Inside Out and Back Again

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THANHHÀ LAI

Inside Out and Back Again is partially autobiographical. Born in Vietnam during the Vietnam War, Lai fled the country with her mother and eight older brothers in 1975, when she was 10 years old. In interviews, she's described the escape from Vietnam as "too easy"—the hardest part of leaving Vietnam, she's said, was feeling at home when her family settled in Alabama. After high school, Lai went on to earn a degree in journalism from University of Texas, Austin. She worked for several years for a California newspaper, covering the local Vietnamese community, and then earned a Master of Fine Arts from New York University. Lai remained in New York after this, and today, she teaches composition at Parsons The New School for Design. *Inside Out and Back Again* was her first book, and it took her about 15 years to write. When she began writing, the story was an adult prose novel. The novel only really began to take shape when Lai decided to write about a child and use poetry, which in her author's note she explains helps convey how rhythmic and musical the Vietnamese language is. After it was published in 2011, *Inside Out and Back Again* won the National Book Award for Young People's Literature and was named a Newbery Honor Book. As of 2021, Lai has written two more books for young adults, *Butterfly Yellow* and *Listen, Slowly*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Hà and her family leave South Vietnam at the very end of the Vietnam War in 1975. In early March of that year, the CIA and Vietnamese intelligence agencies believed that the South Vietnamese forces could hold out against the Viet Cong (the North Vietnamese army) at least until 1976. However, they were wrong and were shocked at how fast the Viet Cong moved. Throughout the Vietnam War, Saigon had stayed relatively unaffected by violence, but as the Viet Cong got closer, people—Vietnamese and American alike—began to fear a bloodbath. Flights out of the city were totally full by the end of March. On April 29–30, the United States carried out Operation Frequent Wind, in which it evacuated nearly all Americans, both military and civilian, and thousands of South Vietnamese citizens. The Viet Cong took control of the city on April 30, renaming it Ho Chi Minh City and planting their flag at the presidential palace. This effectively ended the Vietnam War and resulted in the reunification of North and South Vietnam into a single country. In Vietnam, the day is celebrated as a day of liberation and unification—but among members of the Vietnamese diaspora who fled the country, it's often known as The National Day of Shame or The National Day of Resentment. The thousands of people who left Vietnam fearing violence led to a major refugee crisis and resulted in the single largest influx of refugees in the United States (only the 2021 influx of Afghani refugees rivals it in numbers).

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Thannhà Lai has written two other novels for young adults that take place around the same time period and focus on Vietnamese refugees (or would-be refugees): *Listen, Slowly* and *Butterfly Yellow*. There are a number of verse novels about immigrants, including *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo, *The Good Braider* by Terry Farish, and Aida Salazar's *Land of the Cranes*. Contemporary verse novels have their roots in ancient epics, such as the *Odyssey* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. One of the most famous early modern verse novels was *Eugene Onegin* by Alexander Pushkin, which was published in serial form between 1825 and 1832.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Inside Out and Back Again
- **When Written:** 1995–2010
- **Where Written:** New York City, New York
- **When Published:** 2011
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult Novel, Verse Novel
- **Setting:** South Vietnam and Alabama, 1975–1976
- **Climax:** Vu Lee rescues Hà from Pink Boy.
- **Antagonist:** Pink Boy
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

What's in a Name. Like Hà in the novel, Thannhà Lai went by Hà as a child, and her classmates would mock her by saying, "ha, ha, ha." The name Thannhà is her combined first and middle names, and in interviews she's framed deciding to go by this name as a punishment for her bullies, since it makes pronouncing her name even more complicated.

PLOT SUMMARY

Ten-year-old Hà lives in Vietnam with Mother and her three brothers: Brother Quang, who's studying engineering at college; Brother Vũ, who idolizes Bruce Lee; and Brother Khôi, who loves animals. Hà loves her papaya tree in the backyard, which is just starting to produce baby **papayas**. Though

soldiers patrol Hà's neighborhood, and food has been getting expensive over the last few months, Hà still delights in sneakily buying herself treats when Mother sends her to the market. The only real sad part of Hà's life is that Father has been missing in action for nine years. He was in the navy, and nobody knows if he's dead or a prisoner of war. Mother constantly worries about him.

In 1975 on Tet, the lunar new year, the war is clearly getting closer, and a fortuneteller warns Mother that the family's year is going to "twist inside out." Hà, annoyed with what she perceives as the sexist tradition of requiring a man to bless the house for the new year, sneakily touches the floor before anyone else is awake, thereby blessing it herself.

Over the next few months, Hà watches her papayas ripen and celebrates her birthday. But things take a turn for the worse when school closes a month early, and Father's best friend, Uncle Son, starts to speak to Mother about escaping the country on navy ships. Around this time, Brother Khôi manages to hatch one of his chicken's eggs. Soon, President Thieu resigns. The family will have to escape soon, as the North Vietnamese Communists might murder them because Father served in the South Vietnamese navy.

Mother sews each person a pack, and everyone packs clothes, toiletries, food, and one "choice" item. Hà chooses her **doll**. Just before the family leaves, they eat one of the papayas that's almost ripe, but they have to leave the rest behind. They follow Uncle Son onto a navy ship that leaves in the middle of the night. A few days after they embark, a South Vietnamese pilot steers his helicopter into the water nearby and boards the ship to announce that the Communists took Saigon. South Vietnam is gone.

Life is boring and difficult on the ship. A few weeks into the journey, the stench coming from Brother Khôi becomes unbearable, and Brother Vũ discovers that the smell is coming from Brother Khôi's dead chick. After everyone gathers to ceremonially lower the South Vietnamese flag that afternoon (since the country doesn't exist anymore), Hà and Brother Khôi nestle the chick's body in Hà's doll's arms and toss them overboard.

Weeks later, an American ship finds Hà's ship, passes over boxes of provisions, and then tows Hà's ship to Guam. There, the family lives in a tent city, and Mother considers selling the **amethyst ring** that Father gave her so she can buy supplies. On July 4, Mother decides that the family will move to the U.S., so they soon fly to another tent city in Florida. Families in Florida have to wait for Americans to sponsor them, and it takes Mother weeks to learn that Americans prefer to sponsor Christians. Not long after she changes her paperwork to say the family is Christian, a car salesman from Alabama agrees to sponsor Brother Quan and train him as a car repairman. So, the family moves to Alabama.

Hà is certain her sponsor is a cowboy, since he wears cowboy boots and a cowboy hat and smokes cigars. She likes him and can't wait to ride his horse, but she doesn't like his wife, who she never smiles and makes Hà's family stay in the basement so the neighbors don't see them. Soon, the cowboy sets Hà's family up in a house with donated furniture, dishes, and clothes. Throughout, Brother Quan teaches Hà English, which seems to her like a totally ridiculous language with its hissing sounds and verbs that change spelling for no reason. Mother also writes a letter to Father's brother in North Vietnam, asking if he has any information about Father.

Not long after the family moves, the cowboy takes Hà to register for school. On the way back, Hà works up the courage to ask if she can ride the cowboy's horse. With Brother Quan's help translating, Hà learns that the cowboy doesn't have a horse, and that in the U.S., horses say "neigh," not "hee." She feels totally lost.

Hà's first day of school is demoralizing. Her teacher, MiSSS SScott, thinks Hà's name sounds like laughter—"ha-ha"—and Hà has no idea how to eat her strange food at lunch, or even where to sit. At recess, kids laugh at her, poke her, and pull her hair. Hà isn't the only family member who had a hard first day at school or at work. Indeed, Brother Vũ is the only one who seems happy, so that night, Hà begs him to teach her to fly-kick so she can get back at the bullies. He offers to teach her self-defense instead.

Though Brother Khôi's offer to take Hà to school on his bike makes the next few weeks marginally better, Hà is miserable. MiSSS SScott makes Hà feel like she isn't smart, and people throw eggs at the family's door. Things come to a head when someone throws a brick through the window. After this, the cowboy takes Hà's family to meet the neighbors. Most people slam their doors, but one woman, MiSSSisss WaSShington, hugs everyone and offers to tutor Hà and her brothers. With MiSSSisss WaSShington's help, Hà learns more English. Soon, she knows what the bullies at school are saying.

The cowboy invites Hà's family to his Baptist church, saying that if they agree to something, people will be kinder. The service is loud, and at the end, a loud, round man dips Mother, Hà, and Hà's brothers into a pool. After this, the cowboy's wife smiles at them. At night, though, Hà still listens to the soothing sounds of Mother chanting. In Alabama, though, Mother doesn't have her usual incense to burn or her brass gong to ring.

A few weeks later, Hà admits to MiSSSisss WaSShington that she's been eating candy and bread in the bathroom during lunch. MiSSSisss WaSShington begins packing Hà lunches, and Hà starts eating in the classroom with two other kids, Pem and SSsì-Ti-Vân. Things improve as Hà shows the class that she's a good math student, though this turns her into a target for Pink Boy, the biggest bully at school. Hà also enjoys her lessons with Brother Vũ, who these days goes by Vu Lee. Vu Lee now gives

martial arts lessons to curious kids and adults in the neighborhood.

One day, Pink Boy calls Hà "pancake face." Hà sobs, barely able to explain to Mother what a pancake is, and then tells MiSSSisss WaSShington what happened. MiSSSisss WaSShington shows Hà a photo album containing beautiful pictures that her son, Tom, took of Vietnam before he died fighting there. Seeing that one of the photos is of a papaya tree, Hà shares that papaya is her favorite fruit. The next morning, the cowboy, Mother, and Brother Quang accompany Hà to school for a meeting with Pink Boy and the principal. Pink Boy apologizes, but Hà knows he's going to get revenge.

Later that week, after MiSSS SScott shows photos of the Buddha in class, Pink Boy and his friends chase Hà home shouting "Boo-Da" at her. A few days after this, Hà confesses to Mother that she's being bullied at school as punishment for being mean to her desk mate in Saigon, and that she's responsible for the family ending up in Alabama because she was the first to touch the floor last Tet. Mother assures Hà that it's actually lucky that they're in Alabama—Ha did nothing wrong.

When Pink Boy and his friends chase Hà after school again on Friday, she realizes she's learned enough insults from him to shout back—and on Monday, rumors fly that Pink Boy's burly older cousin is going to beat Hà up. Brother Khôi comes up with a plan, and on the appointed day, Hà trades coats with Pem after school and runs. Pink Boy chases her, though, so Hà stands still—as Vu Lee taught her—and dodges at the last minute, which causes Pink Boy to fall on the pavement. Vu Lee pulls up on his motorcycle and frightens Pink Boy away.

For Christmas, MiSSSisss WaSShington gives Hà dried, sugared papaya. It's not the same as fresh papaya, so Hà throws it away and storms off to bed. When she gets up in the morning, she discovers that Mother rehydrated the papaya, and now, it isn't bad. Pem also gives Hà a beautiful doll with long black hair, though Hà is ashamed that she has no gift for Pem. When she returns to school in January, Mother gives Hà flower seeds to give to Pem. Also after Christmas, Mother receives a letter from Father's brother, who has no information about Father's whereabouts. A few weeks later, Mother loses her amethyst ring at work. After searching, Mother decides this is a sign that Father is gone.

On Tet, Mother makes a version of *bánh chưng*, the ceremonial dish for the holiday, with some new ingredients since she can't find all the traditional ones. Mother also acts as the fortuneteller this year, and she says the family will continue to mix the old with the new. She sets up a permanent altar for Father on a tall bookshelf.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Kim Hà – The protagonist of the novel, Hà is a 10-year-old Vietnamese girl. She lives with Mother and her three older brothers, Brother Quang, Brother Vũ, and Brother Khôi, on the outskirts of Saigon in South Vietnam. She has never known her father, who has been missing in action since she was a baby. Hà is headstrong and finds her brothers extremely annoying. However, she adores Mother—Brother Khôi refers to her as "Mother's tail." Mother does her best to encourage Hà to not take her brothers' taunts seriously and to try to be well-behaved and appropriately feminine, but Hà struggles with this. On Tet (the lunar new year), for instance, Brother Quang is supposed to be the first to bless the house because he's the oldest male in the family, but Hà sneakily beats him to it. Hà is extremely fond of Vietnamese sweets and native fruits, particularly **papaya**. When Mother sends her to shop in the market, Hà sneakily purchases a little bit less of everything Mother asks for so she can afford a treat. At home, Hà loves watching her beloved papaya tree grow and produce fruit. Hà's family is forced to leave Vietnam to escape the approaching Communist army, and Hà struggles with the move to suburban Alabama. Hà doesn't speak English, which makes her feel "dumb" at her new school—even though she was among the top of her class in Vietnam. To escape bullying, Hà hides in the bathroom during lunch and recess and refuses to look at anyone. Things start to get better for Hà when she meets her neighbor, MiSSSisss WaSShington, who begins tutoring Hà. MiSSSisss WaSShington helps Hà make friends (like Pem and SSsì-Ti-Vân), makes Hà bagged lunches, and steps in at school when the bullying intensifies. Hà also asks Brother Vũ to teach her martial arts so she can fight back. But when Hà finally gets the opportunity to hurt her biggest bully, Pink Boy, she finds she doesn't like seeing him confused and afraid. Following this, Hà confesses to Mother about purchasing sweets and blessing the house before Brother Quan—but Mother assures Hà she's done nothing wrong and encourages her to see that coming to Alabama was a lucky thing that happened to the family. The novel ends with Hà feeling more secure in her place in Alabama, in her family, and in her schooling.

Mother – Mother is a single mother to Hà, Brother Khôi, Brother Vũ, and Brother Quang. She's married, but Father has been missing in action for the last nine years, and Mother doesn't know if he's dead, imprisoned, or lost. Hà describes Mother as constantly sad and worried, mostly due to not knowing anything about Father's fate. However, despite Mother's sadness, she's an involved and supportive parent to her children. Hà adores Mother and follows her everywhere. But she also knows when Mother is trying her best to make the best of a bad situation, as when Mother pretends that everything is fine when they don't have enough rice. Mother

works as a secretary for the navy on weekdays, and she also designs French-inspired baby clothes and sells them in the market. But Mother's focus shifts as the North Vietnamese Communist army gets close to Saigon; she fears the family is in danger, given that Father fought for the South. So although it takes some convincing, Mother ultimately agrees to join Uncle Son in boarding a navy ship and fleeing the country. On the journey—and as the family moves from Guam, to Florida, and then to Alabama—Mother tries to be optimistic, but Hà knows that Mother never stops thinking and worrying about Father. In Alabama, Mother tries to help the family fit in with their Christian neighbors by agreeing to be baptized at the local Baptist church, though she never stops practicing her non-Christian religious rituals in private. Things come to a head for Mother when she finally receives a letter from Father's brother, who lives in North Vietnam and who Mother hoped would have information about Father. But Father's brother knows nothing, and days after Mother receives his letter, she loses the **amethyst ring** that Father brought her from the U.S. Mother takes this as a sign that Father is dead, and that the family should mourn him as such. This gives Mother and the rest of the family closure and helps them feel more at home in Alabama.

Brother Quang – Brother Quang, Hà's oldest brother, is a 21-year-old engineering student in Saigon. Since he began attending college, Brother Quang has gotten increasingly pretentious. He's very proud of being South Vietnamese, so he initially opposes leaving the country, believing that it's his and his family's duty as South Vietnamese citizens to stay and help build the country they want to see. But ultimately, he agrees to flee with the rest of the family, though he continues to say things that suggests he's ashamed of this choice. In Florida, the cowboy selects Brother Quang to sponsor and train as an auto mechanic, which results in the family moving to Alabama. As the only family member who speaks English, Brother Quang does a lot of translating and tries to teach Hà English. When Brother Quang finally begins work, he's often angry, though Hà never understands exactly why. He becomes happier when he's finally able to repair a car that nobody else could and receives a promotion at work. At the end of the novel, the cowboy gives Brother Quang tuition so he can resume his engineering education at a night college.

Brother Vũ/Vu Lee – Eighteen-year-old Brother Vũ is Hà's second-oldest brother. He's tall, muscular, and adores Bruce Lee, so he studies martial arts and often impresses girls by karate-chopping wood or bricks in half. Hà finds Brother Vũ (and their other brothers) annoying—particularly when, in Alabama, he begins insisting that everyone call him Vu Lee. However, Hà is also envious of Brother Vũ, as he seems shockingly unbothered when he experiences racist bullying at school in Alabama. She begs him to teach her to fly-kick so she can fight back against her bullies, but instead, he offers to teach her—and eventually, many kids and adults in the neighborhood—defense, for reasons that he refuses to explain. He also rescues Hà from Pink Boy's bullying, and around this time, Hà learns why he refused to teach her to fight: it doesn't feel good to hurt others. Aside from martial arts, Brother Vũ's other love is cooking. He works as a cook at the refugee camp in Guam and then gets an after-school job flipping burgers in Alabama. At the end of the novel, he defies Mother and insists on going to San Francisco to study at a cooking school.

Brother Khôi – Fourteen-year-old Brother Khôi is Hà's third-oldest brother. He's an animal lover and her most sensitive, "agreeable" brother. He's raised fighting fish in the past, and in the novel's present in Vietnam, he's trying desperately to get his allotted eggs from his hen to hatch rather than eating them. When an egg finally hatches, Brother Khôi and Hà make a pact to stay in Saigon and protect his chick and Hà's **papaya** tree, though Mother ultimately convinces Brother Khôi to join the family in fleeing the country. However, Brother Khôi tries to bring his chick with him, and it dies around the time the family boards the ship. It takes two weeks for anyone to investigate the rotting smell coming from his jacket and discover the chick's body, and Brother Khôi is distraught to lose his chick. Hà helps him feel better by performing a burial ceremony and tossing the chick into the sea in her **doll**'s arms, but after this, Brother Khôi seldom speaks. However, in Alabama, Brother Khôi demonstrates his love for and support of Hà by letting her ride along on his bike to and from school so she can better avoid bullies. He's also the one to come up with the plan to protect Hà from Pink Boy's cousin, who is going to beat up Hà. At the end of the novel, Brother Khôi insists to Mother that he wants to be a veterinarian—something Mother doesn't fully support, as she'd rather he study to be a "real doctor."

Father – Hà, Brother Quang, Brother Vũ, and Brother Khôi's father never appears in person in the novel, as he's been missing in action for the last nine years. He was a member of the South Vietnamese navy and was abducted one day while on a mission; nobody knows where he is, or if he's even alive. All Mother has of him is a portrait taken on Tet the year he disappeared, though she misses him so much that she can barely stand to look at it. Since Hà was only a baby when he disappeared, she tries to learn about Father from her brothers and from Mother, when Mother can be convinced to talk about him. Father loved stewed eels and his children more than anything—according to Brother Quang, he'd cry just watching them sleep. Father was a tall, thin, and serious man, though some of Brother Quang's stories suggest that he loved to make Mother laugh. He and Mother were also very close and had known each other their whole lives, as they were promised to each other as five-year-olds and got married at age 16. Mother clings to the **amethyst ring** that Father brought her back from the U.S. as a symbol of their love and connection. When Mother learns that Father isn't trapped in the North and loses her

amethyst ring soon after, she decides these as signs that Father is dead. So, she and her children chant for his safe passage to the afterlife and let him go, which gives the family closure.

MiSSSisss WaSShington – MiSSSisss WaSShington is Hà's family's neighbor in Alabama, and since she's a retired teacher, she volunteers to tutor Hà and her brothers after school. She's kind, open, and encouraging to Hà as she helps Hà learn a new word a day and praises her with fresh fruit. Soon, the two form a close and trusting relationship. MiSSSisss WaSShington is the first adult Hà tells about the bullying she experiences at school and that she eats lunch in the school bathroom to avoid her classmates. Following this, MiSSSisss WaSShington speaks to the school administration, and Hà is then allowed to eat in the classroom with two friendly students, Pem and SSsì-Ti-Van. MiSSSisss WaSShington encourages Hà to not be afraid to speak English and make mistakes—doing so, she insists, is the only way Hà will learn. She also says Hà's classmates should be ashamed of making fun of her for not speaking English well yet, and she points out that none of them would be able to say anything in Vietnamese. Hà is shocked to learn that MiSSSisss WaSShington's son, Tom, died in Vietnam when he was fighting there, but that MiSSSisss WaSShington doesn't hate Vietnam because of this. Indeed, MiSSSisss WaSShington lets Hà take home a photo album filled with pictures Tom took in Vietnam, most of them of happy things like schoolgirls and **papaya** trees. When MiSSSisss WaSShington learns that papaya is Hà's favorite fruit, she gets Hà dried, sugared papaya for Christmas thinking it'll be a great treat. Hà initially rejects the gift (though not in front of MiSSSisss WaSShington), but she decides the papaya is alright after Mother rehydrates it in warm water.

The Cowboy – The cowboy is Hà's family's sponsor when they arrive in the U.S. Though his name is actually Mr. Johnston, Hà never calls him this and only refers to him as her family's cowboy. She does this because he wears a tall cowboy hat and cowboy boots, has a big belly, and smokes cigars—and in Hà's mind, this means he's a cowboy and must own a horse. In reality, though, he's a car salesman and wants to sponsor Brother Quan so he can teach him to repair car engines. Hà experiences a major crisis when she finally asks the cowboy if she can ride his horse, and she learns from Quan that not only does the cowboy not own a horse, but that horses also say "neigh" in America, not "hee" like they do in Vietnam. The cowboy is very supportive of Hà's family: he helps them settle in their own house, registers Hà for school, and regularly brings gifts. When Hà's family becomes victims of racist threats, he also calls the police and introduces the family to their neighbors. His wife, though, isn't nearly as welcoming or supportive—she refuses to even smile at Hà's family until they agree to be baptized at the local Baptist church.

The Cowboy's Wife – The cowboy's wife is a bigoted woman: when Hà and her family initially move in with the cowboy and his wife, she insists that her guests live in the basement and don't go outside—she doesn't want the neighbors to see Hà's family. She remains rude and standoffish until Mother agrees to have the family baptized at the local Baptist church, at which point the cowboy's wife begins to smile at the newcomers.

MiSSS SScott – MiSSS SScott is Hà's fourth-grade teacher in Alabama. Hà dislikes MiSSS SScott from the start, as MiSSS SScott doesn't seem impressed that Hà so carefully pronounces the *s* sounds in the teacher's name—and she doesn't understand that Hà's name is pronounced differently than "ha-ha" laughter. MiSSS SScott also treats Hà like Hà is wholly uneducated, when really, Hà was almost at the top of her class in Vietnam and just can't communicate in English how much she knows. It also bothers Hà when MiSSS SScott talks to the class about Vietnam and shows them pictures of naked, burning girls and emaciated refugees trying to escape the country, rather than happy pictures of Tet celebrations or **papayas**.

Pink Boy – The antagonist of the novel, Pink Boy is a boy in Hà's class. She never learns his real name. He has pink skin and white hair, eyelashes, and eyebrows, and he's cruel to Hà from the moment Hà arrives. He shouts things like "ha, ha, ha" and "Boo-da" at her, and at one point he calls her "pancake face." He also pulls her hair and pokes her cheeks, and he and his friends regularly follow Hà home after school, shouting taunts at her. When Hà finally tells an adult what's going on, Pink Boy is forced to apologize during a meeting with the principal—but this only makes him hate Hà even more. Pink Boy's cruelty makes Hà so mad that she asks Brother Vũ to teach her to fly-kick so she can hurt him. But when Hà learns that Pink Boy plans to have an older, burly cousin beat her up, she finally gets her chance to kick him and realizes that it actually doesn't make her feel good to hurt or scare him. After Brother Vũ rescues Hà on his motorcycle (and gives Pink Boy's cousin a ride), Pink Boy no longer torments Hà.

Pem/Pam – Pem is one of Hà's first two friends in Alabama. Though she introduces herself as Pam, Hà hears "Pem," and so calls her friend Pem in her narration. She's in Hà's class and has long red hair and has to wear skirts that reach to her calves. Pem smiles a lot, helps Hà navigate the social structure at school, and tries to help Hà avoid being beaten up by Pink Boy. For Christmas, Pem gives Hà a beautiful **doll** with long black hair. Hà is embarrassed not to have a gift to give to Pem in return, so a few weeks after Christmas, Mother gives Hà some flower seeds that Hà and TiTi collected to give to Pem.

SSsì-Ti-Vân/Steven – SSsì-Ti-Vân is one of Hà's first friends in Alabama. His name is Steven, but to Hà, the name sounds like SSsì-Ti-Vân, so this is what she calls him in her narration going forward. He has "coconut-shell skin" and a smooth, bald head, and he's always dressed in fancy clothes. He's kind to Hà and helps Pem try to keep Pink Boy from beating Hà up.

President Thieu – President Thieu is the president of South

Vietnam. Mother dislikes him and seems to distrust him; she doesn't think any of his displays of emotion are genuine, and when he steps down in the weeks before the Fall of Saigon, she also doesn't believe his promise to stay in the country and serve his people. Mother only tolerates him because in years past, he's held an event for "war wives" where, at the end, attendees received food to thank them for their husbands' service.

Uncle Son – Uncle Son isn't Hà and her brothers' blood uncle; rather, he was in the same navy class as Father and was Father's best friend. He's short and "smiley." He's remained close with Mother since Father's disappearance, and he's the one to convince Mother that the family should leave South Vietnam for their safety. Uncle Son invites Mother to join him and his family in Canada, but Mother declines because she knows Uncle Son's wife wouldn't like it.

The Commander – The commander is the captain of the navy ship that Hà and her family board to leave South Vietnam. Hà likes and respects the commander, which she realizes is because when he's in his navy uniform, he looks like Father. The commander does everything in his power to get his passengers to safety, taking a slow river route to avoid bombs or capture and then doling out rations slowly to ensure everyone on the ship has enough to last until they're rescued.

TiTi – TiTi is Hà's best friend in Saigon. She has beautiful long hair that Hà envies, and her family is wealthier than Hà's—when TiTi's family flees Saigon, they go to a port city where rich Vietnamese can escape on cruise ships. Hà never learns if TiTi and her family successfully escape the country.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Miss Xinh – Miss Xinh is Hà's fourth-grade teacher in Saigon. When teaching current events gets too sad and frightening, Miss Xinh instead decides to use class time to speak about happy things.

Tram – Tram is the tiny, shy girl who shares Hà's desk at school in Vietnam. Hà resents Tram because she's the teacher's pet and is a tattletale. Mother is friends with Tram's mother, so news that Hà has been pinching or bullying Tram always makes it back to Mother.

TERMS

Fall of Saigon – The Fall of Saigon refers to April 30, 1975, when the North Vietnamese Communist army captured Saigon. This effectively ended the Vietnam War and unified North and South Vietnam into a single country.

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.

WAR, CHILDHOOD, AND MATURITY

Inside Out and Back Again is 10-year-old Hà's story of escaping her home country of Vietnam during the Fall of Saigon in 1975. At this time, Vietnam was divided in two, the communist North Vietnam and the Western-aligned South Vietnam, where Hà and her family live. The Fall of Saigon refers to the North's invasion and capture of South Vietnam, and the unification of the two entities into a single country. For Hà and her family, this isn't a happy experience: they fear that the Communist soldiers will brainwash them, execute them, or otherwise make them disappear because Hà's father (who's been missing in action for nine years) was in the South Vietnamese navy and fought against the North. As threats of violence increase, and as the economic situation gets worse (even food staples like rice become exorbitantly expensive), Hà's mother decides there's only one thing to do to protect the family: leave South Vietnam and escape the war altogether.

As a young child, though, Hà doesn't fully grasp the complexity of the situation in her home country. She's more concerned with wishing she had beautiful long hair, trying to ignore her three older brothers' teasing, and admiring her beloved **papaya** tree's first crop of papayas. And while Hà never totally loses her ability to find joy in the world around her, her family's choice to flee the conflict in Vietnam also means that Hà is forced to grow up before she's ready. For instance, Hà helps Brother Khôi find closure after his beloved baby chick dies by ceremonially tossing both the chick's body and her own favorite **doll** into the sea. This deprives her of her only childish comfort, leaving her feeling even more alone—but it also shows Hà maturely prioritizing someone else's needs over her own. Once the family immigrates to Alabama, Hà also finds that she's not able to enjoy things she once enjoyed in Vietnam, like fresh papaya. Instead, Hà ha to learn to "make do" with dried papaya—and when she eventually deems rehydrated dried papaya "not bad" instead of rejecting it outright, as she did at first, the novel frames this shift is a turning point in her maturity. Through the changes Hà undergoes, the novel suggests that war is inherently transformative for all who are touched by it, and that it can force children to mature much faster than they might have otherwise.

IMMIGRATION, CULTURE SHOCK, AND BELONGING

Inside Out and Back Again presents immigrating to a new country as simultaneously traumatizing and

beneficial. For Hà and her family, fleeing their home in South Vietnam is a necessity: Father fought for South Vietnam and is currently missing in action, which means that when the Communist North eventually reaches Saigon with its armies, Hà's family will be at risk of being killed. Mother decides to move the family to the United States after someone tells her that there, her three sons will have work opportunities and chances to earn college scholarships. For Mother, the choice makes sense. And for Hà and her brothers, particularly Brother Vũ, the U.S. represents other compelling opportunities: Hà believes she'll meet a cowboy and get to ride his horse, while Brother Vũ dreams of living where his idol, Bruce Lee, lived.

However, Hà's family's new life in Alabama is not at all idyllic. Hà experiences a crisis when she learns that her family's sponsor, whom she refers to as "her cowboy" because he wears a cowboy hat, doesn't even own a horse—and that in the U.S., horses say "neigh" instead of "hee." Everything Hà encounters is confusing, from what sound a horse makes, to how to eat her "pink sausage / snuggled inside bread / shaped like a corncob" (a hot dog), to where she should sit in the cafeteria at school. These various struggles make Hà feel like she's never going to fit in—feelings that Hà's family members seem to share. And as Hà and her family try to assimilate, they have to sacrifice important parts of their culture and identity, as when they agree to be baptized at the local Baptist church. Following this, the family's neighbors are kinder to them, but being baptized doesn't help Hà feel like she belongs. And starting to make friends doesn't help Hà feel more at home until the very end of the novel, when Hà is finally able to give her new friend Pem a Christmas gift. Giving a gift gives Hà some of her dignity back, and it helps her feel competent and like a good friend. With this, the novel presents being an immigrant and struggling to belong as experiences that are alienating and characterized by personal and cultural loss. But it also suggests that immigration can be a positive, enriching experience if an immigrant is able to find ways to give back in their new community.

FAMILY AND GRIEF

Ten-year-old Hà is the youngest child in a close-knit family. She has three older brothers, Brother Khôi, Brother Vũ, and Brother Quang, and they all adore Mother. Father, however, has been missing in action for the last nine years, and nobody knows if he's deceased, captured, or living at his ancestral home in North Vietnam (Hà and the rest of her family live in South Vietnam, which has a closed border with North Vietnam). *Inside Out and Back Again* presents Hà's family as unified and emotionally supportive to one another as they flee South Vietnam on a ship to escape the approaching Communist army from North Vietnam. For instance, Brother Vũ protects his family members and keeps everyone together as panicked people rush around the port. Later, Hà and Brother Quan support Brother Khôi when his beloved chick dies on the ship. And once the family settles in Alabama, Brother Vũ frightens away the bully Pink Boy when Pink Boy tries to hurt Hà. Hà's family members are the only people she's certain she can rely on for help, as they're all going through similar struggles.

However, Father's absence casts a huge shadow over Hà's family. Mother is often sad or worried, in part because she doesn't know if she should be grieving for her lost husband or hoping for his return. Mother's sadness, and living in a constant state of not knowing what happened to Father, cause Hà and her siblings to tiptoe around Mother and stay extremely attuned to her emotional state. So, when Mother loses the **amethyst ring** that Father gave her, it's both traumatic and somewhat comforting—she interprets this as a sign that Father is gone, and that she and her children can grieve for him and move on. Following a ceremony in which the family prays for Father's easy passage to the afterlife, Hà and her siblings are able to look forward to their futures in the U.S. with more optimism than they ever had before—suggesting that their grief was holding them back. Letting Father go allows Mother in particular to focus her attention more fully on her children and her family as it is in the present. The novel thus suggests that living family members should take precedence in people's minds and actions, and that letting go is an important part of the grieving and healing process.

CULTURE, FOOD, AND TRADITION

Ten-year-old Hà is Vietnamese, and she shares Vietnamese culture and cuisine with the reader through her narration. For instance, she describes in detail how ripe **papaya** fresh off the tree tastes, how the ceremonial dish *bánh chung* is shaped into a square and steamed in banana leaves, and how her brothers are supposed to bless their house on Tet, the lunar new year. Hà also finds comfort in her various rituals, such as spinning Mother's **amethyst ring** before she goes to sleep each night, or listening to Mother chant and light jasmine incense. These various foods, rituals, and holidays make Hà feel secure, at home, and as though she belongs. Food is especially important to Hà's sense of belonging: she describes herself as "a girl who loves snacks," but particularly once the family immigrates to Alabama, her narration implies she only gets true comfort from *Vietnamese* snacks, like fried dough or roasted coconut.

So, when Hà and her family become immigrants and lose access to cultural items like incense and gongs, Hà feels lost. Some things remain the same—Hà still spins Mother's ring before bed, and Mother still chants—but other things change, such as Mother having to burn dried orange peel instead of incense and hit a spoon on a bowl in place of a gong. Mother encourages Hà to "make do" and "compromise," as she does—in other words, to hold on to tradition in some respects, but also to embrace newness. For instance, Mother agrees to get the family

baptized at the local Baptist church as a sort of compromise—this convinces the family's neighbors to be kinder to them—despite the fact that Mother never actually stops practicing her non-Christian rituals. And on the first Tet that the family observes in Alabama, Mother insists that in the years to come, the family's customs and traditions will continue to change as they integrate things from their new home (such as black beans instead of mung beans in the *bánh chung*). Ultimately, Hà comes around to Mother's way of thinking: that change doesn't have to be a bad thing, as long as they can continue observing their rituals in some capacity. With this, the novel suggests that changing certain aspects of a tradition (or adopting entirely new practices or rituals) doesn't make that tradition any less meaningful. Rather, what's most important is that the people observing the tradition still feel the comfort and cultural connection that it provides.

BULLYING, RACISM, AND SELF-DOUBT

Hà isn't quite the top student in her class in South Vietnam, but she's close—she loves feeling smart and learning challenging things in school. But when Hà's family moves from South Vietnam to Alabama during the Fall of Saigon, Hà has to face the difficult prospect of starting in a brand-new school in a country where she doesn't yet speak English. For weeks, this is demoralizing and even frightening: Hà is the victim of overt racism, as when her classmates call her "pancake face" and ask if she ate dogs in Vietnam. Some boys even chase Hà and pull her hair. This causes Hà to hide to protect herself physically and emotionally, and it keeps her from ever feeling at home in Alabama. But she's also the victim of subtler bullying and racism, even from adults. For example, her teacher, MiSSS SScott, incorrectly assumes that Hà can't understand fractions or multiply multi-digit numbers simply because Hà doesn't speak English. This causes Hà to remark that "this is / what dumb / feels like." Hà, of course, isn't any less intelligent than her classmates; she just doesn't speak the language and so can't tell anyone how much she knows. Through Hà's experiences, the novel shows that bullying, racism, and false assumptions are extremely damaging, particularly for immigrants. This treatment can cause immigrants learning a new language, like Hà, to doubt their intelligence and self-worth for senseless reasons.

SYMBOLS

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

PAPAYA

Papayas, Hà's favorite fruit, symbolize Hà herself. The papaya tree in Hà's family's backyard grew from a seed that Hà flicked outside. Since Hà threw the seed out there, it's grown exponentially—just as Hà has grown from toddler to a 10-year-old child in the years before the novel begins. At the beginning of the book, Hà excitedly watches her papaya tree bear fruit for the first time. She describes the papayas as growing from thumb-size to the size of her fist, knee, and head. Likening the papayas to parts of her own body reinforces that the papayas are symbols for Hà, and their green, underripe state mirrors Hà youthful, innocent state at the beginning of the novel. When Hà's family is then forced to flee South Vietnam before the papayas are ripe, this situation represents Hà's relatively happy childhood in Vietnam being cut short.

Once Hà and her family settle in Alabama, Hà no longer has access to papaya. This is insult added to injury for her, and it makes her feel unmoored and disconnected from her old self, who lived happily in Vietnam and enjoyed fresh fruit regularly. So, Hà isn't initially impressed when MiSSSisss WaSShington, after learning that papayas are Hà's favorite fruit, gives Hà a package of dried, sugared papaya for Christmas. It's nothing like fresh papaya, which highlights the idea that few people, if any, in the U.S. understand Hà or her Vietnamese culture. The dried and sugared papaya is essentially an Americanized repackaging of Vietnamese culture, and Hà resents this immensely. However, Hà ultimately makes do when she discovers that Mother soaked the dried papaya, which dissolved the sugar and rehydrated the papaya into something that better approximates the fresh papaya Hà misses. The papaya's physical transformation mirrors Hà's own internal transformation as she starts to feel more secure in her identity as a Vietnamese immigrant living in the U.S. By the novel's end, Hà is still adjusting, but she's more comfortable with her new life and with finding approximations of the Vietnamese things she loves.

THE AMETHYST RING

The amethyst ring that Father brought back from the U.S. for Mother symbolizes Mother's connection to Father. Father has been missing in action for the last nine years, and nobody knows if he's deceased, a prisoner of war, or otherwise stuck in North Vietnam and unable to travel to South Vietnam or tell Mother where he is. Mother and Hà in particular use the ring to feel connected to Father—indeed, for Mother, it's the only memento of Father's that she can bear to have around all the time. She uses it as a proxy for Father when she chants and speaks to him, asking for his advice, guidance, and often for him to return.

Therefore, it's devastating when Mother loses the amethyst ring at the factory where she works one day, not long after she receives word from Father's brother that he doesn't know where Father is, either. When a thorough search of the factory

turns up nothing, Mother chants and decides to take losing the ring as a sign that it's time to accept that Father is dead and isn't coming back. And while losing the ring is traumatic, it nevertheless brings Mother closure.

DOLLS

Dolls represent Hà's childhood. When Hà and her family packs to flee the war in South Vietnam, Mother allows everyone one "choice" item to include with their necessities (clothes, food, and toiletries). Hà chooses her beloved doll and dresses it in a matching dress and booties that Mother knitted, a mark of her childhood innocence. However, when Hà and her family have been at sea for about two weeks, people discover that Brother Khôi brought his newly hatched chick onto the ship with them—and that it's been dead for a while and smells terrible. Hà decides to help Brother Khôi move on from this loss by holding her own burial ceremony for the chick: she puts the chick in her doll's arms, wraps the chick and the doll in a handkerchief, and tosses them both into the sea. This gesture seems to help Brother Khôi, and Hà is happy to be able to help her brother move on—but she also immediately regrets losing her doll. This signifies that Hà isn't ready to grow up, but that her circumstances are forcing her to do so.

Then, several months after the family has immigrated to Alabama, Hà's new friend Pem gives her a new doll for Christmas. Receiving another doll suggests that Hà has become much safer and more secure than she was when fleeing the war, and so she's able to feel more like a child again. She can enjoy childish comforts again, and she's no longer in a situation where she has to make mature sacrifices, as she did during her family's journey from Vietnam.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harper edition of *Inside Out and Back Again* published in 2011.

Part 1: Saigon Quotes

They're heading to Vũng Tau,
he says,
where the rich go
to flee Vietnam
on cruise ships.

I'm glad we've become poor
so we can stay.

Related Characters: Kim Hà, Brother Khôi (speaker), TiTi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

Hà has just watched her best friend, TiTi, leave Saigon with her family, a devastating parting for both girls. Now, Brother Khôi is leading Hà inside and explaining where TiTi went.

Brother Khôi makes it clear in his explanation that people are beginning to leave Vietnam out of fear of what might happen if the Communist North Vietnamese armies take control of South Vietnam. He also implies that the process of leaving is very different if one is wealthy, like TiTi's family; he suggests that TiTi and her family are going to leave the country in comparative luxury, since they'll be on a cruise ship. All of this speaks to the environment of fear and confusion in Saigon toward the end of the Vietnam War. People aren't sure what's going to happen, but they're already going out of their way to protect their families.

What Hà takes from Brother Khôi's explanation, though, isn't that TiTi and her family are lucky and will be safe, since they're leaving the country and will escape the conflict. Rather, Hà is just happy that she and her family get to stay. Indeed, the way she frames this poem—saying "we can stay"—suggests that staying put is, to her, a privilege rather than a liability. For now, Hà doesn't have an issue with her family being poor. Their poverty is, in her mind, what enables her to stay in the home she loves in the city she loves. This, however, does reflect her youth and innocence—she doesn't seem to understand that staying could put her family in danger, even if it's a more desirable outcome in the short term.

Mother says
if the price of eggs
were not the price of rice,
and the price of rice
were not the price of gasoline,
and the price of gasoline
were not the price of gold,
then of course
Brother Khôi
could continue hatching eggs.

She's sorry.

Related Characters: Mother (speaker), Brother Khôi, Kim Hà

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16-17

Explanation and Analysis

Brother Khôi has a hen whose eggs are distributed among family members, but when it's Brother Khôi's turn for an egg, he tries to hatch it instead of eating it. But Mother won't let him do this anymore, with food so expensive and scarce.

This poem drives home how dire the economic situation is in Saigon at this point (this poem is dated March 17). Mother, as the head of her household and the person in charge of managing the family's finances, is acutely aware of how much basic goods cost. And right now, things are exorbitantly expensive. Noting that rice costs what gasoline used to, and that gasoline now costs what gold used to be worth, indicates that the Vietnam War has made even basic staple foods like rice so expensive as to be almost out of reach. In light of this, it's essential, Mother believes, for her and her children to consume every bit of food they have access to—even if that means making Brother Khôi mad by taking an egg he's trying to hatch. Hatching an egg right now is framed as a luxury that the family simply can't afford.

Brother Khôi reads as young in this passage, like Hà. He's still prioritizing his own wishes and desires over the family's health, suggesting that he hasn't yet been forced to confront that the war might be more serious than he's giving it credit for at the moment.

> Sometimes I whisper
> *tuyet sút* to myself
> to pretend
> I know him.
>
> I would never say *tuyet sút*
> in front of Mother.
> None of us would want
> to make her sadder
> than she already is.

Related Characters: Kim Hà (speaker), Mother, Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Hà shares with readers the few things she knows about Father, who went missing in action when she was a baby. He'd often ask Mother for stewed eels *tuyet sút* (the Vietnamese version of the French phrase *tout de suite*, or "right away").

First, Hà makes it clear in this passage that she doesn't actually know Father—she has to "pretend" to know him by repeating phrases like this when she's alone. She wants to know more about Father, but it's impossible for her to learn much more about this man she doesn't remember when few people, Mother least of all, are willing to speak about him. Father exists as a ghost of sorts haunting the family's every move. And though everyone seems acutely aware of his absence, nobody is willing to say anything about it.

This, Hà suggests, is mostly because nobody wants to be responsible for upsetting Mother. She describes Mother as constantly sad and upset, mostly because Father has been missing for so long. Saying something like *tuyet sút* would, Hà believes, be an unwelcome reminder of her missing husband. This shows that Hà and her brothers are all extremely in tune with Mother's emotions, and that they all care deeply about keeping her happy. Indeed, not upsetting Mother is more important to Hà than learning more about a parent she longs to know.

> Like magic a crepe forms
> to be filled with shrimp
> and eaten with
> cucumber and bean sprouts.
>
> It tastes even better
> than it looks.
> While my mouth is full,
> the noises of the market
> silence themselves,
> letting me and my *bánh cuon*
> float.

Related Characters: Kim Hà (speaker), Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Hà and Mother have stopped at a *bánh cuon* stand on their way to hear the president speak. For Hà, the *bánh cuon* is an almost magical thing: it forms out of nowhere, is pretty to look at, and tastes even better. It transports her to a new place, even, where she doesn't hear anymore the noisy

market. This speaks to the power and the importance of food in Hà's life. Traditional Vietnamese foods, especially those that are considered treats (like *bánh cuon*), help Hà feel grounded and maintain a sense of wonder about the world around her. These foods make her feel at home and connected to her culture, and they give her something to look forward to.

The joy Hà feels as she munches her *bánh cuon* is palpable, and it contrasts greatly with how horrified she is by the food she's served in Alabama later in the novel. This brings up the idea that food is important to Hà's sense of identity and belonging, but only the Vietnamese foods that she loves and is familiar with. She can't get the same joy or feeling of cultural connection from traditionally American foods, like hot dogs or fried chicken.

Five papayas
the sizes of
my head,
a knee,
two elbows,
and a thumb
cling to the trunk.

Still green
but promising.

Related Characters: Kim Hà (speaker), Mother, Uncle Son

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

It's now the middle of April, and Hà is watching happily as her papaya tree produces more baby papayas. This poem begins to associate papayas with Hà herself. Likening the different sizes of papayas to parts of her own body suggests that Hà sees herself in these baby papayas. And like these green and unripe papayas, Hà is just at the beginning of her coming-of-age journey. She's still "green," but like the papayas, she's also "promising"—she has the rest of her life ahead of her, just waiting to unfold.

The fact that this poem is situated between a poem about school closing early and another about Uncle Son speaking to Mother about leaving the country creates tension. Things are clearly getting dire in South Vietnam as the war ramps up, and it seems possible that neither Hà nor her papayas are going to be able to reach their full potential here, before Hà and her family have to flee. So, although the papayas (and Hà's future) are still "promising," that promise is also tinged with worry, danger, and the possibility that it won't come to fruition. The fact that Hà brings none of this up in this poem highlights that as a child, she's still innocent and naive about the conflict raging around her. She's still immature enough that she can focus on these happy, exciting things in her life and forget for a moment that war is drawing closer every day.

I am proud
of my ability
to save
until I see
tears
in Mother's
deep eyes.

You deserve to grow up
where you don't worry about
saving half a bite
of sweet potato.

Related Characters: Kim Hà, Mother (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

When Hà is helping Mother prepare dinner one night, she cuts a tiny sliver off the end of a sweet potato rather than a bigger chunk. She's proud of herself, so Mother's tears are surprising for her. This shows how differently Mother and Hà currently think of the coming war and the financial difficulties that plague their family. To Hà, the family's troubles getting enough food to eat seem a bit like a game: she can improve the family's situation by learning these skills that allow her to save even more food for people to eat. She thinks of it as learning to adapt, and because she loves Saigon and doesn't want to leave, this is a good thing.

But for Mother, it's a tragedy to see Hà so worried about saving a tiny sliver of sweet potato. This shows her that Hà is very aware of how dire the family's situation is, and that Hà is developing coping mechanisms that will help the family survive. Mother implies that she wants better for Hà; she'd rather her children grow up not knowing what it's like

to experience food scarcity, and not having to worry about the nutritional value of a tiny scrap of sweet potato. This influences Mother's decision to leave South Vietnam. Prior to this, Mother seems conflicted about leaving, but seeing Hà save a tiny bit of sweet potato is too much for Mother to bear.

Mother says yellow papaya
tastes lovely
dipped in chili salt.
You children should eat
fresh fruit
while you can.

Brother Vũ chops;
the head falls;
a silver blade slices.

Black seeds spill
like clusters of eyes,
wet and crying.

Related Characters: Mother, Kim Hà (speaker), Brother Vũ/Vu Lee

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

The day before the family leaves South Vietnam, Hà's family members decide to cut down the biggest, ripest papaya from the tree and eat it. But the papaya isn't fully ripe.

Mother's suggestion to eat the yellow (that is, not fully ripe yet) papaya dipped in chili salt is an attempt to make the best of a bad situation. And she implies that this is because things are only going to get worse—she makes it seem like her children are going to be without fresh food, let alone fruit, for some time once they leave the country. They should savor what they have now, while they can, even if it's not as good as it could be otherwise.

However, this is still a traumatic experience for Hà. Seeing her papaya cut down before it's ready is difficult, as it confirms that she's not going to be here long enough to see the papaya mature. This is why she describes the seeds as being like "wet and crying" clusters of eyes. Hà is mourning the loss of her papaya too early, just as she's also mourning the end of her childhood in Saigon. Leaving will thrust Hà into an entirely new life, one that's going to force her to grow up much faster than she would otherwise.

Part 2: At Sea Quotes

The first hot bite
of freshly cooked rice,
plump and nutty,
makes me imagine
the taste of ripe papaya
although one has nothing
to do with the other.

Related Characters: Kim Hà (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

A few days after Hà and her family board a navy ship leaving Saigon, the ship reaches open waters, and safety rules relax enough to allow cooking. Hà gets her first ration of rice.

Up until this point, Hà has been nibbling on balls of rice from days ago, which were moldy on the outside by the time she finished them. Those rice balls represented the scarcity of life on the ship. Things don't feel so scarce and frightening now, though, and the taste of fresh rice is comforting to Hà. She reminds readers that food—particularly comfort foods—are transformative: this "plump," "nutty" rice transports her back home, where she felt happy and secure.

This is, perhaps, why Hà thinks of how ripe papaya tastes when she bites into this fresh rice: she associates fresh papaya with home as well. Things are very anxious and uncertain for her right now; she gives no indication that she even knows where the ship is going, aside from that it's hopefully going somewhere safe. Thinking of home and all the foods that remind her of home is a comfort, and it helps Hà feel like things might turn out okay.

Brother Khôi nods
and I smile,
but I regret
not having my doll
as soon as the white bundle
sinks into the sea.

Related Characters: Kim Hà (speaker), Brother Khôi

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

When it's discovered that Brother Khôi has been clinging to his dead chick since boarding the ship two weeks ago, Hà helps him grieve by devising a burial ceremony. She wraps the chick in her doll's arms, wraps the doll and the chick in a handkerchief, and tosses the bundle into the sea.

In thinking so carefully and compassionately about Brother Khôi's emotional needs, Hà shows her kindness and maturity. She realizes that there's nothing she can really do but perform a ritual to give him some degree of closure—she can't bring the chick back to life, and she can't get him a new one. All she can do is help him move on. She shows just how much she loves her brother by essentially sacrificing her doll in this endeavor. Tossing her doll into the sea represents Hà prioritizing Brother Khôi's needs over her own: Hà is still a child who craves the comfort a doll can provide, and yet she maturely prioritizes his healing over her own needs in this situation. This shows that the hardships of life on the boat are forcing her to grow up and become more mature, perhaps more quickly than she would have otherwise.

This doesn't mean, however, that Hà is *ready* to grow up. Indeed, instantly regretting having to say goodbye to her doll suggests that Hà isn't ready for life without the comfort of her doll yet. So, while she may be making choices that read as very mature, it's not necessarily true that Hà is ready to be so mature.

> I have never seen her
> without this purple rock.
> I can't fall asleep
> unless I twist the ring
> and count circles.
>
> Brother Quang says,
> *NO!*
> *What's the point of*
> *new shirts and sandals*
> *if you lose the last*
> *tangible remnant of love?*
>
> I don't understand
> what he said
> but I agree.

Related Characters: Kim Hà, Brother Quang (speaker), Mother, Father

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 103-04

Explanation and Analysis

In Guam, Mother wants to sell the amethyst ring Father gave her so she can afford to make clothes for her children, but both Hà and Brother Quang object.

At first, Hà's desire for Mother to keep the ring is purely personal: she spins the ring at night to sooth herself before she goes to sleep, and she fears she won't be able to get to sleep without spinning it. While this isn't a formal cultural or religious ritual, but it's a ritual nonetheless, and it's extremely important to Hà. And at this point, when everything is constantly chanting, Hà doesn't want to have to give up a ritual that makes her feel secure.

Brother Quang takes a slightly different view, since he actually remembers Father (he would have been around Hà's age when his father disappeared). He remembers his parents as a married couple, with both of them at home—so for him, the ring signifies his parents' love and perhaps also the happy past. It's inconceivable to him that Mother would be willing to give up a reminder of how happy she once was, especially for clothes (which Brother Quang seems to see as trivial items). But this also reflects that Brother Quang is something of a romantic, and his partial college education gives him the language he needs to say this sort of thing in a flowery way (though this does convince Mother not to sell the ring). It adds humor when Hà doesn't quite understand what Brother Quang is saying—he's too pretentious for his

little sister to understand. But she still knows that Brother Quang is on her side in this fight, so she believes she should support him anyway.

> Then by chance Mother learns
> sponsors prefer those
> whose applications say "Christians."
>
> Just like that
> Mother amends our faith,
> saying all beliefs
> are pretty much the same.

Related Characters: Kim Hà (speaker), Mother, The Cowboy, The Cowboy's Wife

Related Themes:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

When Hà and her family have been in a refugee camp in Florida for weeks, waiting for an American to sponsor them, Mother discovers that sponsors are more interested in Christians than they are in people who practice other religions. (The novel never says outright what faith Hà's family practices, but what she says later about "knowing Buddha" suggests that the family is Buddhist.)

Regardless of Hà's family's beliefs, though, the fact remains that nobody in the family is Christian. This puts them at a disadvantage in the United States, where Christianity is the dominant faith. Mother learns here that potential sponsors are more than willing to discriminate against refugees who aren't Christian. Indeed, later, after the family moves to Alabama, they experience more religious discrimination when the cowboy's wife treats the family coldly until they're baptized at the local Baptist church. This highlights the fact that a lot of the discrimination the family faces is because of their religious beliefs. The language Hà uses, though, minimizes this: saying that sponsors "prefer" to sponsor Christians makes this seem like a normal preference, not something that's hurting people by keeping them in refugee camps for weeks or months. Hà, as a child, might not fully realize that this "preference" is a form of bigotry.

Hà also offers no insight into how Mother actually feels about learning that sponsors would prefer Christians. It's unclear whether Mother actually believes that all belief systems are mostly the same, or whether she's just trying to convince herself or her children that lying about their religion is okay. But this also reflects how difficult of a position Mother is in, as a refugee whose only way out of this camp is to attract the attention of an American willing to sponsor her family. She's already being forced to compromise who she is to make herself seem more palatable and less threatening to Americans.

Part 3: Alabama Quotes

> I bite down on a thigh;
> might as well bite down on
> bread soaked in water.
>
> Still,
> I force yum-yum sounds.
>
> I hope to ride
> the horse our cowboy
> surely has.

Related Characters: Kim Hà (speaker), The Cowboy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

One afternoon, days after Hà's family moves into the cowboy's basement, he brings them fried chicken from a fast food restaurant. This is intriguing, but they find the chicken bland and terrible, as it's nothing like they're used to eating. Most of Hà's family members spit the chicken out.

Hà, though, does her best to be a good sport and bites into her chicken thigh, faking happiness. She doesn't put it into words, but she does sense that the cowboy is trying to introduce her family to American culture—and something that's considered a treat—by bringing them this chicken. In general, Hà is very attuned to how food functions to bind families and cultures together, and she's not interested in rejecting outright the cowboy's attempts to welcome her family into his community.

But Hà also has an ulterior motive here: she desperately wants to ride the cowboy's horse, and she seems to imply that by pretending to like the chicken, he'll be more likely to let her ride his horse. But the cowboy is, Hà later discovers, not a cowboy at all. He's a car salesman who just happens to wear cowboy boots and a cowboy hat, and he doesn't own a horse. Her belief that he must be a cowboy illustrates how her perception of American culture influences how she sees her sponsor. She believes that the U.S. is filled with kindhearted, horse-owning cowboys—and now that she's had the pleasure of meeting one, she's not going to mess it

up by refusing the chicken and offending him. This mindset reflects Hà's childish, undeveloped understanding of the world, but also what she hopes the U.S. will be.

> *No, Mr. Johnston*
> *doesn't have a horse,*
> *nor has he ever ridden one.*
>
> What kind of a cowboy is he?
>
> To make it worse,
> the cowboy explains
> horses here go
> *neigh, neigh, neigh,*
> *not hee, hee, hee.*
>
> No they don't.
>
> Where am I?

Related Characters: Brother Quang, Kim Hà (speaker), The Cowboy

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

After finally working up the courage to ask the cowboy if she can ride his horse, Hà experiences a crisis when she learns (with Brother Quan's help translating) that the cowboy doesn't own a horse, and that horses make a different sound in the U.S. than they do in Vietnam.

As she learns these things, Hà feels suddenly like she knows nothing—she's lost in Alabama. She fully believed that the cowboy was, in every way, a cowboy, not understanding that lots of people wear cowboy hats and boots in the U.S. even if they don't own horses. This contradicts everything Hà thought she know about the U.S.—namely, that it's full of cowboys. Indeed, the cowboy isn't a cowboy at all; he's a car salesman who lives in the suburbs.

Then, it's even more unsettling for Hà when the cowboy shares what sound horses in the U.S. make. Animals make all sorts of different sounds, depending on the language one is speaking or even the country where one lives—but this is a new idea for Hà. She's never had to think about how things are done differently elsewhere in the world, and this makes her feel totally lost. It's so unsettling in part because in Hà's mind, the cowboy is essentially telling her that something she's believed to be true her whole life (that horses say "*hee*") is wrong. She has to rethink how she sees the world, and this is extremely difficult for her.

> I tap my own chest:
> *Hà.*
>
> She must have heard
> *ha*,
> as in funny *ha-ha-ha*.
>
> She fakes a laugh.
>
> I repeat, *Hà*,
> and wish I knew
> enough English
> to tell her
> to listen for
> the diacritical mark,
> this one directing
> the tone
> downward.

Related Characters: Kim Hà (speaker), MiSSS SScott

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 140-41

Explanation and Analysis

On the morning of Hà's first day of school, she meets her teacher, MiSSS SScott, and attempts to introduce herself. Hà immediately runs into problems, though, when MiSSS SScott doesn't realize that Hà is actually Hà's name. This results in MiSSS SScott inadvertently responding in a rude, racist way that makes Hà feel small and powerless.

Vietnamese is considered a tonal language, which means that vowels receive diacritical marks (the accents above or below letters) that signal whether and exactly how the tone moves up (as if one were asking a question in English) or down (as one brings the tone down at the end of a sentence in English to signal the period). So, to Hà, her name and the "ha-ha-ha" of laughter sound entirely different: "ha-ha-ha" has no diacritical marks, so the sounds don't move up or down at all. In her name, the tone moves downward. But Hà doesn't know enough English to explain to her teacher how diacritical marks work, so instead she can only stand and allow MiSSS SScott to essentially make fun of Hà's name—and in Hà's understanding, mock her language as a whole. This incident illustrates how Hà not knowing much English hinders her and makes her an easy target for racism and bullying. She doesn't know enough to explain, defend herself, or fight back, so she can only sit through these

demoralizing and dehumanizing experiences in silence.

> On one side
> of the bright, noisy room,
> light skin.
> Other side,
> dark skin.
>
> Both laughing, chewing,
> as if it never occurred
> to them
> someone medium
> would show up.
>
> I don't know where to sit
> any more than
> I know how to eat
> the pink sausage
> snuggled inside bread
> shaped like a corncob,
> smeared with sauces
> yellow and red.

Related Characters: Kim Hà (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 143-44

Explanation and Analysis

On Hà's first day of school in Alabama, she's totally lost when she joins her classmates in the cafeteria for lunch. She hasn't made a friend yet, and nobody is stepping forward to help Hà navigate the confusing situation in front of her, so she's on her own to figure out what to do (and ultimately, she ends up leaving her lunch uneaten and standing in the hallway).

It's an entirely new experience for Hà to be so aware of her skin and hair color. She realizes that in Alabama, she doesn't fit in: she's someone with "medium" skin, in a sea of people whom she implies are either Black or white. And it's impossible for her to tell where "medium" skin fits into what she perceives to be a binary. The fact that nobody makes any move to help her figure out her place also makes her feel alone and uncertain.

Even more confusing for Hà is her lunch, which is presumably a hot dog. Describing it in this way implies that Hà has never seen a hot dog before, so she has no idea how a person is supposed to eat it. Food, in this case, isn't a comfort—it's one more source of anxiety, and she feels even more like an outsider because she's not familiar with American cuisine.

> I shout, I'm so mad.
> *I shouldn't have to run away.*
>
> Tears come.
>
> Brother Vũ
> has always been afraid
> of my tears.
> *I'll teach you defense.*
>
> *How will that help me?*
>
> He smiles huge,
> so certain of himself.
> *You'll see.*

Related Characters: Kim Hà, Brother Vũ/Vu Lee (speaker), Pink Boy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 152-53

Explanation and Analysis

Hà wakes up Brother Vũ in the middle of the night after the first day of school to ask him to teach her to fight back against her bullies. When Hà first shouts at Brother Vũ in anger, it highlights how being powerless makes her feel angry—it makes her want to lash out and prove that she's not powerless. Indeed, she wants to know how to fight so that she can show her bullies with her body that she's strong and competent, since she can't yet do that with her words. This is so important to her, and it's so humiliating to feel powerless, that she begins to cry.

For Brother Vũ, though, this isn't as easy as teaching his little sister to fight back—he doesn't want to enable Hà to become a bully herself. To Hà, it seems like Brother Vũ is trying to get out of helping her when he offers to teach her defense—defense, she believes, isn't going to help her kick her bullies when they tease her or pull her hair. What Hà doesn't realize until much later, though, is that hurting people doesn't actually make her feel good. Really, it's enough to know how to protect herself—and the training helps Hà feel more confident and secure, even if she's not learning to hurt other people. But at this point, Hà can't see past her desire to cause her bullies as much pain as they're causing her, which highlights how ostracized she feels in Alabama.

I'm furious,
unable to explain
I already learned
fractions
and how to purify
river water.

So this is
what dumb
feels like.

I hate, hate, hate it.

Related Characters: Kim Hà (speaker), MiSSS SScott

Related Themes:

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

MiSSS SScott has just asked Hà to read the English alphabet and then count to 20 in English, and then encouraged other students to clap. For Hà, this is a demeaning experience. She was almost at the top of her class in Saigon, and now, she feels "dumb" because of how MiSSS SScott is treating her. Hà is not at all "dumb," of course—she just doesn't know much English and therefore can't explain to her teacher what she already knows. And because of this, Hà has little choice but to put up with MiSSS SScott's misguided attempts to guess at what Hà knows and make her feel good by praising her for reciting the alphabet.

MiSSS SScott seems to have no idea that she's hurting Hà's self-esteem by doing this. But she's still being racist and making assumptions about Hà's educational history and intelligence by assuming that Hà is only at the level of reciting the alphabet and counting to 20. Racism, this shows, doesn't have to be intentional to still be extremely hurtful. And in this case, it's especially clear that it makes Hà feel terrible for no good reason. Hà isn't "dumb," but her teacher makes her feel that way through this misstep. This causes Hà to doubt herself and hinders her willingness and ability to learn, as she fears people will make fun of her.

She makes me learn rules
I've never noticed,
like *a*, *an*, and *the*,
which act as little megaphones
to tell the world
whose English
is still secondhand.

[...]

A, *an*, and *the*
do not exist in Vietnamese
and we understand
each other just fine.

I pout,
but MiSSS WaSShington says
every language has annoyances and illogical rules,
as well as sensible beauty.

Related Characters: Kim Hà (speaker), MiSSSisss WaSShington

Related Themes:

Page Number: 166-67

Explanation and Analysis

As Hà begins tutoring sessions with MiSSSisss WaSShington, she learns a lot of new rules about English—such as about how articles (a, an, and the) function. Learning about articles is eye-opening for Hà. They are, she realizes, a part of speech she's going to have to be able to use if she ever wants to not sound like someone "whose English / is still secondhand." The way she frames this suggests that she doesn't want to sound like someone who's learning English as a second language—she'd prefer the safety and comfort that comes with sounding like a native speaker. This is how she'll fit in.

But realizing she's going to have to learn how to use articles doesn't make this an easy proposition. Indeed, it's almost an insult to Hà to realize that the very thing she must learn to sound like a native speaker isn't something that exists in Vietnamese. The fact that articles don't appear in Vietnamese means that Hà is going to have to work much harder to remember how and when to use them, because she's having to learn a totally new grammar system. On some level, she doesn't feel like she should have to learn how to use them, since in Vietnamese, they're not necessary.

However, MiSSSisss WaSShington encourages Hà to see articles as just one of English's many "annoyances and illogical rules." The implication here is that Vietnamese

certainly has its own "annoyances and illogical rules," but that Hà isn't aware of them because she's a native speaker. So, as Hà learns English, she's also learning more about Vietnamese—and she's learning to think about both in a more critical way.

> I try
> but can't fall asleep,
> needing amethyst-ring twirls
> and her lavender scent.
>
> I'm not as good as Mother
> at making do.

Related Characters: Kim Hà (speaker), Mother

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

The night after Hà's family is baptized, Mother stays up late chanting. These days, though, Mother doesn't have her brass gong or her jasmine incense to use while she chants, which Hà misses as she struggles to fall asleep.

Hà recognizes that Mother is doing her best to "mak[e] do" with what she can find in Alabama, which means using different items than usual while she chants, such as a glass bowl as a gong, or burning orange peels instead of incense. But while Hà seems to commend Mother for being able to still find meaning and comfort with these differences, Hà finds it much more difficult to feel like the chanting has any meaning, or can provide any comfort, without the exact items she's used to. This reflects the fact that Hà both a young child who finds change difficult, and also that she is struggling to feel at home in Alabama. She desperately craves the traditional items that will make her feel like she's still at home in Saigon, such as the proper incense.

More immediately, though, what Hà wants is for Mother to come to bed (they share a bedroom) so that Hà can engage in a ritual that hasn't changed with the move to Alabama: spinning Mother's amethyst ring and being able to smell Mother's lavender soap. This highlights the fact that every person in Hà's family has their own rituals that make them feel safe and secure, and that every person is willing to accept a different degree of change to those rituals. Hà isn't yet willing to accept any change—she must have these things to fall asleep, or she implies that she's just going to be awake all night. Again, this reflects her youth and her desire for things to go back to the way things were.

> *Things will get better,*
> *just you wait.*
>
> I don't believe her
> but it feels good
> that someone knows.

Related Characters: MiSSSisss WaSShington, Kim Hà (speaker), MiSSS SScott

Related Themes:

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

Hà has just admitted to MiSSSisss WaSShington that she's been eating candy or saved dinner rolls in the bathroom during lunch at school. MiSSSisss WaSShington is horrified, and she's agreed to do something to fix this situation.

The fact that Hà was willing to tell MiSSSisss WaSShington about eating in the bathroom at all speaks to how close Hà is becoming with her mentor. Hà has, at this point, been hiding in the bathroom during lunch for about six weeks, and she's told nobody about it. Trusting MiSSSisss WaSShington with what might feel like a shameful secret (having no one to sit with at lunch is proof that Hà doesn't fit in) suggests that Hà is starting to feel a bit more secure. She's now willing to ask for help from the one trusted adult in her life who she believes can maybe help her feel better.

However, Hà doesn't believe that things are actually going to get any better. This reflects Hà's comfort with hiding, and it also suggests that she underestimates how intent the American adults in her life are in helping her feel safe and secure in her new home. Even MiSSS SScott—whom Hà sees as an enemy for making her feel unintelligent—ultimately gets on board with Hà eating in the classroom, rather than in the lunchroom. So, although Hà isn't ready to accept it yet, this experience is teaching her that people are willing to help if she asks. And for now, it's enough that MiSSSisss WaSShington is able to make Hà feel heard.

> No one would believe me
> but at times
> I would choose
> wartime in Saigon
> over
> peacetime in Alabama.

Related Characters: Kim Hà (speaker), MiSSS SScott

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 194-95

Explanation and Analysis

In class one day, MiSSS SScott shows photos of Vietnam to show the class where Hà is from—but all the photos she chooses are of people burning or trying desperately to escape before the Fall of Saigon. This is dehumanizing and humiliating for Hà. Only showing photos of Vietnam during war, where so many people are in danger or are being hurt and killed, creates the impression that that's all Vietnam is: danger and death.

Having lived there during wartime, Hà knows this isn't a complete picture of Vietnam. Although Hà was there as the war moved closer and closer (and indeed, lived her entire life in Saigon during the Vietnam War, although most of the war didn't affect Saigon much), she still managed to enjoy a happy and fairly carefree childhood. She was able to buy sweets in the market, attend school, and play outside with her friends. And best of all, Saigon was where Hà felt like she belonged. It was her city, and South Vietnam was her country.

In Alabama, Hà has not yet felt like she belongs. She constantly feels like an outsider due to not knowing much English. She's bullied for her appearance, for her religious beliefs, and for her language skills. So, while Alabama is technically peaceful (in that there's no war going on), it feels more like living in a conflict zone for Hà than living in an actual warzone did. But she realizes this isn't something most people in Alabama are going to understand—especially after seeing MiSSS SScott's pictures, which don't make life in Vietnam look desirable at all.

> I thought I would love
> seeing him in pain.
>
> But
> he looks
> more defeated than weak,
> more helpless than scared,
> like a caged puppy.
>
> He's getting up.
>
> If I were to kick him,
> it must be
> now.

Related Characters: Kim Hà (speaker), Pink Boy, Brother Vũ/Vu Lee

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 225-27

Explanation and Analysis

Today is the day that Pink Boy plans to have his cousin beat Hà up, but she, her friends, and Vu Lee have a plan to rescue her. For now, it doesn't seem like anyone is coming to help her, so Hà has just had to evade Pink Boy's attack on her own. He's just fallen.

This is a major turning point for Hà. Pink Boy has, at this point, been tormenting her for months by calling her racist names, chasing her after school, and pulling her hair. His bullying has made Hà so angry that all she can think of wanting is to cause him pain—that, she believed, would be cathartic and make her feel better.

However, seeing Pink Boy hurt doesn't have the desired effect. Hà realizes that instead of making him feel "defeated" and "helpless"—the same way he's made her feel the entire time she's been in Alabama—he looks more like a "caged puppy." Likening him to a trapped puppy suggests that Pink Boy is much less threatening than Hà thought he was. His bullying was undeniably harmful, but he may have been posturing more than anything—he might actually be weak. This is a new idea for Hà, as she used to think that Pink Boy was extremely powerful because of how he made her feel.

Hà's musings are cut short, though, when Pink Boy starts to get up, presumably to launch another attack. In this moment, Hà realizes it doesn't matter how Pink Boy seems to her—if he's going to try to attack her, and if she wants to protect herself, she's going to have to fight back and cause him more pain. In the moment, she decides to look out for herself—it's all she believes she can do if she wants to emerge from this encounter in one piece.

Yet
on the dining table
on a plate
sit strips of papaya
gooey and damp,
having been soaked in hot water.

The sugar has melted off
leaving
plump
moist
chewy
bites.

Hummm…

Not the same,
but not bad
at all.

Related Characters: Kim Hà (speaker), Mother, MiSSSisss WaSShington

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 234

Explanation and Analysis

MiSSSisss WaSShington gave Hà dried, sugared papaya for Christmas, which Hà rejected as soon as she tried it because it didn't taste the same as fresh papaya. She's now gotten up in the morning after throwing it away to discover that Mother rehydrated the papaya.

After having some time to think about it, Hà is now choosing to see the kindness and generosity that both MiSSSisss WaSShington and Mother are showing her. MiSSSisss WaSShington seems to have not realized that Hà was expecting fresh papaya (or, perhaps, she wasn't able to find fresh papaya in grocery stores in Alabama). But the fact remains that she was trying to do something nice by giving Hà a taste of Saigon that she hasn't had in months now. Mother wants to help Hà accept MiSSSisss WaSShington's kindness by trying to make the papaya more palatable. She knows what Hà was expecting, and she suspects she can get the dried papaya closer to what Hà wanted by soaking it. The fact that Mother did this also suggests that she suspected Hà would experience a crisis of conscience and revisit the papaya—and she was right.

For Hà, approaching the papaya and being willing to try it rehydrated is a big step forward in her developing maturity. She's learning to compromise and "make do," as Mother has been doing for much of the time the family has been in Alabama (such as by substituting a glass bowl for a brass gong when she chants, or burning orange peels instead of incense). Hà is starting to understand that in this new country, she's going to have to learn to be okay with things not being exactly the same as they were in Saigon. Fresh papaya is harder to come by, but that doesn't mean she can't ever have papaya—she just has to settle for something that's a little bit different. When Hà agrees to look at the papaya through this lens, it becomes much easier for her to accept that it's not so bad. This, in turn, helps Hà feel more at home and connected to her growing community in Alabama.

Part 4: From Now On Quotes

I tell her
a much worse embarrassment
is not having
a gift for Pem.

Related Characters: Kim Hà (speaker), Mother, Pem/Pam, TiTi

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 246

Explanation and Analysis

Hà has just told Mother about how embarrassing it was to have a classmate inform her that she was wearing a nightgown as a dress, but that not being able to give her friend Pem a Christmas gift was even more embarrassing (since Pem gave Hà a beautiful doll for Christmas).

Hà reads as much more secure in this passage than she has for much of the novel. Her classmates, for one, aren't teasing her the way they used to. Even when they do point out things that Hà is doing "wrong," it still doesn't bother Hà as much as it once did. She's learning to deal with her classmates policing her behavior, and it's no longer as devastating when she doesn't do something quite right.

So, what's bothering Hà more than anything else now is that she doesn't feel like she's on equal footing with Pem, who is now one of her best friends. Pem gave Hà the doll for Christmas, and although Hà adores the doll, her enjoyment has been hindered by feeling like she can't be a good friend and give Pem anything in return. Hà doesn't want to feel like she's taking charity from her friend.

Hà regains some of her dignity when Mother then goes and fishes out the flower seeds that Hà and TiTi collected, so that Hà can give the seeds to Pem. With this gift (though the novel doesn't describe Hà actually presenting it to Pem), Hà regains some of her dignity and is able to feel even more at home in Alabama.

chanting.
The chant is long,
the voice
low and sure.

Finally
she appears,
looks at each of us.

Your father is
truly gone.

Related Characters: Kim Hà, Mother (speaker), Father

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 250

Explanation and Analysis

Earlier, Mother lost the amethyst ring that Father gave her at work, and now, Hà and her brothers are in the living room while Mother chants.

What's significant here is that Hà describes Mother's voice as "low and sure." While Mother always seems to gain comfort from chanting, she seems to not often get answers from her chanting—but now, the ritual is helping her come to the conclusion that losing the amethyst ring is a sign that she and her children can move on and mourn Father as though he's dead. This speaks to the power of Mother's ritual to help her make sense of a truly devastating string of events: losing her husband, having to flee their home country, and then losing the one object that connected her emotionally to him.

Then, fixing each of her children with a look signals what's to come: Mother turning her attention more fully to her living family members, her children, since she no longer has to experience the uncertainty of wondering where Father is. Losing the ring is a terrible event—it shakes Mother's sense of who she is, and it forces her to reevaluate how she relates to her husband and to her children. But ultimately, Hà frames it as a good thing that Mother comes to this conclusion, since it brings Mother emotionally closer to her children.

This Tet
there's no I Ching Teller of Fate,
so Mother predicts our year.

Our lives
will twist and twist,
intermingling the old and new
until it doesn't matter
which is which.

Related Characters: Kim Hà (speaker), Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 257

Explanation and Analysis

The arrival of Tet, the lunar new year, marks a year since the novel began. Last Tet, Hà and her family were in Saigon, where things were starting to get scary as the war ramped up, but where the holiday still felt normal enough to Hà. The usual fortuneteller predicted what would happen to the family during the next year, and the ceremonial dish *bánh chung* was prepared as it always was.

This year, though, things are already starting to change, proving Mother's point that her family members' lives "will twist and twist." For one, Mother is the one making this prediction, rather than the usual fortuneteller—already, traditions are having to change as Hà and her family figure out how to observe them in a new country, where they don't have access to the same foods and people as they did in Saigon.

But this, Mother seems to suggest, doesn't have to be a bad thing. Having to switch up the family's traditions doesn't make those traditions less meaningful—it just means they're adapting to their new lives in Alabama. They'll always carry with them their memories, traditions, and customs from Vietnam, but those will inevitably mix up with new ways of doing things that the family learns in Alabama. And as long as the rituals remain meaningful, Mother insists that this mixing doesn't really matter. Indeed, it's what the family must be okay with if they intend to keep celebrating holidays like Tet at all.

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.

PART 1: SAIGON

1975: Year of the Cat. It's February 11, Tet, the first day of the lunar new year. Every Tet, people eat sweet lotus seeds and rice cakes, and everyone gets new clothes—even underwear. Mother insists that how they act on Tet foretells the whole year, so everyone has to smile regardless of how they feel. Nobody can sweep or splash in water, as they might sweep hope away or "splash away joy." Everyone celebrates their birthday today, so now the narrator is 10. As a 10-year-old, she can learn embroidery and can watch her **papaya** tree bear fruit. She was mad last night when Mother insisted that one of the narrator's brothers had to be the first one up in the morning because only men can bless the house with good luck. The narrator woke up before dawn and sneakily touched the floor herself.

It's significant that the narrator begins her account by introducing readers not to herself, but to the Tet holiday. This indicates that this holiday is extremely important to her; it's what helps her feel secure and at home. In particular, she focuses on the food, which highlights how important food can be to making holidays like this feel special. However, the narrator isn't sold on all the holiday's traditions—it bothers her that as a girl, she isn't as revered as her older brother is. Touching the floor herself is her way of making this holiday her own.

Inside Out. Every new year, Mother visits a fortuneteller. This year, the fortuneteller predicted that the narrator's family's lives will "twist inside out." The narrator wonders if this means that the soldiers who patrol her neighborhood might go away, and that maybe then she can jump rope after sunset. Maybe the sirens that mean everyone must hide under the bed will stop going off. But the narrator has also heard that *bánh chung*, special food eaten only during Tet, "will be smeared in blood." The war is getting closer.

Given what the fortuneteller says—especially with the soldiers, the sirens, and the war (the Vietnam War) getting closer, it seems as though the war will soon upend the narrator's life. Her belief that this will be a good thing—that the war will end, and she'll be safe in her neighborhood—reveals her youth and naivete. But the fact that people are saying the bánh chung *"will be smeared in blood" suggests that the opposite might happen.*

Kim Hà. The narrator introduces herself as Hà. Brother Quang remembers that the first time he saw Hà, she was red and fat like a hippopotamus—so he calls her *Hà Mā*, or "River Horse." Brother Vū startles Hà every time he shouts, "*Hà, Ya*" and breaks wood to imitate Bruce Lee. Brother Khôi, meanwhile, calls Hà "Mother's Tail" because Hà sticks so close to Mother. Hà can't get rid of her brothers, so she hides their sandals instead so the hot ground burns their feet. Mother always tell Hà to ignore her brothers and remember that she and Father named Hà after the Golden River. Hà's parents have no idea how much Hà's brothers torment her, but Hà adores her mother anyway. When Hà's **papaya** tree bears fruit, she'll give Mother first pick of the papayas.

Hà clearly has a somewhat fraught relationship with her brothers; at the very least, they like annoying her, and she gets revenge the only way she can by hiding their sandals. This all reads as very childish, however, suggesting that Hà and her siblings are still able to be kids despite the nearby war. Hà also shows that she's very generous and forgiving, at least to the people she loves, like Mother.

Papaya Tree. Hà's **papaya** tree grew from a black seed. Now, it's twice as tall as Hà. Brother Khôi, who's 14 and taller than Hà, spotted its first flower. Brother Vũ was the first to notice a fist-sized baby papaya on the trunk. He's 18 and can see higher than Brother Khôi. Brother Quang is the oldest at 21; he's studying engineering. He'll no doubt see something important before Hà does. Hà vows to get up first thing every morning to study her papaya tree. She wants to be the first to see the fruit get ripe. It's now mid-February.

Given that Hà has mentioned her papaya tree multiple times thus far, it's clearly an important part of her life. Indeed, although it's taller than any of her brothers, the tree is a symbol for Hà herself: like her, it's just starting to grow up and blossom. Wanting to see the fruit get ripe first thus suggests that Hà wants to grow up and be more mature, like her brothers.

TiTi Waves Good-bye. It's now early March, and Hà watches as her best friend TiTi sobs in the car next to her two brothers. The car is packed with suitcases. TiTi gives Hà a tin of flower seeds and waves as she drives away. Hà would still be standing and looking into the distance if Brother Khôi hadn't led Hà away. He explains that TiTi's family is traveling to Vũng Tau, where rich Vietnamese leave the country on cruise ships. Hà is happy her family is poor now, because that means they can stay.

The fact that TiTi's family is leaving the country is ominous—it suggests that the approaching war poses danger to people in Hà's neighborhood. Hà, though, is perhaps too young and innocent to realize this. Insisting she's happy her family is poor because this means they can stay in Vietnam highlights how connected Hà is to her home—and how innocent she is to the threat the war poses.

Missing in Action. Hà explains that nine years ago on this day, March 10, Father left on a navy mission. He was captured, and that's all the family knows. Today, Mother prepares an altar and chants for him to return. She offers fruit, incense, and sweet foods, and she pulls out the photo taken the year he disappeared. In the photo, he's peaceful and smiling. Everyone in the family prays and hopes. Mother leaves the altar up all day, but she puts the photo away early. She can't stand looking at Father longer than necessary.

Commemorating the day Father disappeared is another tradition that helps Hà feel secure and as though life is proceeding as it should. However, this tradition is complicated because it's also sad, and Mother seems to be taking Father's continued absence very hard. Hà seems very in tune with how Mother is feeling about it, which speaks to how close they are.


Mother's Days. During the week, Mother works as a secretary in a navy office. At night, she designs baby clothes and hires seamstresses to sew the garments. A few years ago, she had enough money to think about buying a car. On the weekends, Hà accompanies Mother to the market, where Mother drops off new garments and collects profits from the last week. She laments that nobody buys the clothes anymore, since food is so expensive. But Mother still keeps trying.

The way that Hà describes Mother's various occupations and how things have changed in the last few weeks helps explain why, as Hà noted in the poem "TiTi Waves Good-bye," her family is poor. Mother is working, but the secretary job doesn't seem to pay enough on its own, and not enough people are buying baby clothes to earn much profit.

Eggs. It's March 17, and Brother Khôi is mad at Mother for taking the eggs his hen provides. The hen only lays an egg every day and a half, and the family members take turns eating them. When it's his turn, Brother Khôi puts his egg under a lamp in the hopes it will hatch. Hà knows she should support her "most tolerable brother," but she loves dipping bread in a soft yolk. Mother insists that if everything wasn't so expensive—if gasoline didn't cost as much as gold, and if rice didn't cost as much as gasoline—Brother Khôi could keep trying to hatch eggs.

Given how poor Hà's family is, the eggs are no doubt an important source of calories and protein—and to Mother, having the food far outweighs Brother Khôi's desire to hatch a chick. It's also obvious to Hà that the eggs should be eaten, since she frames getting an egg as a treat that she savors when it's her turn. Noting that rice costs as much as gasoline suggests that most foods—even staple foods like rice—are becoming prohibitively expensive as a result of the war.



Current News. On Fridays, Miss Xinh's class talks about current events. But as they keep talking about the same things, like how close the Communists are to Saigon, how many bombs they've heard, or how expensive things are now that the Americans are gone, Miss Xinh refuses to talk anymore about current events. She insists they talk about "happy news" on Fridays, but nobody has anything to say.

By this point, near the end of March, many Americans in Vietnam were starting to leave to escape the approaching North Vietnamese army. The threat of war seems to overshadow anything good in Hà and her classmates' lives, hence why they have nothing happy to share on Fridays.

Feel Smart. Hà has afternoon and Saturday classes this year. Since she has the mornings free, Mother sends her to shop in the market. Since last September, Hà has been buying just a little bit less of everything that Mother asks for, and using the extra cash to buy sugary treats for herself. But in September, it took 100 dong to buy groceries, and now groceries cost twice that. Hà still buys a bit less than Mother asks for. Nobody knows about her trick, and it makes Hà feel smart.

Being sent to the market on her own makes Hà feel smart and mature. Again, she shows how important special food is to her happiness when she describes making sure she has just enough change to buy herself a treat. This is a way to hold onto her childhood and her innocence too, though Hà might not think of it in this way.

Two More Papayas. At the beginning of April, Hà spots two more **papayas** on her tree. They're "Two green thumbs" that by summer will be sweet and orangey yellow. Ripe papayas are soft as yams and barely need to be chewed.

Likening the papayas to human thumbs reinforces their symbolism for Hà. Like Hà, they're at the beginning of their maturation process—and like Hà, who's on the brink of starting puberty and becoming an adult, they'll soon be fully grown.

Unknown Father. All Hà knows about Father comes from the little things that Mother occasionally slips into conversation. He loved stewed eels and his children—so much that he'd cry watching them sleep. Sometimes, Brother Quang tells Hà about how Father would say "*Tuyet sút*," the Vietnamese way to say "*toute de suite*" (French for "right away") and follow Mother around the kitchen, asking for stewed eel *tuyet sút*. It made Mother laugh. Sometimes, Hà says "*tuyet sút*" to herself quietly, just to pretend she knows Father. She'd never say it in front of Mother, so as to not make Mother any sadder.

Father disappeared when Hà was still a baby, so she doesn't have any memories of him. Instead, she has to cling to these small tidbits that Mother and Brother Quang share with her. Mentioning how much Father loved the stewed eels again highlights the importance of food, this time to the family's culture: it was something that Mother and Father connected over, and now it connects Hà to her Father.

TV News. Brother Quang hurries home on his bike (he can't afford gas for his moped anymore) and angrily turns on the TV. A South Vietnamese pilot bombed the presidential palace earlier and then flew north to accept a medal. Apparently, the pilot has been a Communist spy for years. Hà doesn't understand—the Communists captured Father, so why would a pilot work with them? Brother Quang flaunts how smart he's become since starting college by saying that "*One cannot justify war / unless each side / flaunts its own / blind conviction.*" Hà starts to tell him he's being pretentious, but Mother gives Hà their silent signal to calm down.

Noting that Brother Quang can't afford gas reminds readers of how dire life in South Vietnam is becoming. That the pilot bombs the palace and reveals himself to be a spy makes the situation seem even more frightening. Hà's youth and innocence again shines through here. Her loyalties and concerns are small compared to how huge the war is, and this makes it hard for her to understand that not everyone has a missing father to guide their loyalty.

Birthday. Since Hà is the youngest in the family, she gets to celebrate her actual birthday. She usually gets a variety of sweets and special foods on her birthday, but this year Mother only makes banana tapioca and Hà's favorite black sesame candy. Hà asks for stories for her birthday. It's never easy to convince Mother to talk about her childhood in the North, but Mother gives in today. Mother's only duties as a girl were to look pretty and write poetry. She was promised to Father when she was five, and they married at age 16. Everything changed when people learned the name Ho Chi Minh. People lost their houses—they suddenly belonged to the government.

The war and the worsening economic situation mean that Hà's birthday treats aren't as elaborate as usual. Learning a little bit more about Mother seems to increase Hà's admiration of her. Through Mother's story, it's clear that things have changed a lot for her since she was a girl: where she was raised to be pretty and pursue her personal interests, she's now a working single mother. Ho Chi Minh was the leader of the Communists in Vietnam at the beginning of the Vietnam War; his ascent to power changed Mother's life dramatically.

The country split in half, and Mother and Father came south to escape Communism. Mother's father was supposed to follow them, as soon as his daughter-in-law gave birth. But before the baby was born and he could travel, the North and the South cut all contact and closed the border. At this point in the story, Mother closes her eyes. Her eyes are like no one else's: they're almond-shaped, like Hà's, but they're deeper like Westerners'. Hà has always wanted her mother's eyes, but Mother encourages Hà to not think like that. Mother's eyes have always carried great sadness. Hà begs to hear more about Mother's childhood, but Mother refuses to open her eyes or say anything more.

The war tore families apart when it split the country in two and closed the border between North and South Vietnam. Hà implies that Mother hasn't spoken to her father or any of her other family members since this day the border closed—and this means that she carries around immense sadness. Hà doesn't seem to quite understand that Mother's eyes, while beautiful, are the way they are because *she's so sad. Mother wants better for her daughter than to spend her life grieving for family members she may not ever see again.*

Birthday Wishes. Later that night, Hà makes secret wishes. She wishes she could be like the boys and get a tan and scars on her knees. She wishes Mother would let Hà grow her hair out. She wishes she could stay calm and ignore her brothers' taunts, and that Mother would stop encouraging Hà to be calm. Hà wishes she had a sister, and she wishes Father would come home. Mostly, though, Hà wishes Father would come home so that Mother could smile instead of frowning all the time.

Hà's wishes reveal that she'd like to be able to make more choices for herself, and not be so caught up in gendered expectations—a sign she's starting to come of age and crave independence. Then, Hà's love for Mother shines through again when she wishes for Father to come home, but mostly so Mother could be happy again. This again suggests that while Hà and her family are close, Father's absence is something that looms over them and prevents them from feeling fully content.

A Day Downtown. Every year in the spring, President Thieu puts on a long ceremony for "war wives." Mother takes Hà to the ceremony because after President Thieu is done talking about winning the war, democracy, or soldiers' bravery, he gives out food to each family. As they cross the bridge leading to downtown, Hà studies Mother. Though Mother is worried, she's beautiful—even her sunken eyes.

Hà frames this event as one that Mother actually has little interest in. Its seems like a display of sympathy for "war wives" that isn't genuine—the only reason they go is so they can get the free food at the end. For Hà, though, this is still a fun outing with her mother, whom she adores despite Mother's sadness.

Soon, Hà hears the noise and bustle of downtown. She and Mother stop at an open market, where they go to a *bánh cuon* stand. Hà watches the vendor seemingly magically make crepes that they then fill with shrimp, cucumber, and bean sprouts. As Hà savors her treat, the noise of the market seems to disappear. Then, Mother leads Hà to the presidential palace, where they stand in line and then sit on hot benches in the beating afternoon sun. Hà is so thirsty that she's dizzy; the fish sauce from the *bánh cuon* was salty. She sucks on a tamarind candy from Mother until President Thieu appears. He thanks the wives for their suffering and then sobs into the cameras. Mother mutters, "tears of an ugly fish." Hà knows Mother thinks the president's tears are fake.

The joy Hà's takes in the bánh cuon *again emphasizes how important traditional Vietnamese food is to her, to the point that it almost seems magical. Notably, Hà doesn't seem nearly as intent on paying attention to President Thieu as she is in paying attention to how Mother reacts. In this way, she's learning how to think about the world by paying attention to Mother and modeling what she sees.*


Twisting Twisting. Mother measures the rice left in the bin and discovers there's not enough to feed the family until she's paid at the end of the month. Her twisting brows are "like laundry / being wrung dry." But Mother smiles and says they can mix the rice with yam and manioc. Hà knows how the poor eat; Mother isn't fooling her.

Mother is trying to make the best of a difficult situation, but in this case, Hà is far more astute than Mother gives her credit for. Hà can tell that the family is poor, and she seems to resent Mother's attempt to ignore this fact. This is a big change from earlier in the novel, when Hà was glad to be poor because it meant she could stay in Saigon.


Closed Too Soon. In the middle of Miss Xinh's lesson on President Ford, a siren goes off. This signals that school is closed—a month early. Hà is so mad that she pinches her desk mate, Tram, who's tiny and nervous. Mother is friends with Tram's mother, and Hà knows that Tram will tell on her and that Mother will scold Hà for being mean. But Hà needs time to figure out this word problem asking how much the wind will slow down a man on a bike. The first person to solve it will get the sweet potato plant in the window, and Hà wants it so it can climb her **papaya** tree. She pinches Tram again; Tram is the teacher's pet and will get the plant.

The war is starting to have tangible effects on Hà's life: in addition to making her family poorer, now it's taking away Hà's education. Hà doesn't know how to manage her anger, so she takes it out on Tram by pinching her. It seems as though Hà desperately wishes she were the best student in class—being the teacher's pet comes with perks, after all, like getting this sweet potato.


Promises. There are now five **papayas** on the tree. Some of them are as big as Hà's head; others are as big as a knee or her thumb. They're all green, but they're all promising.

Again, just like Hà, the papayas are developing and are full of potential and promise. But Hà's schooling was just brought to an abrupt end, thereby limiting her potential, which foreshadows that the papayas might not reach their full potential either.


Bridge to the Sea. Father's best friend, Uncle Son, visits Hà's family. He's short and always smiles, unlike Father, who was tall and serious. Sometimes, when people ask about Father, Hà thinks of him as "short and smiley" first. Uncle Son goes to the kitchen and studies the door, which opens into an alley. He notes that this is lucky: it'll allow them to skip the navy checkpoint and head straight to the port. Mother argues that she won't risk her children's lives on a boat, but Uncle Son asks how she feels about a navy ship. Mother is incredulous—she doesn't think the navy will abandon the country—but Uncle Son insists that "There won't be a South Vietnam / left to abandon." This house, he says, will be their "bridge to the sea."

Having no real memories of Father means that Hà has to essentially fabricate memories based on what other people say about him. This isn't always easy, especially with someone like Uncle Son in Hà's life—he seems to be a sort of father figure, and he's in the forefront of Hà's mind. Uncle Son insists that Mother must consider how to get her family out of the country safely, an indicator that the war is getting closer and more dangerous, as Uncle Son suggests that the country itself might not even exist soon.

Should We? Mother calls a family meeting and explains that several neighbors have bought airplane tickets out of the country or have a van ready to leave. She asks if they should go. Brother Quang insists they must stay to help rebuild the country, and Brother Khôi asks what will happen if Father comes back and they're gone. Brother Vũ says they have to go, but Hà knows he just wants to go to where Bruce Lee lived. Mother's eyebrows twist as she says that after living in the North, she knows how things will go. At first, nothing will happen—but then Quang will leave college and chant Ho Chi Minh's slogans, and Khôi will be praised for telling his teacher what his family talks about.

Hà's brothers' different personalities and concerns are evident as they give their reasons for staying or leaving: Brother Quang is extremely proud to be Vietnamese, Brother Khôi is connected to his family, and Brother Vũ cares about Bruce Lee most of all. Despite soliciting her children's opinions, Mother seems to have made up her mind to leave anyway. Her understanding of how life will proceed suggests that staying in South Vietnam is going to put the family in danger and divide them.

Sssshhhhhhh. Just before dawn on April 18, Brother Khôi shakes Hà awake and leads her to the back garden. He shows her a tiny, fuzzy, just-hatched chick. He murmurs that they can't leave, no matter what Mother says: he has to protect his chick, and Hà must protect her **papayas**. They hook pinkies.

Brother Khôi and Hà are perhaps too young to fully grasp the gravity of what Mother said earlier. They're connected emotionally to the chick and to the papaya tree, respectively, and it's these small comforts that Brother Khôi insists are worth staying and putting the family in danger for.

Quiet Decision. The next evening, Hà helps Mother peel sweet potatoes to mix with the rice. As she goes to chop off a thumbnail-size end of a potato, she decides instead to chop off just a sliver. She's proud; she can save. But then, Hà notices Mother crying. Mother says that Hà deserves to grow up without worrying about half a bite of sweet potato.

In Hà's mind, she's growing up and learning a more useful mindset by saving a tiny bit of sweet potato. But to Mother, this is proof that Hà fully understands how poor the family is—and from her perspective, it's tragic that Hà is taking on the emotional burden of getting the family as much food as possible.

Early Monsoon. Hà's family pretends that the monsoon came early. They can hear bombs, which sound like thunder; and gunfire sounds like rain. It's still distant, but they can hear the sounds and see the flashes. It's not that far away.

In this poem, Hà seems to undergo a loss of innocence. While at first, she can more or less pretend that the war is a monsoon, by the end, it's impossible to ignore that the war is close—and dangerous.

The President Resigns. Hà watches the TV. On it, President Thieu looks shockingly "sad and yellow." He cries and says that he can't be the president anymore. He promises to never leave the country. Mother raises an eyebrow. She usually does this when she thinks Hà is lying.

Again, Hà doesn't quite know what to think about President Thieu's theatrics, so she looks to Mother. While Hà initially seems to take him at face value (by noting how sad and poorly colored he is), Mother's reaction suggests that this is just an act.

Watch Over Us. Uncle Son comes back and insists they must be ready to leave at any moment. He also says they can't tell anyone, or everyone in Saigon will storm the port. Hà explains that Uncle Son and Father were in the same graduating navy class, and it's just luck that Uncle Son wasn't on the mission where Father was captured. Mother pulls Hà close and says that even if Father isn't here, he's watching over them. She explains that she and Father made a pact. They decided that if they're separated, they'll find each other at Father's ancestral home in the North.

It seems that President Thieu's resignation spurs Uncle Son to decide that they won't be safe in the country anymore—things are changing too fast, and not for the better. Mother is trying to make the best of this frightening situation by telling Hà (and herself) that someday, she and Father will meet back up in the North. Essentially, Mother justifies the choice to leave by telling herself that seeing Father again isn't contingent on staying in their current home.

Crisscrossed Packs. Mother pushes her sewing machine as fast as it can go as she sews packs with crisscrossed straps to go across a person's chest. But as the hours pass, she sews more and more slowly. When she finishes the first of five bags, Brother Khôi tells her to just make three. At this, Mother grabs Father's portrait off a shelf and says either they all stay or they all go—it's up to Brother Khôi. She knows Brother Khôi can't stand hurting anyone. Mother tells him that he can make Father proud by obeying. Hà looks at her toes, but she knows her brother is staring at her. Finally, though, he nods. It's impossible to go against Mother.

Noting how Mother's sewing pace slows highlights how arduous this process is—getting the family ready to leave the country is a monumental task. And when Hà observes that Brother Khôi can't stand hurting anyone, this indicates that people are inevitably going to get hurt if they stay. Hà breaks her promise with Brother Khôi, which may be a sign of how scared Hà is, or of how much she loves and trusts Mother.

Choice. Everyone packs clothes, toiletries, and rice in their packs. For their last item, it's their choice what they want to bring. Hà chooses her **doll**. She once let a neighbor borrow the doll, and the neighbor left it outside. The mice bit the doll's cheek and thumb, but Hà loves her doll more with her "scars." Hà dresses her doll in a matching dress, hat, and booties that Mother knitted.

Choosing her doll highlights how young Hà is: she still needs this childish comfort to feel secure as everything else around her changes. And dressing the doll in clothes that Mother made is another way for Hà to show her love for and loyalty to Mother, since she implies that she had other choices.

Left Behind. Mother leaves behind a set of 10 gold-rimmed glasses Father brought back from America, Brother Quang's report cards, and blooming bougainvillea and jasmine vines. They leave behind the cowboy belt Brother Vũ sewed when he still liked Johnny Cash more than Bruce Lee. Brother Khôi leaves behind the glass jars in which he raised fighting fish, and Hà leaves her hammock. Mother chooses 10 family photographs and burns the rest—they can't leave any evidence of Father. It might hurt him.

Hà's family leaves behind evidence that they've made a life here. Each item they leave has memories associated with it, such as of Brother Vũ's former life as a Johnny Cash lover, or Hà's days spent lounging in the hammock. Having to burn the photographs they can't take highlights how afraid Mother is of the Communists for Father's sake: it's imperative they don't connect this house to Father, if they still have him.

Wet and Crying. Hà's biggest **papaya** is light yellow flecked with green. Brother Vũ wants to cut it down so the Communists can't eat it, and Mother says yellow papaya is wonderful dipped in chili salt. She warns her children that they should eat fresh fruit now, while they still can. Brother Vũ chops down the papaya, and black seeds spill out. The seeds are like "clusters of eyes, / wet and crying."

Mother implies that the children won't have much fresh fruit for a while, which is an ominous sign of what's to come. The journey is going to be very hard, and the family may have even less to eat than they do now. For Hà, cutting the papaya and seeing the "crying" "eyes" of the fruit mirrors her own anxiety about having to leave. She's losing her childhood, her homeland, and her culture, whether she fully realizes all of this or not.

Sour Backs. When Hà and her family get to the port on the afternoon of April 29, they realize there are no secrets among the Vietnamese: thousands of people are there to board navy ships. Uncle Son sticks his elbows out to protect his kids, but Hà's family "sticks together / like wet pages." Brother Vũ guides Mother in front of him, lifts Hà onto his shoulders, and then presses Brother Quang and Brother Khôi forward. Hà decides she'll never make fun of Bruce Lee again.

That there are so many other families at the port shows that Hà's family aren't the only ones terrified of what might happen if they stay. But despite sharing a goal with everyone else at the port, Hà's family members are still on their own: they have to work hard to stick together and not get separated or hurt. Suddenly, Brother Vũ starts to look more heroic to Hà.

One Mat Each. Hà's family boards a ship and settles on two straw mats below deck. But by sunset, they're huddled on a single mat. The ship is packed, on deck and below—there are so many people that the ship could sink. And yet, people keep boarding the ship. Nobody tells anyone to not board, though. That would be heartless.

This poem suggests that in general, the Vietnamese trying to flee the country don't see other would-be refugees as competitors or liabilities. They're all in the same boat (both literally and figuratively), trying to escape a worse fate than drowning, and so they're willing to stay quiet about the ship possibly being overloaded.

In the Dark. Uncle Son appears and leads Mother, Hà, and Hà's brothers off the ship. Apparently the next ship over is better equipped with water, food, and fuel. Uncle Son and Mother linger on the dock as people mill around and bombs explode nearby. The port is dark, so it doesn't become a target. Finally, Hà follows Uncle Son and her family back onto the first ship, where they reclaim their original two mats. In the pitch darkness, near midnight and with half the original number of passengers, the ship heads for the sea.

Just because people aren't telling others not to board a ship doesn't mean people aren't worried about the safety implications. It seems like lots of people are doing what Uncle Son leads Mother to do: getting off, boarding another ship, or getting back on once enough other people have gotten off. Leaving in the middle of the night adds some drama and heightens the sense that Hà's family is doing something dangerous.

Saigon Is Gone. Hà listens to Mother's swishing fan, whispering adults, and faraway bombs. The commander told everyone to go below deck, even though the ship is taking a safe route on a river. This means they'll avoid going through Vũng Tau, which is where the Communists are dropping bombs. Hopefully TiTi is safe. Even though the ship is barely moving, Mother is very seasick. Hà listens to a nearby helicopter circling, and people start to scream, "Communists!" The ship rocks as passengers run from one side to the other. The commander tells people the helicopter is on their side as the pilot leaps into the water. Soon after, the pilot appears below deck. He announces that at noon, the Communists drove tanks into the presidential palace and planted their flag on the roof. He says it's all over—"Saigon is gone."

At this point, Hà and her family have little control over what happens to them. They have to trust people, like the commander and the pilot, to keep them safe and tell them the truth. The pilot shares that what's now known as the Fall of Saigon has occurred: the North has taken over South Vietnam, and the country is now in the process of unifying. Interestingly, by ending the poem where she does, Hà doesn't share any thoughts or emotions about this event. She may be too young to fully comprehend what happened, and life on the ship may seem more interesting and relevant to her than the war does.

PART 2: AT SEA

Floating. With no lights, cooking, or bathrooms, the ship crawls along the river. Passengers are supposed to severely limit their water intake, but Hà struggles to comply. Mother sighs, and Hà doesn't blame her. It can't be easy having a daughter who's constantly thirsty, and who constantly needs a bathroom. Hà figures other girls must be made of bamboo, so they're flexible enough to bend and do what they're told. Mother tells Uncle Son that Hà needs a bathroom, and Hà is allowed to use the commander's cabin. It's white, clean, and "worth the embarrassment."

If the commander is telling people to limit their water intake, it implies that the ship's stores of fresh water might be low—this ship might not be as safe as Mother hoped it would be. For Hà, though, the real conflict here is that she doesn't feel like she fits into the mold she's supposed to. She needs too much and wants too much to be able to think of herself as a good girl who can do exactly as she's told.

S-l-o-w-l-y. Very slowly, Hà nibbles the final bit of cooked rice from her pack. It's hard and moldy on the outside, but inside it's still sweet and chewy. Hà has heard other people chewing, but she's never seen anyone eating. She can smell sardines, salted eggs, and toasted sesame. But when Hà leans toward the family on the next mat over, Mother shakes her head and sadly pats Hà's hand.

It's difficult for Hà to understand why people aren't sharing whatever provisions they might have. In her mind, it makes sense that everyone should share—that way, nobody will go hungry, and she won't have to eat moldy rice. But Mother seems to believe this would be impolite, so she stops Hà from asking to share.

Rations. It's now May 3, and Hà has been at sea for three days. Finally, the ship hits the sea and heads for Thailand. The commander gives the okay for his men to cook and for people to go above deck for a little bit. He says they have enough rations for three weeks, but they should be rescued sooner. Supposedly, ships from all over the world are out looking for them. Three times a day, each passenger gets a clump of rice and a cup of water. When Hà takes her first bite of rice, the taste makes her imagine what ripe **papaya** tastes like, even though the two foods have nothing to do with each other.

Now that the ship isn't on the river anymore (and therefore isn't close to land, where the Communists might be able to take it), the commander can relax some of the rules on the ship. Hà has only been away from home for a couple of days, but already she's changing dramatically. The fresh rice causing her to think of ripe papaya suggests that Hà is remembering the childish version of herself she left behind in Saigon. At this point, just having fresh food brings up these memories.

Routine. Mother won't allow children to be idle. After a week at sea, Brother Quang starts teaching English lessons. Hà wishes he'd stick to simple, useful phrases, but when there's no adult watching, he tells kids that it's shameful to abandon their country and go where they'll be the lowest members of society. Brother Vũ's afternoon lessons are better, because he walks kids through kicks and punches. Brother Khôi monitors the bathroom lines; using the bathroom on the ship means hanging one's bottom over the edge with a blanket for privacy.

Everyone, it seems, is processing the experience of fleeing Saigon, but in very different ways. Brother Quang, for one, is fixating on the shame he feels about leaving. Mother and Brother Vũ, on the other hand, seem to be trying to move forward and make do with what they have. Since Hà is so annoyed with Brother Quang, she'd seemingly prefer to take Mother's approach and not fixate on the past.

Mother insists that when Hà isn't in class, she stay within eyesight—which makes Hà feel like a baby. Eventually, Mother gives Hà a writing pad and tells her to write small. When writing gets boring, Hà draws over what she's written. She draws shredded coconut, corn on the cob, fried dough, pineapple wedges, and **papaya** cubes. Mother smooths Hà's hair. She understands how painful it is to be stranded on a ship without any yummy snacks.

Hà has very little agency on the ship, which is frustrating for her. She had a lot of freedom at home, and being forced to stay so close to Mother makes her feel infantilized. As Hà draws various snacks, it becomes clear that these foods bring her a lot of comfort. These sweet foods make Hà feel at home—and moreover, these were the sorts of things Hà bought in the market, without anyone knowing. So, drawing these foods is a way to remember the independence she's lost.

Once Knew. It's now May 12. With so much water everywhere, Hà starts to think that land is just something she once knew. She also once knew what it was like to nap in a hammock, laugh for no reason, and wear clean pajamas dried in the sun.

Hà had to leave her beloved hammock behind—now, napping in it seems more like a dream than an actual memory. It's been several weeks at sea now, with no end in sight, and Hà is longing for the carefree innocence she enjoyed back in South Vietnam.

Brother Khôi's Secret. Nobody can ignore now that Brother Khôi stinks. He insists on wearing a jacket that makes him sweat, and he wraps it around his waist when he has to bathe with a sponge. He clutches the left pocket, which seems to be the smelliest part. Soon, neighbors eight mats away complain. They say that people smell enough in this heat, and they don't want to also smell something rotten. Finally, Brother Vũ forces Brother Khôi's hand open. In Brother Khôi's hand is the flat chick, its neck dangling. Brother Khôi screams and kicks as Brother Quang carries him above deck.

Hà wasn't able to bring her beloved papaya tree with her, but Brother Khôi tried his hardest to bring his chick with him. That Brother Khôi kept his chick for weeks—even though the chick has likely been dead for a while, given the smell—speaks to how traumatizing leaving Saigon was for him. For Brother Khôi, the chick represented his life in Saigon, where he was happy—and now that he's been found out, he has to give up the idea that not much is going to change.

Last Respects. Hà has now been at sea two weeks. The commander calls everyone above deck to formally lower the South Vietnamese flag, since the country no longer exists. A woman tries to throw herself overboard, insisting she can't live without her country. Another man stabs his heart with a toothbrush. To Hà, those people's pain doesn't seem real next to Brother Khôi's grief over his lost chick. Hà takes Brother Khôi's hand and leads him to the back of the ship. There, she opens a white handkerchief to reveal Brother Khôi's chick in her **doll**'s arms. Hà ties the bundle and tosses it into the sea. It makes Brother Khôi smile, but Hà misses her doll immediately.

People clearly felt a huge amount of loyalty to South Vietnam—the country was a major part of their identity, and now it's gone. And though Hà certainly loved her home, it's difficult for her to grasp exactly how and why these other people are grieving when Brother Khôi's pain feels so much more accessible to her, as a young child. And Hà demonstrates immense maturity when she helps Brother Khôi gain closure by sacrificing her doll in this sea burial ceremony. Missing her doll instantly, though, suggests that while Hà is capable of this kind of maturity, she's also not fully ready to grow up.

One Engine. The ship stops in the middle of the night. Mother hugs Hà close and won't let her go. They're terrified: it'll be much worse if the Communists catch them now, than if they'd stayed home in the first place. After a while and a lot of shouting, the ship moves on with one engine. The commander explains that it was risky to take the river, and Thailand is a lot farther away with just one engine. Taking the river meant they escaped the bombs, but they missed rescue ships. Because of this, the commander reduces rations to a half clump of rice morning and night, and one cup of water per day. He warns passengers not to waste strength—there's no way to know how long they'll be here.

To take Hà's narration at face value, things start to go downhill suddenly. But this may reflect that she's a child who can't fully comprehend with what's going on in the wider world—and she's been busy with Brother Khôi, after all. The ship's prospects have potentially been poor for some time. For Mother, the ship's engine stopping is a horrifying reminder of what might happen if her family's escape attempt isn't successful: they may all lose their lives if they're caught.

The Moon. During the day, men and children wander around the deck. But at night, the deck belongs to women. They form lines to take sponge baths and use the bathrooms. Hà always stands with Mother, and every night, Mother points to the moon and observes that it hasn't changed. She suggests that Father could be looking at the same moon. He might already know that they'll wait for him. Hà feels guilty—she hasn't thought of Father once. She doesn't want to hope that he'll appear when she doesn't know where they'll end up.

Thinking about Father seems to comfort Mother. Imagining him elsewhere, staring at the same moon, helps her feel secure and as though she's doing the right thing. But for Hà, there are other things that are much more pressing—like surviving more generally, and dealing with her boredom and hunger on the ship. Her father's memory is important, but in this context, it's not comforting.

A Kiss. The ship's horn blows and wakes everyone up. Passengers hear a nearby honk in return, so everyone runs to the deck. There's a huge American ship nearby, with men in white uniforms waving and smiling. The commander of Hà's ship is now in his fancy navy uniform, and Hà realizes why she likes him: in uniform, he looks like Father. The commander boards the other ship and greets a man with fiery red hair. Hà had no idea it was possible to have hair that color.

Encountering this ship is Hà's first encounter with Americans and American culture. Being surprised at the man's hair color foreshadows that as Hà learns more about the U.S. and other people in the world, she's going to have a number of surprising experiences. For now, she greets this man with curiosity and wonder—this is still new and exciting.

Passengers clap as the ships draw so close together that they look like they're kissing. Sailors pass boxes to Hà's ship. They contain food: fruit, bubbly drinks, and chocolate drops. Then, the American ship tows Hà's ship with a massive steel rope. The passengers on Hà's ship begin to celebrate. Suddenly, ramen noodles, dried shrimp, tamarind pods, and lots of real water appear. Mother sighs; why will people only share when they know they're not going to go hungry anymore? That night, Hà pours fresh water all over her skin. The water tastes sweet, even when it's soapy.

Once again, Hà's main focus as the boxes are passed over is describing the food, both American and Vietnamese in this case. The food and the sweet water are what make Hà feel hopeful and happy again. And though she observes Mother's sigh and makes note of what Mother says, she seems to pass over it without judgment or consideration. The food and her freshwater bath are far more compelling to Hà than thinking about human nature.

Golden Fuzz. When a black dot appears in the distance, Hà and the other passengers are instructed to pack their bags and line up. Groups of 20 board a motorboat and head for the dot. When it's Hà's turn, a fuzzy arm reaches out to help her board. Hà touches the fuzz and then plucks a hair. Mother slaps Hà's hand, and Brother Quang says something fast in another language, but the fuzzy man laughs. The rocking boat means that Mother is too seasick to scold Hà. Hà holds tight to her souvenir hair and smiles.

Hà's perspective as an immature and somewhat selfish child shines through here: she's curious about this "fuzzy" man, and his arm hair seems to be right there for the taking, so she plucks a hair without thinking. She does so out of curiosity rather than malice, and fortunately for her, the man seems unconcerned and even amused by her behavior. Hà, this shows, greets new experiences with curiosity rather than prejudgment.

Tent City. Hà and the other passengers are now on an island called Guam. Nobody except Brother Quang can pronounce the island's name. There were lots of people here before Hà and her family arrived. They all live in tents and sleep on cots. Brother Vũ quickly becomes head chef and heats up canned beef and potatoes, which tastes like salty vomit. The only fruit available is canned, and everyone wants more than their allotted cup. Somehow, Brother Vũ manages to bring a big can home to use as a hand weight. The family eats fruit out of the can while Hà keeps an eye out for fresh cherries or grapes.

The "salty vomit" food that Hà has to eat in Guam makes the island feel even less like home. And Hà's tone as she talks about looking for fresh fruit implies that this is a futile search; she's not going to find any fresh fruit but is perhaps doing it out of habit and to try to find one thing that will make her happier here. Brother Vũ, however, seems to find his place quickly as he becomes head chef. His love of cooking allows him to fit in wherever he encounters food that needs to be prepared.

Life in Waiting. Everyone on the island soon falls into a routine. During the day, camp workers teach English. People have evenings to themselves. They show movies outdoors, and Brother Quang translates for viewers. People love watching Clint Eastwood cowboy movies, but if the main cowboy is someone like John Wayne, most people go swimming instead. Girls flock to watch Disney cartoons, and they surround Brother Vũ as well. Hà listens to the girls beg Brother Vũ to break more wood as she goes to sit with Brother Khôi. He doesn't speak much anymore, but Hà is happy to sit with him. This routine persists through June and July.

Sitting quietly and keeping Brother Khôi company is another way that Hà demonstrates her growing maturity and her love for her family. She's happy watching her other brothers find their niches in Guam, but she realizes that Brother Khôi just needs someone to remind him he isn't alone. Brother Khôi is still recovering from the trauma of leaving Saigon and of losing his chick, so finding community in Guam isn't possible for him yet.

Nuoc Mam. Whoever sent fish sauce to Guam deserves a kiss. The fish sauce, *nuoc mam*, makes everything edible. Brother Vũ puts it on the beef and potatoes and the food lines snake all the way to the beach. When someone catches a puffy sea creature, Brother Vũ slices it up and stews it with seaweed and *nuoc mam*. People are happy with even just rice covered in fish sauce, and others begin to cook for themselves if they can get a cup. Since Brother Vũ hands the fish sauce out in teacups, Hà once takes a gulp of fish sauce thinking it's tea. Even though her breath smells for days, she doesn't care.

The fish sauce represents a welcome taste of home not just for Hà, but seemingly for all the Vietnamese refugees currently in Guam. It seems capable of making anything edible—even the "salty vomit" meals of beef and potatoes—by making it taste more like the Vietnamese fare that the refugees are used to. The fact that Hà doesn't even mind her fishy breath after accidentally drinking it speaks to how homesick she is, as even this seems to remind her of home.

Amethyst Ring. Mother wants to sell the **amethyst ring** that Father brought her from America, where he trained in the navy, and buy needles, thread, and sandals. Hà has never seen Mother without the ring, and she has to twirl it around Mother's finger every night in order to fall asleep. Brother Quang refuses to sell it—there's no point in new shirts or sandals if Mother "*loses the / last tangible remnant of love*." Hà doesn't fully understand what Brother Quang means, but she agrees with him anyway.

Mother wants to be practical: she needs sewing supplies so she can clothe her family, and selling the ring would be an easy way to do this. But selling the ring would create a crisis for her children. Hà has her own rituals that include the ring (spinning it at night), and Brother Quang sees the ring as an essential way for everyone in the family to remember Father and his love for Mother.

Choose. Some people choose to go to France, where many Vietnamese went years ago when North and South divided. Uncle Son encourages Mother to come with him to Canada to be with his sister. Knowing that Uncle Son's wife won't like this, Mother insists Canada is too cold. It's July 4, America's birthday, and every family has to decide by tonight where they're going. Just as Mother starts to write "Paris," a man whispers that she should choose America. There are opportunities, he says, for families with boys able to work. When Mother says her sons need to go to college, the man says America will give the boys scholarships. Mother makes her choice.

France colonized Vietnam in the mid-1800s, and Vietnam split into North and South definitively in 1954. So, because of Vietnam's history as a French colony, many Vietnamese people immigrated to France at this time. Because of this, France at first seems like a good option for Mother. But this man convinces Mother that life will be better for her family if she chooses to go to the U.S. instead. Mother's priorities become clear here when she insists that her sons go to college: she wants her children to be educated, and she'll go wherever will make that possible.

Another Tent City. Hà and her family fly to another tent city in Florida. There, the organizers bring in famous singers from Saigon, but this doesn't keep people from worrying. In order for a family to leave the camp, an American has to sponsor them. Mother says that a "possible widow" with three sons and a "pouty girl" is just too big of a family for Americans. As Hà watches neighboring families leave for Georgia and South Carolina, Mother grows anxious and Brother Quang picks at his skin. Hà doesn't mind it here. She finally has long hair, and she's strong and tanned after running and swimming. Then, Mother discovers that sponsors prefer families who are Christian. She amends the family's faith on their application, insisting that all belief systems are much the same.

During the weeks that Hà's family spends in this tent city, Hà has to confront for the first time that her family might not look as perfect to others as it does to her. But she also doesn't seem to dwell too much on this—the camp in Florida offers her even more opportunities to play, and it's nice to finally have long hair she's always dreamed of having. The camp, in other words, gives Hà the freedom she's craved for some time. By changing the family's religious designation to Christian, Mother is already beginning to compromise her family's culture and traditions to look more appealing (and, perhaps, less threatening) to Americans.

Alabama. A man comes to the tent city in early August. He sells cars and wants to train a young man as a mechanic. The man picks Brother Quang, as he's impressed with Brother Quang's engineering education. Mother doesn't care—soon, the entire family is sponsored and will be going to Alabama.

To Mother, not much matters aside from the fact that her family is finally getting to leave the tent city and settle into their new home. She's ready to begin their new life, not live in the tent city, where they can only wait for someone to decide to help them.

Our Cowboy. To Hà, the sponsor "looks just like / an American should." He's tall, with a big belly, cowboy hat, and cowboy boots. He smokes cigars and has a red face. She loves him instantly. She figures he's kind, loud, and owns a horse.

The sponsor is exciting for Hà, as he seems to confirm that the U.S. is full of loud, big-hearted cowboys. It's impossible to tell if Hà is correct to assume her sponsor is an actual cowboy since he sells cars; it may be that she's only seeing what she wants to see.

PART 3: ALABAMA

Unpack and Repack. Days later, Hà and her family members are giddy as they get off the plane in Alabama. Their cowboy takes them to his huge house surrounded by a perfect green lawn. He invites them to stay until they feel ready. Hà smiles and unpacks her two outfits. But later, when she gets a look at the cowboy's wife—whose entire body seems to be contorted in a knot—she repacks.

Upon first arriving in Alabama, it seems like things are going great: the cowboy is kind, his house is big and roomy, and Hà and her family feel comfortable. But the cowboy's wife ruins all of this with her tense body language. Why the wife is so upset seems lost on Hà, but the fact remains that the woman is not happy to have these guests and has no problem being unwelcoming.

English Above All. Hà and her family spend all their time in the cowboy's basement, where they don't see the cowboy's wife. Hà has to stand on a chair perched on a table just to see out the window, and the wife insists her guests stay hidden from the neighbors. Mother just shrugs and points out that they have more room than they did on the ship, but Hà wishes Mother wouldn't try to make this terrible experience better. Then, Mother calls a family meeting and says that they can't do, think, or hope for anything else until they master English. They can't even think of Father. Hà knows she doesn't mean it.

The cowboy's wife clearly objects to something about Hà's family, whether that be their poverty, their race, or perhaps even Mother's status as a single mother. No matter her reasoning, though, the effect is the same: Hà senses the woman's displeasure, and it makes her feel alone and ashamed. And she seems to believe that it does more harm than good to gloss over the wife's poor treatment.

First Rule. According to Brother Quang, you must add an *s* to a noun if you're talking about multiple things—even if there's already an *s* there. So, *glass* becomes *glasses*. Hà spends her day practicing her hissing. She figures that the person who invented English probably loved snakes.

Now that Hà is in the U.S., she must learn English in order to assimilate. This isn't an easy prospect—she's having to learn totally new sound combinations, as with the "hissing" s *sound at the end of words like* glass.

American Chicken. The cowboy brings most food wrapped in plastic or canned. Any meat comes chopped up and frozen. Mostly, Hà's family lives on rice, soy sauce, and canned corn. But today, the cowboy brings fried chicken in a paper bucket. Brother Khôi draws back, and the cowboy bites into a leg and smiles. Hà, Brother Quang, and Brother Vū try pieces. The skin is crunchy, salty, and spicy—but Mother spits her piece out, and Brother Vū gags. Brother Quang explains to the cowboy that they're used to chickens killed fresh after roaming the yard. Chickens butchered that way tastes sweeter. Hà bites into a thigh. It tastes like soggy bread. She hopes that soon, she'll be able to ride the cowboy's horse.

Hà doesn't say it outright, but she implies that while the cowboy offers her family meat to cook, they generally refuse it in favor of rice and canned corn. Encountering this fried chicken that seems little better than "soggy bread" makes Hà feel less at home than she already did. In this sad moment, though, she's able to hope for something more exciting: getting to ride a horse.

Out the Too-High Window. Out the window, Hà can see that every house has a bright green yard. All the houses have big windows, but with curtains that cover them up. Nobody walks on the sidewalks, and few cars pass. It's quiet—"Clean, quiet / loneliness."

The cowboy's neighborhood reads as very quiet and suburban. Given how Hà described her own bustling neighborhood and the rest of Saigon, this is very different from what she's used to.

Second Rule. Hà learns to add an *s* to verbs when one person performs the action in the present tense, even if there's already an *s*. So *she chooses*, and *he refuses*. She's getting better at hissing—she doesn't spit on herself anymore.

With Brother Quan's help, Hà is learning how to communicate in the U.S. At this point, she's feeling good about things, since she can "hiss" properly now.

American Address. The cowboy finds Hà's family a house on Princess Anne Road and pays three months' rent. Mother can't believe it, but Brother Quang explains that the government gives sponsors money for this. Mother is shocked by the government's generosity, but Brother Quang says they're just guilty after losing the war. At this, Mother grows angry and tells Brother Quang to be quiet. She insists that they can't afford political opinions at the moment, when they depend on others' goodwill.

Mother goes into this encounter with the cowboy believing that he's helping her out of the goodness of his heart—which he is doing, but with money the government has given him to enable this kind of generosity. Brother Quan doesn't think the cowboy's help isn't something to get excited about—it's pity, not generosity. But Mother believes that it's essential they be grateful. Without the help, they're powerless.

Hà inspects the house. There are two bedrooms and a washing machine—nobody here will do laundry in exchange for rice. There's a stove with blue flames, rather than ashy coals. Hà loves the shower best, especially the way the water massages her scalp. But she doesn't like the mismatched sofas, chairs, stained mattresses, and mismatched dishes. Everything has been donated by the cowboy's friends. Hà's family has always had lovely furniture and matching dishes, even when they were really poor. But Mother tells Hà to be grateful, and Hà tries.

Some things about the new house are great, such as the clean stove and the shower. But it's impossible for Hà to ignore that this house still feels like a huge step down, since none of the furniture or dishes match. But just as Mother warned Brother Quan to be grateful, she does the same here. Hà and her family depend on people's kindness right now, and they can't afford to reject anything they're given.

Letter Home. Now that they have an address, Mother writes to Father's brother in the North—he lives in the ancestral home. This is the first time Mother has contacted anyone in the North since the country split up, and unless Father has sent word to his brother, this will be the first Father's brother hears of Father's disappearance. Hà shivers with hope.

For Mother, the best part about moving into her own home is that she now has an address and can contact family in what used to be North Vietnam. This is an exciting prospect for her and for Hà: they may finally be able to piece their family back together with information from Father's brother.

Third Rule. There are always exceptions in English, such as the nouns that don't get an *s* when they become plural. There's one deer, and there are also two deer. Hà asks why *deer* doesn't get an *s* but *monkey* does. According to Brother Quang, nobody knows. Hà thinks that a snake should bite whoever invented English.

The exceptions in the English language are difficult for Hà to understand, let alone accept. In previous poems where she was learning English, it seemed like she was making progress, but now, English is starting to seem nonsensical to her and barely worth learning.

Passing Time. Since staring at the grass and trees doesn't do anything, Hà studies the dictionary. She looks up *Jane*, which isn't listed. *Sees* means "to eyeball something," and a *spot* is a stain. *Run* means to move quickly. Put together, the sentence reads that something "eyeballs stain move." Hà asks Brother Quang for help. He explains that Jane is a name, and Spot is a dog's name. So the sentence is actually that a girl named Jane sees a dog named Spot run. Hà can't even read "a baby book." Nobody will believe that at home, she read Nhat Linh—but nobody here probably knows who he is.

Readers may recognize Hà's reading material as one of the Dick and Jane books, which are intended for beginning readers. Hà tries to go about decoding the first sentence logically, with the dictionary—but the dictionary doesn't tell Hà everything, such as that Spot and Jane are names. Not being able to read the book isn't Hà's fault, and it doesn't reflect her intelligence. But not being able to read this book nevertheless hurts Hà's self-esteem, especially since she was among the top of her class in Vietnam and was reading Nhat Linh, who wrote literature aimed at adults.

Neigh Not Hee. Since Brother Quang is tired of translating, the cowboy takes Hà to register for school. Hà figures he'll let her ride his horse. She starts to climb into his truck, but he motions that they'll walk to school. Hà memorizes the route: she turns right by the big blue flowers and left where the purple flowers are like "fluffy wands." It's hot, and Hà's armpits are embarrassing—she won't raise the reins too high. The cowboy leads Hà to a red brick building. A woman pats Hà's head as she fills out paperwork. Hà hates the woman's pity—according to Mother, pity only makes the person doing the pitying feel better, not the person being pitied.

The prospect of registering for school is anxiety-inducing for Hà, which could be one reason she fixates so much on riding the cowboy's horse afterward—it's something fun to look forward to. Memorizing her route by taking note of the flowers in people's gardens suggests that Hà is starting to look for the beauty in her new home. This isn't enough, though, to make up for the shame Hà feels when the woman at school so openly pities her. The woman's pity denies Hà her dignity.

On the walk home, Hà works up her courage and asks the cowboy, "*You, hor-ssssse? / Hee, hee, hee. / I go, go.*" The cowboy shakes his head, so Hà gallops and says "*Hee, hee, hee*," again. At home, Brother Quang translates: Mr. Johnson doesn't have a horse and has never ridden one. Hà is incredulous; what kind of cowboy doesn't have a horse? Then, the cowboy explains that here, horses say "neigh," not "hee." This is absurd. Hà doesn't know where she is.

Hà frames asking to ride the cowboy's horse as something that's difficult for her to do—she's asking a favor of someone she admires, in a language she barely knows. Learning that the cowboy isn't a cowboy and doesn't even own a horse is an earthshattering moment for Hà. Everything she thought about the U.S. was wrong, and now she feels completely lost.

Fourth Rule. Apparently, some verbs change all the time for no reason. So *I am*, but *she is*, *they are*, and *they were*. Things would be so much easier if English—and life—were logical.

Following the horse crisis with this poem about irregular verbs reflects how lost and alone Hà feels in Alabama, largely because she doesn't know how to communicate.

The Outside. Tomorrow, September 2, everyone is going to leave the house. Mother will start work sewing at a factory, and Brother Quang will repair cars. Everyone else will go to school and repeat their last unfinished grade. Brother Vũ is upset; he wants to be a cook or teach martial arts, not repeat his senior year. Mother simply tells him, "College." Brother Khôi gets a bike, but Mother insists that even though Hà is the oldest kid in the fourth grade, she isn't old enough for one. Mother encourages Hà to worry about sleeping because tomorrow, she can't nap. Instead, she'll eat lunch at school with friends she'll make. Belligerently, Hà asks what she'll be eating and says she hates surprises. When Hà refuses to cooperate, Mother walks away.

Seemingly none of Hà's family members are happy about the prospect of going out and starting their new lives tomorrow, because nobody is getting exactly what they want. In Hà's case, this anxiety and annoyance comes out as belligerence: she wants to know exactly what's going to happen tomorrow. But Mother can't tell her what will happen, in part because Mother doesn't know. Not knowing how school is going to go, what she'll eat, or how kids will treat her is extremely stressful for Hà, when she already feels so alone and lost in Alabama.

Sadder Laugh. Hà wakes up on the first day of school with dragonflies in her belly and eats nothing. She walks carefully to school, enjoying the cool air and taking deep breaths. She's the first student there. The teacher loudly introduces herself as MiSSS SScott. When Hà repeats the name, enunciating each *s*, the teacher doesn't seem impressed. Hà touches her own chest and says her name, but MiSSS SScott fakes a laugh. Hà wishes she knew English so she could tell the teacher to listen for the diacritical mark that changes the tone. But instead, MiSSS SScott fakes a sad laugh again.

Even though she's nervous, Hà is doing her best to show MiSSS SScott that she's taken Brother Quan's lessons about s *sounds to heart—but her teacher seems to have no idea this is even something Hà had to work on. Vietnamese is a tonal language, meaning that vowels rise and fall in ways they don't in English. MiSSS SScott seems not to understand that "Hà" and "ha" (laughter) sound totally different from each other in Vietnamese, and she ends up speaking offensively as a result.*

Rainbow. Hà stands in front of the class while MiSSS SScott speaks. Each student says something, but Hà doesn't understand. She studies her classmates: some have bright hair on spotted skin, while others have fuzzier dark hair on shiny skin. A few have braids on chocolate-colored skin, and there's a pink boy with white hair. Hà is the only kid with straight black hair on olive-colored skin.

Students are presumably introducing themselves when they each say something, but just as Hà didn't realize Jane was a name when she tried to read, she doesn't understand that she's hearing names now. Instead, all she can focus on is that nobody looks like her. This makes her feel like she doesn't fit in at all.

Black and White and Yellow and Red. When the bell rings, Hà follows her classmates to line up and walk down the hallway. She takes a tray and gets her food. Everyone else sits, kids with light skin on one side of the room and kids with dark skin on the other. Everyone seems happy—as though they've never considered "someone medium" exists. Hà doesn't know where to sit, and she doesn't know how to eat the "pink sausage / snuggled inside bread," which is smeared with yellow and red sauces. At first, she thinks they're making fun of the Vietnamese flag—but then she realizes nobody here knows the colors of that flag. Hà puts her tray down and waits in the hall.

As a person with "medium" skin, Hà doesn't know if she should sit with the white kids or the Black kids, which creates another crisis for her. Not knowing where to sit, combined with not knowing how to eat a hot dog, is too much for Hà to face at the moment. The best option that she sees is to go wait in the hallway by herself, where she doesn't have to make a decision or admit that she doesn't know what to do. For now, it's easier to hide than ask for help.

Loud Outside. When the bell rings again, Hà follows her classmates outside. All the kids of all colors surround Hà, shouting and pushing. The pink boy with white hair, eyebrows, and eyelashes pulls Hà's arm hair and laughs. Hà's hair does grow long and black. Perhaps he's curious, just like Hà was curious about the sailor's golden fuzz. But when the boy pokes Hà's cheek and then her chest while everyone else laughs, she realizes they're not curious. Though Hà wants to pull all the boy's white hair out to see if his scalp is as pink as his face, she walks away.

Hà is more than ready to give her classmates the benefit of the doubt and assume that they're just curious about her. She is the only one at school who has "medium" skin, after all, and she knows what it's like to encounter someone who looks different from what one has ever seen. But it quickly becomes clear that her classmates are being mean, not curious, and this increases Hà's desire to hide and be alone.

Laugh Back. The pink boy and two of his loud friends follow Hà home. To help her walk faster (she doesn't want to run), Hà counts her steps in English. She walks and counts faster as the pink boy shouts at her. Hà doesn't care what Pink Boy is saying, but she knows she has to care if she's ever going to be able to laugh back at him.

Hà doesn't want to take the bullies too seriously or spend time worrying about what they're saying. But as a beginning English learner, Hà also knows that she must know what they're saying if she's ever going to fit in. In this situation, learning English is a necessary evil—when she knows what they're saying, she'll know exactly how cruel they're being.

Quiet Inside. When Hà gets home, Brother Khôi is there, sitting silently. Hà joins him, and they shell peanuts in silence. Mother gets home later with two of her fingers bandaged—the electric machines sew very fast. When Brother Quang gets home, he throws down his shirt and showers. His nails are still edged in black oil by dinnertime. Brother Vũ, though, comes home whistling, and he eats four pork chops at dinner. Hà only eats two. She suspects having muscles makes it easier to whistle.

For most of Hà's family members, today was difficult: things are very different than they were in Saigon, and adjusting to life in Alabama is hard. Nobody, though, seems quite ready to talk about it. So, although Hà feels some solidarity with Brother Khôi, for instance, nobody is willing to talk about what happened and make one another feel less alone.

Fly Kick. Hà sneaks into her brothers' room and shakes Brother Vũ awake. Outside, she tells him that kids pulled her arm hair, threw rocks, and threatened to step on her chest. Brother Vũ yawns and tells Hà to ignore them.

Brother Vũ seems, to Hà, like an obvious choice to ask for help, since he seemed to have a fine day. His nonchalance as he tells Hà to ignore her bullies, though, might be frustrating for Hà.

Hà asks Brother Vũ why he was whistling earlier. Brother Vũ explains that someone called him "Ching Chong" today. He doesn't know what it means, but it didn't sound nice. So, when the boy tripped Brother Vũ, Brother Vũ almost scissor-kicked him in the face. He missed on purpose; he just wanted the boy to stop, not to hurt him. Hà says she would've kicked the boy and asks Brother Vũ to teach her to fly-kick. He refuses—Hà has too much of a temper. Hà shouts that she's so mad and that she shouldn't have to run away. When she starts to cry, Brother Vũ offers to teach her defense. He won't explain how this will help.

Brother Vũ doesn't have to know what "Ching Chong" means to pick up on the fact that it's an insult (in fact, it's an ethnic slur used to mock Asian people). But he came out on top in this interaction with his defensive moves and with threats. This suggests that Brother Vũ isn't quite as confrontational as Hà is (or wants to be). Offering to teach her defense is, perhaps, a way to try to train Hà to be less confrontational. Her anger reflects how powerless she feels, though, and defense seems like a poor consolation prize when all she wants to do is hurt the people who are making her life miserable.

Chin Nod. When Hà is halfway down the block the next morning, she hears Brother Khôi's bicycle. He pats the upper bar of the frame and Hà climbs on sidesaddle. She asks, "Every day?" and he nods into the top of her head. He nods again when Hà asks if he'll pick her up after school too. Hà feels like she's floating.

Hà and Brother Khôi might not speak much, but Brother Khôi can still make Hà feel like he cares and is paying attention. This makes it much easier for Hà to face going to school, where she no doubt fears she'll be the victim of racist bullying yet again.

Feel Dumb. MiSSS SScott points to Hà and then to the English alphabet. Hà recites the alphabet, and then MiSSS SScott motions for the class to clap. Hà then counts to 20 in English. When the class claps, Hà is furious. She can't explain to anyone that she already knows fractions. This must be what "dumb" feels like. Hà hates it.

Readers know that Hà isn't "dumb"—she just doesn't speak English and can't tell MiSSS SScott what she knows. MiSSS SScott is being (perhaps unintentionally) bigoted here by assuming that just because Hà is Vietnamese and doesn't speak English, she doesn't know anything.

Wishes. Hà wishes that Brother Khôi wouldn't stay silent about what he goes through every day, that Mother would stop hiding her bloody fingers, and that Brother Quang wasn't so angry after work. She wishes the cowboy would buy a horse. Hà wishes she could be invisible until she could speak, and that she could learn English without all the rules. She also wishes Father would show up in her class, speaking his beautiful English, French, and Chinese. But mostly, Hà wishes she was still smart.

Hà would like her family members to speak up about the hardships they experience every day at work or school, as that might make her feel less alone. Wanting to be invisible is Hà's way of wishing that she could hide away and avoid any bullying until she knows enough to fight back with her words. And wishing for multilingual Father to be here is essentially a wish for someone who could demonstrate that being Vietnamese doesn't make someone unintelligent.

Hiding. These days, Brother Vũ makes everyone call him Vu Lee. Hà has to say it without giggling in order to get her defense lessons. At school, Hà hides. She stares at her shoes during class and sits in the bathroom eating saved dinner rolls during lunch. She stays in the bathroom while everyone else goes outside. After school, Hà hides until Brother Khôi arrives on his bike. But when Hà is with Vu Lee, practicing her squat and learning to see everything at once, she feels like she's "practicing / to be seen."

Hà is, in some ways, getting her wish to be invisible until she can speak by hiding during free periods and staring at her shoes during class. She's going out of her way to never have to speak to her classmates without adult supervision. At home, though, Hà is starting to feel a bit more secure thanks to Vu Lee's lessons. With his support, Hà can accept that one day, she will be visible and vocal at school—and she can look forward to that day.

Neighbors. When someone throws eggs at Hà's front door, the cowboy says it's "Just dumb kids." He says the same when people hang toilet paper from the window. But when someone throws a brick with a note tied around it through the front window, Brother Quang refuses to translate the note. The cowboy calls the police as Vu Lee "pops" his muscles. The police say to stay inside, but the cowboy says "Hogwash" in response. Hà repeats the word. Mother decides they should meet the neighbors, so the cowboy gives everyone a cowboy hat. Hà is the only one who wears her hat.

Hà's first-person perspective means that readers don't know anything more about these incidents than she does, but it seems likely that they're racially motivated. Alabama might not be as safe or as welcoming of a place as Mother initially believed it would be, after the cowboy's kindness. To Mother, the solution is obvious: show the neighbors that she and her children are human, and that they deserve kindness and compassion too.

The bald man who lives to the family's right closes his door on them, and the woman next to him slams her door. As more people don't open their doors, Brother Quang, Vu Lee, and Brother Khôi's faces turn red. But when the cowboy leads them to the house to their left, the older woman there hugs everyone. She introduces herself as MiSSSisss WaSShington and then hugs and kisses the cowboy. It turns out that MiSSSisss WaSShington is a widow and a retired teacher. She volunteers to tutor Hà and her brothers. Hà will visit right after school, but she's afraid to tell the woman how much help she's going to need.

Hà's neighbors read as close-minded and perhaps bigoted. Her brothers pick up on this, and this increases their feelings of shame and inadequacy. It's unclear if Hà fully understands why people are slamming their doors, which may explain why she doesn't express shame like her brothers do. However, Hà does start to feel a bit of shame when MiSSSisss WaSShington offers to tutor her, as this means that Hà will have to open up about how difficult learning English has been for her.

New Word a Day. MiSSSisss WaSShington has rules of her own. Every day, she makes Hà memorize a word and practice it 10 times. Every time Hà remembers a word, MiSSSisss WaSShington hands over tiny bites of fruit or small cookies. Hà learns a lot of new rules, the most important being the one about *a*, *an*, and *the*. These are "little megaphones" that tell people who's not a native English speaker. These words don't exist in Vietnamese, and people get along just fine. MiSSSisss WaSShington insists that all languages have their own silly rules, but that they're all beautiful. Just like Mother, MiSSSisss WaSShington always has an answer.

MiSSSisss WaSShington's methods seem to work for Hà, as she's learning new rules for the English language. This still isn't easy or fun for her—indeed, it's annoying to learn about words like a, an, *and* the, *and to discover that her success in fitting in hinges on her ability to correctly use words that have no Vietnamese equivalents. But Hà starts to feel better when MiSSSisss WaSShington reminds her that all languages have quirks, and that this isn't a bad thing.*

More Is Not Better. Now, Hà understands when kids shout "*ha-ha-ha*" to make fun of her name, or when they ask if she eats dogs. She knows what they're saying when they ask if she used to live in the jungle with tigers. Hà knows this now because she asked Brother Khôi if he hears the same things at his school. He nodded. Now that Hà understands, she wishes she could go back in time and not understand.

MiSSSisss WaSShington's tutoring sessions have increased Hà's understanding of English enough that now, she can understand her bullies' taunts. It's interesting that her bullies' racist taunts are what she focuses on; the bullying is at the front of her mind. It doesn't matter as much to Hà that now, she also better understand English speakers who aren't *cruel to her.*

HA LE LU DA. The cowboy says that the neighbors would be more polite if the family agrees to something at the local Baptist church. When Hà and her family arrive at the church, the cowboy and his wife (who isn't smiling) are waiting for them in the first row. On stage, a plump man shouts and everyone shouts back "HA LE LU DA." After a while, a woman leads Hà and her family away to change into white gowns. Then, they wait in the hallway. Finally, Mother steps forward. The plump man, who's now in a small pool, pinches Mother's nose and pushes her under the water. Hà is ready to leap in after Mother when Mother stands up again.

The service at the Baptist church is shocking and unsettling for Hà—she's not used to so much shouting, and she also has no idea what's going on. This is best expressed by her understanding of what people are saying: "HA LE LU DA," instead of what they're probably actually saying, "hallelujah." And it's extremely unsettling for Hà to witness Mother being baptized—it seems violent and scary, even more so since she still doesn't understand much English.

Hà watches her brothers "get[] dipped," and then it's her turn. Mother says nothing, even though Hà gives Mother a look begging her to stop it. Once Hà has had her turn, she and her family get dressed and line up next to the cowboy and his wife, who's now smiling. She smiles bigger as people kiss Hà's cheeks. Hà's skin grows chilly as she realizes they'll be back here every Sunday.

As she's baptized, Hà feels powerless: she can't choose to skip this religious ceremony for a religion she doesn't actually follow. The cowboy's wife smiling after the family has been baptized reveals why she was so cruel to them earlier: they weren't Christian.

Can't Help. When Mother taps her nails on the table to signal she wants to be alone to chant, Hà goes to their bedroom. However, she continues to listen to Mother as she chants. The tones of Mother's chant are so quiet after the "HA LE LU DAs" today. Mother has to hit a spoon against a glass bowl, since she doesn't have a brass gong. And instead of jasmine incense, Mother has to burn dried orange peels, which isn't calming. Hà can't fall asleep. She needs to twirl the **amethyst ring** and smell Mother's lavender smell, since unlike Mother, Hà isn't as good at making do.

For Hà, it's comforting to hear Mother chanting after her loud church experience. This is what she's used to, and the chanting is what makes Hà feel secure and at peace. However, even Mother's chanting is different here in Alabama, since she doesn't have the proper gong or incense. Though it seems like Mother is getting something out of her modified chanting ritual, Hà is struggling: she misses how things used to be, and she craves those reminders of home.

When Mother comes in, she turns away from Hà; she wants to be alone longer. Hà sniffs quietly for lavender as Mother sighs and sniffles. Then, Mother asks someone where they are, and if they should keep hoping. She thinks Hà is asleep. Mother keeps sniffling quietly and tells Father to come home and see their children. Hà has spent her whole life wondering what it's like to know someone one's whole life, and then have that person disappear. Mother sighs that it's harder here than she thought it would be. This is confirmation for Hà that no matter what Mother says, she can't stop wishing for Father, just like Hà can't stop tasting **papaya** in her dreams.

It's eye-opening for Hà to hear Mother speaking to Father like this. It shows her that Mother is struggling too, but that Mother is trying to put on a brave face for her children's sake. Hà can't really empathize with Mother—she doesn't know what it's like to have a close loved one disappear after decades together. But she does realize that both she and Mother are grieving in similar ways: Mother for her husband, and Hà for the food that helped her feel secure and in touch with her culture in Saigon.

Spelling Rules. When adding an *s* to a word, the spelling sometimes changes. For instance, *knife* becomes *knives*. And sometimes, you use a *c* instead of a *k*, even if a *k* might make more sense. Similarly, *y* and *e* are sort of interchangeable. Hà thinks that whoever invented English should've learned to spell.

Again, these spelling rules seem ridiculous to Hà, which reflects how lost she feels in Alabama. Nothing makes sense, but for now, she can only direct her anger and powerlessness at language rather than at people.

Cowboy's Gifts. The cowboy likes to bring gifts. Mother loved the live catfish the best, and it tasted wonderful when Vu Lee cooked it. Now, since Hà and her family were dipped at church, the cowboy brings gifts more often. Vu Lee likes beef jerky, while Hà prefers grapes. Today, the cowboy brings over chips and chocolate. Hà and her brothers finish the chips quickly, but Mother throws away the candy bars. Once Mother is asleep, Hà picks the bars out of the trash. They'll make a better lunch than bread tomorrow.

Though Hà never described the cowboy as especially distant or unsupportive before, it's interesting that his gifts have increased since the family was baptized. He may have held some preconceived notions of his own about the family, though Hà might not have picked up on them.

Someone Knows. Today, Hà learns the word *delicious*. MiSSSisss WaSShington asks if Hà's lunch was delicious. She waits patiently while Hà translates in her head and then responds that she "*eat candy in toilet*." MiSSSisss WaSShington looks panicked at this, and Hà amends that she ate in *the* toilet. This doesn't make MiSSSisss WaSShington look any happier, so Hà says she doesn't eat candy all the time.

That Hà is willing to tell the truth about sitting in the bathroom during lunch shows how much she trusts MiSSSisss WaSShington. She's starting to feel more comfortable with her tutor, so it's easier for Hà to admit that she feels she must hide when she's at school.

Hà admits she always eats in the bathroom, but she can't explain why. She doesn't know how to describe how nervous she is whenever she thinks about all her classmates happily eating in the big, noisy room. Before Hà can speak, MiSSSisss WaSShington says she'll pack Hà a lunch so she can eat in class, even though it's against the rules. She promises things will get better. Hà doesn't believe this, but it does feel good that someone knows what's going on.

Hà can't articulate all she's feeling, though it's unclear if this is because of a language barrier, or because Hà is ashamed. Whatever is causing Hà to be unable to speak, though, MiSSSisss WaSShington steps in to save the day and help Hà feel more at home. The positive result is instant: it feels good for Hà to have told someone how lonely and afraid she feels.

Most Relieved Day. Hà stays in class during lunch the next day, and MiSSS SScott only nods. This is too easy. Inside Hà's bag is a sandwich, an apple, salty "crunchy curly things," and a cookie. She hears footsteps coming, and two students run into class, laughing. Hà prepares to fight, but the kids smile. The girl, who has long red hair and a long skirt, introduces herself as Pam. To Hà, this sounds like "Pem." The boy has "coconut-shell skin" and is dressed fancily. He introduces himself as Steven, which sounds like SSsì-Ti-Vân. Hà hasn't seen these two in class, but she does mostly look at her shoes. When she gets home, Hà will write that October 14 is her "Most Relieved Day." She was saving that for Father's return, but the day he returns can be her "Life's Best Day."

It's a huge relief for Hà to be able to eat a real lunch in peace, and to learn that at least two of her classmates are willing to be friends rather than bullies. That this day becomes Hà's "Most Relieved Day" speaks to how alone she felt before this. That this day overtakes the day that Father will return highlights that while she still wants him to come back, that's not as pressing of a concern for her as fitting in at school is.

Smart Again. Pink Boy is at the board, struggling to multiply 18 by 42. Hà goes to the board and works it out quickly. She smiles—until she sees the horrified looks from Pem and SSsì-Ti-Vân. Pink Boy's pink face is now bright red. MiSSS SScott pushes Hà back toward her seat and Pem takes Hà's hand. Pem's hand is trembling. Ha knows Pink Boy will get revenge, but for now, Hà feels smart.

For Hà, it's exhilarating to finally be able to show her new classmates that she's not "dumb"—indeed, she's better than Pink Boy at math. Pem and SSsì-Ti-Vân's horrified response suggests that Pink Boy is a known bully; Hà isn't his only target.

Hair. One day, a girl with honey-colored hair ties her pink ribbons into Hà's hair but then pulls the ribbons off—pink doesn't look good on Hà. Next, three girls with dark skin take bright barrettes out of their hair and twist Hà's hair into braids. Since Pem and SSsì-Ti-Vân nod, Hà holds still. As Hà walks home later, her shadow looks like she has eels on her head. Mother notices but says nothing. Hà sleeps uncomfortably on the barrettes, and the next morning, the girls pull out the barrettes. Hà's hair immediately goes back to being straight, so the girls pull Hà's hair and walk away. This is what Hà gets for wishing for long hair.

With her new friends' encouragement, Hà is more than willing to go along as her female classmates play with her hair. At first, Hà seems to expect that this will be a way for her to connect with more of her classmates—but then she finds that her unique hair texture means she can't use the same hair products as her other classmates. So, Hà comes away from this interaction feeling ashamed of her unique traits.

The Busy One. These days, Vu Lee can't dedicate his time only to Hà. In the mornings he delivers newspapers, and in the afternoons he flips burgers. At sunset, he teaches lots of people "Bruce Lee moves" in the yard. So far, he's only taught them to squat and shift. Hà always gets a spot in the front row. She practices with boys, giggling girls, and curious neighbors. These days, the neighbors are friendly and sometimes bring bright food to Hà's house. All Vu Lee's students wear yellow, and some wear suits like Bruce Lee wears. Brother Quang and Brother Khôi join in, and once, Hà spots Mother smiling from inside.

Bruce Lee, a Chinese actor and martial artist, was a cultural icon: he introduced many Americans to the idea that Asian men could be strong and competent, and he was wildly popular. Vu Lee idolizes Bruce Lee, and emulating him helps Vu Lee connect with the neighbors, who now realize that they have something in common with the Vietnamese newcomers. Seeing her children form connections like this is thrilling for Mother, as it's proof that her family is settling in.

War and Peace. At the end of October, MiSSS SScott shows photographs of a naked girl with burns running on a dirt road. There are pictures of people screaming as they try to board the last helicopter leaving Saigon. She shows pictures of emaciated refugees on fishing boats, and pictures of piles of boots once worn by soldiers "of the losing side." In theory, MiSSS SScott is showing the class where Hà is from, but she should've chosen pictures of **papayas**, or of Tet. It seems unbelievable, but sometimes Hà would rather be in Saigon during the war than here in peaceful Alabama.

Hà is feeling better about her life in some respects, but the photos MiSSS SScott shows to the class upset Hà. To Hà, it seems as though MiSSS SScott is pushing a very specific picture of Vietnam on her students, essentially teaching them that Vietnam is a horrible, dangerous, war-torn place. Hà knows Vietnam is much more than that, and more importantly, Hà felt at home in Vietnam in a way she hasn't yet in Alabama. This is why wartime Saigon seems preferable to Alabama: it at least feels like home.

Pancake Face. Today, Pem is wearing a long skirt that looks like a pioneer woman's skirt. SSsì-Ti-Vân is wearing a beard—apparently today is "pretend day." Pink Boy keeps asking Hà what she is. After school, Pink Boy shouts that Hà should be a pancake, since she "has a pancake face." It takes a minute for Hà to understand, and when she does, she runs from her classmates' laughter. She can still hear them laughing when Mother gets home, and Hà breaks down and tells Mother about what happened. Mother doesn't know what a pancake is. Hà just sobs—she can't explain to Mother that pancakes are extremely flat.

Pink Boy is making fun of Hà's face (and her not knowing it's Halloween, or even what Halloween is) by calling her "pancake face." Hà has never had her features targeted in this way, and it makes her feel singled out and ashamed in a way that she hasn't ever felt before. It causes her to feel even worse when she then has to explain to Mother exactly why being called "pancake face" is so insulting. It forces Hà to relive her trauma yet again.

Mother's Response. Mother strokes Hà's hair and walks her through chanting and breathing peacefully in and out. Hà chants as Mother rubs Hà's back and arm. She doesn't want Mother to stop stroking, and she wants to be as calm as Mother.

Mother doesn't have to fully understand Pink Boy's insult to understand that it made Hà feel terrible. Her goal is to comfort Hà and show her that someone loves her, and that Pink Boy's insults don't define her.

MiSSSisss WaSShington's Response. Hà is quiet during her tutoring session with MiSSSisss WaSShington. She looks around the room until she notices a framed picture of a boy. The boy is MiSSSisss WaSShington's son, Tom, who died at age 20 in Vietnam. Hà had no idea that "Vietnam" could sound so sad. Afraid to look up, Hà asks if MiSSSisss WaSShington hates her, but the woman just hugs Hà. Hà tells her about the pancake incident, and then MiSSSisss WaSShington pulls out a book of pictures that Tom took in Vietnam. There are pictures of Tet, temples, and schoolgirls. Tom both loved and hated Vietnam.

Particularly since MiSSS SScott showed the sad photos of Vietnam at war, Hà is acutely aware that Americans don't think Vietnam is a good, happy place. They've mostly seen horrifying pictures, and as MiSSSisss WaSShington explains when she tells Hà about Tom, the war in Vietnam has killed many Americans. But with Tom's photo album, MiSSSisss WaSShington encourages Hà to realize that Vietnam can just be a complicated idea for people. It's both happy and sad, and Hà's happy memories don't invalidate the pain the war has caused others, and vice versa.

Hà gasps when she sees a picture of a **papaya** tree heavy with ripe papayas. Excited, she shouts, "*Du du*!" and says, "best food." She teaches MiSSSisss WaSShington *du du*, and MiSSSisss WaSShington teaches Hà *doo-doo*, and they laugh uproariously. MiSSSisss WaSShington lets Hà take the book home.

Hà and MiSSSisss WaSShington are able to bond as Hà teaches her tutor the Vietnamese word for papaya, and MiSSSisss WaSShington teaches Hà that the Vietnamese word sounds like an English euphemism for feces. This is all in good fun—it shows Hà that she can trust her tutor, and that learning language can also be entertaining and silly.

Cowboy's Response. Just before school, the cowboy arrives at Hà's house—MiSSSisss WaSShington told him about the pancake incident. Now, the cowboy, MiSSSisss WaSShington, Mother, and Brother Quang are going to school with Hà, which just makes Hà nervous. They enter the principal's office, where Pink Boy is sitting with his mother. After the adults speak angrily for a bit, Pink Boy manages to say he's sorry. Hà wants to vomit—and she feels even worse when Mother kindly says that Pink Boy is "from a proper family" and must not have known how insulting his words were. Pink Boy stares hatefully at Hà.

It's interesting that this is the first time the school administration seems to step in and do something about the bullying Hà experiences at school. It's unclear whether they didn't know about previous playground incidents, or whether it took MiSSSisss WaSShington and the cowboy getting involved for anyone to care. Either way, for Hà, this is not a good experience. This isn't justice for her; rather, she realizes that getting Pink Boy in trouble is just going to fuel his hatred even more.

Boo-Da, Boo-Da. Today, MiSSS SScott shows maps and photographs of Vietnam. This time, she shows landscape photos and one of the Buddha. She asks Hà if she'd like to say anything, and Hà offers that she knows Buddha. Kids laugh and start to mutter "*Boo-Da*." Students continue to say "*Boo-Da*" all day. When the final bell rings, Hà runs. Pink Boy and his friends follow, shouting "*Boo-Da*" at her. When Hà takes a wrong turn and finds herself heading away from where Brother Khôi will be, she races even faster. She can barely see through her tears. Finally, the boys catch Hà, pull her hair, and shout "*Boo-Da* Girl" in her face. Hà runs again, feeling angry, lonely, confused, and ashamed.

The maps and landscape photographs of Vietnam initially make it seem like MiSSS SScott is trying to present a more balanced view of Vietnam, and show students that it's a beautiful country. However, she's not able to control how her students react to the photo of the Buddha and Hà's assertion that she knows Buddha. It's unclear if Hà's Alabama town is particularly religiously intolerant, or if Pink Boy and the other kids simply find the word "Buddha" funny—but either way, their taunts make Hà feel attacked and as though she can't win in her new home.

Hate It. Hà is too angry to go inside when she gets home. She digs a hole by the willow tree and screams "I hate everyone!!!!" into it, again and again. MiSSSisss WaSShington appears, speaks comfortingly to Hà, and then drags Hà up and across the yard. The woman asks Hà to tell her what happened as Hà stops screaming, but Hà keeps thrashing. MiSSSisss WaSShington holds Hà down once they get into the MiSSSisss WaSShington's house. She repeats "Hush, hush," over and over again, like a chant. Finally, Hà's mind calms down, and she says she hates everyone. MiSSSisss WaSShington asks if Hà really hates Mother, and Hà has to stop herself from giggling. When MiSSSisss WaSShington pats Hà's head, Hà's hatred disappears.

Hà is so overwhelmed with anger and powerlessness that she sees no other choice but to scream and thrash. This doesn't solve anything, but it lets her get her emotions out. And when Hà is done screaming, she's able to speak calmly with MiSSSisss WaSShington about what happened. MiSSSisss WaSShington has by now become a trusted figure in Hà's life, so Hà feels comfortable being honest with her. Because of this, MiSSSisss WaSShington is able to help Hà process what happened and move on.

Brother Quang's Turn. A few days later, Brother Quang comes home extremely happy because he repaired a car nobody else could fix. Going forward, he's going to only work on engines. Mother is so happy that she cries, but Hà pouts. Is she ever going to get a turn to be happy?

Things are starting to improve for Hà's other family members: Vu Lee is earning the neighbors' respect, and now Brother Quang seems to have gotten a promotion at work. But Hà feels like she's being left behind, since she hasn't experienced success yet.

Confessions. Hà decides it's time to tell Mother why she's been so miserable, so she admits that she used to buy less pork so she could buy sweets. Mother says she already knows, surprising Hà, and then asks what else Hà has to share. Hà admits that she used to like making Tram cry—and now kids make Hà cry. She asks if she'll be punished forever, and then says she has one more big confession: she was the first one to touch the floor on Tet. Mother's eyes go wide, but Hà shouts that she hates being told she can't do things because she's female. Hà asks if she ruined the whole family's luck, and if that's why they're in Alabama.

If Mother knew about Hà's purchasing sweets all along, it implies that she wasn't bothered by it. She realizes that Hà wanted to feel independent and smart, and it perhaps seemed like a small sacrifice to let Hà have this pleasure. Hà, though, feels like she's been deceiving everyone by not following Mother's instructions, by pinching Tram, and by touching the floor on Tet. It's a sign of how much she trusts Mother that Hà comes clean, but it also speaks to how miserable Hà is and how desperate she is to feel better.

Mother assures Hà that she's taking on too much. Mother says she's just superstitious; if Hà did anything, she gave the family the luck they needed to get out and end up in Alabama. Hà is incredulous; it doesn't feel like a good thing to be here. Mother encourages Hà to wait and see, but Hà says it's awful right now. Kids chase her, shout at her and call her names, and pull her arm hair. Hà asks if she can hit her classmates. Mother says that sometimes, Hà will have to fight—but she should ideally not fight with her fists.

Mother tries to get Hà to see that she didn't do anything wrong. It's okay, she implies, for Hà to want sweets and to resent certain traditions, and perhaps Hà's rebelliousness actually helped. Mother also encourages Hà to see that being in Alabama is a positive. It means they're not in danger in war-torn Vietnam, and Mother insists that things will continue to improve.

NOW! Hà accompanies Mother and Brother Quang to the grocery store, where Mother buys ingredients for egg rolls. An American holiday is coming up where Americans eat a turkey "the size of a baby." Mother asks Hà to ask the butcher to grind the pork, but the butcher slams the pork down and waves Hà's family away. Mother's brow furrows and then she rings the bell and asks the butcher herself to grind the pork. The butcher walks away. Mother presses the bell again and then sternly speaks to the butcher in Vietnamese. She ends with, "NOW!" The butcher grinds the meat.

Hà humorously shows here that she isn't charmed at all by Americans' traditional foods: the turkey "the size of a baby" is presumably for Thanksgiving, and describing it in this way conveys incredulity rather than excitement about eating it. Instead, Hà's family is going to have egg rolls. Mother shows that she's becoming more secure when she demands the butcher serve her. She won't stand for his mistreatment.

Du Du Face. Once again, boys are chasing Hà and yelling "*Boo-Da*" at her. Hà runs toward Brother Khôi, but she still has to listen to their taunts. But this time, Hà turns arounds and yells, "*Gee-sus*" at them, which makes the boys stop and stare. Suddenly happy, Hà runs and shouts words she learned from the boys, like "Bully," "Coward," and "Pink Snot Face." When Hà turns around, Pink Boy is very close, and his face is red. She shouts, "*Du Du* Face" at him. His friends, of course, hear "Doo-doo Face" and laugh at him, but this isn't Hà's fault. Hà jumps on Brother Khôi's bike.

Pink Boy and his cronies seem to never have considered that one day, Hà might stand up to them. Shouting "Gee-sus" (Jesus) at them is a sort of equivalent for Buddha, as she's also shouting the name of a religious figure. It delights Hà to know that she's then actually calling Pink Boy "papaya face," but that his friends think she's calling him "poop face." Language, in this case, is fun and satisfying for her.

Rumor. On Friday, rumors fly: apparently, Pink Boy is getting his cousin, a sixth-grade girl who's extremely muscular, to beat Hà up on Monday.

Shouting back may have made Hà feel better in the moment, but now she has to face Pink Boy's retaliation. It's unclear how she'll get through this.

A Plan. Hà doesn't even have to tell Brother Khôi about the threat, since he heard that Hà's face "is to be flattened / flatter" on Monday. He says that Hà doesn't have a flat face, and that he has a plan.

Hà discovers once again that she can rely on her family members to help and support her. Readers don't learn what Brother Khôi's plan is, but it's clear that Hà trusts him entirely.

Run. With five minutes to go, Hà gets ready to run. She races out the door as soon as the final bell rings and switches coats with Pem. Pem takes Hà's usual path while Hà turns left, and SSsì-Ti-Vân blocks the door. Hà runs as fast as she can. She's all alone—the boys must have followed Pem. Hà stops where Brother Khôi told her to wait, but Brother Khôi isn't there. Suddenly, Hà sees Pink Boy racing around the corner toward her.

Though it seems like the plan isn't exactly working (since Pink Boy is still catching up to Hà), the plan is clearly coordinated between Hà's family and her school friends. Pem and SSsì-Ti-Vân don't want to see Hà hurt any more than her family members do, so they're more than willing to help protect her.

A Shift. Pink Boy runs toward Hà, and Hà squats so she's ready. Pink Boy puts his fist out and when he's close enough to Hà that she can see his arm hair, she shifts away. He flies past her and thuds on the pavement, writhing in pain. Hà thought she'd like seeing him in pain, but instead, he just looks defeated and helpless. But now he's getting up. If Hà is going to kick him, she has to do it now.

Hà is surprised to realize that it doesn't feel good to hurt Pink Boy. She's waited for this moment for months now, but it's not at all what she imagined. Still, Hà reminds herself of the goal here: to prove she's too strong to pick on. And if that means she has to hurt Pink Boy, so be it.

WOW! Hà hears a roar, and both she and Pink Boy turn toward the sound. A huge motorcycle pulls up and stops. When the rider takes his helmet off, it turns out to be Vu Lee. Pink Boy hurries away just as Brother Khôi runs up pushing his bike, which has a flat tire. At Vu Lee's signal, Hà climbs on behind him and Brother Khôi climbs on behind her. Brother Khôi keeps ahold of his bike as they ride home.

Vu Lee's arrival saves Hà from having to hurt Pink Boy. His motorcycle is extremely imposing—he's essentially showing Pink Boy that Hà has big, powerful friends and relatives, and that he'll suffer if he continues to pick on her.

The Vu Lee Effect. Now, Vu Lee always picks Hà up after school. This means that people always want Pem, Hà, and SSsì-Ti-Vân to sit with them at lunch, and they're constantly getting party invitations. Girls hope that Vu Lee will give them rides—he gave a ride to Pink Boy's muscular cousin, who smiles and waves at Hà these days. Fortunately, Pink Boy avoids Hà and her friends.

Thanks to how cool Vu Lee is, Hà's peers now think she's *cool and worth being friends with. Again, Vu Lee is using the cultural power of Bruce Lee to help people rethink how they see Asian people: as people who are worth knowing and admiring, not as unknowable "others."*

Early Christmas. Mother invites the cowboy and MiSSSisss WaSShington for egg rolls a few days before Christmas. The guests don't want to embarrass their hosts, but they bring early Christmas gifts anyway. The cowboy gives Mother catfish, Brother Quang money to attend night college, Vu Lee jerky, Brother Khoi two fighting fish, and Hà a new coat. MiSSSisss WaSShington gives a gong and jasmine incense to Mother, an engineering textbook to Brother Quang, more jerky to Vu Lee, a hamster to Brother Khôi, and a package of dried orange stuff to Hà. Everyone else says the gifts are perfect, but Hà frowns.

Hà's family is still just getting started in Alabama, so they don't necessarily have the funds to buy Christmas gifts—Mother instead has to settle for sharing her cooking with her guests. The gifts that the cowboy and MiSSSisss WaSShington bring show how well they now know Hà's family: they support their career pursuits, education, and other interests. The dried orange stuff, though, seems odd to Hà; it's not yet clear what it is.

Not the Same. The package MiSSSisss WaSShington gave Hà contains dried **papaya**. This papaya is chewy, waxy, and sticky—it's not like papaya at all. Hà is so mad that she throws all of it away.

MiSSSisss WaSShington no doubt thought she was doing a kind thing for Hà by giving her papaya as it often is eaten in the U.S. But for Hà, this is just offensive. Dried papaya isn't what she craves—instead, it's a reminder of all she's lost.

But Not Bad. Mother slaps Hà's hand and tells her to compromise, but Hà refuses. Instead, she goes to bed and stares at the picture of a real **papaya** tree. Will she ever get to eat a fresh papaya again? Mother's gong rings out, soothing Hà, and the incense smell seems to surround Hà like a blanket. Hà wakes up early in the morning feeling guilty. But when she heads for the trash, she finds that her dried papaya isn't there. Instead, she finds the papaya on the table—the pieces have been sitting in hot water, and this has melted the sugar off. The papaya still doesn't taste the same, but it's not bad.

Thanks to MiSSSisss WaSShington's gifts for Mother, Hà now has the comforts of Mother chanting in the traditional way, with the gong and the proper incense. This helps her feel more secure and open to trying the dried papaya in the morning. The fact that Mother soaked the papaya is a sign of how much Mother loves Hà and wants her to be happy. And when Hà accepts the rehydrated papaya, it shows she's growing up and coming around to her new life in Alabama.

PART 4: FROM NOW ON

Letter from the North. The war ended eight months ago, and Mother sent her letter to the North four months ago. Today, Mother receives a reply from Father's brother, but it doesn't offer any new information. He writes that he went south to talk with old neighbors and Father's old friends, but he learned nothing. The letter doesn't tell the family what to do, and Mother doesn't offer any insight either. Christmas Eve is a silent affair.

Hà and her siblings might finally be settling into their new home, but getting no information about Father stops their development short. The silent Christmas Eve suggests that this new development weighs heavily on everyone. Without knowing where Father is, they can't move forward.

Gift-Exchange Day. On December 25th, "gift-exchange day," Pem comes over with a **doll**—Hà told her about the mouse-bitten one that she lost. Hà almost screams, as the doll is gorgeous and has lovely long black hair. But it's hard to feel too happy, as Hà is embarrassed that she doesn't have a gift for Pem.

Receiving the doll allows Hà to reclaim a little bit of her innocence, as she now has this childish comfort in her arms again. But even though this is a good thing, the doll isn't all positive: receiving it with nothing to give in return makes Hà feel like a poor friend.

What If. Brother Quang wonders if Father escaped to Cambodia. Perhaps he's building an army and will go back in time to change history. Vu Lee, on the other hand, wonders if Father might have escaped to France and has a new family—he might not remember his old family. Brother Khôi wonders if Father joined a monastery in Tibet. Hà doesn't have any exciting what-ifs, but she can't let her brothers win. So, she asks what if Father is just gone. Everyone looks sad when Hà says this. She realizes that they think she's right, despite their various what-ifs.

Hà's brothers' suggestions seem based more in far-fetched hope than in reality, which Hà starts to pick up on when she suggests that perhaps Father is gone. This shows Hà that her family members have been trying to ignore the fact that Father isn't going to come back. But until everyone is willing to accept that Father is gone, they'll continue to hope for the impossible, and this will keep them from moving forward and healing.

A Sign. Mother keeps quiet about Father, but she chants every night. Hà knows Mother is waiting for a sign, and she thinks that she'll decide what happened to Father when Mother decides.

Hà seems to suspect on some level that she's right—that Father is gone. But her loyalty to Mother means that she's not going to let herself believe that's true until Mother gives her permission.

No More. Hà knows that she's supposed to wear all new clothing items when she returns to school after Christmas break. The only new garments she has are her coat and a secondhand dress, which is cream with blue flowers. It's fuzzy and thick, so it'll keep her warm. As soon as Hà takes her coat off, everyone goes quiet. A girl dressed in red velvet tells Hà that flannel fabric is only for nightgowns and sheets. Pem shrugs; it doesn't matter to her what Hà wears when Pem can't cut her hair or wear skirts that hit above her calves. SSsì-Ti-Vân says it looks like a dress. But the girl in red velvet points to the flower on Hà's chest and says flowers only go on nightgowns. Hà rips the flower off—her dress isn't a nightgown anymore.

Hà is doing her best to follow what she thinks are American New Year's traditions by wearing all new clothes, as she normally would on Tet. But this backfires when her classmates accuse her of wearing a nightgown, not a dress. This has the potential to be humiliating for Hà. But because Hà's friends stand up for her and insist that it doesn't matter what she wears, Hà finds the courage to push through and take matters into her own hands. By ripping off the offending flower, Hà can control this one aspect of her life and make the dress what she needs it to be.

Seeds. Hà wears the dress to sleep and explains to Mother what happened. She says that she pretended she didn't care, and when nobody else cared, Hà actually stopped caring. This makes Mother laugh. Hà admits that it's far more embarrassing to not have anything to give Pem for Christmas. Thoughtfully, Mother goes to her drawer and pulls something out. She says she was saving it for Hà for Tet, but now seems like a good time to give it to Hà. Mother gives Hà the tin of flower seeds that Hà and TiTi gathered. It's a perfect gift for Pem.

Hà is learning that not all embarrassment is created equal. It was embarrassing to be accused of wearing a nightgown—but that was nothing compared to the embarrassment Hà feels about not being able to be a good friend to Pem. By giving the flower seeds to Pem, Hà gets some of her dignity back. She's able to engage with Pem on a different level—not as someone who's accepting charity, but as an equal.

Gone. Mother runs into the house after work, barely able to speak. Her fists are clenched and her face is ashy—and the **amethyst ring** is gone from her left hand. Brother Quang drives everyone back to the factory so they can all help Mother look around the cafeteria, bathroom, and parking lot. Mother's eyes stay wild. Hà is afraid of what Mother's expression will look like if the ring is gone. Finally, at dusk, the guards tell the family to leave. Hà and her brothers are afraid to look at Mother.

Losing the amethyst ring—a symbol of Father, and his and Mother's love—is devastating for Mother. Hà and her brothers know how important the ring is to Mother, and their enthusiasm for searching seems to be rooted in their desire to make Mother happy. In other words, the ring and what it symbolizes—Father—seems less important to the kids than keeping Mother content.

Truly Gone. Once the family gets home, Mother goes to her room and stays there through dinner. Around bedtime, Hà and her brothers hear the gong and then Mother chanting. Now, her voice is "low and sure." When Mother is finished, she appears and says that Father is gone.

Mother ultimately decides to take losing the ring as a sign that Father is gone, and she can now mourn him and move on. This is devastating, but it also gives Mother some closure and peace—her voice is "low and sure," rather than anxious and upset.

Eternal Peace. Mother puts on her brown *áo dài*, Hà's brothers wear ill-fitting suits, and Hà wears a pink ruffly dress. She hates it, but it's undeniably a dress. They all face the altar and hold lit incense sticks. As they pray, the portrait of Father as a young man stares back. He'll never get any older, and this thought makes Hà's eyes turn red. Mother explains that they're going to chant so Father has a safe passage to eternal peace. Trying not to cry, she says that they can't hold onto Father, or he won't leave. At least now they know, and they don't have to wait anymore.

Hà's youth and childish concerns shine through early in this passage: she desperately wants to wear a dress that's obviously a dress, which suggests that she's annoyed after the nightgown incident at school. But Hà still takes this opportunity to do as Mother asks and grieve Father. Now, Hà can also find closure. She can figure out how she relates to this man she's never known, and she doesn't have to keep hoping that he'll show up one day.

Start Over. Hà is trying to explain Father's ceremony to MiSSSisss WaSShington, but it's hard to get all the nouns, verbs, and tenses right. MiSSSisss WaSShington counsels Hà that people learning a language can't wait to speak up until they're fluent, or they'll never speak. Hà must practice and make mistakes. When Hà says her classmates laugh at her, MiSSSisss WaSShington says "shame on them"—Hà should ask them to say something in Vietnamese and laugh back at them. Then, Hà tells MiSSSisss WaSShington that Father is at peace, that she'd like to plant some flower seeds from Vietnam, and that Tet is coming. Luck starts over on every new year.

The way that Hà describes her struggle to use correct grammar suggests that for now, her main concern is speaking correctly—she doesn't want people to judge her, and she also doesn't want to be misunderstood. But MiSSSisss WaSShington encourages Hà to realize that learning is more important than being correct at this point. Hà must be willing to try to speak, even if she makes mistakes. Until she has a better grasp of English, this is the only way she'll learn, and the only way she can communicate with English speakers.

An Engineer, a Chef, a Vet, and Not a Lawyer. Now, Brother Quang is in night school to study engineering, which makes Mother smile. Vu Lee is refusing to go to real colleges. He's going to go to cooking school in San Francisco, where Bruce Lee once lived—this makes Mother sigh. Brother Khôi insists he'll be an animal doctor. Mother stops herself from saying something and nods. She's always wanted her children to be an engineer, a poet, a "real doctor," and a lawyer. She asks Hà if she likes to argue, and Hà snaps that she doesn't. Mother smiles, and Hà decides to be less contrary.

Things seem to be looking up for all of Hà's family members. After deciding that Father is gone, and after letting him go, Mother can now turn her attention more fully to her children. She can take pride in the fact that Brother Quang is going to finish his studies in the U.S., and she can tolerate her other two sons not doing exactly as she'd like them to. But she also seems far more willing to support them in cooking and becoming a veterinarian than she might have been a few months ago—she's allowing them to grow up and is supporting them as they do.

1976: Year of the Dragon. Since there's no fortune teller this Tet, Mother predicts the family's year. She says that their lives will mix up the old and new, and soon, it won't matter which is which. There's no *bánh chung* in the square shape this year. Mother makes one that's log-shaped and made out of different ingredients than usual. It's not exactly the same, but it's not bad, either. Hà and her family members smile the entire first three days of the year. They all wear new clothes, including underwear, and they don't splash water or pout. Mother asks Brother Quang to bless the house after midnight, so Hà can't touch the ground first in the morning.

Without the fortuneteller or all the traditional bánh chung *ingredients, Hà's family has to come up with some new traditions, such as Mother acting as the fortuneteller and making a modified version of* bánh chung. *Enough things remain the same, though—getting new clothes, smiling, and Brother Quang blessing the house—that this tradition still feels meaningful. And now, Hà can appreciate that her traditions are changing. She's looking forward to the future now more than she could earlier in the novel, when she didn't want anything to change.*

Mother also sets up a permanent altar on a tall bookshelf and displays Father's portrait. Hà can't look at it. She holds her incense stick and waits for the gong to sound. Hà prays for Father and for Mother, Brother Quang, Vu Lee, and Brother Khôi to be happy and successful. When she opens her eyes, the others are still praying. Who knows what they're still praying for. But Hà closes her eyes and keep thinking. She hopes that this year, she learns to fly-kick. She doesn't actually want to kick anyone, though. She wants to fly.

Now that Mother has let Father go, it's less painful for her to allow his memory to be a part of her family's everyday life by setting up this altar. Hà's first prayers are for her family members—they're still the most important people in her life. But when she returns to praying, she then thinks of herself and how she'd like to change. Hà now realizes she doesn't have to lash out at others to be successful. Instead, she just has to be happy with herself.

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