lies." De Frankie asks Solomon why De Frankie should entrust "the culture of the movement" to Solomon. After a pause, Solomon replies that knowing the enemy's story is essential to defeating them. Solomon is on his fourth whiskey, and he feels horribly drunk. He tells himself to stop drinking—that De Frankie is trying to get him drunk to get him off his game.

De Frankie seems "dangerous" to Solomon because he has always operated outside of the system—that is, mainstream, white supremacist Western society—from which Solomon has only recently broken free. Solomon seems to get a little guarded and defensive when De Frankie draws attention to Solomon's permissiveness with mainstream society, mocking Solomon's history degree as a degree in "white history" and accusing him of being indoctrinated with "Babylon's lies." Note that the term "Babylon" can be used derogatorily to refer to oppressive institutions, like the police, for example.

De Frankie grips Solomon's hand suddenly and asks him what he believes in—and he wants Solomon to answer carefully, not just repeat the things he mentioned in the manifesto De Frankie asked him to write for this meeting. Solomon tells De Frankie that everything he believes in is in the manifesto. When De Frankie asks Solomon if he has any children, Solomon curses inwardly. De Frankie gives Solomon a bemused look and suggests that Solomon may have gotten a white woman pregnant. Solomon says nothing. He's read about De Frankie's opinion about interracial sex—he's suggested that Black women who have sex with white men should be lynched for "making mockeries of black men." This doesn't really make much sense to Solomon, though, since it's clear from De Frankie's complexion that he's biracial.

De Frankie's vehement condemnation of interracial relations illustrates how extreme some of his views are. It calls into question when solidarity and devotion to a cause can go too far. And when Solomon meditates on the hypocrisy of De Frankie's position that Black women who have sex with white men should be murdered—a position that doesn't make much sense, since De Frankie himself is biracial—Solomon further calls into question De Frankie's legitimacy.

Just then, Liv walks through the door. De Frankie yells at her that she should have knocked. As he yells, his eyes fixate on Liv's underwear outline, which shows through her tight pants. As Liv leaves, De Frankie flashes an evil grin at Solomon and makes a suggestive remark about her. Solomon is furious but keeps it to himself.

It's clear that Solomon's admiration for De Frankie has started to wane somewhat. Still, it's not for any reason related to the cause—it's because he's jealous or threatened by De Frankie ogling Liv. Solomon's emotional response to De Frankie's suggestive remark calls Solomon's own commitment to the cause into question.

Sometime later, Solomon stands outside the Holloway Road tube station, waiting to carry out the test De Frankie has tasked him with. In the distance, Solomon can see De Frankie at the corner of Holloway and Francis. Just then, another brother appears at the tube entrance. He touches his right forefinger to his temple, signifying that it's time to go. A woman (the kept woman) appears right when she's supposed to. She walks toward the station entrance, distracted as she rummages through her bag to find something. De Frankie told Solomon that the Panthers have been tracking her for months and know that she's in a relationship with a white man. Solomon doesn't think she looks much like "a kept woman." She's quite unremarkable; she wears her hair in a natural Afro and is neither thin nor chubby. She reminds Solomon of his mom.

Tension builds as the moment approaches for Solomon to prove his commitment to De Frankie and the Black Panther Party. It seems that Solomon will have to put his scholarly, theoretical ideas about Black empowerment into practice—and since readers know De Frankie has said Black women like the kept woman should be lynched, this is a tense and almost sickening moment. When Solomon sees his mom in the woman the Panthers have targeted, he familiarizes and humanizes her—and with this, it seems less likely that Solomon will be able to go through with whatever task De Frankie has assigned him to carry out.

Down the road, De Frankie is watching Solomon, "waiting on him to prove himself." The woman (the kept woman) walks toward Solomon, acknowledges him, then carries on. Solomon thinks about the two thin, white English girls he met at polytechnic "whose bodies he'd known like he shouldn't have." One of them pulled him inside the freezer in a science classroom and forced him on her, as though she "expected, *wanted* savagery." In time, Solomon came to feel "dissected, scalpel-carved" as though he were an object of anthropological study.

In the previous scene, Solomon's commitment to the present mission—and to the cause at large—seemed to wane. Here, he reminds himself of the way two white English girls he had sex with objectified and exoticized his body, perhaps to re-engage his rage and recommit himself to De Frankie's philosophy of absolute, unwavering solidarity to the cause of securing Black rights.

Back in the present, the Black woman (the kept woman) nears Solomon, who thinks about how she's headed home to her rich white boyfriend. He calls out to her, "Miss, scuse me, miss?" just as he's been instructed to do. Then De Frankie sneaks up behind the woman and places her neck in a chokehold. She struggles, but De Frankie succeeds in placing an iron collar around her neck; he snaps it shut and asks her, "Where your handsome white prince now?" The woman's eyes are full of fear as she stares pleadingly at Solomon. But Solomon says nothing. The police approach, and De Frankie flees down an alley.

Solomon's strategy of thinking about past experiences where white people dehumanized him appears to have worked: he distracts the woman, successfully carrying out at least his first responsibility in this mission. Still, Solomon's fixation on the fear in the woman's eyes suggests that he's humanizing and sympathizing with her—which will make it hard for him to carry out whatever De Frankie expects him to do next.

Solomon takes the woman (the kept woman) down Francis Lane. He stares at her as she falls to her knees. She gasps for breath even though the collar is wide enough for her to breathe. Solomon hears a patrol car grow closer and knows that they'll be here any minute—and if they see the woman, they'll catch him too. But the patrol car passes them and continues down the road. Both Solomon and the woman sigh with relief. Then the woman demands to know why Solomon is doing this to her. She knows De Frankie's been following her, and she calls him insane. She begs Solomon to remove the chain, but Solomon can't: the Railton Road blacksmith made the slave collar so that a special key is required to open it, and Solomon doesn't have it. Solomon hates the woman for wanting it off, and he hates himself for wanting the key.

Solomon hates himself because his sympathy for the woman contradicts his desire to be absolutely in solidarity with De Frankie and the Panther Party's cause to achieve Black rights. When the woman calls radical De Frankie insane, she suggests that it's De Frankie *Solomon should be upset with, not himself—that De Frankie is the one with the problematic views, not Solomon. Solomon hates the woman and himself for the same reason: in wanting not to carry out De Frankie's orders they're both not committed enough to the cause—and therefore have aligned themselves with so-called "Babylon," that is, with the white-supremacist society that exploits them. But is this true? Is there no room for nuance where solidarity is concerned?*

Solomon imagines the woman (the kept woman) going to a hospital to have the collar removed. He imagines the doctors laughing at her, and then he hates her—and himself—some more. Solomon realizes that "De Frankie was right about him." Though he has "the thirst" for rebellion, it's not consistent: "it lulled and peaked," until eventually, "Babylon [comes] a-calling." Solomon leaves the woman and walks back down Francis Lane.

As Solomon imagines the woman going to the hospital—an institution, and therefore a symbol for institutional power in a broader sense—to have the collar removed, only to have the (white) doctors laugh at her, he is once more suggesting that the woman's participation within mainstream society (dating a white man, believing that De Frankie's views are too radical) is self-defeating: her participation only benefits the powerful people who exploit her and other people of color. But Solomon's own wavering commitment to the revolution is more upsetting to him. In abandoning the woman and the mission, he proves that De Frankie was right about him: he's been educated within and conditioned to uphold the status quo of mainstream society. Solomon delves into rebellion in an unserious manner, more like it's a hobby to him. But when "Babylon [comes] a-calling," that is, when De Frankie's outsider tactics become too difficult or uncomfortable for Solomon to carry out and he longs to retreat to the comfortable place that is the moderate realm of mainstream society, he does just that.

GAPS IN THE HICKORY

Ella laughs as she boasts to Delores that she (Ella) is too tough for anyone to mess with her—and if anyone tries, her mother will go after them. Plus, Ella "got a white lady lookin' out for [her] now." Delores warned Ella that she'd take her key away if she caught Ella sneaking out again, but Ella knows that Delores doesn't have it in her to do this.

Ella's snarky quip about having "a white lady lookin' out for [her] now" implies that she's Black, and Delores is white. Unlike many of Foreign Soil*'s stories, "Gaps in the Hickory" starts off with two people who have overcome differences of age, race, and life experience to form an unlikely friendship.*

Delores looks out the window and sighs. She's tried not to think about her friend Izzy's death, but it's hard when it's the middle of the summer—the time of year Izzy used to call "Izzy's Still" when they were living in Mississippi. Delores goes to the bathroom to use the toilet. She makes a mental list of everything she has to do for herself, and for organizing the carnival. Her undergarments need a wash, too. Ella giggles that Delores's lacy pink underwear are "too saucy" for an old woman, but Delores doesn't care.

That Delores and Izzy connect Izzy to a particular place (their old home in Mississippi) and a particular time of year further expounds on the significant influence that place has on a person's character and relationships.

Jeanie carries the clothes basket to the children's room and sits down. It's summer in Mississippi, and it's unbearably hot outside. Jeanie looks at Izzy's crochet blanket spread across Lucy's bed. It has holes in it from where Lucy pokes her thumb through to suck her thumb—it's making her teeth appear rabbit-like, which is a shame. At least it's summer now, though—that means that Jeanie can put off fixing her late mother-in-law's (Izzy) blanket for a few months.

The scene shifts to what seems to be a second, concurrent storyline. Jeanie's mention of Izzy confirms that Delores's story is linked with this one, though how specifically the stories relate remains unknown—perhaps Delores has some connection to Izzy's former home in Mississippi.

Jeanie returns to the clothes basket and separates her son's clothes from her daughter's clothes, and then she begins to fold them. She got these clothes secondhand, and she drives far away to buy them, since she doesn't want anyone to know where she's been shopping. Jackson, her husband, is too proud to have his children "playin' with some nigger's leftovers." Jeanie wanted to ask Jackson why he thought a Black person in their part of Mississippi was any worse off than a white person, but she didn't ask him.

The two stories that "Gaps in the Hickory" alternates between take place in vastly different environments. Delores and Ella get along despite their racial and age differences. In Mississippi, meanwhile, Jeanie's husband, Jackson, openly flaunts his hateful, racist views—which go unchallenged, due to Jeanie's apparent unwillingness to confront him and risk stirring the pot.

Jeanie looks out the window; she sees Lucy running around in the yard outside. Jackson is sitting on the porch drinking a beer, and Carter, their son, is talking to Jackson. Jeanie notices that Carter has been digging his fingernails into his palms—a habit that started when his grandma Izzy died. Jackson starts to yell at Carter, and Carter stares at his feet.

Carter's new habit of digging his fingernails into his palms is concerning; it seems that he's suffering in the aftermath of Izzy's death, perhaps because she was a source of support to him in an otherwise threatening, unpleasant environment. Indeed, Carter's instinct to stare at his feet when his father yells at him suggests that Jackson frightens him.

Back at Delores's, Ella barges into the bathroom and teases Delores for staring at herself in the mirror. Delores again tries to scold Ella about sneaking in at night, but Ella talks back. Delores thinks that Ella's mouth will give her trouble if she doesn't watch it. She leaves to give Ella privacy in the bathroom—everyone is friendly in the building, and Delores has lived there for 20 years, "but you can never be too sure who gon accuse you-a what where there's a li'l pickney concerned."

Delores's cryptic remark about "never be[ing] too sure who gon accuse you-a what" refers to her wariness of being accused of being inappropriate with Ella, a young child ("li'l pickney"). This is a standard, even prudent thing to be cautious about, but it does hint that there's perhaps something about Delores that would cause her neighbors to be suspicious of her. As well, Delores's reasoning that living in New Orleans for 20 years should be enough to have gained her neighbors' trust implicitly ties the time a person has somewhere to their acceptance within a community. Once more, the book shows how difficult it is to be an outsider.

Delores remembers that Izzy would warn her to watch out with Ella. She told Delores to make up with her son so she could see her own grandpickeys instead of "takin' in strays from next door." Delores didn't like how Izzy called Ella a stray, and she threatened to throw her off the balcony of her New Orleans apartment. Anyway, Izzy didn't know what she was talking about: she had her grandkids with her in Mississippi. But Delores's son won't speak to her ever again.

Even Izzy, Delores's friend, thought it prudent for Delores to watch how much time she spent with Ella, suggesting that there's a clear (if perhaps unjust and discriminatory) reason that people would be suspicious of Delores spending so much time with a young girl. The detail about Delores's son not talking to her anymore also suggests that there's something about Delores that would cause others to view her as an outsider.

Jackson stares at Carter as though he wants to ask him something, but no words come out. Jackson asks Carter if he wants to try something. When Carter says no—it's too hot, he says—Jackson calls him soft. He accuses him of moping around ever since Izzy died. But this is true, and Carter misses Izzy terribly. She died of a cold, which Carter thinks is funny, given how hot it was when she died. She died while she was sleeping in a rocking chair, and the men who took her body away had a hard time straightening her to go on the stretcher. Jeanie ordered him not to watch, but he did anyway. Jackson saw him watching and slapped him on the back, applauding him for not crying. As soon as Jackson turned around, though, Carter broke down.

Foreign Soil *is full of characters who repeatedly fail to communicate with each other and experience misunderstanding and conflict as a result—and Jackson and Carter are no exception. They either don't talk, or else they fail to talk about serious, interpersonal issues. Here, Jackson responds to Carter's obvious grief over Izzy with cruel taunting, suggesting that it's not manly for Carter to cry over his dead grandmother. And because of this, Carter doesn't share any of what he's really feeling with Jackson—like the obviously traumatic experience of seeing Izzy's dead body.*

Jackson finishes cutting a strip of fabric out of a white piece of cloth. He tells Carter that he'll have to "come ridin' with [him]" at some point. Carter hates that Jackson and Nate call it that: "*ridin'*." When Carter was younger, he thought they had horses somewhere. Later, when he snuck into the bed of Jackson's truck one night, he learned that this wasn't true. Jackson drove the truck to a forest. Nate and a bunch of other local men were there. They were all wearing white hoods and capes and singing songs about "*Nigger that*" and "*Nigger this*." Then they lit a cross on fire. Jackson found Carter and drove him home. Jeanie was furious; Jackson left to return to the forest.

Jackson's term, "ridin'," is a euphemism for his involvement with the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). Jackson's involvement in the hate group further shows what a hateful, racist, and violent environment this story takes place in. It perhaps helps to explain—albeit not justify—Jackson's racism. He grew up in a place where racism was commonplace enough to maintain a KKK chapter, which means such harmful ideas might have seemed acceptable and right to him.

Jackson notes what a good night it is for "ridin'" and continues to cut fabric. Carter recognizes the fabric: it's his sister Lucy's old nightgown. It seems wrong that Jackson is taking the pretty nightgown with him. Carter turns around and sees his mother staring at him from inside; she has an odd expression on her face. Carter turns and watches Lucy dancing and singing on the lawn. He presses his fingernails into his palms.

Conflict dominates Carter's family life. Jeanie seems to disapprove of Jackson's racism, and she seems worried about the way it's affecting Carter. Carter, meanwhile, is clearly suffering as he grieves Izzy's death and tries to deal with his mean, racist father. Yet nobody discusses any of this, and so these various conflicts persist and grow stronger.

Jackson is taking forever to go ridin'—he's been preparing since morning. Carter watches now as Jackson double knots the old nightgown around a stick. Jackson is a large man—just like Carter's grandfather Denver was. Carter hasn't met his grandfather, though; he ran away with another woman when Jackson was just a little boy. Jackson finishes his work, then suddenly he tears the leftover piece of nightgown in two. The sound startles Carter.

It's clear that Jackson is prejudiced against Black people, but the violence with which he tears Lucy's old nightgown to fashion some kind of "ridin'" accessory might symbolically suggest that he's misogynistic, too, though this is speculative. At any rate, it's clear that Carter is growing up in an environment that oozes hatred, violence, and prejudice.

Back at Delores's, Delores screams as she rips a wax strip off her chin. Ella tells her to stop—all New Orleans will think someone's been murdered. Delores reminds Ella that it's beauty day. Looking at Ella's "nappy" hair, Delores asks Ella if she wants her to tease it into an Afro. Ella says her mom will "slit [Delores's] throat" if she messes with Ella's hair again. Delores laughs; Ella's mom is a tough lady. She's raised five children on her own and keeps all of them in line—Ella is the only one who acts out. But Delores loves Ella's confidence. She and Ella make an odd pair, but Delores loves Ella like she's one of her own grandchildren. She smiles when they're out together, Ella pushing the shopping cart or helping with the laundry.

Delores and Ella's chaotic but loving relationship shows that a person's home isn't always where they're from or where their family lives—above all, home is a place where a person is surrounded by a supporting, loving community who accepts them and makes them feel less alone.

Ella notes that it's been a long time since Delores's friend from Mississippi came to visit. (Izzy used to drive down once a month.) Delores hasn't been able to tell Ella that Izzy died. She's been thinking about the kids, Carter and Lucy, a lot lately; Izzy always swore she'd take them out of that house and move them to New Orleans. Delores pauses and then admits to Ella that Izzy died five months ago. Ella tells Delores that she knows. She asks if Delores is okay, and Delores says she is. Delores and Izzy would talk a lot on their visits, and sometimes they'd forget that Ella was there. Once, Izzy admitted that she was afraid of Jackson—even though he was her own son. Now, Ella tells Delores it's good she's feeling better—because they need to go check on Carter, like Izzy would've wanted them to do.

Izzy recognized how a person's environment shapes the person they become—their identity, the values they hold, and the way they treat others. Before she died, she longed to bring Carter and Lucy to New Orleans because she knew it would give them a safer, more tolerant environment to grow up in than could their home in rural Mississippi. Indeed, Ella's fierce desire to help Carter suggests that growing up in the diverse environment of New Orleans has taught her to empathize with—not hate—people who are different or come from different stretches of life.

Jeanie watches Jackson prepare for his evening and thinks about how his "Klan business" has gotten out of hand. He first got into it when he lost his job, insisting that Black people were taking away employment from "real" Americans. But three years later, he's still at it. And besides, around here, it's hard to get by whether a person is Black or white. Still, Jeanie isn't worried that Nate or his people will hurt any Black people—lynchings don't happen anymore. No, it's Carter that Jeanie is most worried about.

Rather than attribute his inability to find work on broader economic forces or increased automation, for instance, Jackson misdirects his anger toward Black people—who not only are "real" Americans, but who also don't have anything to do with Jackson's employment status and are likely suffering as much as he is.

It was Izzy who told Jeanie about Carter. She told Jeanie she'd caught Carter dressed up in a lacy blouse, Izzy's old heels, lipstick, and some pearls. Izzy told Jeanie that Carter's been this way since he was born. He's a good kid, and Izzy worries what will happen to him the day Jackson discovers the truth about him. Then Izzy handed Jeanie a piece of paper with Jackson's father's New Orleans address written on it. Jeanie's kept it hidden under her mattress, just in case she ever needs it.

The story doesn't explicitly state it, but it's heavily implied that Carter is transgender. That Izzy is aware and accepting of this might explain why her death has affected Carter so much—she seems to be the only adult who saw him for who he really is. Finally, it's interesting that Carter's grandfather, whom the story has only referenced vaguely and in passing, lives in New Orleans—could there be some connection between him and Delores?

Delores fills a kettle with water and lights the stove. She thinks about the Still. Delores hated leaving Mississippi, though she's grown to love New Orleans. It was Izzy who told Delores to leave—nobody in their small town would accept the way she was. So Delores left—"an lef Izzy to deal with the mess." Delores occupies herself with preparing a cup of cocoa for Ella. Ella joins her at the table and drinks her cocoa. Delores thinks about Carter and starts to cry. Ella looks at Delores's teary eyes and asks when they're going to bring out the nail polish—it's Beauty Day, after all.

With Izzy's vague remark about nobody in rural Mississippi accepting Delores the way she was, Delores's connection to everyone in Mississippi becomes even clearer. It seems likely that she is in fact "Carter's grandfather," and that she is a transgender woman. This certainly would explain the mystery surrounding Carter's grandfather's leaving. Delores cries here because she knows she should help Carter escape, just like Izzy helped her escape so many years before—but doing so would require her to revisit a past and a place that would resurface old traumas and perhaps even put her in harm's way.

Lucy jumps up and down and demands to know why Jackson is cutting up her clothes. Jackson promises that he's only cutting up old clothes. Carter turns and looks at his sister. He likes the dress she's wearing; Izzy bought it for her, he remembers. She brought it back from one of her visits to New Orleans to see her old friend. It was too big for Lucy then, and Izzy winked at Carter as she hung it in the closet.

That Izzy knowingly bought the dress in a size that would be too large for Lucy—but just the right size for Carter—reflects her acceptance of Carter. Jeanie might not ridicule Carter for being "soft," as Jackson does, but she doesn't actively communicate her love and support for him either. Carter has lived in Mississippi his whole life, so it's the only home he's ever known—but really, it was Izzy and her love and acceptance of him that made it feel like home.

Jackson drives away later that night, and Carter and Lucy watch his truck as it disappears into the distance. Carter loves his sister. He also loves all the accessories that arrived once she was born: hair clips, flowery baby soaps, ribbons. Jackson always hated how interested Carter was in Lucy's girly things. Jeanie assured him that it was just a phase. But Carter has always known that he wasn't a boy. He's found ways to keep this a secret, like painting his small toenail with purple polish and keeping it hidden in a sock for a week.

Again, while Jeanie doesn't react to Carter's gender non-conformity with Jackson's hatred, she doesn't really accept it either, minimizing it as a "phase." This passage further shows how place shapes a person's character: growing up in a judgmental community hasn't suppressed Carter's conviction in his gender identity, but it has forced him to keep it a secret and perhaps even view it as a shameful thing.

Delores tips open her blue bucket of nail polish. But Ella doesn't want to paint her nails anymore. She tells Delores she can't believe Delores isn't going to check on Carter. Delores snaps at Ella to stop talking about Carter. When Ella won't listen, Delores tells her that Beauty Day is cancelled today—Delores has a lot of sewing to do for the carnival. Then she quickly gets up from the couch so that Ella can't see her cry.

Note the parallel between this scene and the previous scene, which described Carter's love of painting his toenail. Sometimes "home" is the geographic, literal place a person's from, but other times, it's where they're surrounded by a likeminded community who supports and nourishes them. Carter and Delores are related by blood, but more than this, they're connected by their shared interest and by the similar hardships they've endured (not being accepted for who they are).

Delores's thoughts drift back to Mississippi—back to the days when she was Denver, Izzy's husband. They were married for nine years and already had Jackson when Izzy found out about Delores. Delores can hardly remember being Denver anymore. Denver worked at a meat plant and loved his wife and son. On the outside, he was the perfect Southern man. But on the inside, he was suffering. But that's not who she is anymore. She became her true self when she moved to New Orleans.

Though Delores was never really Denver—that is, though she never identified as a man—she draws a clear line between the suppressed, unaccepted person she was in Mississippi (Delores-as-Denver) and the new, fully realized person she became in New Orleans. Though moving to a more accepting place didn't change who Delores was, it helped her to come into herself and be proud about the identity she previously had to hide.

Ella hugs Delores and says she didn't want her to cry—she just wants Delores to go get Carter, especially since Delores "know what it be like out there." Delores freezes. She asks Ella what she means. Ella giggles as she tells Delores that "no real-life born-in-a-lady's body woman got feet an hands that damn big." She tells Delores that everyone knows—but nobody cares. Then she asks Delores if there's any tin spaghetti to eat.

Ella's observation that Delores "know what it be like out there" momentarily frightens Delores—it implies that Ella knows that Delores is transgender. But Ella's kind and lighthearted teasing just reaffirms that Delores is surrounded by a supportive, loving community in New Orleans and has nothing to worry about.

Jeanie opens a can of spaghetti, dumps its contents into a bowl, and places the bowl in the microwave. She thinks about what's become of Jackson. He used to be so normal, and now everything's changed. Lucy enters the kitchen, excited to eat spaghetti. Carter follows her inside, looking sullen. Izzy's warning about Jackson finding out about Carter echoes inside Jeanie's head. Jeanie tries to say something to Carter but can't find the words. Instead, she orders Carter to eat his spaghetti. Carter doesn't budge; he's always like this "in the Still."

Jeanie's vague remark about Jackson changing is curious—it complicates the assumption that his environment has caused his racism and bigotry and hints that perhaps some specific, recent event caused him to become so angry and hateful. Meanwhile, Carter's environment continues to influence his behavior. His lacking appetite and despondency "in the Still" (the time of year associated with Izzy) suggests that he's consumed with grief and suffering.

Ella eats her spaghetti ravenously. Delores asks if everything is okay at home—if there's been enough to eat. Ella glares at Delores and says everything's fine. Just then, there's a knock at the door. Delores says it's for Ella. Before Ella leaves, Delores tells her to take some cans of spaghetti to her mother's house; Delores lies, claiming she doesn't like tin spaghetti, so Ella doesn't feel ashamed. The knocking at the door starts up again, startling Ella and Delores. Ella sees a mail truck outside and suggests that it might be the mail carrier knocking. Delores dreads opening the door—she doesn't want to receive a letter full of bad news, especially if it's about Carter.

The tin spaghetti featured in this scene and the previous scene connects the Mississippi storyline and the New Orleans storyline while also emphasizing their differences. Unlike Carter, who lives in a place that's so unaccepting and threatening that it seems to take away his appetite, Ella experiences community and acceptance in New Orleans, and so she eats ravenously and joyfully. Though Ella's life isn't without its troubles—it's clear that money is tight, and the family doesn't always have enough to eat—living among people who look out for each other makes things more manageable.

Delores left Newmarket, Mississippi when Jackson was about Carter's age. It was hard for her, but she and Izzy thought that was best; Jackson was too young to understand it, anyway. Izzy told Delores that Carter asked for his daddy every day that first year. It was hard for Izzy to lie and tell Carter his father had run away with another woman.

Just as many of the immigrants and refugees from Foreign Soil*'s other stories have made sacrifices in order to build a better life for themselves and their children, Delores, as a person whose gender identity places her at the margins of society, had to sacrifice raising her son in order to preserve and protect herself.*

Four years ago, Jackson came to visit Delores, though Delores never told Izzy about it. He'd come wanting Denver's help for one thing or another. When Delores answered the door, Jackson didn't recognize her. He asked if she was Denver's "woman." Before she could stop herself, Delores said, "Hello, Jackson." Jackson stared at Delores, confused and shocked. Then he backed away and left without saying a word. It was then, according to Izzy, that Jackson changed. That was when his "Klan nonsense" started. Delores knows that Jackson never told Izzy about coming to New Orleans, and Delores didn't see the point in telling her herself. Ella interrupts Delores's reveries to shout up to her that she has mail to sign for.

Jackson's visit to Delores helps to explain his present hatefulness, though it doesn't justify it. Seeing Delores and realizing that she was his long-lost father was something he didn't know how to handle, and it seems that he turned to anger, hatred, and bigotry to combat the complicated, big emotions the reunion with Delores made him feel. Just as Jackson unjustly blames Black people for his economic hardships, he unjustly blames anybody who's different from him—Black people, "girly" Carter—for the hurt and betrayal he experienced on finding out the truth about his father.

Carter still hasn't touched his food. Instead, he traces the porcelain plate's floral pattern. Gram Izzy bought it at the thrift store years ago. When Jackson found out where Izzy got them from, he got angry; he didn't want to eat off a plate that Black people might have eaten off first. Izzy laughed at him and told him to quit it with the Klan nonsense; she mentioned a little girl named Taneesha that Jackson knew in the third grade, insinuating that Jackson kissed her. Jackson stormed out. That night was the angriest Carter had ever seen his father.

It seems that the porcelain plate's symbolic resonance is what makes Carter lose his appetite: he associates the plate with Izzy, the last person who accepted Carter and actively challenged Jackson's hatefulness. Living in Mississippi has never been all that great for Carter, it seems, but Izzy made things bearable. Now, in her absence, he wastes away—emotionally and physically.

Delores greets the mailman at the door. He hands her an envelope. Delores takes the mail inside; her eyes shake as she opens it. It's a letter from a lawyer in Mississippi; apparently, Izzy has left her the house. Delores tells Ella about the house, and Ella asks if Delores will move back to Mississippi. Delores is about to explain that she can never go back there, but then it hits her: maybe, in leaving Delores the house, Izzy gave Delores a way to save Carter before it's too late.

Delores is afraid to return to Mississippi for multiple reasons. First, she likely fears for her physical safety—Izzy made it clear how afraid she was of the person Jackson has become in recent years. Returning would force her to confront many traumatic memories: it would remind her of the family and life she abandoned in order to create a new life for herself, and all the lives that decision has indirectly hurt.

Carter continues to trace the porcelain plate's floral pattern. He thinks about Gram Izzy. She never had many friends around Newmarket. He knows this had something to do with Carter's grandpa and the woman he ran away with. The only thing Carter really knows about his grandpa is that Jackson hates him more than anything in the whole world. As Jeanie angrily cleans up a mess Lucy has made, Carter scrapes his uneaten spaghetti into the garbage. Jeanie scolds him. Carter walks to the sink to rinse off his plate. As he does this, he runs his fingers through his long hair, which he hides under a baseball cap when Jackson is home. Then Carter asks Jeanie when Jackson will be home. Jeanie swears, knowing why Carter is asking.

Izzy's social ostracization suggests that perhaps others around town knew about her husband's transgender identity and discriminated against Izzy because of it, though the story doesn't make this clear. That Jeanie knows what Carter is really asking her when he asks when Jackson will return suggests that he's done this before. Also, whatever Carter is up to, it's not something he wants Jackson to know about, so the reader can infer that it has something to do with his gender expression. Jeanie's negative reaction to Carter further shows how while she's not explicitly rejecting her child, she's not actively supporting him either.

Carter runs to Lucy's room, opens the wardrobe, and shuts the door. Then he takes off his clothes and changes into Lucy's clothes, which are covered in glitter and sequins. "His mind unfog itself" when he sees himself in the mirror.

When Carter's external appearance matches his internal appearance, "His mind unfog itself," and he feels at peace with his body and identity. This scene further shows how vital it is that Carter leave Mississippi, as Izzy seems to have intended: the place he lives now will only continue to beat him down and prevent him from realizing his true identity.

Delores and Ella stare at the papers from the lawyer. Ella asks what Delores wants to do. Delores wipes the sweat from her forehead and blinks; she knows that "Izzy's soul done leap through the gaps in the elm an the hickory," and she knows what she has to do.

Delores seems to regard the legal papers as a sign from Izzy beyond the grave—a sign that has "leap[t] through the gaps in the elm an the hickory" that form the walls of her old home in Mississippi, a sign that she must act now if she wants to save Carter.

Jeanie opens the door to Lucy's room quietly. She sees Carter standing in front of the mirror, his eyes closed, dressed in Lucy's clothes. Lucy sneaks up behind Jeanie and asks Jeanie, "Ain't he look beautiful?" Carter opens his eyes and stares back at his mom. She looks gutted. Jeanie tells Carter to get dressed; they're going for a drive.

Lucy is still young and has yet to internalize the bigotry that is common among people in her hometown, so she is still able to look at Carter and call him "beautiful." The reason for Jeanie's gutted expression is ambiguous: it could be that she's disapproving of Carter's dress, but it could also be that she's upset about the difficult decision she's just made: the reader can infer that when Jeanie says they're going for a drive, it means she's finally going to take Carter to New Orleans.

Carter and Lucy hold hands in the back seat as Jeanie backs out of the garage. Carter doesn't know what's going to happen, but he knows he's ready. They've been driving for about an hour now, and Jeanie hasn't spoken the entire time. Carter falls asleep. When he wakes up, it's nearly dark out; they've been on the road for hours. Carter looks around and sees tall buildings and houses built close together. Jeanie tells Carter that they're in New Orleans. Things are really bad back in Newmarket, so Jeanie's brought Carter to stay with her grandpa (Delores), like Izzy told her to do. Lucy is too young and will stay back in Mississippi. Carter can't believe that Jeanie's going to leave him with a strange man—and a man who ran off and left his family, no less. Jeanie waits in the car with Lucy as Carter approaches the building they're parked outside of.

Though the story curiously omits the scene in which Jeanie decides it's time to take Carter to New Orleans, the reader can infer that Delores, acting on the supposed "sign" she received from Izzy (legal notice that Izzy had left the house to Delores in her will), called Jeanie and told her to bring Carter to live with her. Regardless, Jeanie's heartbreaking decision to give up her child is an important moment in her character development: finally, she's acting in solidarity with him in a way that will make his life and future meaningfully better than the life he would have had back home in Mississippi.

Delores stares down at the street at the dirty car that's been stopped outside their house for the past 30 minutes. It's the same one Jackson drove when he came to see her years ago. The car's back door opens, and a little boy hops out. Ella joins Delores at the window to see who she's been staring at. She peers down at the street and cries, "Izzy's Carter!" She calls out to him. Delores can hardly contain her joy: she knows that as soon as she and Carter see each other, they'll know that they're family. She walks toward the front door and prepares to greet her grandchild.

The story ends on an uncertain but happy note. Ella's joyous greeting of Carter suggests that Carter has a happy life ahead of him in his new home: he's finally in a place where people will accept and love him for who he is, and where he can move about the world unafraid to be himself.

BIG ISLAN

Nathanial Robinson looks down at his reflection in the water. He's wearing jeans and work boots; he's a big man, but he's gentle. He decides that Kingston Port hasn't changed one bit. The water, breeze, and flat horizon are all the same. And even though there are more cargo ships out now, he can still smell "dat same crazy-fresh islan air[.]"

Nathanial Robinson's world is simple and unchanging, but he doesn't seem unhappy or bored: instead, he seems to take comfort in the natural beauty of where he's from (Jamaica) and finds comfort in the consistency of "dat same crazy-fresh island air[.]"

In other ways, though, things are very different: "Since *J fe Jamaica*, de ocean bin callin', nyah calmin', de young man." The sun used to calm Nathanial, but now it just annoys him, and he feels a perpetual sense of "unease deep deep down in im own self skin." One year ago, Nathanial's wife Clarise made him promise to learn one letter per week, starting with "*A fe ackee*." Nathanial remembers how Clarise watched him trace the letter A as she cooked food. But Nathanial's hands are awkward, and he's struggled to write the letters. Clarise tells him he needs to take his time to learn the alphabet and learn everything right. If he does this, Clarise insists, then he'll eventually be able to read any book in the city library.

Though the island where Nathanial has spent his entire life has remained unchanged, other aspects of his life haven't: namely, his wife Clarise has demanded that he learn to read, and ever since then, Nathanial's attitude toward his home has changed. Now, the natural features that once calmed him only bring him "unease deep deep down in [his] own skin." It seems perhaps that gaining literacy—though Nathanial clearly still has much to learn—has shifted Nathanial's perspective. Though the island itself hasn't physically shrunk, Nathanial's world has grown.

Learning the alphabet was Clarise's idea, though—not Nathanial's. She wants him to be more educated so he can make more money. It's hard for Nathanial to relate this person to the little girl she was 20 years ago—the person he met before his father died and he had to work to support his family.

Clarise hopes to move up in the world, and she thinks that education is the way to do this. Their home offers them few opportunities for economic or social advancement, but an education could be a ticket out.

Nathanial would return home once a year. In the time that elapsed between those visits, Clarise got more and more beautiful, and eventually Nathanial married her. After that, she announced that she wanted to move to the city.

Clarise isn't the first character in this collection who has moved from a rural place to the city hoping to find opportunity: Millie, in "Hope," did the same when she travelled to Kingston to apprentice at Willemina's shop.

After Clarise teaches Nathanial "*A is fe ackee*," she makes Nathanial point out all the As on packages at the grocery store. Sometimes he can, sometimes he can't; Clarise enjoys herself, but Nathanial feels humiliated. Clarise praises Nathanial's efforts and tells him they'll work on *B* next week. But to Nathanial, the "praise like an open-palm slap on de back ov [his] head." He never felt like hitting a woman before he was married, but now, he does. Nathanial can understand her behavior a little bit—she's probably bitter that he concealed his illiteracy from her when they were married. But Clarise also kept secrets from Nathanial—for instance, she swore that Nathanial was the first man she had sex with. But just before the wedding, Nathanial's cousin found out that this wasn't true. Even so, Nathanial still married Clarise, and he never told anyone about her sexual history.

Lack of communication creates tension in Nathanial and Clarise's relationship, though Nathanial's impulse to equate his lying about being illiterate with Clarise's lying about not being a virgin doesn't seem like a totally equal comparison. His anger at Clarise's perhaps patronizing praise seems similarly defensive—he thinks he's angry at Clarise, but in reality, he's perhaps angry and ashamed of himself for his illiteracy, and Clarise is merely a convenient scapegoat since she's the one who communicated that his illiteracy was a problem.

Back in the present, Nathanial closes his eyes. He knows he's dirty from working all day, and he knows that Clarise will want him to clean up when he gets home—she prefers "uncalloused" men, like the men who work at the bank. A wind blows through, distracting him; it "whisper roun im ear, like a chilehood sweetheart." It's been a year since Clarise taught Nathanial "*J fe Jamaica*." Now, Nathanial can read and understand sentences. After they learned J, Claris brought down a small globe and pointed out the West Indian island. She asked him to locate the Js. Nathanial was shocked at how small Jamaica was on the globe. "Dis a small, small island we livin' on, mi husband," she told him before leaving him sitting there with the globe.

Clarise's preference for "uncalloused" men, or men who work white-collar office jobs (unlike Nathanial, who is a dock worker) reflects her hopes for the future. She wants to move up in life and have economic stability. Though Nathanial claims to be bitter about having to learn to read, it's clear that this is only because doing so has expanded his knowledge about the broader world and brought his life into perspective: being able to spell and locate Jamaica on the globe has showed him how much world there is out there, and how small Jamaica is in comparison.

It's Friday now, and Nathanial is done unloading at the dock for the week. He and his coworkers make sure that the loading and unloading process goes smoothly—that boats carrying bananas and coconuts reach London in time for the fruit to be at its ripest. Clarise has been telling Nathanial to get a new job. He's been with the Port Authority for years now and hasn't gotten a promotion. Clarise knows why—it's because he's a grown man and can't read. But she also knows that Nathanial is working on it so that he can get a promotion. But until that day comes, this is Nathanial's life. He's told Clarise that he won't resign. He loves working at the port, watching things approach and leave the island. Sometimes, he feels "like [his] own self is part ov de globality ov it all." When Nathanial told Clarise this, she snapped that "globality" isn't even a word.

The idea of globalization, or "globality," as Nathanial puts it, is at the forefront of this scene, with the mention of boats shipping fruits to London. Though reading has piqued Nathanial's interest in the broader world—or given him a sense of its scope, anyway—he's still more content than Clarise is to live out their life together in Kingston. Working at the port gives him all the "globality" he needs, and he doesn't feel it's necessary to improve himself or seek their fortune abroad in someplace like London.

Now, on Friday afternoon, most of the ships have already departed for the day. But the big ones are still waiting around in the port. One of the ships, *Windrush Three*, is the biggest that Nathanial has ever seen. The ship's name tells Nathanial it's from England. Nathanial bets that some of his fellow Jamaicans—Clarise included—would board the ship if they got the chance, genuinely believing that England's streets "jus a-pave up wid gold." They think that they'll have a chance at a better life in England. "*E is fe Inglan,*" and "*O is fe opportunity,*" thinks Nathanial. But he doesn't believe this. When he looked up England on the globe, he was shocked that a country that is always "rapin' an pillagin'" everywhere else is so small.

Nathanial thinks that Clarise and other Jamaicans idealize places like England, where there are supposed to be more opportunities for economic and social advancement. When the story takes place, Jamaica is still a colony under British rule, so Nathanial also might view people who'd jump at the opportunity to go to England as disloyal to Jamaica and the interests of the Jamaican people. Finally, Nathanial's observation that England is just a small island—just like Jamaica—speaks to the absurdity of borders and national power. Though England and Jamaica appear similar on the map, it's England that is always "rapin' and pillagin'" and places like Jamaica that are the victims of such atrocities.

Nathanial's older brother Curtis left on a ship like the *Windrush Three* six years ago—in fact, it was the first one: the *Windrush*. It used to be a banana boat. But in Nathanial's mind, that ship's function didn't much change: "de cargo's still a-gobble up abroad by foreigner." Curtis left Jamaica dressed in his nicest clothes, hopeful about the new life he'd have abroad. Nathanial hasn't seen him since he left. He thinks, "*B is fe bon voyage. P is fe possibility. D is fe dreams.*"

To Nathanial, it makes no difference whether it's immigrants or fruit that giant ships like the Windrush Three *carries to England: either way the English will treat its shipment like cargo, dehumanizing immigrants and treating them like resources to exploit rather than people to respect. In this scene, Nathanial's recitation of "*B is fe bon voyage. P is fe possibility. D is fe dreams*" is ironic: he's pointing out a disparity between people like his brother who believe in opportunity and people like himself who have a better sense of how the unjust world treats immigrants and minorities.*

Nathanial returns his thoughts to the water. "Oh, dis island," he murmurs to himself. Anyone would be crazy to overlook its beauty and go looking "fe bettah ting." Unlike his brother, Nathanial vows never to leave the island. He gets up then, walks down the pier, and heads home; Clarise will be making dinner about now. He thinks that even if he leaves this place, the letter *H* "always gwan stand fe *home*."

Nathanial's declaration that H "always gwan stand fe home*" reinforces one of the book's overarching themes: the essential role that place plays in a person's life. Jamaica might not be as wealthy as other nations, but its culture and boundless natural beauty have made Nathanial into the person he is today.*

Sometime later, Nathanial sits at his small wooden table and finishes the yams Clarise has prepared for dinner. Clarise, meanwhile, folds clean clothes and places them in the laundry basket. She seems distracted. When Nathanial teases her about it, she jokes that she's swooning over the entire West Indies cricket team. Nathanial laughs. Then he gets up and moves to the lounge room, sinking into an old armchair. Clarise follows Nathanial into the lounge room. She hands him the newspaper and asks him if he wants to practice reading. Nathanial told Clarise to stop reading aloud from the newspaper weeks ago. He doesn't want to hear about all the politicians debating about independence from the British. Ever since slavery, Jamaicans have done exactly as their British rulers demanded, anyway.

The issue of Jamaican independence continues to color the background of this story. Nathanial's disparaging reflection that Jamaicans have bowed to British demands ever since slavery suggests that Jamaican people are still functionally enslaved to this day, even if the institution of slavery has long been abolished: put another way, Nathanial sees that in not insisting on independence, and in idealizing England as a fantastical world of endless opportunity, Jamaican people allow themselves to remain victims of British exploitation.

Nathanial looks at the front page of the paper and sees a photo of the cricket team. He asks Clarise why they're on the front page. She explains that they're getting a lot of coverage for playing in "Owstrayleah," a place at the bottom of the earth that is so large it could fit all of the Caribbean inside it and still have plenty of space left over. Nathanial tells Clarise that A is not just for ackee now—now it's for Owstrayleah, too. Clarise shakes her head as she walks away.

"Owstrayleah" is the phonetic spelling of the way Nathanial pronounces "Australia," and it seems to be the "Big Islan" referenced in the story's title. When Nathanial tells Clarise that A is now for "ackee" (a type of fruit) and for "Australia," it shows how, despite his initial skepticism, learning to read is expanding Nathanial's world and warming him to the notion that maybe it's not so foolish and futile to dream of a bigger, better life someplace else.

Nathanial leans back into his chair and regards the newspaper some more. The cricket team on the front page looks so happy, "like dem in paradise[.]" It makes Nathan feel uneasy. "*E is fe envy*," he thinks to himself. When he closes his eyes, he momentarily hears the sound of crashing waves—and the sound of "de people ov Owstrayleah cheerin' im on an smilin'." But Nathanial will never be a part of that. "*Big, big island*," he thinks to himself.

As Nathanial sees the cricket team looking so happy and fulfilled in Australia, his happiness with his own home starts to shrink. He used to think that Jamaica would always be enough for him—that it would always be home –but now, the island seems small and limiting. At the same time, Nathanial doesn't let himself get carried away with grandiose hopes for the future: he seems to sense that as a functionally illiterate, poor person of color, he doesn't have the kind of opportunities that the cricket team has.

A few months ago, the South African cricket team toured England, which resulted in protests in response to "dat dreadful partheid business." But in Owstrayleah (at least, according to this photo in the paper), it doesn't look like anyone cares what color your skin is. Clarise, from the other room, calls out that the West Indies team has been playing in Owstrayleah a few days now, and everyone there loves them. They're calling this season "Calypso Summer." Clarise hums the Linstead Market song as she walks back into the lounge to join Nathanial.

Unlike South Africa, which until the early 1990s upheld a form of institutionalized racial segregation known as apartheid, Australia seems not to care about skin color. Of course, as other stories in this book (like "Shu Yi") show, this isn't exactly true—though laws might not overtly sanction racism, people of color still experience discrimination on personal and systemic levels.

That night, Clarise goes to bed early. Nathanial stays awake. Though he's never much cared for cricket, he "labor one sentence at a time tru de sport section ov de paper."

Despite his earlier skepticism about England, the idea of Australia and all the possibilities it offers enchants Nathanial—he's so swept away that he labors through an entire article about a subject he doesn't even care about to learn more about this strange, big island.

The next morning, Nathanial wakes to sun streaming in through the bedroom window and the smells of Clarise cooking breakfast drifting in from the kitchen. The newspaper is folded up on Nathanial's bedside table. Nathanial walks over to the window, the image of the cricket team lingering in his mind. Outside, Kingston has already come to life; shop doors are open, and people are wandering the streets. It's a typical Saturday morning. But this morning is different for Nathanial. Today, "Kingston feel insignificant small." He thinks to himself, "*R. R is fe restlessness.*"

Everything about this Saturday morning is typical, and yet Kingston is irrevocably changed for Nathanial. Though just yesterday he vowed he'd never leave, learning and reading about Australia—and, in a broader sense, the act of reading itself—has given Nathanial a hunger for opportunity and a renewed sense of hope. Of course, it's significant that Nathanial's closing thought is "R. R is fe restlessness," *rather than* "O. O is fe opportunity." *Though he now longs for more, he seems pragmatically resigned to the reality that his social, economic, and racial conditions may limit the trajectory of his life and the opportunities available to him.*

THE STILT FISHERMEN OF KATHALUWA

In a flashback, Asanka stares at the ocean and wonders how much time they have before the storm breaks. When the two men greeted their passengers at the start of their journey, they warned them not to wear white—it's too visible at night. Asanka guesses their boat is somewhere near Galle right now, but he's not sure. Everyone is standing vigilant.

Galle is a coastal city in southwestern Sri Lanka. It's not clear whether the boat Asanka is on is going to or leaving Galle. The men's warning not to be too visible at night suggests that the journey Asanka is taking is secret and dangerous—that he and his fellow passengers are perhaps fleeing some place.

The two boatmen, whom Asanka refers to as Mustache and Ponytail, start dividing the group in two. Mustache orders Asanka and some others to get in the fish hold at the front of the boat. Asanka doesn't like small spaces, not since the first time he tried to escape the Tigers—as punishment, the Tigers locked Asanka and his friend Dinesh in a potato chest and nailed the chest shut. Thinking of this makes Asanka sick; he remembers how Dinesh cried for his mother, whom he hadn't seen in a year, and peed his pants.

"The Tigers" refers to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (or the Liberation Tigers), a Tamil nationalist paramilitary group that fought against the Sri Lankan government during the country's civil war. They infamously enlisted (often by force) child soldiers to join their ranks. It seems that Asanka and his friend Dinesh served the Tigers as child soldiers and experienced horrific traumas there. With this, the reader can assume Asanka is fleeing Sri Lanka and the Tigers with the goal of seeking asylum elsewhere.

Mustache, threatening Asanka with his fish knife, orders Asanka to get inside the fish hold. Asanka refuses and feels himself start to cry, which is unusual for him, since he no longer fears things or shudders at the sight of "naked butchered bodies of nearly still girl-women lying ripped on the roadside." Now, the stumps where Asanka's fingers used to be begin to ache. He can't get kicked off this boat, and he can't go back to Sri Lanka. His parents sold everything for him to get a spot on this boat, and the soldiers are watching his house in Dehiwala.

Asanka may have escaped the Tigers, but he continues to experience violence, trauma, and abuse on his journey to freedom. Adding to this, it's clear that he's suffering from unresolved traumas from his days as a child soldier—he's been desensitized to extreme violence, and stumps where his fingers used to be serve as a physical reminder of all he's endured.

Just then, another passenger, a small man (Chaminda), gets up from his place on the cabin floor. Reasoning that Asanka is just a kid, he insists on going into the fish hold in Asanka's place. The small man gestures for Asanka to take his place on the cabin floor, and Asanka does so.

Rather than mind his own business and avoid being punished himself, the other passenger steps into defend Asanka, who as a child is more vulnerable and has less power than he does.

Asanka thinks back to when he was five and would go fishing at his grandparents' place in Gampaha. He remembers one fishing trip as "the first time [he] ever saw death close up." On that trip, he watched as his poppo gutted the fish and dumped their insides off the side of the boat.

Since this fishing trip with his grandfather, Asanka has had to witness far more brutal and depraved scenes than a gutted fish. Living in a violent, war-ravaged place has forced him to witness things no child should have to see.

Asanka's thoughts are interrupted when Mustache walks over to the man (Chaminda) who helped Asanka and attacks his face with the fish knife. The man clutches his bleeding face. Asanka stares at Mustache and sees his own face that day he lost his finger and was locked in the potato chest. As Asanka and the others drive the ship out of the bay, they spot another boat headed their way. Ponytail, looking nervous, approaches Asanka and the other men on the cabin floor and orders them to act like normal fisherman.

Asanka's memories of the past blend with the present, showing the lasting impact of the traumatic experience of serving with the Tigers as a child soldier. This scene builds tension as the fishing boat full of stowaways approaches another boat—if the other boat catches on to what they're doing, they could be in deep trouble.

Just then, Asanka sees three shirtless men crouched atop long poles. They look like they're floating above the water. They stare into it, fishing rods in their hands. Tied to the stilts are plastic bags filled with the men's catch. The fishermen nod at Asanka's boat as they pass. What Asanka just saw shocks him: he thought there weren't any more stilt fishermen of Kathaluwa. He closes his eyes, and when he opens them, the fishermen are gone. Asanka figures he must have imagined them.

The practice of fishing from stilts originated in Sri Lanka during World War II, when the heavy British military presence led to overfishing, forcing Sri Lankan fishermen out of their usual fishing spots. To combat this, Sri Lankan fishermen built stilts over coral reefs and fished from them. It's unclear whether the stilt fishermen are real or a hallucination—but it's clear that Asanka, traumatized by the horrors he's survived, isn't psychologically well, so it's reasonable to guess that he's imagining these fishermen now.

Elsewhere, in the story's present, Loretta wakes up and smells liquor on Sam's breath. "Client drinks," he explained in a text to her last night—a text that Loretta received after she and her mom had been waiting for Sam at the restaurant for nearly an hour. Loretta was furious. Now, she turns away from Sam and looks at her alarm clock: it's just past seven. She thinks about turning off the alarm, since Saturday is Sam's only day to sleep in, but she decides she doesn't care.

It's clear that Loretta and Sam's marriage isn't all that healthy. They don't seem to communicate all that well—Sam blew off Loretta and her mother at dinner last night, and drinking seems to be a source of tension. Meanwhile, Loretta waking Sam up early on his day off in retaliation is rather passive aggressive and, ultimately, not all that productive.

The alarm goes off. When Sam stirs, Loretta tells him she has to go to the center. Sam thinks she's lying and accuses her of letting the alarm go off to punish him for getting too drunk last night. He then tries to initiate sex with Loretta. She resists at first but eventually gives in; her and Sam's bodies go so well together. Even so, she knows that sexual chemistry isn't enough to sustain a marriage. After Sam finishes, Loretta reaffirms that she has to go to the center, since Viv can't go today. Sam protests, but Loretta gets out of bed to get ready anyway. She misses her old job at the Asylum Seekers Center and volunteers on Saturdays to continue doing that work.

This scene further establishes the precarious state of Sam and Loretta's marriage. All they have going for them is sexual chemistry; meanwhile, they clearly have ongoing conflicts that they're not communicating with each other. This scene also offers a clue about how Asanka's story and Loretta's might relate: Loretta volunteers (and used to work with) asylum seekers. Asanka's story left off with him seeking asylum.

Sam convinced Loretta to quit working for the center, citing the job's low pay and long hours—neither of which would work once they have kids. He suggested that Loretta work at new firm for a few years before going on maternity leave. Hearing Sam say this last bit delighted Loretta, and she fantasized about having their empty, "soulless" house happy and full of children. But it's been seven months since Loretta left the center, and Sam hasn't brought up children again.

Sam's failure to support Loretta's work at the center is perhaps the most serious problem in their marriage. His scheme to get her to quit—vaguely hinting that children would be in their future—is also troubling. This scene further highlights that poor communication and misunderstanding are core issues for the couple.

Elsewhere, in the story's present, Asanka stares at the blue watch the Brother of St Laurence lady gave him on her visit a few months ago. He keeps the watch tucked into the springs of his bunk. The bunk is approximately eight of Asanka's foot lengths long, and Asanka's room is just over 16 foot lengths long. It's 7:44 now. Any minute, an access card will open the door to Asanka's unit, and it'll be time for morning checkup. Sometimes, Asanka thinks about making a run for it when the door opens, but he doesn't know what the Australians would do to him—would they be like the Tigers?

This scene, which takes place in the story's present, confirms that Asanka safely completed his harrowing journey aboard the fishing boat. But as it turns out, getting to safety (in this case, Australia) is only half the battle. Now, Asanka finds himself facing yet another traumatic experience: being detained at an immigration detention center (perhaps the same center that Loretta is volunteering with).

At 7:45, a guard walks in and orders Asanka out of bed. When the guard sees Asanka rouse, he moves on to the next room. Asanka has had a room to himself since Chaminda died. Asanka goes about his morning routine, using his watch to count the seconds that go by; at 07:45:28 he opens his drawer; at 07:55:00 he takes out his jeans and T-shirt. He has to count like this, because if he stops, "he will be locked in the chest. They will shove him in the fish hold. […] Dinesh will be dead, and his face will already be decaying." The doctor Asanka sees says none of this is real, but Asanka doesn't believe him.

This scene details the horror and injustice of Asanka's present situation. He's an innocent child who has travelled to Australia to escape horrific conditions in his home country—only to be locked in a cage and treated like a prisoner. What's more, his roommate, Chaminda, has died. Asanka is clearly not handling any of this well: he compulsively, anxiously counts out each second of the day, seemingly to avoid thinking about the traumas of his past. It's not clear if Asanka's vision of Dinesh's decaying face is fantasy or memory, but it's not unlikely that Dinesh really did die as he and Asanka were trapped in the chest together.

Asanka used to stay in bed all day, but they've been making him get up at 7:45 ever since Chaminda's death. It's hard for Asanka to find ways to fill his days. He thinks he "deserves to die" because he left Dinesh behind. He wishes they didn't fight for the Tigers—he wishes they'd just the Tigers take all their fingers instead.

Asanka and Chaminda must have been close if Asanka's response to Chaminda's death was to stay in bed all day. Asanka feels immense grief about traumatic past events over which he had no control. It speaks to the direness of his situation back home that he feels his only choices were to fight for the Tigers or let the Tigers take all his fingers.

Asanka showers a little after eight. He feels the water wash the blood off his body, though he hasn't killed anyone since he escaped the Liberation Tigers. The doctor told Asanka that the blood isn't real—that he'll never be locked in a chest again. But then the doctor walked away, leaving Asanka behind in the chest.

While the blood that washes off Asanka's clearly isn't real, the chest is, though it's not the potato chest the doctor thinks Asanka is talking about—it's the detention center, where Asanka is locked in a cell like an animal.

Asanka remembers when the cleaner found Chaminda's body; it was covered in vomit and had been sitting there for a day before the cleaner found it. Asanka found Chaminda earlier in the day. He met Chaminda on the journey to Australia, and Chaminda became like family to him. Asanka decided that Chaminda deserved some peace after all they'd been through, so he just closed Chaminda's eyes and didn't tell anyone he had died. The news hasn't mentioned Chaminda's death, but the center has installed locks on doors where they keep cleaning fluids.

In addition to grieving Chaminda's death, Asanka is also dealing with the trauma of having discovered Chaminda's body. The story doesn't state it so explicitly, but given Chaminda's importance to Asanka and the fact that they met on the boat, the reader can assume that Chaminda was the small man who stuck up for Asanka when the boatmen tried to force him into the fish hold. That Asanka thinks Chaminda's death ought to be on the news suggests that the death was suspicious or unnatural. The center's response to install locks on the doors where they keep cleaning fluids suggest that he was perhaps poisoned—or maybe he died by suicide.

In a flashback to his journey on the fishing boat, Asanka wakes up soaking wet. His right hand is tied to the bench with Chaminda's shirt—Chaminda did this after Asanka told him he couldn't swim. Now, the storm has passed, the ocean is calm, and the sky is blue again. Mustache is talking to some men by the fish hold. Chaminda appears before Asanka. He's holding a fish and motions for Asanka to drink from it. Asanka drinks the fish blood. The ship's water containers broke a few days ago, and nobody has had anything to drink since. Asanka looks at Chaminda's bare chest and fears that Chaminda will burn up without his shirt. Chaminda's been looking after Asanka ever since the fish hold incident, and Asanka isn't used to such kindness. Asanka tried to smile at Chaminda last night, but Chaminda told him it wasn't necessary: he should just say thank you. He looked so sad when he said it.

Chaminda continues to sacrifice his own welfare and comfort to ensure that Asanka is okay, literally giving him the shirt off his back. It's rather disheartening to know that Chaminda's acts of selflessness and solidarity seem to have been in vain—in the story's present, Chaminda has died, and Asanka remains locked inside the detention facility with no clear exit strategy in sight.

There are carved notches on the boat bench that Ponytail has added to keep track of how long they've been at sea; according to the notches, they've been traveling for 35 days. The sea is often turbulent at night, and Asanka fears they'll never make it to shore. They lost a man four days ago. Nobody even noticed until headcount the next morning.

The trying conditions aboard the ship and the almost equally horrific conditions Asanka experiences later at the center present an unedited, dire look at the experiences that many immigrants and asylum seekers face in places with inadequate or discriminatory immigration policies.

Back in the present, Loretta makes her way to the Villawood Immigration Detention Center. There's a crowd of reporters and camera crews gathered outside when she arrives. Loretta doesn't go near them; she doesn't want to know what's happened.

The Villawood Immigration Detention Center is a real place, located in Sydney, Australia. In 2008, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) stated that of all Australia's detention centers, it was "most prison like."

Meanwhile, at 10:00:01, the visiting hour bell sounds. Asanka sometimes thinks that he sees his family, but it's only in his head. Other times, when a room checker rouses him from sleep, his thoughts flash back to the night the Tigers came for him. They said that all Tamils had to make sacrifices to fight back against the government that mistreated them. Asanka's father insisted that Asanka was too young to fight and tried to reason with them, but they had a gun to his head. Asanka quietly volunteered to go with the soldiers; his father cried.

Though Asanka has successfully made it to Australia, he carries intense memories of the trauma he experienced back in Sri Lanka with him. This is similar to Asha in the book's opening story, "David," who carried with her traumatic memories of her young son's murder in Sudan.

Asanka wanders down the hallway toward the common area. He knows he has to stop counting and seeing blood; if he doesn't, they'll send him to the Blaxland Unit, which is where they send people who are unwell. He's been there before. Chaminda tried to tell them that he's just a boy, but Immigration doesn't believe him. And they shouldn't; Asanka isn't a boy—"Not after what he's done, what he's seen." Now, Asanka looks up and sees the stilt fishermen hanging upside down.

Many characters throughout the book misdirect their anger over injustices toward undeserving scapegoats. It seems that Asanka has internalized the shame and trauma of having been made to commit horrific acts of violence during his time with the Tigers. He blames himself for his actions, even though he was an innocent child. His trauma has warped his sense of self and his reality. This scene is also important in that it marks the reappearance of the stilt fishermen Asanka saw earlier, when he was on the boat. It remains unclear what significance they have to Asanka, however.

Back in the present, Loretta signs in at the center. An officer scans her purse and body. She apologizes to Loretta for the invasiveness as she rummages through Loretta' purse. "There was an incident recently," she explains. But Loretta already knows about this; Chaminda was one of her cases. Loretta is irritated when the officer tells Loretta she can't take in the flatbread and candy she brought with her.

The connection between Loretta and Asanka becomes even clearer in this scene: Loretta was Chaminda's lawyer. It's plausible that she's going to see and support Asanka in the aftermath of Chaminda's death. When the guard refers to Chaminda's death as "an incident," she dehumanizes Chaminda. This detail further illustrates the inhumane, unjust treatment many immigrants and asylum seekers experience.

It's 10:05:21. Asanka approaches the door to the visiting room but wonders if they'll even let him in like this—he's covered in blood. But he walks inside, and nobody stops him. He knows to look for the woman's (Loretta) hair—Chaminda told him the woman would be able to help him. As he waits for her, he examines a picture of the world posted to the noticeboard. He finds Indonesia, the Cocos Islands, Sri Lanka, and the Indian coast on the map. The distance he traveled to get here seems so small. Asanka continues to wait for the woman. He recalls his father telling him to be strong, but now he considers this advice "foolish optimism."

Asanka continues with his coping mechanism of counting out each second of the day. These abundant references to the time reinforce how tortuous Asanka's present situation is. He's forced to wait out each day in what is effectively a prison, all the while grieving his friend's recent death, suffering the lasting effects of his own traumas, and having no idea if or when he'll ever be allowed to leave the center. In noting the short distance Asanka traversed to get from Sri Lanka to Australia, the story perhaps reflects on the arbitrary, senseless concept of borders and border enforcement—is it right that Asanka should be imprisoned indefinitely for traveling a short distance and crossing over an imaginary line?

In a flashback to Asanka's journey aboard the boat, Chaminda and Ponytail frantically yell at Asanka to pull himself up out of the water (Asanka has been sick and now must relieve himself in the water, so he doesn't infect the rest of the passengers). Eventually, Chaminda and Ponytail, who've been holding onto a rope that's attached to Asanka, get Asanka back onto the ship. Asanka is freezing cold. Chaminda, angry, tells Asanka that he was only supposed to relieve himself and then let them pull him back in. Asanka calmly explains that he was talking "to them," gesturing toward the stilt fishermen. The others give Asanka a puzzled look, then they ask what "they" said. Asanka points in the direction the fisherman showed him and explains that there's a boat and land waiting for them there. Ponytail is worried and says Asanka needs water; Chaminda tries not to cry.

Ponytail and Chaminda clearly can't see the stilt fishermen and seem to think that Asanka's dehydration is making him hallucinate. But the fact that Asanka continues to see the stilt fishermen and other hallucinations at the detention center suggests that his problem is psychological, not physical. Asanka's immigration story isn't one of hope and perseverance leading to triumph and the chance at a better future—it's one of setbacks and traumas, with no happy ending in sight.

Back in the present, Loretta heads to the visiting area. She sees a young man of about 17 or 18 years (Asanka) looking at her from across the room. He's very thin and has thick black hair. Loretta smiles, and walks over to meet Asanka, but Asanka doesn't smile back. 10:16:55, Asanka is facing Loretta. She has red hair, just like Chaminda said she would. But it's a nice red, like a sunset—not like blood. She looks so new and "unbroken." He wants to touch her, not believing she's real. In a brief flashback, Ponytail wonders if they can trust what Asanka said about there being land and a ship nearby—he thinks Asanka is crazy. But Chaminda climbs up on the ship's roof to investigate, and then another man laughs.

This scene makes it clear that Asanka hasn't met Loretta before—they only know each other indirectly, through Chaminda. Asanka's observation about how "unbroken" Loretta looks gets at the idea that where a person's from impacts nearly every aspect of their life. Loretta, as an affluent, white Australian woman, has had privileges that Asanka can't even fathom—that's why he struggles to believe she's real (but believes that his horrific hallucinations are real).

Asanka tells Loretta that Chaminda is dead, and Loretta immediately knows he must be Asanka—Chaminda told her so much about him. Loretta asks Asanka if he wants to sit down, but he doesn't seem to register her question. She can't believe how young he is. Ever since Viv called her to tell her about Chaminda, Loretta has tried to forget the horror of Asanka's situation. When Loretta listened to Viv's voicemail, she collapsed on the floor. Sam came home and found her there. He was angry when he learned what was wrong and felt Loretta was overreacting. He insisted that "some of [these people] just aren't right in the head."

Loretta's situation examines the limits of solidarity. It might seem cold for Loretta to try not to think about Asanka's horrible situation, or self-pitying for her to cry over Chaminda's death when she hasn't come close to experiencing the traumas that Chaminda and Asanka have gone through—but what is she to do? Immigration is a vast, complicated system for which one woman's good intentions are no match. From this perspective, while Sam's dismissive remark about Chaminda is cold and unfeeling, at the end of the day, his bad attitude isn't helping or harming Chaminda and other immigrants any more than Loretta's empathy.

On Loretta's last day at the center, Chaminda's case was almost closed. She left a note detailing his release memoranda on Viv's computer, but it got lost. In retrospect, Loretta should have known; stuff like that happens all the time at the center.

This passage explains why Loretta feels especially bad about Chaminda's death: she left a document related to his release somewhere where it got lost, presumably postponing Chaminda's release and ultimately leading to his likely suicide. Still, Loretta's remark about this kind of thing happening all the time suggests that the mix-up was a systemic issue and that she herself isn't really to blame.

In the present, Asanka observes Loretta. She looks sad when he says Chaminda's name. All Asanka wants to do is wrap his arms around the woman's waist and let her comfort him. He remembers how Chaminda made them *kiribath* the night before he died—he'd convinced a volunteer to bring them coconut milk and rice. The meal wasn't perfect—they had to cook the rice in the microwave—but eating it made them feel like they were home.

Despite all that Asanka has been through back home, he still has good memories of Sri Lanka, and he misses the culture and food of his home country. When he and Chaminda share the kiribath *(a kind of rice pudding), it transports them back to happier times.*

In a flashback, Asanka sits on a bench on the ship and rubs his legs, which are still numb with cold. The other men are gathered on one side of the deck, staring at the other boat. It's made of metal and is unlike anything they've ever seen before. As the boat draws closer, Asanka sees that the men onboard are pointing big machine guns at them. Asanka drops to the floor and screams. The men on the boat are soldiers, and he knows what soldiers do. Chaminda runs to Asanka and kneels beside him to comfort him; he promises that the men on the other boat don't have guns and aren't soldiers—they're Australian officials. And the government officials "in this country" aren't like the government people in Sri Lanka.

Chaminda's comment that Australian government official aren't like Sri Lankan government officials turns out to be less true than Chaminda likely hoped. While it's true that Asanka doesn't experience the same kind of torture and abuse at the center that he did while serving the Tigers, he is similarly captured and detained against his will and dehumanized. Asanka and Chaminda will soon learn that in order to reap the benefits of a freer, more just country like Australia, one must be a citizen—and they had the poor luck of being born on the wrong side of an arbitrary border.

Back in the present, Loretta asks how old Asanka is, but he tells her he doesn't know. The Tigers took him when he was 14, he explains, but he doesn't know how long ago that was. He knows that he was on the boat for 37 days and in the center for 421 days—but that's it. He begs Loretta to help him. Loretta can't—she doesn't work here anymore—but there's no way Asanka can understand this; he's just a child. Asanka tells Loretta more about what he's been through. The Tigers took his thumb after he refused to rape a young girl; then they later took his finger when he tried to escape. Immigration keeps asking him questions, but they don't listen to him. Loretta sees his hopeless eyes and remembers why she started working here in the first place.

This passage juxtaposes the enormity of traumas Asanka has endured, and how desperately he needs someone to help him, with Loretta's microscopic ability to actually give Asanka the help he needs. Loretta wants to advocate on behalf of people like Asanka—but want and ability are two very different things. Loretta's solidarity means little in the face of a much larger, unjust immigration system.

There's a commotion behind Loretta and Asanka as a group of men in suits appears in the doorway. Asanka says they—the government people—must be "filming again." Then he abruptly smiles and tells Loretta he has to go. Loretta stares as Asanka walks away from the suit-clad men and through the doorway to the center. He walks carefully, one foot in front of the other, as though balancing on a tightrope.

It seems possible that the government people are filming the center to try to downplay to the public the poor, unjust conditions of the center. At least in part, the system that keeps people like Asanka from getting the relief they need relies on the public's indifference to immigrant rights.

Back in his room, Asanka removes two metal hairpins he discreetly stole from the lawyer (Loretta). He drags the pin along the concrete wall to remove its rounded plastic end, revealing a sharp pointed piece of metal underneath. He jabs the sharp metal into his skin, but he can't feel any pain. If he were to slip away in the middle of the night, like the man on the boat did, probably nobody would remember he ever existed, either.

Loretta came to Asanka to try to help him, but in fact, she's indirectly harmed him, unwittingly giving him the opportunity to assemble items he now uses to mutilate himself. This gruesome reversal can be read as a loose metaphor for the disparity between Loretta's desire to help Asanka and her ability to actually help him.

Asanka hears the stilt fishermen in the distance, but he can't see them. He looks inside his pocket for the floss he took from Loretta's purse, then he uses the floss and the hairpins to sew his mouth shut. Asanka goes to check the time but finds that his watch is missing. He thinks maybe the fishermen hooked it when he passed beneath them. He walks to the mirror and ties a knot in the floss, tightening the stitches and sealing his mouth shut. He thinks of the embroidery his mother used to do. He holds a tissue over his mouth and heads back to the visitors room; the fisherman are back again, hanging from the ceiling. He walks past the new visitors to the outside area.

Having lost his watch, Asanka can no longer count out the day's seconds to keep his traumas at bay, culminating with him sewing his mouth shut. Asanka's motives for doing this remain ambiguous. It's clear that he blames himself for the situation he's in now and for the atrocities the Tigers forced him to commit, so perhaps this act is Asanka's attempt to silence himself and prevent himself from doing more harm.

In a flashback, the Australians climb onto Asanka's boat. At some point, they bring him onboard their big, metal boat and wrap a blanket around him. A man in a uniform asks if there was anyone else onboard. Chaminda tells him about the man they lost but admits that he doesn't know the man's name. The uniformed Australian man looks around at Asanka and the others, then he brings a small machine to his mouth and speaks into it. A voice speaks back. In Asanka's mind, the man becomes a stilt fisherman, and he and Chaminda are fish.

This scene marks the moment that Asanka realizes he and Chaminda and the others are being detained rather than rescued. In visualizing the Australian official as a stilt fisherman and himself and Chaminda as fish, Asanka makes clear that he and Chaminda are prey to be caught and destroyed—not human beings to be rescued. This scene sheds light on what the stilt fishermen have meant to Asanka this entire time: they've been a reminder of his entrapment and his powerlessness.

Back in the present, Loretta sits in her car. She thinks about the strange way Asanka walked away from her. She wants to get out of the car, go back to the center, and talk to Asanka some more; she doesn't know what will become of him. Loretta begins to cry as she watches the news crews swarming the building. "Fuck Sam," she thinks to herself, "fuck having a baby, fuck her new job[.]" He doesn't feel like her husband anymore. And she doesn't know why she's crying about him here, in the Villawood parking lot. As she pulls out of the lot, she notices something happening behind her: everyone is "shouting, sprinting, pointing at a figure moving slowly and steadily toward the fence, across the asphalt of the visitors yard."

When Loretta starts to cry, it's not for Asanka—it's for herself. Her daily struggles and setbacks distract her from thinking about Asanka. Still, whether Loretta cries for herself or for Asanka makes no difference; ultimately, Loretta is only a volunteer and so lacks the ability to help Asanka in a meaningful way. And as the tragedy of Chaminda shows, even lawyers struggle to enact real change when up against a crowded, indifferent system. Finally, even if Loretta does turn back to talk to Asanka some more, he's already beyond any comfort she can give him: the figure headed toward the fence is clearly Asanka, who will likely suffer a whole new set of traumas in the aftermath of his disturbing present actions.

AVIATION

Mirabel adjusts the couch cushions and straightens the windows. She can still remember buying them with Michael near Union Square four years ago. Michael teased Mirabel about "nesting" as he ran his hands over her pregnant belly. Mirabel hoped that her pregnancy would work out. Only two weeks after that shopping trip, though, she lost the baby. Now, even though her empty house is so full of memory and trauma, she can't bear to leave.

The theme of trauma reappears in "Aviation," this time in the form Maribel's multiple miscarriages. Like many characters from previous stories, place plays an important role in Maribel's life: though painful, staying in the house she used to live in with Michael helps her keep his memory alive.

Mirabel returns to her cleaning. Child Protection hasn't given her much notice. But these days, with just Mirabel and her dog, Big Ted, living here, it's never that messy; Michael died three years ago. Mirabel walks to the window and observes the warm, golden sun. It was like this in Oakland the day Michael died. Her house was nearly packed, and she was ready to join Michael in New York. The empty house reminded her of how life was before she quit her teaching job to move across the country for Michael—before they realized how impossible it would be to have children. A knock at the door interrupts Mirabel's reveries.

Not only does Mirabel's house keep her memory of Michael alive, but it also reminds her of earlier, happier days, when she still held out hope for a better future. Though Maribel is currently living in Oakland—where she lived before moving across the country to be with Michael—Michael's death transforms Maribel's world into a symbolic sort of "foreign soil," making unfamiliar and lonely a home that used to have happier associations for her. Finally, the knock at the door is likely Child Protection, though it's unclear exactly why Mirabel is expecting them.

Antonio and Sunni wait outside Mirabel's front door. This is the third place today that Antonio has inspected for Sunni, and he hopes that this one will work out. Antonio feels that there's something unsettling about this place, but he tries to reassure Sunni. He wishes he could hug Sunni and tell him that none of this is Sunni's fault.

Antonio and Sunni's presence outside Mirabel's front door answers the question of what Child Protection is doing at Mirabel's house: she's being evaluated to provide foster care for Sunni. Like the refugee and immigrant characters of other stories, Sunni is displaced, forced to navigate "foreign soil."

Antonio's mom doesn't consider his work "a *proper* job." Antonio is half Black and half Puerto Rican, and he graduated at the top of his class. His mom thinks that he's throwing away his future—that children whose parents don't want them are already "hopeless," so there's no point to Antonio's work. Antonio's dad, a big, muscular construction worker, promises Antonio that his mom will come around. Antonio hopes that whoever opens the door will be as loving as his father.

Antonio so far seems like a positive, well-meaning character. He's forgoing a higher paycheck and a less stressful job to be an advocate for kids like Sunni whom others, like Antonio's mom, have deemed "hopeless." Antonio's mom thinks it's better for Antonio, as a minority, to do everything he can to work his way up in the world, but Antonio recognizes the importance of giving voice to people less fortunate than himself.

Sunni, meanwhile, just hopes that whoever answers it will be nice. The last two ladies were white and wore fancy, gold earrings, and neither of them wanted him. But what Sunni really wants is to go back to Sunni's maa. The police who eventually came to get him when his maa failed to pick him up from school told him that "his maa was in *custody*," though Sunni still doesn't know what this means.

The detail that the first two women who rejected Sunni are white suggests that racism or prejudice may have helped inform their decision—the name Sunni can be of Sanskrit origins. Finally, Sunni's young age—he's at least young enough that he doesn't know what "in custody" means—makes his situation all the more traumatic. The book has featured many characters who feel overwhelmed and alienated to be on "foreign soil," but Sunni is by far the youngest.

Sunni overheard the police talking about what happened to Sunni's maa, though. Apparently, she'd been yelling at people in a Walmart, screaming about terrorism and America. "We're American. We're not even Muslim. We're Sikh," she'd screamed. Sunni didn't like how the police were talking about his maa—they made it sound "like she was really crazy." They told Sunni that his maa had "done some bad things," and so they'd have to find a new place for him to stay. The police seemed like they felt bad for Sunni, and Sunni hated them for it. After that, Antonio came to get him.

This passage lends some clarity to Sunni's situation. It seems that he and his mother have been the targets of anti-Muslim harassment—even though they're not even Muslim. The cause for such harassment seems to be the simple fact that Sunni and his mother have dark skin and look different from the average white American citizen. That Sunni's maa was punished in the first place may be seen as another layer of racism. The police claim that she was being "really crazy" and did "some bad things." While this may be true, the narrative implicitly points to the hypocrisy of demonizing Sunni's maa's reaction to racial harassment while letting the instigators of the racial harassment off the hook.

Back in the present, Mirabel goes to answer the door. As she walks, the floors turn to blue carpet, and her surroundings transform into the interior of a plane. She can hear men yelling things in a language she doesn't understand. She sees the first tower of the World Trade Center through the glass. Mirabel struggles to breathe; she tries to tell herself it isn't real. She sees Michael in the first tower; he turns around, a look of confusion on his face. Mirabel tells herself that today will be a fresh start for her; she wants this child to be hers and Michael's, though she knows this is impossible. Maybe the child will even have Michael's sandy hair and green eyes.

Mirabel's anxiety attack sheds light on the Michael's death and the catalyst for the harassment that Sunni and his mother have faced: she's seeing herself inside one of the hijacked planes that Al Qaeda terrorists flew into the World Trade Center in the September 11 terrorist attacks. Presumably Michael was working inside one of the twin towers when the attack took place. Because the terrorists were Islamic extremists, many people of Middle Eastern descent who lived in the U.S.—or people who looked, to ignorant eyes, "Muslim"—experienced increased harassment following the attacks. It seems that Sunni and his maa's brown skin made them targets for such harassment.

Mirabel opens the door. Antonio introduces himself and Sunni. Mirabel greets Sunni and tells him she's glad he's here. Then she invites Sunni and Antonio inside, gesturing for them to sit on the couch. Antonio walks to the couch and scans the photographs on the wall, many of which feature Mirabel with a man. Antonio thought he'd read that Mirabel's husband (Michael) was dead; something isn't right. Then he sees the American flag resting on the ledge. Below it is a photograph of her husband with the words "September 11, 2001. Never forgotten. God Bless America" written across it. Now Antonio understands. He feels Sunni shaking next to him on the couch and wonders if he sees the flag, too.

Antonio and Sunni both spot the September 11 objects memorializing Michael's death on the walls—and they both seem to recognize that this may make it impossible for Sunni, with his brown skin, to stay with Mirabel. It's clear that Mirabel is still traumatized by Michael's death. It's possible that her grief and trauma may cause her to misdirect the anger and fear she feels toward the Muslim terrorists who actually killed Michael toward Sunni, who, though blameless, has the misfortune of resembling those bad men, at least to Mirabel's ignorant, traumatized eyes.

Mirabel leaves Antonio and Sunni sitting on the couch and goes to the kitchen to make some tea. The boy is eight, but he looks younger. He seems scared of her. She realizes she's basically ignored him and resolves to really interact with him when she returns from the kitchen. She finishes making tea, assembles some cookies on a plate, and brings everything back to the living room. She looks at Sunni directly and tells him how happy she is that he's here.

When not consumed by her trauma, Mirabel is able to think clearly and recognize that Sunni is just a kid in need of her help—he's totally separate from the bad men who killed her husband and thousands of others. Whether or not Mirabel well be able to reconcile her trauma-induced prejudice to act in solidarity with Sunni remains unknown, though.

Sunni looks up at Mirabel timidly. When he does, she sees something poking out from under his baseball cap. Mirabel looks away from Sunni and turns to Antonio. Antonio carefully instructs Sunni to be polite and remove his cap. Sunni does, revealing "a piece of black, stretchy material" that covers his hair. Sunni sees that Mirabel is no longer smiling—she's doing what everyone does. She's doing what made his maa go crazy and yell. Sunni shoves cookies into his mouth to try to stop the bad thoughts, but they come anyway.

Mirabel's reaction to Sunni's head covering all but confirms that she won't be able to set aside her prejudices to help him. And that Sunni recognizes her reaction as the same thing everyone else does speaks to the prevalence of anti-Middle Eastern harassment in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks.

At first, things were okay with Sunni and Sunni's maa. Sunni's dad left them when Sunni was really young, and Sunni barely remembers him. He and his maa lived in an apartment. Their elderly neighbors, Bill and Susie, used to watch Sunni when his maa was at work. They were lonely, with no children or grandchildren of their own, and Sunni knew they loved him. But all that changed after bad men crashed planes into the towers in New York. After that, people stopped being kind to Sunni and his maa. Someone threw a roof tile through their window. Sunni's maa explained that people think they're Muslim, but that things would eventually get better.

Being on foreign soil—that is, being a racial, religious, or ethnic minority—wasn't so bad for Sunni and his maa when they had people in their life like Bill and Susie, who supported them and made them feel welcome. But after the terrorist attacks, their community turned its back on them, rendering the formerly familiar soil foreign once more.

But things got worse. Bill and Susie stopped looking after Sunni. They planted flowers in the concrete that separated their balcony from Sunni's. Sunni's maa explained that the flowers, oleander, were poisonous. There was a scared look on her face as she said this—the same face that Sunni sees on Mirabel's face now.

Not only have Bill and Susie turned their backs on Sunni and his maa, but the act of planting a poisonous plant, oleander, serves as a symbolic threat. Almost overnight, Sunni and his maa go from being accepted members of a community to feared, foreign outsiders who prejudiced folks believe pose a threat to that community.

Antonio looks at Mirabel. Mirabel panics; she reminds herself that Sunni is watching her and tries to calm down. She apologizes to Antonio, explaining that she was just caught off guard. She says Sunni "looks scared." Antonio says that Sunni is scared. He reminds Mirabel that she agreed to provide emergency care—"For *any* child." It'll just be for the weekend.

Tension mounts as Mirabel consciously tries to reconcile her trauma-induced prejudice with her knowledge that Sunni is a blameless child who has nothing to do with her husband's death.

Mirabel considers what Michael would do. She thinks back to the day they shopped for curtains. Antonio interrupts her thoughts and explains that Sunni's family is Sikh. Mirabel hardly hears them—and she doesn't know what Sikh means, either. She asks where Sunni will go if she can't take him. Antonio says he doesn't know. He reminds Mirabel that Sunni is only a child. Mirabel closes her eyes and imagines the plane again. Everything is spinning, and she hears the men shouting in the strange language again. Antonio is speaking to her, but she can't hear what he's saying.

The reappearance of Mirabel's anxiety attack doesn't completely rule out the possibility that she'll overcome her prejudice to offer Sunni care, but it's seeming less likely than ever that this will happen—especially since she can no longer rouse herself from her vision to hear what Antonio's saying to her. This is yet another story that ends ambiguously, leaving it up to the reader to dwell on what decisions the characters will make after the story has ended.

THE SUKIYAKI BOOK CLUB

Avery hangs from the monkey bars. Underneath her school uniform, her black bloomers are tight around her waist. Avery told Avery's dad she needs new ones, but when they arrived at Target and found the place buzzing with families, he froze, gave Avery some money, and told her to find some lady inside to help her. Avery is only seven—far too young to buy sports knickers from a store by herself. But she went inside anyway. She waited around awhile, then came back out and told her dad they were out of knickers.

Seeing families in Target was triggering for Avery's father, for some reason—perhaps this is because Avery's mother isn't in the picture. Whatever the exact case, it's clear that Avery's dad isn't communicating his thoughts and feelings with his daughter. This leaves Avery, who's just a young child, alone and vulnerable.

Now, on the monkey bars, Avery feels faint. Her knees are sore, her arms feel like they're about to fall off, and her back has started to itch. Avery tries to wiggle away the itch, but it doesn't work. And then she realizes that she doesn't know how to get down from the monkey bars.

Like many of the book's immigrant and minority characters, Avery, as she realizes she doesn't know how to get down from the monkey bars, finds herself alone and lacking in support—on metaphorical "foreign soil."

Down the hallway from the narrator's (the unnamed writer) bedroom, the narrator's kid watches a silly kids' show on TV. The narrator knows they should be glad her kids aren't *that* loud. Then the narrator walks toward their bed and climbs on top of the quilt. They look out the window at the Melbourne skyline. Maryam, the narrator's daughter, asked the narrator if they could take the window with them when they leave; Maryam is only three but has lived in four places so far.

Despite her young age, Maryam has already lived in four places—she's perpetually on "foreign soil," with no hometown or culture to anchor her in place. It's unclear why the family has moved around so much, but the smallness of the apartment, its proximity to the train, and the fact that the writer appears to be a single mother all suggest that the family doesn't have much money. So often throughout the book, place has affected a person's access to opportunities, but the reverse is true in this story: the family's economic situation has impacted the places they live.

Below the apartment, Irving Street is abuzz with commuters. The narrator (the unnamed writer) looks out the window and sees an old Vietnamese man playing a violin outside the Vietnamese bakery and the Ethiopian coffeehouse. The narrator opens the window so they can hear. They recognize the music: it's a Japanese song called "Ue o Muite Arukou," or "I Shall Walk Looking Up." It's about keeping your head held high and moving past sadness. The narrator's son's (Markie) class performed the song at school last year, and the teacher had them sing it in an upbeat style. The teacher also gave the song the name "Sukiyaki," which was easier for Western audiences to pronounce. Even after Markie researched the song, the teacher still insisted on singing the song in a happy style.

While where a person is born can shape the trajectory of their life, people can also have a big role in shaping the atmosphere of a place. Drawing attention to the old Vietnamese man playing the Japanese song on his violin, the unnamed writer portrays her city as a melting pot of different cultures, showing how the many immigrants who have settled here have brought their traditions with them, turning the city into a multicultural place. Still, this isn't a guarantee that everyone will respect other cultures, as evidenced by Markie's teacher's ignorance about the Japanese song—and her unwillingness to make changes to her interpretation of it as a happy song when Markie brings it to her attention that she's wrong. Solidarity can be a good, empowering thing, but only so far as people are willing to adapt their behavior to give oppressed peoples or minority cultures the support they need.

Meanwhile, back on the playground, Avery is still stuck on the monkey bars. She's so desperate to get down that she wouldn't even mind if the mean principal, Ms. Lothian, were to be the one to find her. Ms. Lothian is as mean as the principal in *Matilda*. Avery's mum gave her the Roald Dahl book the day of the accident. Avery was about to read it when they entered the roundabout. When Avery woke up after the crash, she found the book beside her hospital bed. Now, Avery wishes she could use magic to move things with her brain like Matilda.

This passage makes it clear why Avery's mum isn't in the picture: she died in a car accident. The accident thrusts Avery onto a metaphorical sort of "foreign soil," forcing her to navigate life without the familiar, comforting presence of her mother. Though this passage gives more insight into Avery's life, it's still unclear how her story is connected to the unnamed writer's story.

Back at the apartment, the narrator (the unnamed writer) stares out the window at the evening traffic. The rumbling sound of a passing train shakes the bedroom floor and walls. The narrator, a single mother and freelance writer with two kids, thought this place would be temporary. But it's been a year already, and they're still here. Markie appears in the door and announces that he hates the captain of the 5:36 Watergardens to City train. The narrator says that finding someone annoying is different from hating them. Markie starts to protest, but the 5:41 train arrives and drowns out his words. Markie always closes his eyes for a few seconds to block out the flash of a passing train. Last winter, his teacher suggested that his hearing was bad. But the unnamed writer knows that the real problem isn't his hearing—it's where he lives.

Once more, the story demonstrates the connection between place and the quality of one's life. The writer wants to give her kids a better place to live, but she can't afford to. Meanwhile, the apartment's proximity to the trains directly effects Markie's success at school and his overall health, negatively affecting his hearing and causing him to develop some of a stress response to the sight of a passing train.

Meanwhile, Avery continues to struggle on the monkey bars. She's terrified that she might fall. She saw Avery's dad crack his head open at Avery's mum's funeral. He'd had too much to drink and was walking and talking funny. He slipped in the kitchen, and there's still a dent where his head hit the fridge.

It seems that Avery's father isn't coping well with Avery's mum's death—he can't even deal with his own grief, so it's doubtful that he's providing his daughter with the support she needs to make it through this trauma. In not communicating with his daughter about their mutual loss, he leaves Avery alone and suffering in her grief.

The unnamed writer is worried for Avery. She imagines a strange man approaching Avery and harming her. The writer then redirects her attention toward her laptop screen, on which she is typing Avery's story. The narrator keeps printouts of rejection e-mails from publishing houses beside her bed. A lot of them say they like her writing but request that she submit material about a different subject—something "*with more everyday themes*," or something "*that has an uplifting quality.*" One publishing house thought that "Harlem Jones" was very good—but instead of ending it with him throwing the Molotov, they suggested it would be better for him to return to "the straight and narrow" and move past his anger.

The connection between Avery's story and the writer's story becomes clear: Avery is a character in a short story the writer is currently working on. The many rejection letters the writer receives suggests that the dominant culture's unwillingness to acknowledge the trauma and tragedy inherent in the lives of immigrants and other oppressed peoples—instead, people want to hear about inspiring stories where hope, determination, and staying on "the straight and narrow" pay off. They don't want to acknowledge how prejudice and systemic oppression create obstacles for people who exist at the margins of society. Finally, that the writer includes "Harlem Jones" (the second short story of Foreign Soil*) suggests that she serves as something of a stand-in for* Foreign Soil*'s author, Maxine Beneba Clarke—which in turn suggests that Beneba Clarke has received similar critiques in response to her own stories.*

The unnamed writer considers that Avery's story was supposed to be about love. Just then, Markie runs in, interrupting the writer's thoughts. She follows Markie out to the living room, where Maryam is watching *Giggle and Hoot*. Markie tries to make his sister change the channel, but Maryam refuses.

Though the writer wanted Avery's story to be uplifting, inevitably, tragedy, grief, and conflict find their way into it, perhaps metaphorically suggesting that the happy, ordinary stories the writer's publishers desire aren't possible for people who live at the margins of society.

Back on the playground, Avery is crying on the monkey bars. The other kids didn't mean to leave her there after recess—they just didn't realize she was there. Everything changed so quickly for her, and she never even thought to cry out for help. Sometimes, Avery's dad doesn't even register that she exists. A few weeks ago, Avery's next-door neighbor told her she looks just like Avery's mum—and that's why Avery's dad can't stand to look at Avery. Avery wishes that the neighbor was here now to help her.

Like many of Foreign Soil*'s immigrant and minority characters, Avery finds herself alone and lacking in support: her classmates have abandoned her, leaving her with nobody to help her down from the monkey bars. And her father is too consumed with his own grief to comfort and support her. He almost turns her into an enemy—someone who reminds him of his late wife and so exacerbates grief—instead of someone who has been equally affected by the death.*

Meanwhile, the unnamed writer ushers Markie and Maryam toward the apartment's miniscule bathroom for shower time, promising that the first one in gets ice cream. On hearing this, both kids sprint toward the bathroom. Markie leaps into the shower with some of his clothes still on. The writer's children shower. Markie sings Duke Ellington in the shower; the lyrics are "about the soul of the music, the uselessness of a melody without a soul." Maryam joins him in singing. The writer hears Markie dancing around in the shower and worries that he'll slip and fall. But now both children are singing and dancing under the water. The writer watches them from the hallway and marvels at their unabashed happiness.

Despite their poverty and dire circumstances (symbolized by the smallness of the shower), the writer's children find ways to be happy, carefree children. It's easy to sink into despair when one considers all the unfair disadvantages that are stacked up against people living at the margins of society, but the writer reminds herself that it's also important to relish the happy moments and to maintain hope that things will get better.

Avery can't hold on much longer and prepares to fall. But as she slips toward the ground, her body instinctively flips, and she somersaults in the air and lands right-side up, just like the Olympic gymnasts that she Avery's mum watched on TV. Avery freezes, shocked. She can't believe she's okay. She laughs, and then she runs off toward her classroom.

Perhaps inspired by her own children's happiness, the writer gives Avery a happy ending. Still, the story's conclusion seems almost too neat: it's almost as though the writer has decided to just give her publishers what they want, even though she herself believes that happy endings are rare for people living at the margins of society, and that it would be truer to reality to end the story with Avery getting hurt. On the one hand, Avery's story supports the idea that hope sometimes pays off, and that everything works out in the end. However, the sudden reversal of Avery's fate—the far-fetched chance that she's really able to fall down without hurting herself even a little bit—suggests that happy endings like these are fantastical and often not found in reality.

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