

Little Fires Everywhere



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CELESTE NG

Born in Pittsburgh to immigrants from Hong Kong—both scientists, a physicist and a chemist—Celeste Ng was raised in Shaker Heights, Ohio, the town in which *Little Fires Everywhere* is set. A graduate of Harvard and the prestigious creative writing program at the University of Michigan, Ng has published essays and short fiction widely in literary magazines. Her debut novel, [Everything I Never Told You](#), was released to critical acclaim in 2014; like *Little Fires Everywhere*, it's a mystery-driven thriller that deals with the insidiousness of racism and the crumbling of an American family.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Little Fires Everywhere is set in Shaker Heights, Ohio—one of the nation's first planned communities, envisioned as a utopia by its founders—in the late 1990s. Ng engineered the novel's timeline to reflect several important historical events. The text unfolds against the backdrop of the Bill Clinton/Monica Lewinsky scandal, the opening of *Titanic* (the highest-grossing film in history at the time), the nationwide rise of American adoptions of Chinese infants and orphans, and the American unemployment rate's dip below 5% in the middle of 1997, which was the lowest it had been since 1973 and was indicative of the nation's moment of financial prosperity. The utopic qualities that the community of Shaker Heights—and, more specifically, the Richardsons—are trying to embody mirror the qualities that the America of the nineties was attempting to reflect.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Little Fires Everywhere follows a single mother and her daughter, Pearl, as they navigate life in a close-knit, highly-regulated, often falsely altruistic community—sound familiar? Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel [The Scarlet Letter](#), penned in 1850 but set in the puritanical Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1640s, also focuses on themes of ostracism, motherhood, order, and anarchy. Hester Prynne, having given birth to an illegitimate daughter named Pearl after an affair with Arthur Dimmesdale, a Boston minister, is punished and shamed for her sins and transgressions. Hester and Pearl, though shunned by their community, are close, and Pearl grows into a precocious child whose unruly actions threaten her removal from her mother's custody. Ng draws heavily on themes, symbolism, and characterization found in [The Scarlet Letter](#), from choosing the name Pearl—a whole, shining, pure object of luxury and

beauty—to delving into the slights and small corruptions found in a rigid American community.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Little Fires Everywhere*
- **When Written:** 2014-2016
- **Where Written:** Cambridge, MA
- **When Published:** 2017
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Literary fiction; realism
- **Setting:** Shaker Heights, OH, USA
- **Climax:** Mia Warren is revealed to have agreed to act as a surrogate in college for a wealthy couple unable to conceive, only to change her mind and run away with the baby, who is now her daughter Pearl. The reason for their transient, on-the-lam-like lifestyle is revealed, as are Mia's motivations for helping Bebe.
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Baby Jessica. In 1993, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Roberta DeBoer and her husband Jan were forced to return their adopted daughter Jessica, whom they had raised nearly from birth, to her adoptive parents in Iowa. The story featured in the national media, with articles in *People* and *Newsweek* detailing both the DeBoer's fight to keep the child they'd come to love as their own and the joy the Schmidt family—Jessica's birth parents—felt at welcoming her home after a long legal battle. Ng reverses the outcome of the Baby Jessica case—Bebe Wong is denied custody of her daughter—but complicates the already difficult moral debate by ending the novel with Bebe's retaliation against the McCullough family, and her triumph over them. Mirabelle, or May Ling, just like Baby Jessica, is the object of tensions, debates, and moral grey areas, though as an infant she has no agency of her own. Ng uses the complicated precedent set in the original case to delve deeper into themes of motherhood, ostracism, assimilation, and altruism.



PLOT SUMMARY

The Richardson house has burned down and Izzy Richardson, the youngest of the four Richardson children, is the primary suspect. The firemen who assessed the damage have determined that there were "little **fires** everywhere" throughout the house, indicating "multiple points of origin." Mrs. Richardson and her three older children, Lexie, Trip, and

Moody, stand on the lawn surveying the damage and wondering where Izzy has gone.

The narrative then flashes back to the previous June, when Mia and Pearl Warren arrived in Shaker Heights, Ohio, to live on the top floor of the Richardsons' rental property on Winslow Road—in one of the manicured, utopic planned community's "less desirable" fringe neighborhoods. Pearl and Mia have lived a transient lifestyle, moving from town to town. This time, Mia has promised Pearl, the two of them will "stay put."

Moody is the first of the Richardson children to befriend Pearl Warren. As their friendship deepens, Moody brings Pearl to his house, hopeful that she will be as fascinated by his family as he is by her and her mother's bohemian "magic trick" of a life. Pearl is "dazzled" by the Richardsons; Mrs. Richardson is a journalist, Mr. Richardson is a lawyer, and the children are all "artlessly beautiful." Mia begins to notice Pearl's growing infatuation with the Richardsons but tells herself that she owes Pearl a semblance of a normal life, and allows her to continue visiting their home daily, where Pearl watches [Jerry Springer](#), takes trips to the mall or thrift stores with Lexie, flirts with the charming Trip, and receives an expensive notebook from Moody, who has developed feelings for Pearl.

Pearl is invited to tag along to a house party at the home of Stacie Perry, a popular girl known for her wild gatherings. Pearl, Lexie, and Serena Wong enjoy the beginning of the party together. Lexie's boyfriend Brian arrives and the two sneak away to have sex. Pearl, slightly drunk and alone, searches for Lexie, Serena, and Trip, but is unable to find any of them. Pearl then calls Moody, who drives his mother's car to come retrieve her. Pearl misses her curfew, upsetting Mia. The following Tuesday, Mrs. Richardson stops by Mia and Pearl's apartment to check in. Realizing that Mia has had to take several odd jobs to make ends meet, Mrs. Richardson offers to hire Mia as a housekeeper. Mia, happy for an inroad into her daughter's new life, accepts Mrs. Richardson's offer. Pearl fears that her mother's presence will ruin her relationship with the Richardsons—especially her flirtations with the handsome Trip.

One morning, Mia is home alone with Izzy, who has been suspended from school for breaking her racist, alcoholic orchestra teacher Mrs. Peters's violin bow and throwing the pieces in her face. Izzy, days later, is still upset about the incident; Mia asks her "what [she is] going to do about it." Izzy is stunned to realize that, in her whole life, no one has ever asked her this question before. Izzy concocts a plan, with Moody and Pearl's help, to insert toothpicks into every door throughout the school, jamming the locks. The prank is baffling to the teachers and thrilling to the students, and goes off without a hitch. Mrs. Peters, hungover, drinks coffee from a huge thermos while waiting for her classroom to be unlocked and urinates all over the floor of a student bathroom, earning herself the nickname "Mrs. Pissers." In the wake of the prank's success, Izzy begs Mia to allow her to work for free as her [photography](#)

assistant, and Mia agrees.

On a class trip to the art museum, Pearl and Moody notice a print which seems to feature Mia holding a newborn Pearl in her arms. The photograph is credited to a woman named Pauline Hawthorne. After school, the two of them persuade Lexie to drive them back to the museum—and the three agree that the woman in the photograph is definitely Mia. When Pearl, along with Moody, Izzy, and Lexie, confronts her mother about the photo, Mia grows defensive. Izzy, curious but unable to uncover any useful information about Pauline Hawthorne on her own, enlists her mother's help. Mrs. Richardson contacts a gallerist named Anita Rees in New York City, who also deflects her questions.

After Thanksgiving, the Richardson family attends a birthday party held by their friends Linda and Mark McCullough. The McCulloughs are in the process of adopting a baby girl—her name is Mirabelle (originally May Ling,) she is Asian, and she is one year old. The baby was left on the steps of a fire station, and the McCulloughs had received a call from a social worker and gained temporary custody of Mirabelle that same day. In the wake of the party, Lexie gushes to Mia about the "miracle" of Mirabelle's adoption. Meanwhile, Mia has taken a second job at Lucky Palace, a Chinese restaurant, and one of her coworkers, Bebe Chow, recently shared that a year ago she had a baby, but was forced to leave her on the steps of the fire station when she was unable to care for her—perhaps due to postpartum depression. Though Mia's cardinal rule is to not get attached, she calls Bebe to inform her of her daughter's whereabouts.

Days later, Bebe arrives at Mia and Pearl's house, hysterical. She says she went to the McCulloughs' house to try and talk with them, only to be dragged away by police. Mia comforts Bebe, and implores her to "fight this fight." The following afternoon, the McCulloughs are ambushed by the local news team, and the evening after that, an interview with Bebe herself airs. The media hounds the McCulloughs, and a local lawyer named Ed Lim offers to represent Bebe pro bono as she sues the state for custody of May Ling. Mr. Richardson, meanwhile, is recruited to assist the McCulloughs. Mrs. Richardson spots an article which mentions that Bebe was informed of May Ling's whereabouts by a coworker at Lucky Palace—and Mrs. Richardson realizes that the coworker is Mia. Mrs. Richardson does not confront Mia with this information, but resolves to dig into her past in retaliation for the "trouble [she has] stirred up."

Lexie gets into Yale, and Mrs. Richardson offers to take her, Izzy, and Pearl out for a special girls' lunch, in hopes of getting some information about Mia's past out of Pearl. Pearl divulges that she was born in San Francisco, and Mrs. Richardson uses this information to request a copy of Pearl's birth certificate. When the certificate arrives, Mia's birthplace is listed; Mrs. Richardson uses that information to track Mia's family, the Wrights, to Pittsburgh, and she discovers that their son,

Warren, died at the age of 17 in 1982. Mrs. Richardson obtains the Wrights' home address.

Meanwhile, the debate over May Ling rocks Shaker Heights. The Richardsons fight amongst themselves about the morality of the situation, Bebe Chow obtains visitation rights, and the McCulloughs appear on the evening news for an exclusive interview, feeding the fire of the media circus. Mrs. Richardson books a flight to Pennsylvania, angrier than ever at Mia for "heedlessly throwing sparks" into the orderly world of Shaker Heights.

Pearl and Trip begin a clandestine affair; meanwhile, Lexie becomes pregnant with her boyfriend Brian's baby and makes an appointment at an abortion clinic. Lexie implores Pearl to come along with her, and Pearl agrees. At the clinic, Pearl realizes that Lexie has used her name to book the appointment, and is shocked and briefly upset.

In Pittsburgh, Mrs. Richardson arrives at the Wright home, introducing herself as a journalist working on an article about "promising teen athletes whose careers were cut short." The Wrights, after some prodding, divulge Mia's life story. Mia, after a childhood spent behind the lens of a camera given to her by a friendly neighbor, moved to New York City for college, where she studied photography at a prestigious art program. One of her teachers, the famous Pauline Hawthorne, quickly took Mia under her wing, but Mia's education was cut short when her program revoked her scholarship due to lack of funds. Desperate for a way to continue paying tuition, Mia agreed to act as a surrogate for a wealthy couple, the Ryans, who had been unable to conceive a child. Mia hid her pregnancy from her family except for her brother, who stopped speaking to her months before his life was taken in an accident. When Mia returned home for the funeral, her parents, angered by her pregnancy and her willingness to "sell" her own child, shunned her. Mia, distraught, wrote a note to the Ryans in which she lied about having miscarried, then set off on a road trip across the country—a road trip that has arguably never ended.

In Shaker Heights the custody hearing begins. On the final day of the hearing, Mrs. McCullough is called to the stand. Bebe Chow's lawyer, Ed Lim, makes it clear that while the McCulloughs would no doubt be fit and loving parents, they would be unable—and perhaps even unwilling—to raise May Ling with any authentic or meaningful connection to Chinese culture.

Moody catches Pearl and Trip together and lashes out in anger, ending his friendship with Pearl. Lexie breaks up with Brian, and seeks refuge and guidance from Mia. With no decision from the judge in sight, Mrs. McCullough and Mrs. Richardson begin scrounging for anything they can use to sway the tides in the McCulloughs' favor. Mrs. McCullough notes that Bebe had looked heavy and ill a few weeks ago, and wonders if she might have become pregnant and gotten an abortion. Mrs. Richardson calls upon her friend Elizabeth Manwill, who runs a

clinic that provides abortions—the same clinic Lexie visited just weeks ago. Mrs. Richardson attempts to pressure Elizabeth into providing her with the clinic's records, and when Elizabeth refuses, Mrs. Richardson does some snooping of her own. She discovers Pearl's name in the appointment records, assumes that Pearl and Moody have been sleeping together, and plans to confront Moody that evening.

The McCulloughs win the case. At Mia's house, a distraught Bebe takes refuge in the kitchen. Izzy, also at the house, asks Mia if Bebe will be all right; Mia replies that "people find a way [to] start over," like soil after a "prairie fire." Izzy returns home. That night Mrs. Richardson confronts Moody, but he tells his mother that "Trip [is] the one screwing her." Izzy, from her room, overhears everything. In the morning, Mrs. Richardson drives to the Warrens' house. She reveals her knowledge of the Ryan affair, as well as the fact that it was Mia who informed Bebe of May Ling's whereabouts. She tells Mia to vacate the apartment. That afternoon Mia arrives early to pick Pearl up from school, and tells her that they'll be leaving Shaker Heights. Pearl, miserable, begins to protest, imagining a life in which the Richardsons take her in as one of their own. Mia convinces Pearl to follow her to the car, and together they return to the house on Winslow to pack up their belongings. Pearl demands to know why they are leaving, and Mia finally divulges the story of her past, and Pearl's origins. There is a knock at the door; it is Izzy, but Mia sends her away, reminding her once more about the prairie fire anecdote, and telling her that "sometimes you need to start over from scratch." Izzy searches for Lexie—first at home, where she fights with Moody over his cruelty toward Pearl, and then at Serena Wong's, where she finds Lexie and confronts her sister over the abortion conducted under Pearl's name. Izzy returns to the house on Winslow, where the downstairs tenant Mr. Yang tells Izzy that Pearl and Mia have just left.

The next morning, Izzy, distraught and overwhelmed by her family's betrayals of the Warrens, decides to burn down her home. She packs her belongings, drizzles gasoline throughout the house and lights a match, ready to set out to find Mia and Pearl. The narrative then circles back to the beginning of the novel—the moments just after the fire has consumed the Richardson house. While the Richardson siblings wonder where their sister has gone and laugh together over the trouble she'll be in when she returns, Mrs. Richardson plans their journey over to the rental house on Winslow, where they'll stay for an indeterminate length of time. Once there, the family discovers that Mia has left behind a set of emotionally revealing photographs—or, rather, art pieces—that reflect each member of the Richardson family. Mr. Richardson checks his voicemail and discovers a message from a distraught Mr. McCullough, who reveals that, in the night, Bebe stole May Ling from her room and boarded a flight to Canton. Mrs. Richardson resolves to search for Izzy "for as long as it [takes.]"



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mia Warren – Mia Warren, inspired in part by [The Scarlet Letter](#)'s Hester Prynne, is a single mother and struggling artist who finds herself at the center of a strange and tight-knit community, the manicured and utopic Shaker Heights, Ohio. She then rapidly becomes entwined in several of the town's interlocking scandals and snafus. Empathetic, intuitive, and secretive, Mia avoids her shadowed past by focusing intensely on her art—manually manipulated **photographs** and portraits—and dodging the questions about heritage asked of her by her daughter Pearl and her landlady and eventual employer, Mrs. Richardson. Mia's sense of duty to others and desire to guide, soothe, and assist often gets her—or whoever she's trying to help—into hot water. When Mia realizes that Bebe Chow, her coworker at a local Chinese restaurant, is the mother of a baby who's about to be adopted by a prominent Shaker Heights family, the McCulloughs, Mia encourages Bebe to step up, leading to a long, difficult, and emotionally taxing legal battle. Mia takes Izzy Richardson under her wing as her photography assistant, and indirectly influences Izzy first to pull a large-scale school prank, and eventually to **burn down** her own family's home. Mia embodies, at various turns, several of the novel's themes: motherhood, disruption, identity, altruism and manipulation, and ostracism. Her painstakingly crafted photographs are symbolic of the valuable perspective of an outsider, and also of an outsider's power to sow seeds of disruption—both positive and negative, helpful and destructive.

Pearl Warren – Pearl, Mia's daughter, was named by her mother for a character in [The Scarlet Letter](#)—a precocious child whose strained relationship with her mother ultimately threatens both women's well-being. In *Little Fires Everywhere*, Pearl and Mia repeat that dynamic. Pearl is sick of being dragged from town to town, and has implored her mother to promise her that Shaker Heights will be the place where they finally settle down. Pearl almost immediately becomes intertwined in the lives of the Richardson family—first through her friendship with the shy, love-struck Moody, and later through her codependent friendship with Lexie and her sexual relationship with Trip. As Pearl finds herself drawn deeper and deeper into the Richardsons' lives, Mia takes a job, offered to her by Mrs. Richardson, to work as the Richardsons' housekeeper. Pearl is never far from her mother's watchful eye, even as the emotional distance between them grows. Pearl and Mia are ultimately asked to leave their rental house after Lexie uses Pearl's name as her own at an abortion clinic—a fact which Mrs. Richardson discovers, and uses to jump to the conclusion that Pearl has been sleeping with Moody. Pearl's misery at the idea of leaving is not enough to hold her and her mother to Shaker, and their lives as transients resume once again. Thoughtful, introspective, eager to please and allured by luxury

and stability, Pearl embodies the novel's themes of motherhood and daughterhood, ostracism and acceptance, and the search for and struggle with identity, heritage, and transience.

Mrs. Richardson / Elena – Mrs. Richardson is a journalist, mother, and Shaker Heights native who embodies several of the novel's themes: motherhood, altruism, and allegiance to order. Born and raised in Shaker Heights, the prim and proper Mrs. Richardson—who, in a nod to her need for order, respect, and control, is hardly ever referred to by her first name—comes from a well-to-do family whose assets include, among other things, a small rental property which serves as a source of supplemental income. Mrs. Richardson takes the house on as her pet project, and sees that the funds from her tenants' rent is put toward her family's yearly vacation. With the arrival of Mia and Pearl Warren—her newest tenants—Mrs. Richardson slowly begins to feel the anxiety of her children being pulled away from her. She starts to realize that perhaps there is no one right way to be a mother, and is forced to accept that her strict adherence to the rules and regulations that have governed her life has not delivered her all the happiness, fulfillment, and ease that she thought it would. Mrs. Richardson feels intensely competitive with Mia, as her daughters, Lexie and Izzy, are pulled into Mia's orbit, and Mrs. Richardson seeks to explore—and exploit—Mia's shadowed past. Mrs. Richardson becomes so involved in attempting to order and organize the lives of everyone around her that she grows blind to the ways in which her children are maturing or struggling to mature, engaging with the world around them or failing to.

Mr. Richardson / Bill – Mrs. Richardson's husband and the Richardson children's father. He and his wife met in college, and, though he was not from Ohio, he was easily convinced to move to his wife's hometown, Shaker Heights. He is often on the fringes of his family's day-to-day life, though he has a tender relationship with Izzy; he is a defense attorney who works in the city. He agrees to assist the McCulloughs in their legal case against Bebe Chow, but eventually becomes skeptical of their claim to May Ling and hyperaware of the blurred lines between right and wrong when it comes to the case and to parenting in general.

Izzy Richardson – The youngest and most rebellious of the Richardson children, Izzy is a freshman in high school and is desperate for escape from her heavily-regulated life. Born prematurely and, as a result, over-parented by her mother Mrs. Richardson, Izzy learns throughout the course of the novel—at the prodding of Mia Warren—to use her voice and her action to “do something” about her circumstances. Izzy, drawn to Mia because of her freedom, artistry, and sensitivity, asks to become her **photography** assistant. Mia agrees, and the two begin spending most of their afternoons together, working in the rental house. Mia teaches Izzy several lessons about agency, change, and renewal, prodding her to “do something” to change the things in her life with which she is unhappy and

warning her that, like ground razed by **fire**, sometimes “everything” must be burnt to the ground to make way for the “growth” of new ideas. Izzy takes Mia’s advice a bit too literally, and uses Mia’s words as fuel for school pranks, for challenging her parents, and for, eventually, literally setting a fire to her family’s home. Izzy represents disruption and ostracism, and her relationship with her own mother is one of the relationships at the heart of the novel’s theme of mothers and daughters.

Moody Richardson – A sophomore in high school, Moody is the first of the Richardson children to befriend Pearl. He develops romantic feelings for her, and attempts to show her the ways in which his family can be false and manipulative in order to raise his own stock with her. He then grows embittered and even cruel when he discovers Pearl’s relationship with his brother Trip.

Trip Richardson – A junior in high school and an athlete, Trip is “roguish” and good-looking, and quickly becomes the object of Pearl’s affections. Though at first it seems as if Trip could just be using Pearl, he develops real romantic feelings for her and reveals himself to be more sensitive than he first appears. He and Pearl embark on a sexual relationship, often sneaking off to Trip’s friend Tim’s basement.

Lexie Richardson – The eldest of the Richardson children and the most like her mother, Lexie is a smart and sensitive “girl’s girl” who dreams alternately of escaping to Yale and remaining in Shaker Heights to raise a family. Lexie is deemed “baby crazy” by her brother Trip and, ultimately, by her boyfriend Brian—and her obsession with babies is brought on when she meets May Ling Chow. Lexie and Pearl become close after Moody brings Pearl into the Richardson home, and soon Lexie is dependent on Pearl for guidance. Pearl writes Lexie’s college application essay and accompanies her to a women’s clinic when Lexie becomes pregnant and decides to have an abortion. Lexie uses Pearl’s name as her own at the clinic, unknowingly setting up a dangerous and devastating time bomb which will impact her own family and Pearl’s when Mrs. Richardson, combing through the clinic’s records for research in the Chow/McCullough case, discovers Pearl’s name in the appointment records.

Bebe Chow – Mia Warren’s coworker at Lucky Palace, a local Chinese restaurant. Bebe confides in Mia about her life, revealing that a year ago she had a baby, but was forced to leave her at a **fire** station when she was unable to properly care for her. Mia puts two and two together, and alerts Bebe to the fact that her daughter is in the process of being adopted by the McCulloughs. Bebe then files a suit against the state for custody of her daughter, leading to a scandal and media circus that rocks Shaker Heights and forces each character, in their own way, to reckon with big questions about family, race, care, and “who gets to parent.” Bebe ultimately loses her case, but takes her daughter, May Ling, from the McCulloughs’ house and leaves for China. Bebe’s actions connect directly to the

book’s larger themes of identity, heritage, and assimilation, as well as motherhood, altruism, and disruption of social and societal order.

Mirabelle McCullough / May Ling Chow – Left at an East Cleveland **fire** station as an infant, May Ling Chow becomes the center of a complex, emotional legal case surrounding the legality—and morality—of her transracial adoption by a white family, the McCulloughs, who live in Shaker Heights and who are good friends of the Richardson family. The McCulloughs rename May Ling “Mirabelle,” which means “wonderful beauty.” At the conclusion of the case, Mirabelle is placed in the custody of the McCulloughs, with the recommendation that her adoption be expedited. However, soon thereafter, Bebe Chow steals Mirabelle from the McCulloughs’ home in the middle of the night and returns with her to China.

Linda and Mark McCullough – May Ling Chow’s adoptive parents, who have longed for a child for years. They rename May Ling “Mirabelle” and welcome her lovingly into their home—but before the adoption can go through, they are blindsided by Bebe Chow’s case for custody of her daughter. The McCulloughs, though loving parents and kind individuals, are hopelessly misguided and quite tone-deaf when it comes to raising their daughter with a knowledge of her cultural heritage. In order to appease the media and dodge questions of thoughtlessly assimilating their child, they buy Asian wall art and a stuffed panda for May Ling to play with. Though they eventually win the case, May Ling is taken from them by Bebe Chow, who returns to China with her child, effectively going off the grid and making a search impossible. At the end of the novel, they apply to adopt a baby from China, and take comfort in the fact that “coming from China, the odds of the baby’s family trying to regain custody are almost nil.”

Mr. Yang – The tenant in the downstairs apartment of the Richardsons’ rental house—the first tenant Mrs. Richardson had ever taken on. Mr. Yang is an immigrant from Hong Kong, and he works as a school bus driver and a handyman. He is, according to Mrs. Richardson, “exactly the kind of tenant she want[s]: a kind person to whom she could do a kind turn, and who would appreciate her kindness.”

Brian – Lexie’s boyfriend, also a high school senior. He has his heart set on Princeton; his parents, who he has nicknamed “Cliff and Clair” due to their “Cosbyish vibe,” met at Princeton as undergraduates. Lexie and Brian have sex for the first time on Halloween, and, after that, often sneak off to sleep together. When Lexie becomes pregnant, she fantasizes aloud to Brian about her dreams of having a baby with him, but Brian shuts her down, telling her she’s “crazy” and that he does not want to be “that guy—another black kid [who] knocked up a girl before he even graduated.”

Mrs. Peters – The orchestra teacher at the Richardson’s school. Her alcoholism and the hangovers with which she shows up to

class are an open secret, and she is cruel to several of her students, most pointedly Deja Johnson. Izzy, with the help of her siblings, pulls a massive prank which results in teachers throughout the school being locked out of their classrooms as well as the faculty bathrooms and lounge; Mrs. Peters, unable to access a bathroom but having spent the morning drinking coffee in an attempt to cure her hangover, urinates all over the floor of one of the student bathrooms, becoming the subject of the whole school's ridicule.

Pauline Hawthorne – A famous photographer whose photographs “had been some of the most sought after” of the 1970s, she was Mia’s instructor in college and, eventually, her mentor and closest confidante in New York City. She and her partner Mal invited Mia to weekly dinners at their loft, which Mia began to see as a utopia where “everything [is] worth looking at more closely.” Pauline fell ill with brain cancer shortly after Pearl’s birth, and died within weeks. She left in Mia’s possession a series of **photographs** she’d taken of Pearl and Mia during their final visit, with a note that explains that Anita, the gallerist who sells her work, would sell the photos for Mia to assist with her finances, and would take Mia on as a client, too, whenever she felt ready. Pauline’s continued influence on Mia as a friend and an artist inspires Mia “with each shutter click.”

Joseph and Madeleine Ryan – During Mia’s time as an art student in New York City, Joseph Ryan, a wealthy Manhattan lawyer, spotted a young Mia on the subway and was struck by her resemblance to his wife. He and his wife Madeleine offered Mia ten thousand dollars to serve as a surrogate for them—they’d been unable to conceive a child for many years. Mia, desperate for money to pay her art school tuition, accepted their offer, became pregnant, and was soon moved into a private studio apartment and lavished with gifts and attention. After her brother’s death, Mia wrote the Ryans a note telling them she’d lost the baby, left nine hundred dollars to pay them back for all of her medical appointments, and ran away in the night to San Francisco, where she soon thereafter gave birth to Pearl.

Mr. and Mrs. Wright – Mia’s parents, who shunned Mia after learning of her pregnancy, unable to believe that she would “sell [her] own child.” They have been estranged from her ever since her brother Warren’s funeral, which they asked her not to attend for fear of their friends and family “getting the wrong idea.”

Warren Wright – Mia’s younger brother, a promising athlete who died at the age of 17 in a tragic car accident. Mia and Warren had been very close and had shared a deep friendship until she asked him to keep the secret of her pregnancy from their parents—the two were still not speaking at the time of Warren’s death.

Ed Lim – A local lawyer who offers to represent Bebe Chow pro

bono in her custody case against the state. Ed helps Bebe to file paperwork that grants her visitation rights with May Ling, and attempts to clinch the case in Bebe’s favor by revealing, through his line of questioning, the McCulloughs’ insensitivity to racist tropes about Chinese culture and their resulting inability to raise her in a way that connects her to her “birth culture” in any meaningful way.

Elizabeth Manwill – An old college friend of Mrs. Richardson’s and the head of a medical clinic on Shaker Heights’s East Side—the only clinic that provides abortions. Once mousy, “timid,” and an “easy target for mockery,” Mrs. Richardson took Elizabeth under her wing during their years as roommates and “transformed” her into a confident beauty.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Serena Wong – Lexie’s best friend since the sixth grade. The two girls seem to be on opposite sides of the debate over May Ling Chow, and, perhaps as a result of this tension, Pearl slowly replaces Serena as Lexie’s closest confidante.

Stacie Perry – One of the Richardsons’ classmates, notorious for her “legend[ary]” house parties. Lexie, Trip, and Pearl, as well as Brian and Serena, attend a costume party at Stacie’s house on Halloween.

Anita Rees – A gallery owner in New York City who once represented Pauline Hawthorne, and now sometimes sells Mia’s work.

Deja Johnson – Izzy Richardson’s classmate who is bullied mercilessly by their orchestra teacher, Mrs. Peters.

Tim Michaels – Trip’s friend, who allows Trip to use his parents’ basement as a meeting place for his trysts with girls. Trip eventually brings Pearl there as they conduct a hidden relationship.

Mal – Pauline’s partner.



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.



ORDER VS. DISRUPTION

Shaker Heights, Ohio, the real town in which *Little Fires Everywhere* takes place, was one of the very first planned communities in the United States. When the plans for its development were created in the early 1900s, they were laid out with a motto in mind: “Most communities just happen; the best are planned.” Planning

completely rules the world of *Little Fires Everywhere*, since order, as Celeste Ng describes it, allows one to “avoid the unseemly, the unpleasant, and the disastrous.” Though Ng’s narration delivers this statement in a tongue-in-cheek manner, many of the characters in *Little Fires Everywhere* sincerely do believe it, clinging to an ideal of regulation and discipline that ultimately fails them. Over the course of the novel, Ng shows that every person, family, and community must sometimes confront disorder in life, and this fact makes the *need* for order a liability rather than a strength. The relationship between order and chaos, then, is one of give and take, and the characters who achieve order in every aspect of their lives are no happier than the characters whose lives are in disarray. Additionally, as the novel progresses, characters who seemed to have it all together begin to fall apart, and those who’d started out in shambles make clear progress towards plans, order, and rule-making.

Shaker Heights is a largely affluent community, and the area is governed by rules that attempt to give every aspect of “Shaker,” as the residents call it, the appearance of wealth, security, and order. Trash cans are not permitted to be left at the curb; garages must be built at the back of houses so as not to interrupt the landscape and the pristine look of each street; the grass on any Shaker Heights lawn must be mowed before it reaches six inches in height. Mrs. Richardson is the character who most embodies this micro-managerial commitment to order and regulation. She was born and raised in Shaker, she has been told all her life that there is tremendous value in following rules and sticking to the status quo, and she describes her life as following a pre-determined pattern. Her family, too, is immersed in her rules and values and subject to her attempts at total control. In addition to working to control her own children, Mrs. Richardson attempts control Pearl, Mia, Mia’s parents, her friend Elizabeth (who works at the women’s clinic), and her tenants—current and former—at the rental house she and her husband own. Mrs. Richardson takes great pleasure in controlling who gets to rent the space and how they occupy it, and she loves to check in on her tenants to ensure that they are following the rules of the building and the community. Yet as Mrs. Richardson loses her ability to control the people around her and the circumstances of her life, her children’s lives, and the lives of her friends the McCulloughs, she slips further and further into personal disarray, culminating in a massive fight with Mia—a fight during which Mia accuses Mrs. Richardson of taking out her misery over having spent her life obsessed with plans, order, and regulations on everyone around her. When Izzy runs away at the novel’s end, Mrs. Richardson experiences only the second loss of control she’s ever had—the first being Izzy’s premature birth. Mrs. Richardson finally realizes that her allegiance to order has ultimately failed both her and her children, and left all their lives in disarray. Her plan to search for Izzy “for as long as it takes” to find her, then, is both an attempt to make up for the pain she has caused and, true to her

unchangeable nature, a last-ditch attempt to assert her control over an uncontrollable situation and return her life—and her family’s lives—to the normal, orderly way they once were.

Despite having grown up in an orderly community and within a strict family, the Richardson children—inadvertently or deliberately—invite disorder into their lives, embodying a blend of the order with which they grew up and the rule-breaking to which they’re drawn. Lexie, who takes after her mother, is the most orderly of the children; she plans to go to Yale and dreams of marrying her Princeton-bound boyfriend. She subverts the status quo, though, when she accidentally becomes pregnant, suggesting that even an earnest commitment to order does not keep disorder at bay. While Lexie seeks to restore order by getting an abortion, her brother Trip justifies his womanizing through heavily regulating his “bad” behavior. When he and Pearl begin sleeping together, Trip arranges their meetings on a careful schedule to avoid being caught. Though humorous, his allegiance to order—even when breaking the rules—paints order and regulation as psychological defenses, rather than meaningful bulwarks against disorder. While Lexie and Trip try to appear orderly, their sister Izzy openly invites disorder, since she finds the regulations of her family and community to be harmful and hypocritical. Her rebellion ranges from the purely symbolic (refusing to participate in the dance recital) to the outright destructive, when she sets the house on **fire** after discovering her family’s many slights against Mia and Pearl. This complex mingling of order and disorder is also embodied in the siblings’ daily routine of watching the **Jerry Springer Show** together. They are fascinated by the disruption of order and authority that they see on the show, which demonstrates that—despite (or perhaps because of) their upbringings—they are attracted to chaos.

While the Richardson children flirt with disorder, the Warren family—whose life has always been chaotic and nomadic—aspires to the orderly life of Shaker Heights. After so many years of living a transient lifestyle, Mia and Pearl—a “struggling artist” and her free-spirited daughter—adjust their behavior to fit in with the Shaker Heights norms in hopes of being accepted into the community. For Pearl, who longs to fit in somewhere, the clear rules and norms of Shaker Heights seem to offer her a roadmap to the life she wants, and through her following of the Richardsons’ “rules” and her adoption of some of their behaviors, she finds herself on what she believes is the road to earning their total acceptance. Mia is more reluctant to embed herself in the community, and into the Richardson family, but it is she who is perhaps the most devastated when her and Pearl’s life in Shaker is disrupted and the two of them are ostracized and expelled by Mrs. Richardson for not following the “rules.” After having taken two jobs in order to support her and her daughter’s lifestyle and assure that they’re seen as a part of the community, Mia is crushed to have it all brought down by Mrs. Richardson—the one person

who had most symbolized, to both Mia and her daughter, the possibility of achieving control over one's circumstances and deriving happiness from order.

Despite the fact that Mia and Pearl largely succeed, for a while at least, in integrating into the community, they maintain their eccentricities and values, which influence the values and behavior of other community members. Mia's influence is central to Bebe Chow's decision to fight the McCullough family for custody of her daughter. Bebe's aggressive and impassioned disruption of the McCulloughs' adoption process then shakes the general sense of calm in Shaker Heights, forcing the community to confront new questions about transracial adoption, what makes a parent, and whether the community is really as stable and orderly as it seems to be. The media circus that overtakes Shaker Heights at the height of Bebe's custody battle against the state—and, by proxy, the McCulloughs—disrupts the public's view of both parties at alternating turns. Mia also influences Izzy Richardson's decision to burn down the Richardson family's house. Izzy, who is inspired by Mia's comfort with disorder and endorsement of pranks, burns down the house after taking Mia's metaphor about starting her life over like soil after a prairie fire literally.

At the novel's end, some characters have become casualties of the need for order and found themselves plunged into chaos, such as the McCulloughs and Mrs. Richardson; while others, such as Izzy and Bebe, have cemented their status as disruptors. Others still, such as Lexie, Pearl, and Mia, have found a way to live with the give-and-take nature of order and disruption, and have paved a path for themselves that, while not orderly by Shaker Heights standards, nonetheless makes sense for them and allows them to remain in control of their lives and circumstances.



ALTRUISM AND MANIPULATION

In a novel where there are no real villains or antagonists, almost all of the malevolence—intentional or accidental—comes

from failed or false altruism, and the manipulative instincts behind it. Altruism, or concern for and devotion to the welfare of others, is supposedly at the heart of many of the actions that the characters in *Little Fires Everywhere* carry out. Mrs. Richardson gives her new tenant, Mia Warren, a job as a housekeeper in her home, effectively cancelling out Mia's cost of rent; Izzy pulls a massive school prank in order to get justice for a classmate who's being bullied by their teacher; Lexie, overwhelmed by her many glamorous possessions, begins giving them away to Mia's daughter Pearl as tokens of friendship and goodwill; and Mia alerts her coworker Bebe Chow to the fact that her daughter, whom she abandoned, is being adopted by a local family, the McCulloughs, and urges her to take action to regain custody of the child. The motivations behind all the altruistic action at work throughout the book are

not always as pure as they might seem, however. Though some characters do truly believe that they are doing good for those around them, those characters also cause distress or harm through their "altruistic" acts. Meanwhile other characters are purposefully manipulative, hoping that their actions, under the guise of altruism, will serve themselves first and foremost. To Ng, the flip side of altruism is always manipulation, and she uses her characters to argue that there is no such thing as doing a good deed entirely unselfishly.

Lexie Richardson's actions toward Pearl, whom she sees as shy, sweet, and cute, start off as altruism bolstered by her desire to feel "the fuzzy internal glow of teenage generosity." When she realizes the depths of Pearl's fascination with her and her family, however, Lexie becomes a manipulator. Lexie manipulates Pearl into writing her college application essay for her—Lexie has, at this point in the novel, showered her new friend Pearl with attention, affection, and hand-me-downs, and Pearl, when Lexie asks her for the essay, feels both indebted and eager to help Lexie in order to secure more affection, more attention, and more of Lexie's possessions (though she's not motivated by greed; Pearl simply wants to immerse herself in the physical things that make up the Richardsons' world). Lexie later uses Pearl's name at a women's clinic in order to hide the fact of her own abortion, with devastating consequences for Pearl and for her own family, too—she manipulates Pearl's circumstances with no regard for what the outcome might be (and entirely denying Pearl agency and dignity in the matter), finally revealing the selfishness, narcissism, and lack of true empathy and altruism beneath all Lexie's actions thus far.

Mrs. Richardson, after noting how much time Pearl spends with the Richardson children and how difficult it is for Mia to make ends meet, offers Mia a job in her own home as a cleaner and a cook. Mia accepts the job gratefully, excited for a glimpse into her daughter's life as it starts to diverge from her own. Though Mia finds fulfillment and happiness in the job to begin with, and is able to observe both her daughter and the Richardsons' daily lives from a close distance, eventually Mrs. Richardson's condescension and misguided attempts to better Mia and Pearl's lives (combined with her voracious need to uncover the secrets of Mia's past), result in a devastating schism between the two families. Mrs. Richardson describes her desire to have as a tenant "a kind person to whom she could do a kind turn, and who would appreciate her kindness." This quotation reveals several things: first, Mrs. Richardson's belief that her actions are kind and altruistic; second, the narrative judgment that her altruism is connected to the desire to manipulate the feelings of others; and third, that Mrs. Richardson's designs on both altruism and the manipulation behind it are bound up in her need for order, control, and the regulation of the world around her. Though Mrs. Richardson tells herself she is doing a good deed by offering Mia employment, a part of her perhaps knows—and the narrative is certainly aware—that it is not a

purely altruistic act in the least.

In attempting to help her coworker, Bebe Chow, Mia unintentionally throws the McCulloughs' docile family life into disarray by informing Bebe of the fact that they are in the final stages of adopting her child. At the point in the novel at which Mia begins to help and champion Bebe—apparently altruistically, motivated by her belief that “a mother has a right to raise her own child”—the audience is unaware of a crucial bit of information about Mia: the fact that she herself gave birth to Pearl after agreeing to act as a surrogate for a wealthy family, only to find herself unable to surrender the baby and on the run from that family just months before Pearl was due. Once this information is revealed, however, it becomes clear that not even Mia's deeds are motivated by pure unselfishness—she is, in a way, attempting to use Bebe to confirm her own choices. Mrs. Richardson later accuses Mia of having intervened in the Chow/McCullough affair to help herself “sleep at night,” revealing that Mia's motivations are more rooted in selfishness and the desire to manipulate a cause to obtain a certain effect than Ng originally led her audience to believe.

In the end, the many manipulations throughout *Little Fires Everywhere* range from the maliciously cunning to the transparently calculating to attempts at true benevolence. The hitch with altruism, Ng argues, is that no one can know what is truly best for another person—and attempts to manipulate another's feelings or circumstances under the guise of helpfulness often result in more difficulty for all involved.



MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS

Celeste Ng's fascination with the complicated nature of mother-daughter relationships is evident throughout *Little Fires Everywhere*. The fathers of

the novel are often on the fringes of the action, while mothers and their daughters are brought to the forefront. The mothers in this novel are shown to need their daughters just as much as the daughters need them—and more often than not, even moreso. Overall Ng makes the rather cynical argument that most relationships between mothers and daughters are rooted in longing, dissatisfaction, and an inability to understand one another. Through the morally grey and emotionally intense custody battle between Bebe Chow and Linda McCullough, and through the strained relationships between Mia and Pearl and Mrs. Richardson, Lexie, and Izzy, Ng demonstrates the ever-present longing of daughters—or, in May Ling's case, the unknown and unknowable needs of daughters—for something other than what their mothers have given them, no matter the amount of wealth, love, or care present in the relationship.

Bebe was unable to be a good parent to her daughter May Ling when she was first born, and, desperate for her baby's survival, she left her in the care of the state. After the McCulloughs have carefully and lovingly parented “Mirabelle” for nearly a year, Bebe appears in their lives, seeking custody of her daughter on

the grounds that not only has she attained stability over the course of the past year, but she is the child's true mother, and the only person who can raise her daughter “within her own culture.” As the trial unfolds, Ng allows readers a glimpse of the arguments made on both sides. May Ling, when she was found, was undernourished—but Bebe had been unable to produce breast milk, and could not afford formula. Neighbors heard the baby crying, and Bebe cried too, likely in the throes of undiagnosed postpartum depression and unable to seek psychological treatment, a victim of a healthcare system which does not make immigrants or the poor a priority. Bebe, even emotionally stable and working a restaurant job, cannot reasonably hope to provide May Ling with the comforts that the McCulloughs can—but “how [can] a mother's love [be] weigh[ed] against the cost of raising a child?” Though Mrs. McCullough dotes on May Ling and clearly loves her, Bebe's representation argues that May Ling already *has* a mother.

Through these arguments, Ng raises important questions of “what ma[kes] someone a mother.” Though there is perhaps no morally right answer, the narrative creates a solution: Ng draws on a reversal of the precedent set in a real-life, high-profile adoption custody case from the 1990s (that of “Baby Jessica”), in which the adopted child was returned to her birth parents. Though in *Little Fires Everywhere* the state sides with the McCulloughs, Ng gives the final victory to Bebe, who steals her daughter and absconds with her to China in the dead of night. With this Ng introduces a final blow of total anarchy into the carefully regulated world of Shaker Heights and, in doing so alongside revealing Mia's “theft” of Pearl from the Ryans (and with the knowledge of the outcome of the real-life case which inspired the fictionalized one), makes the narrative argument that perhaps it is biology, first and foremost, that gives someone the “right” to motherhood.

The complicated moral questions raised by this plot point—tied in with issues of race, class, social stigma, and the state's imperfect or even harmful attempts at regulating custody—have no clear answers in the real world. But by asking them, Ng interlocks the theme of motherhood and daughterhood with the novel's companion themes of disruption, manipulation, and identity, ultimately suggesting that the only way to approach such questions is to do so holistically, carefully, and with great awareness of all the wonder and woe that goes into loving another person.

Ng's mother figures are completely rooted in their identities as mothers, as demonstrated by the difficult struggle between Bebe Chow and Linda McCullough. Another character whose identity as a person is inextricable from her duties as a mother is Mrs. Richardson. As the undisputed matriarch of her family, she must navigate throughout the novel how best to relate to her two very different daughters—who, despite Mrs. Richardson's best efforts, shirk at almost every turn the values with which they've been raised and the things their mother has

given them. Lexie, the eldest, is Mrs. Richardson's golden girl, so to speak, at the start of the novel. Lexie is a hard worker and values the role of order in her life and community. Though Lexie eventually proves herself to be more tempestuous than she first appears to be—and winds up needing an abortion after repeatedly having unprotected sex with her boyfriend, Brian—Mrs. Richardson doesn't believe that Lexie could possibly behave in any way other than the status quo. Izzy, on the other hand, has been a "problem" for Mrs. Richardson from birth. Born many weeks premature and fighting for her life from the start, Izzy has always been the object of Mrs. Richardson's most pointed concerns and criticisms. As a result, the narrator points out, Izzy has grown up struggling against her mother's overprotective tendencies, and lashing out and seeking shelter elsewhere as a result. As Mrs. Richardson struggles for more and more control over her youngest daughter, Izzy squirms away from her grasp harder and harder, ultimately seeking refuge in a friendship with Mia and abandoning her family and her comfortable life in Shaker Heights in order to pursue the recognition and acceptance that Mia offers her. This dynamic feeds into Ng's argument that children—daughters, especially—will always reject what their mothers have taught them.

Ng deepens this argument through the relationship between Pearl and the stringent, clean-cut Mrs. Richardson. Because Mia and Pearl are so often moving from place to place, their relationship feels slightly transient—Pearl longs for a stable homestead and, in a way, for the control that Mrs. Richardson exerts over her children's lives. As a result, Pearl winds up spending most of her time at the Richardsons' house, entangling herself in friendships as well as relationships that eventually tumble over into the emotional (with Moody) and romantic (with Trip). Pearl fantasizes about having a mother like Mrs. Richardson, and, at the end of the novel when Mia tells Pearl that it is time to leave Shaker Heights, thinks that "if only" she could get to the Richardson house, Mrs. Richardson would take her in as her own.



IDENTITY: HERITAGE, ASSIMILATION, AND TRANSIENCE

Little Fires Everywhere is a book that makes deep and difficult inquiries into what, exactly, makes up a person's identity. Throughout the novel, Ng again and again makes the argument that identity is not easily sought or discovered. Her characters struggle to identify themselves internally from one another through the places they were born and raised, the people who raised them and loved them from afar, the families they were given or chose, and the things they were taught as children in opposition to the hard lessons they learned as adults. The characters suffer as they attempt to make—or discard—their identities, and through their sufferings Ng argues that identity is not something so easily pinned down,

and that the search for an authentic or permanent identity often leads to frustration and pain.

For Mia Warren, the search for identity is bound up in the transience of her life. Though the narrative does not immediately make the reason for her transient nature clear, it presents her and Pearl's way of living as alternately fun and bohemian, or lonely and rootless. Mia is estranged from her family, and it is truly her and Pearl against the world. Pearl learns to find refuge in her mother and in their unique, special relationship as they move from place to place, though deep down she truly longs for friends her own age and for a place she can feel at home in and a part of. She also yearns to know her true heritage, but any time she asks Mia about her parentage, her past, or the reason for their nomadic lifestyle, Mia dodges her questions. Mia wants to erase her identity, and has built her life—and her daughter's life—around escaping her past, who she was, and the people she once knew who made her into who she is. Though strong in her personal identity as an artist, Mia has adopted an artist's transient lifestyle largely in part because she hopes to lose herself within the vast landscape of America, and to hide from anyone who might still be pursuing her on behalf of the Ryans, the family whose baby she carried and ultimately refused to surrender. Mia's identity has been built on so much secrecy that her search for privacy and her constant, repetitive erasure of her past has, in a way, become her identity itself.

Pearl, unable to get any answers regarding the roots of her mother's identity or her family's identity—and thus, by proxy, her own identity—observes and longs for the Richardsons' comfort in their identities as she grows closer to them, both as individuals and as a family. They have deep roots in Shaker Heights, and the familial identity their ancestors built has influenced the present identities of their whole clan. Pearl, a shy teenager often uncertain of herself, wants that kind of built-in identity as well, and her mother's inability—or unwillingness—to give it to her pushes her toward attempting to assimilate herself into the Richardson family, dreaming of the day they accept her as one of their own.

The questions of assimilation raised subtly through Pearl's desire to join the Richardson clan are brought more forcefully to the forefront of the narrative as Bebe Chow's case against the state for custody of her daughter, May Ling, begins to intensify. Ed Lim, Bebe's lawyer, intensely questions Mrs. McCullough as to her ability to keep May Ling—or Mirabelle—"connected" to her Chinese identity. When Mrs. McCullough states that she takes Mirabelle out to eat at Chinese restaurants and bought her a panda rather than a brown bear for her first birthday, her statements come across as completely tone-deaf and rather offensive, if well-intentioned. Though Mrs. McCullough loves Mirabelle—"[no one] has any doubts about that," Ed Lim says—she is woefully unprepared to sensitively or meaningfully raise her adoptive

daughter within Chinese culture. Though Ed Lim's arguments are valid, and reveal to both Ng's audience and characters the nuance and difficulty of transracial adoption and the potential of assimilation to completely erase cultural identity, the McCulloughs are awarded custody of May Ling. They proceed with the adoption—and with the change of May Ling's name to Mirabelle—until Bebe Chow, inspired by Mia's comforting but confusing advice to “always” remember that she is May Ling's true mother, steals the child right out of her crib and books a flight back to China, where she herself will raise her child in her own country and her own culture. All of the fighting over May Ling's identity throws the child's emotional well-being into the background of the case. One of the most complicated and hotly debated issues throughout the novel, Ng's tug-of-war between Bebe Chow and the McCulloughs seems to suggest that though assimilation should not be the “cost” of a child's being raised in capable, loving hands, the attempt to predict, litigate, or pin down identity itself is not the right course of action, either.

Ng's characters struggle to create identities for themselves without ever realizing that identity is inextricably linked not just to heritage alone, transience alone, or assimilation alone, but an ever-changing combination of the three. The search for identity plagues many of the novel's main characters, and it's only when they relax into the identities that their life experiences have formed for them that they can begin to find peace with their own identities, and the identities of those around them.



SYMBOLS

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



FIRE

“Sometimes, just when you think everything's gone, you find a way,” Mia Warren tells Izzy Richardson, referring to Bebe Chow's loss of her daughter, May Ling, to the custody of the McCulloughs. “Like after a prairie fire.” Fire—literally and figuratively—is omnipresent throughout the novel. It is in the book's title, and a mysterious fire is the plot's first major event, placed at the beginning of the first chapter and used as a framing device for the rest of the book as it delves into the months leading up to the blaze. Fire, again and again, serves as a metaphor for renewal and a symbol of the scorched physical and emotional landscape that the Richardsons, and the whole town of Shaker Heights, don't yet know they're living on.

Tied inextricably into themes of order and disruption, fire symbolizes both loss and the potential for beginning anew. May Ling Chow—adopted by the McCullough family and renamed

Mirabelle—is abandoned by her birth mother, Bebe Chow, at a fire station. When Izzy Richardson, fascinated by Mia Warren's art and lifestyle, begs to become her **photography** assistant, Mia describes feeling as if “something inside Izzy [has] reached out to something in her and caught fire.” Whenever fire appears in the text, it denotes the arrival of a moment of renewal, as well as a character's encounter with a point of no return. The mystery around which the novel rotates is who set the fire that claims the Richardsons' house, and why. The fire is revealed to be the product one of those points of no return—a culmination of the messy interweaving of families and blurring of boundaries that develops between the Richardsons and the Warrens. Izzy Richardson, miserable over Pearl and Mia's sudden departure and the prospect of “going back to life as it had been before [they arrived,]” plots to burn down her own home. Mia's words of encouragement echo in her ear as she uses a can of gasoline from the garage to cover each room of the house in accelerant—“Sometimes,” Mia told her earlier in the narrative, “you need to scorch everything to the ground and start over. After the burning the soil is richer, and new things can grow.” Inspired by the prospect of renewal, angry at her family for driving the Warrens away, and desperate to regain the sense of acceptance she felt with Mia, Izzy starts a series of “little fires everywhere” throughout her own home, reducing the grand structure to a burnt-out hull before running away, perhaps for good.



MIA'S PHOTOGRAPHS

Mia Warren has, since childhood, been a devoted and talented photographer. Her skills brought her to New York City, where she worked closely with Pauline Hawthorne, a famous photographer who recognized in Mia the potential for great talent and true art. New York was also where, desperate to be able to afford tuition in order to continue her studies, Mia agreed to serve as a surrogate mother for a wealthy couple, the Ryans, who'd struggled to conceive for years. After changing her mind about giving up the baby she'd carried for nearly nine months, Mia fled in the night, changed her last name, and began her life of transience, bohemian art-making, and hiding from anyone who might be able to piece together her true identity.

Mia's photographs are not simply prints. Mia manually edits the photographs she takes, often cutting out sections, pasting on pieces of paper or other small objects which accentuate the subject or cast them in a different light. Mrs. Richardson, on an early visit to check in on Mia and Pearl to see what they've done with the rental space, notes a print of a dancer modified to “ma[ke] her resemble an enormous spider.” Mia's vision as a photographer shows not simply what exists through the lens, but also what the lens can't reflect.

The photographs, too, represent Mia's livelihood—as do the

pictures that Pauline took of Mia and Pearl and then, after her death, left to Mia, in order to help Mia and Pearl get on their feet and hopefully stay there. With the help of gallerist Anita Rees, Mia allowed Pauline's pictures to be sold, and then was the recipient of the profit; when Mia was ready, Anita began selling Mia's own work. Mia takes odd jobs everywhere she goes, but the sale of a photograph, and the often large sum of money she receives for that sale, represents accomplishment and the hope for success and stability for both Mia and Pearl.

As a parting gift of sorts—or, perhaps, as a kind of curse—Mia, when she and Pearl depart Shaker Heights at the novel's end, leaves behind emotionally revealing photographs she's taken over the course of the past several months, unbeknownst to the Richardsons, of each one of them. They are “half portraits, half wishes, caught on paper,” and the Richardsons describe looking at the photographs of themselves as “like catching a glimpse of your own naked body in a mirror.” The photographs offer the Richardsons self-reflection, catharsis, and judgement. Lexie's features a piece of her discharge slip from the clinic; Moody's, the wrinkled pages of a notebook he gave to Pearl as a gift, which she never used. Mrs. Richardson—a journalist—finds that her photograph depicts “a paper cutout of a birdcage, made of newsprint [cut from] one of her own articles.” Mia, an outsider, was able to wind herself into the Richardsons' lives, and the photographs she's created symbolize her ability to see each member of the family more clearly than any one of them can see each other. She offers them the photographs as both a benediction and an indictment as her final act before leaving Shaker Heights forever.



THE JERRY SPRINGER SHOW

Almost every afternoon after school, the Richardson children—except for Izzy, whose siblings taunt her by telling her she'll soon be on the show herself—gather on their family's giant, plush sectional sofa to watch *The Jerry Springer Show* together. Choosing to sit together and watch the show is “one of the few times [the children] agree on anything.” The Richardsons' lives are ruled by strict rules and careful regulations, and the iconic television program—its popularity at a fever pitch in the late 1990s, the time during which the novel unfolds—provides the Richardson brood with a heady glimpse into chaos, scandal, and the lurid lives of others, far from Shaker Heights. “Thank god we live in Shaker,” Lexie says one afternoon while Pearl has joined the Richardsons to watch an episode of the show centered around race; “No one sees race here.” The children then begin to discuss race amongst themselves over the commercial break, but cut the conversation short once the program returns. The show, then, symbolizes both the desire to peer into the lives of others, and the fear of finding what's actually there. The Richardsons are insulated from the world by their wealth and privilege, and by the careful order that governs Shaker

Heights—they can *choose* not to discuss race, or not to notice familial or interpersonal chaos, but fail to see their privilege in being able to do so.





QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Books edition of *Little Fires Everywhere* published in 2017.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☛☛ “The firemen said there were little fires everywhere,” Lexie said. “Multiple points of origin. Possible use of accelerant. Not an accident.”

Related Characters: Lexie Richardson (speaker), Izzy Richardson

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

The novel opens with a raging fire which decimates the Richardson family's home. Each member of the family except for Moody, the youngest boy, believes that Izzy—who has fled the scene and, perhaps, the town—is to blame. While the Richardson siblings bicker and muse amongst themselves as to the fire's origin, the eldest child, Lexie, explains that the fire looked purposeful, and designed to level the house—and, by proxy, the entire Richardson family. Immediately setting up some of the novel's central themes—disruption of order and the complicated, often explosive nature of mother-daughter relationships—this quote gives the novel its title and foreshadows the “little fires” that will consume Shaker Heights as the rest of the novel unfolds. The little fires are more than the flames that consumed the Richardson household—the fires are the disruptions, small and large, that will change the Shaker Heights community's structure just as the Richardsons' house fire changes the structure of their home, the structure of their relationships, and the structure of their futures.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☛☛ Mr. Yang was exactly the kind of tenant Mrs. Richardson wanted: a kind person to whom she could do a kind turn, and who would appreciate her kindness.

Related Characters: Mrs. Richardson / Elena (speaker), Mr. Yang

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Richardson is one of the novel's main characters—though she is neither protagonist nor antagonist, she is a central figure in the action of the book and is responsible for both positive and negative developments within the narrative. This quotation centers her motivations and her potential for both help and harm. The tenant in her rental house, Mr. Yang, is someone to whom she can “do a kind turn”—someone she can manipulate through altruism, and fold into the order of her life—and who will provide her with the affirmation she needs through being suitably thankful for her “kindness.” Her identity as a person is centered around the combined products of altruism and rule-making, and though Mrs. Richardson often claims kindness, truth-seeking, or justice as her main motivator, the seed of all her endeavors is the desire to control the situations and people around her. The community of Shaker Heights, so rooted in creating and maintaining order as well as doling out kindnesses, genuine or not, has formed Mrs. Richardson since her childhood. She is the human embodiment of all that is problematic about Shaker Heights, and all that will make living there difficult for Mia and Pearl Warren—Mrs. Richardson's newest tenants, and the newest recipients of her misguided “kind turn[s]” and the many strings attached to them.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☝☝ This was how Moody made a decision he would question for the rest of his life. Until now he had said nothing about Pearl or her mother to his family, guarding their friendship like a dragon guards treasure: silently, greedily. Deep down he had the feeling that somehow it would change everything. If he had kept her to himself, perhaps the future might have been quite different. All he had to offer her, he felt, was what his family had to offer, his family itself, and it was this that led him to say, one afternoon in July, “Come over. You can meet my family.”

Related Characters: Moody Richardson (speaker), Pearl Warren

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 32-33

Explanation and Analysis

Ng's tendency to situate her characters within a narrative that looks forward toward the future allows her audience to understand the gravity of several key moments—most notably here, the crucial decision Moody makes to bring Pearl into the fold of his home and his family. Narrative tools such as this one disrupt the flow of the text in order to highlight a disruptive moment in the life of a character, weighting the choice with the character's realization of what could have been versus what has come to pass. The understanding that Moody will continue to look back on this moment for years, from wherever he is in the future, creates tension, anticipation, and the understanding that a crucial point in the text has been reached. Moody's greediness where his relationship with Pearl is concerned is, in this moment, outweighed by his desire to give her something that will make her reciprocate the feverish attachment he feels to her. Young and lacking confidence in his own identity, Moody sees the answer to the fear of Pearl becoming bored with him as a simple one: he will bring her to his home, introduce her to his family, and let them “dazzle” her—which they do. Pearl's introduction to the Richardson family, however, sets in motion a chain of painful events and kicks off a series of tumultuous relationships and friendships that Moody never could have foreseen—though his future self, looking back on this moment, will be unable to see his past through unclouded eyes.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ “Mom,” [Pearl] began, then found she could not repeat Lexie's blunt words. Instead she asked the question that ran below all the other questions like a deep underground river. “Was I wanted?”

...Mia said nothing for such a long time that Pearl wasn't sure if she'd heard. After a long pause, Mia turned around, and to Pearl's amazement, her mother's eyes were wet. “Were you wanted?” Mia said. “Oh, yes. You were wanted. Very, very much.” She walked rapidly out of the room without looking at her daughter again.

Related Characters: Mia Warren, Pearl Warren (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 44-45

Explanation and Analysis

Though Ng's audience is not yet aware of Mia's shadowed past, and of the difficult choices she made to ensure that

Pearl belonged to her, the weight of this mother-daughter moment nonetheless reveals Mia's rootedness in her role and identity as a mother and her deep devotion to her child. Pearl's inquisitiveness as to her own identity, and as to where she came from, has until this point been met with deflection or apparent disinterest from Mia. Now, though, Mia realizes that her daughter's questions will soon need answers; as a mother, it's her job to help steer her daughter in the direction of her true identity, and of who she'll grow to be. Though Mia has thus far coasted along without answering Pearl's many questions, Pearl's latest inquiry has disrupted the illusion that her roots won't tie into her identity. Mia's shame at having made her daughter question whether or not she was wanted is not the tipping point for revealing the truth of her past, but it foreshadows the avalanche of questions—not all necessarily all from Pearl—still to come.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☝☝ “Listen to this dumbass question,” [Lexie] groaned, fishing the application from her bag. “Rewrite a famous story from a different perspective. For example, retell *The Wizard of Oz* from the point of view of the Wicked Witch.”

“How about a fairy tale,” Moody suggested. “‘Cinderella’ from the point of view of the stepsisters.”

“‘Little Red Riding Hood’ as told by the wolf,” Pearl suggested.

“Or ‘Rumpelstiltskin,’” Lexie mused. “That miller’s daughter cheated him. He did all that spinning for her and she said she’d give him her baby and then she reneged. Maybe she’s the villain here. She shouldn’t have agreed to give up her baby in the first place, if she didn’t want to.”

“Well,” Mia put in suddenly. “Maybe she didn’t know what she was giving up. Maybe once she saw the baby she changed her mind. Don’t be too quick to judge.”

Related Characters: Mia Warren, Pearl Warren, Moody Richardson, Lexie Richardson (speaker), Linda and Mark McCullough, Bebe Chow

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 54-55

Explanation and Analysis


Another moment of potent foreshadowing, this quote highlights the novel's themes of disruption of preconceived notions, the complicated questions of who ultimately has the “right” to motherhood, and the search for and the roots of identity and heritage. Lexie's assignment, which is, essentially, to shake up her normal patterns of thinking in

order to prove to a college admissions committee that she has empathy and a capacity for thinking outside the box, allows her to veer into asking a question that she does not have the tools to answer. Mia, however (but unbeknownst, at this point in the narrative, to the audience or any other character), has firsthand experience with the very real consequences of surrogacy, adoption, and motherhood, and warns Lexie that assigning the role of “villain” to someone whose only “crime” is being desperate to be a mother is not necessarily the right answer. The themes and questions surrounding the complex moral dilemma represented by the inversion of the Rumpelstiltskin tale will be repeated again when Bebe Chow seeks custody of her daughter, who she has “give[n] up” to the custody of the state and, by proxy, the McCulloughs.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ “You see now,” Moody said. “What they’re like.”

Related Characters: Moody Richardson (speaker), Trip Richardson, Lexie Richardson, Pearl Warren

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 64



Explanation and Analysis


Moody's complicated relationship to Pearl and to his own family is the motivation behind this jab. When Lexie and Trip abandon Pearl at a popular girl's Halloween party, she calls Moody to come get her. Moody arrives just minutes later, a little indignant but nonetheless eager to help Pearl out of a tough spot. Moody, who had been reluctant to introduce Pearl to his family in the first place, asks her now if she can see clearly “what they're like.” He means to ask her if she can see that they are selfish, thoughtless, flighty, and ultimately disloyal—Pearl, however, clouded by her fascination with Lexie and her infatuation with Trip, is still unable to understand that the Richardsons have been falsely altruistic, and even manipulative, toward her. Moody will, throughout the course of the novel, become less and less of a priority to Pearl as she becomes more deeply entangled with each of the Richardsons—he can sense his hold on his status as her favorite Richardson diminishing as she grows more and more attracted to his older brother and more and more entwined in her friendship with his older sister. Moody's attempt to help Pearl see his family for who they are is thus ultimately a selfish attempt to disrupt how “dazzle[d]” she is by them and reclaim her for himself, but it

is a futile one at this point in the narrative.

☛ [Mrs. Richardson] turned her attention to the largest print, which had been stuck up alone over the mantelpiece. It was a photograph of a woman, back to the camera, in mid-dance. The film caught her in blurred motion—arms everywhere, stretched high, to her sides, curved to her waist—a tangle of limbs that, Mrs. Richardson realized with a shock, made her resemble an enormous spider, surrounded by a haze of web. It perturbed and perplexed her, but she could not turn away.

Related Characters: Mrs. Richardson / Elena (speaker), Mia Warren

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

When Mrs. Richardson drops by the rental house on Winslow Road in order to check up on her newest tenants, she's hoping to find that they've settled into life in Shaker Heights nicely—meaning they're living an orderly existence defined by careful rule-following, and have stayed in the borders of what Mrs. Richardson thinks is “normal.” Though she's told herself that her visit to the rental house is an altruistic one, to check in and make sure there's nothing that Mia and Pearl want or need, the visit is ultimately a manipulative one in which Mrs. Richardson judges Mia and Pearl's existence, and attempts to change it. At the sight of Mia's doctored photograph of a dancer, Mrs. Richardson realizes that the way Mia sees the world—and interacts with it—is completely opposed to her way of moving through life. Though she is “perturbed and perplexed” she finds herself unable to “turn away;” in other words, she realizes her fascination with Mia's life, and experiences the early stages of her need to get to the bottom of it.

☛ Mia could see there was no point in protesting, that protesting, in fact, would only make things worse and lead to ill will. She had learned that when people were bent on doing something they believed was a good deed, it was usually impossible to dissuade them. Then she imagined herself safely installed in the Richardsons' kingdom, half obscured in the background, keeping watch over her daughter. Reasserting her presence in her daughter's life.

Related Characters: Mia Warren (speaker), Pearl Warren, Mrs. Richardson / Elena

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 70


Explanation and Analysis

Though Mia can see that Mrs. Richardson is attempting to control her and offer “charity” (but with strings attached) by offering her a job as a housekeeper—which Mrs. Richardson sees as an improvement upon Mia's other part-time job at a local Chinese restaurant, an example of manipulative efforts disguised as altruistic ones—Mia is actually excited by the offer, realizing that it will afford her the opportunity to observe her daughter in her new environment: the Richardsons' household. Mia has watched her daughter pick up gestures and phrases from the Richardson children, and discuss them as if their life were a TV show she's become obsessed with. Now Mia has the opportunity to attempt to exert her own kind of control, and impose her own kind of order, on her daughter, whom she fears is slipping from her grasp and drifting further and further from their relationship.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☛ “Well?” said Mia. “What are you going to do about it?” It was not a question Izzy had been asked before. Until now her life had been one of mute, futile fury. What was she going to do about it? The very idea that she *could* do something stunned her.

Related Characters: Izzy Richardson, Mia Warren (speaker), Deja Johnson, Mrs. Peters

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis



Izzy Richardson is one of the characters most representative of the theme of disruption, though it's her actions that herald disruption, not simply her presence, as in the case of Mia and Pearl. Izzy has been acting out in small ways throughout her childhood and early teens when Mia begins working in the Richardson household, and when Izzy confides in her about the injustices she sees at school, Mia prompts her toward further—and larger—action. Izzy's life of “mute fury” has been one lived, despite her small outbursts, well within the order established by her

community and by her mother. The idea that she can be more than just a minor disruptor, and can actually effect change, appeals to the both the rebellious and altruistic sides of her, the side that wants to do something not just to do it, but to make a difference. This moment of enlightenment pushes Izzy toward a novel's worth of disruptions as she discovers the agency she has over herself and her circumstances, as well as the desire she has to change the family and the community in which she lives.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☝☝ She had learned, with Izzy's birth, how your life could trundle along on its safe little track and then, with no warning, skid spectacularly off course.

Related Characters: Mrs. Richardson / Elena (speaker), Izzy Richardson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Richardson's quest for control has been a lifelong one, rooted deeply in her childhood and adolescence in Shaker Heights. Her exposure to a world defined by order and regulation from such an early age created in her the idea that perfection is not just possible, but worth striving for. For many years, Mrs. Richardson's life "trundle[d]" along the pattern she carved out for it—until the birth of her youngest daughter, Izzy, who was born premature and spent months on the edge of sickness and calamity, and who has grown up to be headstrong, defiant, and unrelenting—the very qualities that enabled her to survive her infancy. Mrs. Richardson has not been able to see Izzy's disruptive tendencies, outspokenness, and intrepidity as valuable things—rather, they have been the things that have removed her life from the course of its "safe little track." Because of this, her relationship with her daughter has been difficult and strained throughout the years, furthering Izzy's contribution to the deviation of Mrs. Richardson's life from the perfection she continues to seek.

☝☝ Mia thought suddenly of those moments at the restaurant, after the dinner rush had ended and things were quiet, when Bebe sometimes rested her elbows on the counter and drifted away. Mia understood exactly where she drifted to. To a parent, your child wasn't just a person: your child was a *place*, a kind of Narnia, a vast eternal place where the present you were living and the past you remembered and the future you longed for all existed at once. It was a place you could take refuge, if you knew how to get in. And each time you left it, each time your child passed out of your sight, you feared you might never be able to return to that place again.

Related Characters: Mia Warren (speaker), Mirabelle McCullough / May Ling Chow, Pearl Warren, Bebe Chow

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

Mia observes Bebe Chow's pain over the loss of her daughter, May Ling. Regardless of the fact that she chose to surrender the child, Mia knows that Bebe's distress is real and runs deep. Mia's assertion that a child is a "place" reveals some of her motivation for having "stolen" her own daughter, and suggests Mia's later realization that Pearl is her "home." Though the audience isn't aware at this point in the narrative of Mia's backstory and her involvement with the Ryans as their surrogate, this quotation both foreshadows and explains Mia's attachment to Pearl. Her identity as a mother is something she clings to as fiercely as she clings to the "eternal" love her daughter represents—she projects that, for better or worse, onto Bebe, and uses it as the justification and the inspiration for enlightening Bebe as to May Ling's whereabouts and for offering to help her as she sets out on her journey to hopefully regain custody of her beloved child.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☝☝ "I believe in knowing where your roots lie. That kind of thing shapes your identity so much."

Related Characters: Mrs. Richardson / Elena (speaker), Pearl Warren

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis



Mrs. Richardson's attachment to roots and identity shapes several key components of the novel's narrative. First, it explains why she is so staunch in her ways: her allegiance to order and procedure is born of her deep Shaker Heights roots. Not only has Mrs. Richardson lived in Shaker her entire life except for her four years at college, but she rests comfortably in the knowledge that her family has lived in Shaker Heights for many generations, and has always been a part of the received order that governs life there.

Secondly, such a deep pride in her own roots offers some insight into why she searches so desperately for Mia and Pearl's—combined with her desire to “get back” at Mia for helping Bebe Chow and thus hurting the McCulloughs by exposing whatever there is to expose of her past, Mrs. Richardson simply cannot understand how someone could deny their heritage or, perhaps even worse, experience no interest in discovering it or paying it any homage. Lastly, Mrs. Richardson hopes to impart the importance of identity to her daughters; she has striven to raise both Lexie and Izzy in her own image, with mixed-to-poor results.

Though Lexie appears to have the same allegiance to order and rule-following as her mother, she breaks the mold—and the rules—in many ways throughout the novel, whereas Izzy feels the fervor for disruption that her mother feels for order. When Mrs. Richardson tells Pearl, in this quotation, that she believes in “knowing where your roots lie,” she is attempting to be manipulative under the guise of altruism—she wants information from Pearl, and is attempting to glorify the joys of engaging with your identity in order to extract from Pearl anything that might lead her to more (hopefully incriminating) information about Mia's past.

☝ It was so easy, she thought with some disdain, to find out about people. It was all out there, everything about them. You just had to look. You could figure out anything about a person if you just tried hard enough.

Related Characters: Mrs. Richardson / Elena (speaker), Mia Warren

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis


This quote carries more than a hint of irony. The characters in this novel are deeply unknowable to each other and, often, to themselves; Mrs. Richardson's “disdain” for the ease with which one can “figure a person [out]” represents

her narrow view of what makes a person a person, and what constitutes an identity. As seen in the previous quotation, Mrs. Richardson believes in the total importance of knowing one's “roots” and forming one's identity firmly based upon the facts of those roots. Mia Warren has, since her arrival in Shaker Heights, represented an unknowable and baffling way of life to Mrs. Richardson; she is in such disbelief that anyone would choose to live without order and structure that she feels she must delve into Mia's past in search of what motivated her to take on such a life. Though Mrs. Richardson is ultimately correct in her assumption that Mia did not choose to be itinerant and “root”-less, the things she discovers about Mia's past do not allow her to see Mia any more clearly or substantially. Though she will, in the chapters and pages that follow, technically succeed in “figur[ing]” Mia out, she will continue to miss out, blinded as she is by procedure, order, and regulation, on the actual substance of identity, and what makes a person who they are.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☝ It had been a long time since her daughter had let her be so close. Parents, she thought, learned to survive touching their children less and less. It was like training yourself to live on the smell of an apple alone, when what you really wanted was to devour it, to sink your teeth into it and consume it, seeds, core, and all.

Related Characters: Mia Warren (speaker), Pearl Warren

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 248

Explanation and Analysis

The relationships between mothers and daughters throughout the text range from the beautiful to the difficult to the impossible. Pearl and Mia, upon their arrival in Shaker Heights, have established a deep closeness which baffles the Richardsons. Mrs. Richardson demands respect and deference from her daughters, and though she loves them both dearly, her relationship with Lexie suffers from lack of trust and her relationship with Izzy is marred by both mother and daughter constantly struggling for control. The closeness between Mia and Pearl disrupts Mrs. Richardson's sense of security in her relationships with her own daughters, as well as her daughters' preconceived notions about what a mother-daughter relationship can offer. As Pearl becomes closer to the Richardsons, though, she longs for a degree of separation from her mother as

well.

At this point in the novel, Pearl has attempted to distance herself from Mia, and Mia expresses her longing for the closeness she once had with her daughter, who she has, more or less, made her whole world. It has always just been Pearl and Mia on the road together, seeking adventure after adventure, never settling in any place too long or making relationships beyond the one they share together. Though a more relaxed relationship, it in many ways mirrors the constraints and regulations of Mrs. Richardson's relationships with her daughters—freedom can be confining, too, as Pearl has begun to learn. The desire to “consume” one's children is not exclusive to Mia—Bebe Chow and Mrs. Richardson each, in their own way, experience that need for complete, all-consuming closeness with their children, and the attempt to realize it or force it to happen has disastrous effects for both of them.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☝ It came, over and over, down to this: What made someone a *mother*? Was it biology alone, or was it love?

Related Characters: Mr. Richardson / Bill, Mirabelle McCullough / May Ling Chow, Ed Lim, Linda and Mark McCullough, Bebe Chow

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 258

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation is one of those most thematically rich and unanswerable questions in the entire novel. As the case between Bebe Chow and state—and, by proxy, the McCulloughs, who are in possession of her daughter May Ling—rages on, the opposing sides argue back and forth about which party will have the right to raise May Ling. Though Bebe is her biological mother, the McCulloughs, who believe themselves to be true altruists, can no doubt offer May Ling a more comfortable life—however, the likelihood of her assimilation into white American culture and the loss of her Chinese heritage looms large over their claims on her. Ed Lim and Mr. Richardson argue against each other's points with skill and incisiveness, but can never topple the other's perspective, since the case is rooted in an unanswerable question about what constitutes motherhood, a question that not even the narrative can, in the end, answer cleanly. Ng “grants” custody to the McCulloughs, but then “overturns” that ruling by having

Bebe steal her daughter back—a large and ambitious narrative statement that seems to side with biology. However, Izzy Richardson will ultimately burn down her family's home and escape from Shaker Heights in pursuit of Mia Warren, with whom she feels a deeper connection than with her own mother—here, Ng is seemingly arguing the case of love. With so many upheavals, reversals, and disruptions, the narrative sets up and then overturns preconceived notions of “what [makes] mother[hood]” and reinforces themes of order, disruption, and manipulation on a meta-textual level.

☝ For [Mrs. Richardson] it was simple: Bebe Chow had been a poor mother; Linda McCullough had been a good one. One had followed the rules, and one had not. But the problem with rules, [Mr. Richardson] reflected, was that they implied a right way and a wrong way to do things. When, in fact, most of the time there were simply *ways*, none of them quite wrong or quite right, and nothing to tell you for sure which side of the line you stood on.

Related Characters: Linda and Mark McCullough, Bebe Chow, Mirabelle McCullough / May Ling Chow, Mrs. Richardson / Elena, Mr. Richardson / Bill

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 269

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Richardson is often depicted on the fringes not only of the book's narrative, but of his family as well. As a busy and high-powered lawyer he works tirelessly, even on the weekends, off in the city. Though he has a tender and understanding relationship with Izzy, Ng rarely shows him interacting directly with the rest of his children, and very little with his wife. In a rare moment of insight as to Mr. Richardson's perspective—on his family, on the divisive, heated case he's been working for months, and on the general mechanics of Shaker Heights (a place he was brought to, not born into like Mrs. Richardson)—we see a conflicted man who is uncertain as to the value of rule-following. While Mrs. Richardson clings to rules as if they are her life preserver, Mr. Richardson is unsure that rules have any moral or practical value at all—he can see the nuance of not only Bebe Chow's situation, but the ways in which nuance is totally lost within the strictly-ordered world of Shaker Heights. Though Mr. Richardson's perspective doesn't get much more “air time” than this passage throughout the rest of the novel, his internal bend

toward questioning the status quo heavily foreshadows the difficult emotional and moral territory of the novel's final act.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☝️ Since the visit to the clinic, Pearl had felt a strange sense of reversal: as if, while she and Lexie slept under the same roof, Lexie had somehow taken her place and she'd taken Lexie's and they had not quite disentangled.

Related Characters: Pearl Warren (speaker), Lexie Richardson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 270

Explanation and Analysis

Pearl's description of the "strange," even magical reversal she and Lexie experience as the novel nears its close feels a little bit like a fairy tale, albeit a twisted one. Lexie used Pearl's name as her own at the abortion clinic in order to avoid detection, as her family is well-known in their small community. This action, combined with her stay in Pearl's room while she recovered, as well as the diminishment of Lexie's self-confidence and growing closeness to Mia in the wake of the procedure, has allowed Pearl to feel as if she and Lexie really have switched places. This quotation ties in with themes of order and disruption, as well as personal identity. Pearl feels her identity beginning to shift—she has gained confidence through her relationship with Trip as well as the sense of belonging that the promise of "staying put" in Shaker Heights has given her.

Earlier in the novel, Pearl wrote Lexie's college application for her, and the girls discussed viewing fairy tales from a different point of view—Pearl has disrupted the Richardsons' "fairy tale," and has finally gained confidence in both the value of her perspective and her place in Shaker Heights. Its importance (as well as the reversal between her and Lexie) was foreshadowed in the college application essay prompt, but she has not been able to see it until now. Pearl has had a greater effect on all of the Richardsons than she knows, though she is beginning to sense the power, allure, and mystery she holds—not just for Trip and Moody, but for Mrs. Richardson and Lexie herself.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☝️ "Is she going to be okay?"


"She's going to survive, if that's what you mean." Mia stroked Izzy's hair. It was like Pearl's, like her own had been as a little girl: the more you tried to smooth it, the more she insisted on springing free. "She's going to get through this because she has to."

"But how?"

"I don't know, honestly. But she will. Sometimes, just when you think everything's gone, you find a way. Like after a prairie fire. I saw one, years ago. It seems like the end of the world. The earth is scorched and black and everything green is gone. But after the burning the soil is richer, and new things can grow. People are like that, too, you know. They start over. They find a way."

Related Characters: Izzy Richardson, Mia Warren (speaker), Bebe Chow

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 295

Explanation and Analysis

In the wake of Bebe's having lost any and all opportunity to obtain custody of her daughter, May Ling, she seeks comfort in Mia's home. Izzy, after arriving for her daily routine of helping Mia with her photography, witnesses Bebe's anguish and becomes concerned. Mia, herself having narrowly escaped having to give up her child years ago, can't possibly convey to Izzy the pain that Bebe feels, and in the face of such raw torment struggles to find a way to explain to a child what the lesson in the situation is, or where the hope in it lies. Mia, seeing the wildness in Izzy that she recognizes in both herself and Pearl, offers her an anecdote about the healing and restorative powers of a prairie fire—though it leaves destruction in its wake, it offers the opportunity for a "richer" new start.

Though Mia seems to believe this quote to be true, Ng's narrative doesn't necessarily agree. Bebe goes on to break into the McCulloughs' home while they sleep and steals her daughter back, and Izzy burns down her family's home as a kind of punishment for their many acts of cruelty toward the Warrens. It's unclear whether the pain of these "fires" is then worth the potential for a "new start" that follows them—that is, Bebe and May Ling's new life in China, and Izzy's new life as a runaway.

Chapter 20 Quotes

●● The police would find Izzy, she told herself. They would find her and she would be able to make amends. She wasn't sure how, but she was certain she would. And if the police couldn't find her? Then she would look for Izzy herself. For as long as it took, for forever if need be. Years might pass and they might change, both of them, but she was sure she would still know her own child, just as she would know herself, no matter how long it had been. She was certain of this.

Related Characters: Mrs. Richardson / Elena (speaker), Izzy Richardson

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 336

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the novel, Mrs. Richardson has lost her home, her daughter, and the sense of order, regulation, and predictability that once governed her cookie-cutter existence. As she sits on the front steps of her rental home on Winslow Road—a place she has looked down upon for

years as “less desirable” than her own home, a place where she is now forced to live for an indeterminate length of time while her own ravaged home is rebuilt— thinking of her runaway daughter Izzy, she finally breaks down. Izzy is not just lost or missing—she has chosen to escape her family, and to leave in her wake the literal ruins of the place that served as both an emotional and physical prison for her for so many years. Mrs. Richardson then decides here that she will pursue Izzy for as long as it takes, hoping once again to impose some semblance of order on a chaotic situation.

Mrs. Richardson was unaware of the ways in which her ordering of not just the physical but the psychological layout of her home has harmed herself, her husband, and her children—most obviously Izzy, who has finally taken Mia's words to heart, for better or for worse, and burned things down in hopes that they'll grow again. Though an angry, destructive act and a definite escalation from her more or less harmless school prank earlier in the novel, Izzy's final act in the novel can perhaps be seen as one of altruism—she wants for her family to be able to learn from their mistakes and start again, just as in Mia's parable about the prairie fire.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

CHAPTER 1

On an ordinary May Saturday in Shaker Heights, Ohio, there is a new item of gossip to discuss—the Richardson family’s house has burned down in a raging **fire** and Izzy, the youngest of the Richardson children, is the suspect. All the following summer the residents of Shaker Heights will come to discuss amongst themselves how Izzy is a “little lunatic,” but on the morning of the actual fire no one knows what’s going on. Neighbors and police gather and watch the flames, while in the pond across the street geese swim peacefully.

As her family’s house burns, Mrs. Richardson stands on the lawn in her bathrobe. She had been asleep when the **fire** started, after a late night awake and distressed over the departure of the tenants at her rental house on Winslow Road. The tenants, Mia Warren and her teenaged daughter Pearl Warren, had left in the night, and Mrs. Richardson watched with a sense of relief as they packed up and drove off. She had then slept in, and awoke to the screeching of smoke detectors. She searched frantically for her children, but notes that she hadn’t looked for Izzy, as if she knew from the start that Izzy was responsible for the fire.

The house had smelled of gasoline and a **fire** had been set in the middle of each family member’s bed. Mrs. Richardson finally ran outside, realizing that her husband had probably gone in to work early and her eldest daughter, Lexie, had spent the night at her best friend Serena Wong’s house. Alone on the lawn, Mrs. Richardson wonders where Izzy “had gotten to” and where her sons are.

When the **fire** is finally put out, it’s revealed that the house hasn’t been entirely burned down—a “brick shell” remains. All of the Richardson children, except for Izzy, have gathered on the lawn. Lexie had been awakened by a phone call from her mother after staying up late arguing with Serena Wong about “little Mirabelle McCullough” and “whether her new parents should’ve gotten custody or if she should’ve been given back to her own mother.” Lexie’s brother Trip had been playing basketball, and by the time he drove home and noticed the flames Lexie and their younger brother Moody were already there. The three siblings sit on the roof of Trip’s car in descending order of age: Lexie the high school senior, Trip the junior, and Moody the sophomore. Izzy, the freshman, is missing, and they feel the “hole” of her absence.

Though there are no answers as to who has started the fire or why, the public shame of such unsightly disorder on display for all to see is enough to cause a wave of shock and intrigue throughout the orderly, tight-knit community of Shaker Heights (which is usually idyllic to the point of cliché, as shown by the geese in the pond). The story begins at its climactic conclusion, and then jumps back to the events leading to this point.



The careful order of Mrs. Richardson’s life has been disrupted. Her late night the night before was a break in her routine; she is on the lawn in her bathrobe, shirking her attention to appearances; and though the circumstances surrounding Pearl and Mia’s departure as well as the fire aren’t all immediately clear, it’s obvious that a major disruption has occurred. Also foreshadowed is the difficult relationship between Izzy and Mrs. Richardson.



Even the fire, which now rages out of control, had a kind of order to it when it was lit. Mrs. Richardson, who might otherwise be consumed entirely with worrying about appearances, is only worried about the safety of her four children—especially her youngest and most rebellious daughter, Izzy.



The Richardson family’s lives and familial identity have been disrupted physically and emotionally. The burnt-out hull of their house is a physical emblem of their loss of control over their lives, while the absence of Izzy—the youngest and the last piece of the Richardson family picture—represents the emotional “hole” that has been left in the wake of the fire. The Richardson children, though seeming to have been out and about having normal weekends, have actually been up to—and dealing separately with—more than meets the eye.



The siblings talk about how Mrs. Richardson “is going to murder” Izzy when Izzy comes back, and they assume that they’ll all stay in a hotel, which “the insurance” or “the adults” will probably pay for. Trip laughs, thinking about the “nutcase” Izzy starting **fires**, and Moody wonders why his siblings are so sure Izzy is responsible. Trip says everyone else is accounted for—and Moody claims he was riding his bike to the library when the fire started—so it must have been Izzy.

Moody then suggests it could have been an accident, but Lexie argues that “the firemen said there were little **fires** everywhere. Multiple points of origin. Not an accident.” Moody chastises his siblings for always picking on Izzy, saying that maybe that’s why “she acts *mental*.” Meanwhile everyone has seemingly forgotten about the sudden departure of Mia and Pearl Warren. As Mr. Richardson approaches in his BMW, Trip predicts that their parents will institutionalize Izzy when they find her. Moody is unsure that they’ll be able to find her at all.

CHAPTER 2

The narrative flashes back in time to the previous June. Mia Warren and her fifteen-year-old daughter Pearl have just moved into the Richardsons’ “little” rental property on Winslow Road. Mrs. Richardson and Mr. Richardson were aware when the two of them moved in that Mia was an unmarried single mother, but nevertheless she had paid her first month’s rent, last month’s rent, and security deposit up front and in cash.

Winslow Road is lined with duplexes, designed to appear to be single-family homes to “allow residents to avoid the stigma of living in a duplex.” The fact that each house is a duplex is common knowledge, but is only discernable from *inside* each structure.

Shaker Heights is governed by many unspoken ways and rules, often both strict and obscure. As Mia and Pearl settle in, they begin to learn the rules. They must write the word *Up* following their new address, so that their mail is delivered to them and not to the downstairs tenant, Mr. Yang. Each property has a “tree lawn,” a strip of grass which separates the sidewalk from the street. All throughout the city, garbage cans must be left in the rear of the house, never dragged out to the curb. Garages, too, are placed at the backs of properties in order to maintain a pleasant, streamlined appearance, and lawns must never be allowed to grow more than six inches tall, which the Warrens learn when Mr. Yang takes a trip to Hong Kong and leaves the lawn unmowed resulting in a “polite but stern letter from the city.”

Lexie and Trip’s hurry to blame their sister foreshadows the reasoning behind their individual but shared need to have the attention turned away from them at this moment. Moody’s empathy for his sister and his defense of her, too, speaks to as-yet-unknown circumstances which contributed to the larger disruption at hand.



Lexie’s description of the “little fires everywhere” throughout the house will become one of the book’s central symbols and metaphors. The “little fires” that have disrupted the status quo of Shaker Heights throughout the past year have reached a disastrous head and are no longer ignorable. With this, the story loops back to show how the characters arrived at this desperate point.



The Richardsons expect for the Warrens to be disruptors right off the bat. Mia’s identity as an artist and as a single mother seems to signal to the Richardsons that she will shirk order and create problems for them, but she proves that she is able to play by their rules. It’s immediately shown that the Richardsons are wealthy and comfortable.



There is something sinister about the “altruism” of “allow[ing]” residents to maintain the appearance of wealth and luxury. The world of Shaker Heights often puts appearance ahead of reality.



The many rules that permeate every aspect of life in Shaker Heights are presented through the text in a rapid and matter-of-fact manner—the audience is meant to be just as overwhelmed by the abundance of strict regulations and unseen mechanisms that keep the city in order as the Warrens are.



Each house in Shaker Heights is built in either Tudor, English, or French style, and each style can only be painted one of a few certain colors. Shaker is one of the nation's first planned communities, laid out in 1912, and the "underlying philosophy" of Shaker is that "everything [can] and should be planned out" in order to avoid "the unseemly, the unpleasant, and the disastrous."

Along with the more stringent, off-putting rules, Mia and Pearl begin to learn the "more welcoming things" about their new neighborhood. They start to memorize local street names and become familiar with the local grocery store, where customers are treated "like aristocracy," and bagboys deliver customers' groceries to their cars free of charge and without accepting even a tip. On weekends, Mia and Pearl visit nearby neighborhoods with less stringent ordinances—neighborhoods where trash can be left at the curb—in order to collect free furniture to fill their new home.

Moody Richardson overhears his parents discussing whether or not Mia will pay the rent on time with some concern — she is, they know, a struggling artist—though they both concede that the rent is not important to the Richardson family's well-being. Mrs. Richardson's parents purchased the duplex as an investment property when she was young, and used the rent money it generated to help send her to college, then to help her get on her feet as a young professional, and finally to help her and Mr. Richardson to put a down payment on their own home.

Mrs. Richardson inherited her parents' rental house after their deaths five years ago, and in addition to being a "sentimental memory," most of the income generated from it is funneled into the Richardsons' yearly vacation fund. Because the Richardsons do not *need* the money the house generates, Mrs. Richardson has the luxury of using it as a tool to "do good," by picking the "kind of tenant" who is "deserving but who ha[s], for one reason or another, not quite gotten a fair shot in life." Mr. Yang, who occupies the downstairs apartment, is one such tenant. An immigrant from Hong Kong and a bus driver for "a nearby private girls' school" as well as a part-time handyman, Mr. Yang is "exactly the kind of tenant Mrs. Richardson want[s]: a kind person to whom she could do a kind turn, and who would appreciate her kindness."

The idea that the opposite of careful order is "disaster" keeps everything in Shaker Heights running along a careful, predetermined path. Shaker Heights sees order as an identity, and it manipulates its residents—even those who live on its outskirts—into following a set of arbitrary rules that are framed as having been established for benevolent purposes. Mia and Pearl confront their new world as a team, doing what they must to ensure they fit into the orderly place they've chosen as home.



For Pearl and for Mia, the sudden presence of stringent rules and an allegiance to order is disorienting. Nevertheless, they interrupt their own version of "order" to make room for the good and the bad parts of their new lives in Shaker Heights. Mia and Pearl show themselves to be deft manipulators of the world around them, able to look for loopholes in their circumstances and assimilate into almost any situation.



The Richardsons' lives and privilege are introduced in this passage. Mrs. Richardson's parents, lucky enough to be in a position to purchase an extra property, used it as an altruistic endeavor to help their daughter through life.



Mrs. Richardson, now in a secure financial position—due to the boost she's been given as a result of her parents' prosperity and her inheritance of that prosperity—is able to take the house's "altruistic" purpose one step further. Though Mrs. Richardson's altruism is just thinly-veiled manipulation—she gets to decide who she feels is worthy of a place in the house—it allows her to maintain the order, regulation, and sense of hierarchy that has defined her life since childhood. Mrs. Richardson's faith in kindness only extends to those who she feels will "appreciate" her kindness, and thus be indebted to her—an even larger manipulation into which she's now dragged Pearl and Mia.



Mrs. Richardson has had less success with renting the upstairs apartment to the “kind” of tenant she wants—though her tenants have all been deserving, none of them have “stayed long.” Mrs. Richardson vowed to be “more careful” in choosing a tenant this time around, and settled on Mia and Pearl in part because she wanted Pearl, a bright girl in all AP and honors classes, to have a place in the pristine Shaker Heights school system—though Mia, as a renter, will “get all the benefits with none of the burden.”

Moody is intrigued by his mother’s mention of a young girl living in the rental house, and, a few days after Mia and Pearl move in, he rides his bike over to the property to introduce himself. He is the first of the Richardson children to “venture” to the house on Winslow. When Moody arrives, he watches as Pearl unpacks a bed frame from her mother’s car and arranges the pieces on the front lawn. Moody notes that Pearl’s hair is in a “thick braid straining to burst free.” Mia leans out of the second-story window and **photographs** Pearl lying playfully in the grass in the middle of the bed frame, and Moody watches the intimate moment unfold between them. When Mia goes back inside, Pearl calls across the street to Moody, asking if he wants to help them “or just stand there.” Moody doesn’t remember crossing the street or introducing himself to Pearl, and feels that “he ha[s] always known her name and she ha[s] always known his.”

Moody helps Pearl bring the bed frame inside and watches as she assembles it. Mia brings them a set of tools, and Pearl knows exactly what to do with each of them. In the Richardson house, if something breaks, his parents call a handyman or simply replace the broken thing. “Every three or four years,” Moody notes, his parents purchase a whole new living room set, move the old set into the basement, and donate the “old-old set” to a local shelter. Moody has only ever handled tools in shop class, where he made the same project as his brother before him and his sister before his brother. Moody asks where Pearl got the bed frame, and Pearl tells him that she and her mother “found it.” Moody is surprised when Pearl confesses that she has never had a house of her own before, let alone a room. Moody cannot “believe that people could be so poor.”

As Pearl recounts her and her mother’s itinerant lives and all the places they’ve lived, Moody can’t “see all that she [is] remembering.” Pearl and Mia have lived in dilapidated apartments in Urbana, Middlebury, Ocala, and Muncie, and had subletted a place in Ann Arbor where Pearl had played dress-up in the clothes of the “lucky girl” who normally occupied the home. Pearl now prefers totally empty apartments “to [ones] filled with someone else’s things.” Pearl tells Moody that she and her mother move whenever Mia “gets the bug.” Pearl says that this time, though, she and Mia are staying put.

Mrs. Richardson does not see her tenants as people with full identities, but rather as benefactors of her charity who should be eternally grateful. She makes a snide comment about Mia and Pearl’s ability to “benefit” from the rules already in place in Shaker Heights as a way to manipulate them into seeing the “differences” between their families, and the hierarchy they are now a part of.



Moody, though he does not know Pearl or Mia, right away observes a very intimate moment between the two of them, and is instantly fascinated by their closeness and by the oddity of their lives. The sensation that he has “always” known Pearl both stems from and foreshadows the ways in which their very different pasts will complement one another’s present. Moody will teach Pearl things, Pearl will teach Moody things, and a friendship built on breaking down the barriers between their identities will soon form, transforming both of their lives.



Moody’s privileged and luxurious life is contrasted with Pearl’s, to almost comic effect. The Richardsons’ ability to simply discard the things they don’t want, and the Warrens’ need to subsist off of the discarded things of others, feed into one another in a cycle of consumption. Moody has never encountered poverty, especially in the sheltered, ordered world of Shaker Heights, and feels almost embarrassed by his own privilege and his family’s ways—which he is starting to realize are wasteful and a little bit helpless.



Moody has never known struggle, and is unable to really “see” or understand what life has been like for Pearl up to this point. Pearl’s transient existence has taken a toll on her—she is thrilled by the order, regulation, and permanence that Shaker Heights offers. Moody is so bored of his own privilege, and with the same things about Shaker Heights that excite Pearl, that he is unable to understand her excitement.



Moody has the sudden realization that he is infatuated with Pearl, and that his life has been “divided into a before and an after.” He eagerly asks her what her plans are for the next day.

Moody's infatuation with Pearl grows out of the differences between them and Pearl's disruption of the routine that has, until now, been Moody's life.



CHAPTER 3

“The next few weeks” are, for Moody, “a series of tomorrows” as Pearl and Moody develop a deep friendship. Moody shows her the best local spots, including those sentimental to him—his old elementary school, for example. When Pearl asks Moody to “take [her] to see the Shakers,” Moody explains that the Shakers “all died out [because they] didn’t believe in sex.” Moody is only “half right.” Though at the time—1997—there are only “twelve [Shakers] left in the world,” Shaker Heights was indeed founded on the Shaker ideal of creating a harmonious utopia born out of “order—and regulation, the father of order.” At the time of the community’s inception, “everything” had been regulated in order to create “a patch of heaven on earth, a little refuge from the world.” As a result of this strict organization, to this day, “even the teens of Shaker Heights” retain a “drive for perfection.”

Pearl has already begun to navigate—and to some degree, assimilate into—the ordered world of Shaker Heights, but as Moody shows her around and teaches her more and more about her new home, the extensive role that order plays within the Shaker value system becomes even clearer. Pearl is eager and excited to learn about Shaker, and the fact that even the youth there are driven by order allows her to feel as if she is truly in a place that will, for once, hold her.



As Pearl learns more about Moody and Shaker Heights, Moody also learns more about Pearl and Mia and their transient lifestyle, much of which has been spent in poverty. Though Moody has never needed to think about money and has had an allowance since the age of ten, he comes to understand the “intricacies” of the Warrens’ finances. Mia and Pearl scrimp and save, getting whatever they can for free, as well as repurposing discarded furniture, shopping in thrift stores, and eating leftovers for days. When Moody asks Pearl why Mia doesn’t get a “real job,” Pearl insists she already has one—“she’s an artist.”

Pearl and Mia have never known any semblance of order and have never followed a plan, but despite the uncertainty that comes with transience they are happy together. For them, the stability and stringency of Shaker Heights—and the possibility of putting down roots—is the disruption in their lives. Moody comes to realize this, affecting his view of both his privilege and his preconceived notions of how others live.



In each place they live, Mia takes on a part-time job — or jobs — to make enough for her and Pearl to “get by,” but Pearl “underst[ands] the hierarchy; her mother’s real work [is] her art, and whatever pa[ys] the bills exist[s] only to make that art possible.” Mia works several hours a day on her **photographs**, or spends her time reading and gathering material for her “process.” Mia does not consider herself just a photographer—photography is for Mia just a “tool.” She doctors her photographs with embroidery, collage, or distortion of the negatives with overexposure, double exposure, or bleach. She discards any product she’s not happy with, and often destroys her negatives.

Mia’s faith in her identity as an artist—and Pearl’s faith in it as well—is what drives Mia’s choice to live a transient life, and to bring Pearl along with her, without much appearance of order or regulation. However, Mia refuses to play the game in terms of the social aspect of being an artist, and is completely at the mercy of how her own art affects her. The significance of the fact that she manipulates her photographs ties in with larger themes of manipulation and disruption throughout the novel, and frames Mia in her own way as a manipulator of perspectives and circumstances.



Mia occasionally is able to sell her work, which Moody himself describes as “startling,” with the help of a New York City gallerist, Anita Rees. Mia refuses to attend any events in New York, even though Anita tells her that it would improve her sales. Her **photographs** can sell for “two or three thousand dollars [apiece,]” but sometimes they don’t sell at all. Pearl believes that someday her mother will be famous, which is why she “d[oesn’t] mind the shifting precariousness of [their lives.]”

Pearl continues describing to Moody “what [her and Mia’s] life on the road is like.” Moody thinks that their existence is “a magic trick.” Pearl and Mia travel with few possessions. They go everywhere in their tan VW Rabbit, sleeping on the road as they travel from place to place “until Mia [finds] a spot that [feels] right” and they begin to set up shop. Pearl tells Moody that her mother has promised her that the two of them are going to stay in Shaker Heights for good. Pearl shows Moody her poetry, and Moody plays the guitar for Pearl. When they are together, Moody feels as if he is “in two places at once”—both physically with Pearl and mentally searching “desperately for the next place” to bring her. Eventually, Moody decides to bring Pearl over to his house and introduce her to his family. Moody “[doesn’t] think himself interesting enough to hold her attention,” and decides that his family will be. The narrator notes that Moody will question this decision “for the rest of his life.”

On her first visit, Pearl notes that the Richardsons’ house is large, pristine, and dreamlike, and the family seems to be “arranged in a tableau for her enjoyment.” Mrs. Richardson bakes in the kitchen, Mr. Richardson is outside grilling, and the children are lounging on the giant sectional in the living room. Pearl is instantly overwhelmed and allured by the perfection of their lives.

CHAPTER 4

Pearl quickly becomes a regular fixture at the Richardsons’ house, and feels enveloped and accepted right away. She does not see much of Izzy, though she does not notice this, as “dazzled” as she is by the other Richardsons, including the handsome Trip. She spends whole days at the Richardson house, on Moody’s invitation. She is impressed by Mr. and Mrs. Richardsons’ confidence and high-powered jobs—he is a lawyer, and she is a journalist for the local newspaper. The Richardsons “kn[o]w important people” and the even Lexie and Trip have a “sureness” about them. Pearl wonders where their “ease come[s] from.”

Mia’s work is “startling” and disruptive, just as is her and Pearl’s presence in Shaker Heights. Though Mia identifies as an artist, she nonetheless takes an unusual approach to that identity. It’s suggested that Mia might be afraid of fame and recognition, but the reasons for this aren’t revealed until much later.



Pearl’s perspective on her own life is one marked by profound weariness with routine. What is routine for her, though, is a complete disruption of anything Moody has ever seen or heard of—his description of it as a “magic trick” shows its complete foreignness to him. Moody’s desire to similarly impress Pearl leads him to make a pivotal decision, one that is both altruistic and manipulative—he feels that there is nothing he himself can give her, even after they have shared their art with one another, besides access to his perfect family. He wants to do something for Pearl in the first place, though, in order to manipulate her into remaining friends with him—and possibly becoming more than that.



Pearl’s introduction to the Richardsons’ home and lives seems as if it has been “arranged for her,” or manipulated to her liking. Her fascination with order, perfection, and strong familial identity is on display in every aspect of the Richardsons’ lives.



The Richardsons represent all the things that Pearl has never known—order, familial identity, wealth, and not just comfort but luxury. Her physical infatuation with Trip, too, becomes a large part of what draws her to the Richardson household. Pearl’s life has been marked by transience and uncertainty, and the “sureness” that the Richardson children have represents a kind of stability she has never before known or even seen.



The Richardson house is filled with luxurious furniture and decorations, and absolutely everything has an order to it. Their home is full of trinkets and souvenirs from far-off places, accrued through years of family vacations, and Pearl is amazed by how embedded their family is in their home. The affectionate and fascinating Mrs. Richardson is of particular interest to Pearl, who likens her to a TV mom like Mrs. Brady from *The Brady Bunch*.

Mia notices her daughter's burgeoning "infatuation" with the Richardson family. At first she is happy and grateful to see Pearl making friends, especially with the sensitive Moody. Mia feels guilty for having made Pearl live according to her own desires and decides not to question her daughter's new fascination. Soon, though, she becomes worried by the influence the Richardsons have on Pearl, and how Pearl has started to talk about them in an obsessive way. However, feeling guilty for having moved Pearl around so much and often forcing her into isolation, Mia says nothing.

At school, Pearl and Moody are in almost all of the same classes. Moody guides Pearl through her first couple of weeks, but she is soon able to navigate things on her own. After school, Pearl spends her afternoons watching **Jerry Springer** with the Richardson children, who watch the program voyeuristically and with great fascination, as if it is "a psychological study" or "anthropology." Lexie and Trip joke that their younger sister Izzy, who doesn't enjoy watching the show, will soon be on Springer herself. They recount to Pearl Izzy's many acts of rebellion throughout the years, including a protest at a dance recital and an attempt to free cats from the local Humane Society. Moody defends his younger sister in the face of his siblings' cruelty. Watching an episode about race, Lexie remarks that they are all lucky to live in Shaker Heights where no one "sees" race—Lexie's boyfriend, Brian, is black, and she says that nobody "gives a crap" about the fact that the two of them are together.

Lexie asks Pearl, in the middle of another **Jerry Springer** episode—this time, about paternity—who her real father is. Pearl does not know. Lexie wonders aloud if Pearl's father is dead or alive, an old boyfriend of her mother's or a "rap[ist]." Trip attempts to silence Lexie, but Lexie insists she was only joking. Pearl realizes that her father could indeed be anybody, though Lexie's questions are "nothing Pearl ha[sn't] thought herself." Pearl realizes that any time she has asked Mia about her identity, her mother has deflected and refused to answer, joking that she found Pearl in a "bargain bin" or a "cabbage patch."

A mother figure who falls in line with the expected behaviors of a "TV mom" is entirely foreign to Pearl's lived experience. Her fascination with Mrs. Richardson foreshadows complications to come in Mia and Pearl's own relationship, resulting from this disruption in what Pearl sees mothers can be.



Mia's transient existence has kept Pearl from developing close relationships in the many places they've lived. The Richardsons represent the opposite of the identity Mia has tried to instill in her daughter, but she can concede that Pearl having some order and stability might be good—though her daughter's head-over-heels obsession raises some red flags.



Pearl is grateful for the order and stability school represents. Meanwhile, the Richardson children's obsession with Jerry Springer represents their underlying desire for and fascination with chaos and disruption. Izzy, already a true disruptor herself, has no need for the program—or perhaps she senses the voyeuristic nature of her siblings' viewing habit, in which they treat the subjects of the show more like animals than people with complex identities. Lexie's perspective on the absence of race as an issue in Shaker Heights both betrays the vacuum of privilege she has lived in, and also foreshadows the major questions of identity, heritage, and assimilation soon to come—both for Pearl and for several other characters throughout the novel.



For the Richardsons, who have a long history in Shaker Heights and who are able to trace their heritage back for generations, identity is grounded in knowing one's roots—it's another method of asserting order and, if not control, then a sense that things are regulated. Pearl is unable to do this, but suddenly wonders if this is the answer to forming an identity after all.



That night, back at home, Pearl asks her mother if she was wanted as a baby. Mia begins crying, which shocks Pearl, and tells her that she was wanted “very, very much” before quickly leaving the room.

Mia's emotional reaction to her daughter's question of whether or not she was wanted foreshadows the depths of both of their true pasts.



CHAPTER 5

Lexie begins to take a shine to Pearl, though both Lexie and Lexie's friend Serena note that Pearl seems to be “trying not to be seen.” This fascinates Lexie, who pities Pearl because of the way she looks at “everything in [the Richardson] house as if she'd never seen it before.” One afternoon, Lexie brings Pearl along to the mall. Once there, Pearl, realizing she can't afford any of the designer clothes in the upscale shops, suggests the two of them visit a thrift store.

Lexie, driven by desires both genuinely and falsely altruistic, takes Pearl under her wing. She is just as fascinated by Pearl as Pearl is by the Richardsons—Pearl is shy, meek, and moldable, which are qualities Lexie does not seem to have come across very often.



Under the guise of being bored by everything at the mall, and thinking everything looks “the same,” Pearl directs Lexie to the local thrift shop, where she teaches Lexie how to shop for deals, switch tags to get discounts, and pick out the perfect thing. Later, Lexie gives some of her own clothes to Pearl after noting that one of Pearl's new thrift-store skirts would “go great with a striped button-down.” Pearl brings these clothes home along with her thrift store finds, slightly embarrassed to be accepting hand-me-downs but excited to have something of Lexie's. Pearl is relieved when Mia launders Lexie's old things along with the thrift store finds and doesn't say anything about the difference between the two.

Lexie and Pearl's afternoon shopping trip, though seemingly casual, is full of thematic importance. The mall represents order; the thrift shop represents disruption. Everything at the mall is the same, whereas the thrift store is a melting pot of identities. Pearl shows Lexie this, but still secretly accepts her hand-me-downs, excited to have a piece of Lexie's identity, and she hopes, by proxy, some of the order and stability it represents.



Trip also begins to talk to Pearl more and more, much to her delight and embarrassment. He compliments her outfits, telling her she looks “nice,” to which Moody protests that Pearl “always looks nice.” Moody, afraid to be outshone by his brother, uses his savings to buy Pearl an expensive black Moleskine notebook for her poetry.

The Richardsons' fascination with Pearl doesn't stop at just Moody and Lexie—Trip, too, begins to notice Pearl as a force of beauty and intrigue. Moody, threatened by this, wants to manipulate Pearl and direct her attention away from his older brother. Here we see signs of Moody's selfish and competitive nature.



One afternoon, the carpet in the Richardson house is being cleaned, and the children are told to stay out of the house during the day. Lexie invites herself over to Pearl's house, and though Pearl is reluctant to have visitors, she agrees. Lexie drives Pearl and Moody to the house on Winslow. When they arrive Mia fights the urge to refuse them, but remembers that she wanted Pearl to make friends. She makes the children popcorn, and the three of them chatter away.

Pearl is afraid to allow the Richardsons, whom she admires, into her home—a home that is very different from theirs, and much less luxurious. The Richardson children, however, always hungry for something different from the orderly, cushy pattern of their lives, love the Warren home. Mia, too, is spooked by the disruption the Richardsons represent; Pearl has not often made close friends in the past, and opening her home to or sharing intimacy with anyone other than Pearl puts Mia on the defensive.



Lexie describes her frustration with college applications—her boyfriend Brian is applying to Princeton, where his parents went to school, while Lexie has her heart set on Yale. “Despite her air of frivolity [and] shallowness,” Lexie is very smart. She’s stumped by Yale’s admission essay, though, which asks for students to rewrite a famous story from an alternate point of view. Moody suggests rewriting a fairytale. Lexie thinks that it might be interesting to rewrite Rumpelstiltskin, noting that, in the story, the miller’s daughter “said she’d give him her baby and then reneged,” wondering if the miller’s daughter is actually the villain. Mia advises Lexie to relax her judgment and leaves the room.

Pearl offers to write Lexie’s application essay for her, and Lexie is overjoyed. Moody seems irritated by what he perceives to be his sister taking advantage of Pearl. In the next room, Mia cleans her paint brushes in solitude.

CHAPTER 6

Pearl completes Lexie’s essay within a week. Both Mia and Moody are “uneasy” that Lexie has wrangled this favor from Pearl. Pearl starts dressing in Lexie’s clothes and borrowing Lexie’s makeup and jewelry, further worrying Mia. Lexie submits her application to Yale, and wants to celebrate by attending a Halloween party at a girl named Stacie Perry’s house. She invites Pearl to come along. Pearl is hesitant, never having been to a high school party before, but when Trip tells her that he will be there as well, she is convinced. The party is the “hot topic” at school the entire week leading up to it.

Izzy and Moody are not invited to the party, as they’re underclassmen. Moody is disappointed that Pearl will be ditching him, but Pearl promises him that they will spend the following weekend together. Since a costume for the party is required, Lexie suggests that she, Pearl, and Serena go together as Charlie’s Angels. The party is full of high schoolers “dry hump[ing]” in dark corners and doing body shots off of one another’s stomachs. Trip is there, dressed as a devil, and Serena explains that Stacie thinks Trip is “fine.” While Pearl plans what she will talk to Trip about, trying to think of something “sultry and witty,” something that Lexie might say, Trip disappears.

Lexie is having a great night grinding with Serena on the dance floor. Her boyfriend Brian arrives dressed as “a guy who just mailed his application to Princeton” and the two of them sneak off to have sex for the first time in Lexie’s car, while Pearl waits alone in the kitchen for any sign of Trip. When she’s unable to find him, Lexie, or Serena, she calls Moody from the Perry house’s landline.

The conversation about elite colleges again places the Richardsons as members of the “one percent.” Notably, Lexie’s take on Rumpelstiltskin ruffles Mia’s feathers—and as we learn later, this is because the situation closely relates to Mia’s own past with Pearl. This then seems to add to Mia’s concern over the kind of friends her daughter is making and the effect their friendship and influence might start to have on Pearl.



Lexie is manipulating Pearl, though she does truly delight in her friendship. Mia has removed herself from view of the situation—and thus seems ready to let events steer their own course.



As Pearl is becoming more and more absorbed by the Richardsons’ world and Lexie Richardson specifically, Mia and Moody—those closest to her—fear she will abandon her own personality. Pearl, however, longs for the disruption in her identity and the chance at a new one that Lexie represents. Pearl’s entanglements with Lexie and Trip deepen as Halloween approaches—a time when disruption and false identities are made literal through costumes and mischief.



Even though the teens in Shaker Heights usually value order, there’s still room for the chaos of a massive party and the excitement it brings, and it probably seems especially liberating because of their carefully-planned daily lives. Even Pearl has never been to a “real” high school party, and is overwhelmed, just as she was overwhelmed by her first visit to the Richardson home. Pearl wants to earn Trip’s attention and affection, but doesn’t know how to do so in a way that doesn’t erase her own identity or subsume it into some else’s (like Lexie’s).



Lexie breaks the “rules” by having sex with her boyfriend—a major act of rebellion against Mrs. Richardson’s ordered world. Meanwhile, Pearl’s feeling of being safeguarded by the Richardsons dissipates when they each abandon her in pursuit of their own pleasures.



Shortly thereafter, Moody arrives in his mother's car to pick Pearl up. He is disappointed in her behavior, tells her that Trip couldn't help her home because he was probably having sex with someone. Moody asks Pearl if she can at last see what his family is really like—they're the kind of people who would abandon her at a party to pursue their own vices. It is nearly one in the morning when Moody drops Pearl at her house, and she has just missed her curfew.

The Halloween party goes on until well past three in the morning, and the Richardson children "creep home" in the middle of the night. Lexie feels different, and afterwards looks different to Pearl, who feels that everything Lexie does from this point on is "tinged with sex." For now, though, Moody tells Pearl that she smells a little bit like smoke and alcohol, and offers her a mint. Pearl goes upstairs and Mia, upset, sends Pearl straight to bed. She tells herself that "this is what teens do," and doesn't bother confronting Pearl about the party the next morning, though she wishes that she could know what exactly Pearl, and all of the Richardson children, get up to when no adults are around.

Conveniently, the following Tuesday, Mrs. Richardson arrives at the rental house to check up on Mia and assure that she's "settled in" all right. She notes that the house is clean, though there is not a lot of furniture and what is there is mismatched and shabby. She inspects Mia's **photographs**, which hang on the walls and, finding them alluring but disturbing, offers to buy a piece. Mia delivers what Mrs. Richardson perceives to be a "lukewarm" thanks.

Mrs. Richardson asks whether Mia sells enough of her art to make a living, and Mia divulges that she has a part-time job at Lucky Palace, a local Chinese restaurant. Mrs. Richardson reminds herself that "artists d[on't] think like normal people." She reflects on her own orderly life, regimented meals and exercise, and the belief that "the proper functioning of the world depend[s] upon her compliance." Mia shirks the rules Mrs. Richardson sticks so closely to, and Mrs. Richardson thinks to herself that she must keep watch on Mia as if she is keeping watch on a "dangerous beast."

Moody, nervous that Lexie and Trip are becoming the only objects of Pearl's affection, attempts to manipulate Pearl's vision of the rest of his family. Though he's not entirely wrong—Lexie and Trip did abandon her—his motivations are not entirely altruistic, or born of a desire to help Pearl and make her feel better.



The disruptive effect that Lexie's lost virginity will have on her and Pearl's friendship, as well as Lexie's own view of and interaction with the world around her, is foreshadowed here. Meanwhile, Mia realizes that her daughter's identity is shifting, and she feels Pearl drifting away from her. Mia has always seen her daughter as somehow separate from other children and teens her age, and now must confront the fact that Pearl has succumbed to some "normal" teen behavior.



Mrs. Richardson's visit comes under the guise of altruism, but is really conducted with the purpose of manipulating Mia imposing order on anything that isn't quite to Mrs. Richardson's liking. Upon seeing the apartment, Mrs. Richardson is actually impressed by Mia's art, but still views it as far outside the norm and, for this reason, slightly upsetting. Mrs. Richardson wants to buy a piece nonetheless in order to continue to appear altruistic, and to help her "struggling" tenant—but note that her generosity is entirely dependent on how grateful Mia seems to her.



Mrs. Richardson's wariness about Mia and her equation of disorder or uniqueness with danger highlights the borderline fearful way in which she clings to order and to the familiar, and rejects any identity that is not similar to her own. Mia's side job at the Lucky Palace, and the fact that Mrs. Richardson now knows about it, will lead to an important plot point later on.



Mrs. Richardson notes aloud that Mia keeps a very clean and tidy house, and then, struck with an idea, offers to hire Mia to clean the Richardson home a few hours each day. Mia once again accepts Mrs. Richardson's "generous" offer, wary at first but then genuinely excited at the chance to reinsert herself into Pearl's daily life and to see what she's up to when she's at the Richardsons'. She offers Mrs. Richardson a glowing thanks, and Mrs. Richardson smiles.

Mrs. Richardson's next offer is even more falsely altruistic than her first. She doesn't approve of the job Mia has taken to supplement her income, and gives her one that seems more orderly and dignified. Yet any reluctance Mia might have felt at accepting this kind of charity dissipates when she realizes that she will be able to observe Pearl in her new environment.



CHAPTER 7

Mia agrees to work as the Richardsons' housekeeper three times a week, and to prepare their dinners each night, for three hundred dollars a month. Pearl is privately angry that her mother will intrude on her relationship with the Richardsons, and what she views as "her space," though her mother's new job will effectively cancel out their rent. Pearl is particularly upset to have her mother hovering over her burgeoning flirtation with Trip. Mr. Richardson finds the arrangement "awkward" as well, though he talks to Mia about how he got to Shaker Heights. He fell in love with Mrs. Richardson in college, and she brought him back to Shaker after graduation. Mr. Richardson tells Mia that "if working here ever stops suiting [her] needs, there will be no hard feelings."

Mia is, once again, seen as a major disrupting force—this time, it is not just the Richardsons who see her presence that way, but her own daughter as well. Mr. Richardson's reassurance to Mia that there will be no bad blood between their families should Mia want or need to quit reveals that there is something genuinely altruistic about him, as opposed to his wife's false altruism, which has led to Mia being put in the awkward position of relying on the Richardsons as both her landlords and employers.



Mia settles into her schedule: she works at the house from eight thirty in the morning until ten, then goes home for the rest of the day until five, when she returns to cook, insisting that the middle of the day is the best time for her to work on her **photography**, though truthfully wanting to "study the Richardsons both when they were there and when they weren't." Mia observes the Richardsons' schedules and habits, and learns things about them from what they throw in the trash and keep on their shelves. Mia also observes changes in her daughter, as Pearl picks up phrases and gestures from each of the Richardsons.

As both an artist studying people and a mother concerned about her daughter's environment, Mia wants to get a full, holistic sense of the Richardson family and the way they navigate their household and each other. Because Mia is in charge of picking up after them and preparing meals for them, she develops not just a familiarity but an intimacy with the more hidden parts of each member of the Richardson family's identities.



A week into working for the Richardsons, Mia finds herself alone in the kitchen with Izzy, who is suspended from school. Izzy introduces herself as "the crazy one," then sits with Mia in the kitchen while she works and recounts the story of her suspension. Mia makes her a piece of toast and listens. The mean, alcoholic orchestra teacher at the Richardson children's school, Mrs. Peters, made racist remarks to one of Izzy's kindest classmates, Deja Johnson, when she was having difficulty keeping up during a complicated piece of music. Unable to bear the injustice, Izzy broke her teacher's violin bow and threw the pieces in her face.

Izzy's outbursts and disruptive qualities have previously been benign. This is the first violent thing she's done, and she still doesn't feel as if it made enough of a statement. Izzy's actions at this point are motivated almost entirely by altruism, even if there is a tinge of desire to act out and continue in her role as a rebellious disruptor—a role that has become comfortable, or at least expected for Izzy. This scene also shows some explicit racism beneath Shaker Heights' façade of equality and happy prosperity.



Izzy is frustrated with having been suspended when she believes she was standing up for what was right. Mia asks her what she plans to “do” about her circumstances, and, Izzy, never having been asked that question before, is shocked to discover that she has agency over her life and choices.

A bit later, Izzy, with “the heart of a radical but the experience of a fourteen-year-old living in the suburban Midwest,” reveals her plan to toilet paper Mrs. Peters’s house. However, Moody, Pearl, and Mia advise against it. Mia recalls a student at her own high school having glued the lock in a teacher’s door shut. Izzy hears a “permission” in Mia’s words and, using them as a jumping-off point, devises a plan. She then ropes Moody and Pearl into helping her.

Moody, Pearl, and Izzy “immobilize” their high school in under ten minutes by inserting toothpicks into every locked door and snapping the ends off. As teachers arrive to their classrooms, the instructors further jam the locks by inserting their keys, and delight and confusion overtake the hallways. While the school’s janitor makes his way through repairs, Mrs. Peters, hung over and chugging a large thermos of coffee, becomes increasingly agitated by her inability to access the locked faculty restroom. She finally deigns to use the student bathroom, but urinates all over the floor before she can make it to the toilet. She is humiliated, and earns the nickname “Mrs. Pissers.”

In the wake of the prank, toothpicks are banned from school, and Izzy and Deja experience a moment of silent solidarity—Mrs. Peters now leaves Deja alone. The prank’s largest side effect, though, is Izzy’s respect for and adoration of Mia Warren, who has given her permission to “delight in mischief [and] in breaking the rules.” She goes to the house on Winslow and begs Mia to allow her to become her **photography** assistant, offering to work for free. Something in Izzy “reache[s] out to [Mia] and [catches] **fire**,” and Mia agrees to take Izzy under her wing.

Though the word manipulation can carry dark connotations, Mia is manipulating Izzy in a positive way here: she is showing her the power of her own actions and the validity of her thoughts and emotions. It seems that Izzy had gotten much validation or affirmation from her own mother.



Izzy, Moody, and Pearl are excited to finally have an adult’s approval as they plan a major disruption. Mia giving them “permission” to act out is left vague—she wants them to be able to express themselves and seek justice for a classmate, but her own desire to create mischief plays a key role in her help as well. This also sets a precedent for Izzy taking Mia’s advice too literally sometimes.



Izzy’s prank results in her classmates’ delight and Mrs. Peters’s humiliation. Izzy could never have foreseen the way her disruption would unfold, but her manipulation of circumstances to achieve Mrs. Peters’s complete embarrassment definitely delivers justice as Izzy sees fit.



Izzy knows that she couldn’t have pulled off the prank—and wouldn’t even have thought to do it in the first place—if not for Mia, who gave her confidence and the realization of her own agency. The “fire” that sparks between them is a symbol both of chaos and renewal—a new chapter in both their lives, as they’ll begin to seek things from one another and give to one another as well.



CHAPTER 8

Izzy walks to the house on Winslow every day after school to work as Mia's **photography** assistant. Meanwhile, Pearl does the "exact reverse," accompanying Moody home to lounge in the living room with him, Lexie, and Trip. Pearl is "grateful" to Izzy for absorbing her mother's attention, and happy to not be cooped up with Mia alone any longer. Izzy, meanwhile, begins to "absorb Mia's aesthetics and sensibilities." She asks Mia to explain her work step by step, and Mia tells her that she doesn't have a plan—that "no one really does, no matter what they say." Izzy tells Mia that Mrs. Richardson has a plan for everything, and also states that her mother "hates her." Mia tells Izzy that's not true, though she does concede that there is a "peculiar dynamic" between Mrs. Richardson and Izzy, in which Mrs. Richardson is harsher on her than any of her other children. Izzy begins to spend their afternoons together "pretend[ing] that Mia [is] her true mother."

On a class trip to an art museum in the middle of November, Pearl and Moody step into a special exhibit called "Madonna and Child." There they encounter a black-and-white **photograph** which seems to feature Mia holding a newborn baby. Pearl wonders if the infant in the photograph is her, but she and Moody are called away—the class is leaving the museum. Their classmates tease them about having stayed behind together. After school, they convince Lexie to drive them back to the museum, where the three of them more or less confirm that it is indeed Mia in the photograph; the print, attributed to an artist named Pauline Hawthorne, is titled *Virgin and Child #1*. Lexie wonders if Mia is "secretly famous."

Lexie drives Pearl and Moody back to the Richardson house, where Mia is preparing the Richardsons' dinner while Izzy watches. At Lexie's nudging, Pearl confronts Mia about the **photograph**, but Mia is defensive and refuses to answer any of Pearl's questions. Moody and Lexie continue to press Mia, asking if she knows anyone named Pauline Hawthorne. Mia snaps at the children and denies her ability to remember all she's done over the years to try and provide for herself and for Pearl. Pearl, regretful of having put her mother on the spot, drops the subject. Mia is "silent" the rest of the evening, as the two of them return home and eat dinner. The next morning, back at their home on Winslow Road, Mia acts as if nothing has happened.

Izzy and Pearl are experiencing a mutual disruption of one another's lives. Izzy, after years under the thumb and watchful eye of her picture-perfect, overbearing mother, longs for the freedom that her relationship with Mia represents. Meanwhile, Pearl, after a life of transience and impermanence, is drawn to the structure, order, and propriety that Mrs. Richardson—and the entire Richardson family, save for Izzy—represents. Both girls are living in a sort of fantasy version of each other's lives, trying on the other's identity and romanticizing all that comes with it. However, Izzy doesn't realize the difficulties that have marked Pearl's life, and Pearl can't imagine the troubles that have accompanied Izzy's.



When Pearl sees herself and her mother captured on film together, she is reminded of their shared bond, even though they are in a difficult moment in their relationship. Seeing her mother in a photo that's never been mentioned, though, and which was taken in a time in her life which Mia never talks about—and thus having no answers for her curious friends—reignites both Pearl's insecurities in her own identity, and her curiosity about her mother's true identity as well.



Pearl has betrayed the trust of her relationship with her mother by confronting her in front of the Richardsons and attempting to manipulate her into an answer, when she knows on some level that Mia already views the constant presence of the Richardsons as a threat to the security of her and Pearl's special bond. Even in private, though, Mia refuses to answer—or even acknowledge—Pearl's questions about her history and her identity, revealing a deeper and even more mysterious reluctance to talk to her daughter about her past.



Izzy, hungry for answers that will help her understand Mia, researches Pauline Hawthorne but can't find any connection between her and Mia despite learning that Hawthorne was a "pioneer of modern photography" and died of cancer in 1982. Izzy enlists her mother to help with her research. Mrs. Richardson, touched by Izzy's faith in her journalistic capabilities and frustrated with her frequent puff-piece assignments, thrills at having something worthwhile to investigate. She remembers her youthful passion for journalism. Though a hard worker throughout high school and college, she could never make it to Cleveland's city newspaper, and has continued to report on "feel-good" stories from the safety of Shaker Heights.

After stopping by the art museum to view the **photograph** and take down the name of the gallery that supplied it for the exhibit—the photo had sold originally for fifty thousand dollars—Mrs. Richardson contacts Anita Rees, an art dealer in New York responsible for the sale. Anita Rees who dodges her questions about both Mia and Pauline, stating that "the original owner of the photo wished to remain anonymous." Mrs. Richardson, discouraged but still feeling that there is "some strange mystery waiting to be unraveled", returns to her assigned work for the newspaper. She recalls that it was Izzy who sent her down this futile "rabbit hole" in the first place.

CHAPTER 9

Mrs. Richardson remains annoyed with Izzy for the rest of the week—though she admits "she [is] usually annoyed with Izzy." Mrs. Richardson reflects on the reasons for her difficult relationship with her youngest daughter. Mrs. Richardson told Mr. Richardson when they married that she wanted to have a large family, and he agreed. After having Lexie, Trip, and Moody, Mrs. Richardson pushed for one more, and Mr. Richardson again agreed. After a difficult pregnancy marked by illness and bed rest, Mrs. Richardson gave birth to Izzy eleven weeks early. Izzy spent months in the hospital and grew into a healthy baby, despite her mother's constant fear of the many complications that plague premature babies. Mrs. Richardson continued to scan Izzy for troubles even after she returned home, and kept up with her worry all throughout Izzy's childhood, placing a "microscopic focus" on everything Izzy did. Mr. Richardson, throughout the years, has urged his wife to "let [Izzy] be," but Mrs. Richardson cannot.

Izzy and Mrs. Richardson experience a moment of strength in their bond when Izzy acknowledges her mother's talents and capabilities. Mrs. Richardson, both flattered by Izzy and still suspicious of Mia's past, agrees without skipping a beat, eager to impose order: firstly, on the revelation of Mia's past, which she wants to assert control over; secondly, on her own identity as a journalist, which she feels is languishing or failing to thrive due to her constant assignments of puff pieces and "easy" journalism.



Mrs. Richardson, though initially inspired by Izzy's faith in her, finds herself questioning her capabilities and identity as a journalist, revealing a crack in the smooth appearance of her identity as a journalist and a career woman. The speed with which she blames her lack of findings on her daughter also demonstrates the schism in their relationship and Mrs. Richardson's deep-seated need to have control over Izzy, rather than allowing Izzy to have any power over her (or any real agency of her own).



Mrs. Richardson has feared for Izzy's well-being every moment since her birth, and has thus attempted to control and manipulate her out of fear for her well-being, creating friction between the two of them. One of the novel's most profound examples of misplaced altruism which actually results in harmful manipulation, Mrs. Richardson's attempts to control Izzy have made Izzy into the willful disruptor she is today. The relationship between the two of them is now marked by mutual distrust, and Mrs. Richardson's reflection on her difficult history with Izzy is perhaps brought on by the arrival of a healthier, more mutually respectful mother-daughter relationship in all their lives: the one between Pearl and Mia.



The week after Thanksgiving, the Richardsons are invited to attend a birthday party thrown by their friends, the McCulloughs. Moody and Izzy want to invite Pearl, but Mrs. Richardson refuses, telling them that “Pearl is not part of the family.” The Richardsons take two cars to the party, which is “full to overflowing” and luxuriously decorated and catered.

Mirabelle McCullough, the birthday girl, is in Mrs. McCullough’s arms—she and her husband are in the process of adopting the baby. Mirabelle first arrived at the McCullough household almost a year ago. The McCulloughs, who had been on the waitlist to adopt a baby, received a call saying that an Asian baby had been left at a fire station. By that afternoon the baby—originally named May Ling—was theirs. While Lexie and her mother gush over the baby, Izzy needles Mrs. McCullough for having assigned May Ling a “random” birthday and changing her birth name. Mrs. McCullough tells Izzy that she wanted to give Mirabelle a new name to “celebrate the start of her new life,” and Mrs. Richardson chastises Izzy for misbehaving.

Moody and Trip remark on Lexie’s obsession with the baby. Moody teases Trip about the “dozens of girls” who are going to have “baby Trips,” while Trip teases Moody about the fact that “in order to knock someone up, someone has to actually sleep with you.” Lexie gets a tour of May Ling’s nursery, and begs to hold her again and again throughout the party. Moody tells Lexie that May Ling is “a baby, not a toy.” After the party, Lexie’s “baby fever” only grows stronger. Trip jokes to Brian, Lexie’s boyfriend, that he had better be careful.

On Monday, when Mia arrives to prepare dinner, Lexie continues to gush about May Ling. She tells Mia the “mirac[ulous]” story of how the McCulloughs came to adopt May Ling after she was left at a fire station. Though Mia’s job at the Richardsons’ pays her rent, she has kept a few of her shifts at Lucky Palace to earn some more money on the side—and Mia recalls a conversation with a coworker, Bebe Chow, in which Bebe confessed to having left her child at a fire station about a year ago. Bebe had divulged to Mia the difficulties she faced as a young, single immigrant mother dealing with what was, more than likely, undiagnosed postpartum depression.

Mrs. Richardson attempts to reestablish order and redraw her family’s boundary lines, with Pearl firmly on the outside. Her struggle to define family boundaries mirrors the McCulloughs’ impending struggle to similarly create a definition of what constitutes a family and a familial identity.



The McCulloughs are both altruists and manipulators. They have hungered for a child for years, and the arrival of May Ling seemed like fate—she fell, almost literally, into their laps. However, they have already begun to erase May Ling’s history and identity by reassigning her a new name and a new “birthday.” Though their actions are, at heart, benevolent, Izzy is the first to see them as thoughtlessly and irresponsibly forcing a kind of assimilation onto May Ling.



Lexie’s tactile and emotional obsession with May Ling highlights May Ling’s lack of agency, her constantly manipulated identity, and her status as a “toy” or object for many characters in the novel. Though the McCulloughs are kind and loving, this introduction foreshadows their inability to fully understand or care for their daughter, who may be the victim of misguided altruism.



By reducing May Ling—or Mirabelle—to being a “miracle,” rather than a person with heritage, identity, and agency, Lexie joins the McCulloughs in imposing an “order” onto May Ling and attempting to manipulate her personhood. Mia’s realization that Bebe is May Ling’s mother reignites her altruistic tendencies and her desire to repair a mother-daughter relationship, as her own relationship to Pearl is changing.



Mia knows that Bebe is now “desperate” to find her child, and Mia feels that Bebe is stable now. Though she has developed “one rule” of transient life, which is to never get attached or involved, Mia decides, after careful reflection upon her own close relationship with Pearl, to help Bebe. She has a “sense of what she [is] starting,” feeling the sensation of wafting “smoke from a far-off **blaze**,” but decides that it is “unbearable” to imagine Bebe without her child. Upon returning home from the Richardsons’ that evening, Mia picks up the phone and calls Bebe.

The audience doesn’t yet know the full story of Mia’s past—and her true reason for being so motivated to help Bebe reconnect with her daughter, despite the fact that another family has already taken steps to claim her as their own. Mia cements her status as a disruptor in Shaker Heights by taking the leap to help Bebe, even though she can tell that she is putting a “blaze” (another example of fire as an image of chaos and disruption) in motion.



CHAPTER 10

On Tuesday evening, Pearl and Mia’s doorbell rings, and someone knocks frantically at the door. Bebe Chow has arrived, having been turned away from the McCullough house. After knocking and ringing the doorbell there, Bebe saw Mrs. McCullough peeking out from behind the curtain. Mia tells Bebe she shouldn’t have gone over uninvited. Bebe explains, though, that she called first and spoke to Mrs. McCullough, who hung up on her. Bebe then took a long journey over to their home, and told Mrs. McCullough through the door that she just wanted to talk, but no one would answer. Eventually, a Lexus and a police car pulled up, and Mr. McCullough, along with two policemen, told Bebe to leave the property—“You have no right to be here,” Mr. McCullough told her. Bebe could hear May Ling crying as the policemen pulled her away from the house. Bebe asks Mia what she should do. Pearl suggests she gets a lawyer, but Bebe says she has no money. Mia, having thought long and hard about what she would do if she were in Bebe’s position, begins to tell her what she must do to “fight this fight.”

Bebe has begun to emerge as a disrupting force in Shaker Heights. Her visit to the McCulloughs perturbs the couple, and though Mr. McCullough tells her she has “no right” to attempt to see her child, the truth of this claim will soon become a major issue throughout the entire community. When Bebe seeks comfort and guidance from Mia, Mia continues to manipulate Bebe, though she is doing so for altruistic reasons—she believes she is standing up for what is right. Now that she has taken action, Mia is inextricably bound to Bebe’s situation, and she uses her knowledge of how Shaker Heights operates to concoct a plan to help level the playing field for Bebe. Mia’s attachment to her own identity as a mother is a strong motivator in her actions as she helps Bebe to reestablish hers.



The following afternoon, during **Jerry Springer**, the Richardson children do not notice the commercials for the evening news. No one in the Richardson household or the McCullough family watches the news that evening but, the following morning, Mrs. McCullough answers the doorbell with May Ling on her hip only to find a news crew on her front steps. Mrs. McCullough quickly shuts the door, but the news team catches footage of a “slender white woman, looking angry and afraid, clutching [a] screaming Asian baby in her arms.” When Mr. McCullough arrives at work, one of his coworkers alerts him to the coverage on the news the night before. The news did an interview with Bebe, who told the team that she has her life together and that the McCulloughs have no right to her child—“a child belong with her mother,” she says. Mr. McCullough leaves work immediately.

The disturbance of the news stories about Bebe, May Ling, and the McCulloughs speaks to the wafting scent of the oncoming blaze Mia described in the previous chapter. The “little fire” of Bebe’s claim on May Ling has begun to ignite, and issues related to the themes of mother-daughter relationships, identity and assimilation, and the role of altruism are about to spark. The work Bebe has done—with Mia’s help—to raise these issues publicly demonstrates Mia’s altruistic endeavor—her aid in helping Bebe to manipulate public favor and tip the scales away from the McCulloughs—already at work.



Bebe stops at Mia's house to tell her that the team who interviewed her believes her story is "a good story," and that "people [will] really get behind [her.]" After Bebe's segment aired, the station was indeed flooded with calls, and a follow-up was ordered. The next evening, Mrs. McCullough and Mrs. Richardson watch the news together and commiserate. Mrs. McCullough's lawyer has told her that she is on "solid footing," and that Bebe's grievance is "with the state." Mrs. Richardson tells Mrs. McCullough that the news will blow over soon—but it does not. News teams continue to hound the McCulloughs, and the story is featured each night. A local lawyer named Ed Lim offers to represent Bebe Chow pro bono.

The Richardsons, gathered together for dinner, discuss the case. Mr. Richardson has agreed to work as the McCulloughs' representation, telling his family that "they just want to do right by the baby." Izzy calls her father a "baby stealer," and is sent to her room. As she leaves the table, she suggests to her father that the McCulloughs "bargain" with Bebe and "pay her off." Mrs. Richardson plans to confiscate Izzy's beloved Doc Martens.

The next morning, while reading an article in the newspaper about the McCullough case, Mrs. Richardson comes across a tidbit which describes how Bebe was informed of her daughter's whereabouts by one of her coworkers at Lucky Palace—a coworker whom Mrs. Richardson suddenly realizes must be Mia. Mrs. Richardson thinks of Mia's standoffishness and quietness about her past, even after the kindness Mrs. Richardson has shown her. Mia takes "perverse pleasure in flaunting the normal order," she thinks.

The following morning, Mia arrives for work at the Richardsons' house. Mrs. Richardson, who believes that Mia is "dangerous" because she doesn't care what anyone thinks of her, has waited to leave the house until Mia arrived so that she can look her "in the eyes." Rather than confronting Mia about her involvement with Bebe, Mrs. Richardson privately resolves to intensify her own investigation into Mia's past, though she refuses to admit to herself the truth: that she is doing so as retribution for Mia's ruining Mrs. McCullough's happiness.

The divisive nature of Bebe's story, and the appeal it has as a piece of journalism which the public of Shaker Heights consumes, is completely unpredictable—much like a wildfire in this usually peaceful and orderly community. As Bebe begins to win over many people's sympathy, she also wins the support of a lawyer—a tool that will help her "fight this fight," which was one of Mia's goals for her all along.



The divisive power of the Chow-McCullough case is on display right in the middle of the Richardsons' seemingly idyllic home. Fault lines begin to form, dividing the members of the Richardson clan into camps, with Izzy, as usual, firmly on the side of the opposition.



The revelation that Mia has been Bebe's champion from the get-go disturbs Mrs. Richardson for a number of reasons. Mrs. Richardson's close friendship with Mrs. McCullough is a major one, but so too is her obsession with Mia's lack of regard for order or authority. Unable to look at things from any perspective other than her own, Mrs. Richardson becomes quietly enraged.



Mrs. Richardson's anger at Mia's friendship with Bebe and her assistance in getting the case off the ground reveals her complete lack of tolerance for anyone other than her engaging in manipulative behavior. She believes that Mrs. McCullough, has the right to be May Ling's mother, and decides to attack Mia's identity as a mother in return.



CHAPTER 11

Mrs. Richardson reads up on Pauline Hawthorne—she’s heard of her before, but doesn’t know much about her. She rediscovers Pauline’s famous photographs and learns that Pauline taught at the New York School of Fine Arts, although her photographs at the time were selling for enormous sums and she had no need of a teaching salary. When Mrs. Richardson contacts the school there is no record of Mia Warren, however there is a record of Mia Wright. Mrs. Richardson learns that Mia Wright had been granted a leave of absence after only one year of school, and had not returned. Hitting a dead end, Mrs. Richardson next plans to attack her research from another point of view: through Pearl.

Lexie is admitted to Yale and, to celebrate, Mrs. Richardson offers to take Lexie, Izzy, and Pearl out for a fancy girls’ lunch. Pearl is surprised by the invitation, but Mrs. Richardson tells Pearl that she is “practically part of the family.” Izzy finds Mrs. Richardson’s interest in Pearl strange, and asks why Pearl is invited. Mrs. Richardson frames the invitation as one of generosity.

On the day of the lunch, which is held at a crowded and glamorous buffet-style restaurant where the Richardsons go “for very special occasions,” Mrs. Richardson carefully steers the conversation to Pearl’s heritage. She asks where Pearl was born and where else she’s lived, preying on Pearl’s desire to impress her to get Pearl to talk. Pearl tells her that she and Mia have lived all over, and reveals that she was born in San Francisco, but that she and Mia did not spend much time there at all—“we never stay in any place too long,” she says. Mrs. Richardson tells Pearl that roots are important—her grandparents were some of the founding citizens of Shaker Heights. Pearl says that she doesn’t know anything about her family, and reflects privately on how Mia has never told her anything about her heritage.

Mrs. Richardson’s manipulations will not stop at the adults around her—she quickly moves on to seeing Pearl as a viable option for exposing Mia’s past, unaware that Pearl has, at times, been just as desperate for answers about her own identity as Mrs. Richardson is for answers about Mia’s. Mrs. Richardson’s search is now, too, bound up in her hopes of confirming her own identity as a competent journalist. She must succeed no matter what it takes—even if it involves the innocent Pearl.



Reversing her stance on Pearl’s inclusion in the family for the sake of manipulating her daughter, Mrs. Richardson sets up the perfect scenario for a ruthless manipulation of Pearl’s naiveté and joy to be included in a Richardson family outing. And in typical fashion, Mrs. Richardson disguises this (even to herself) as altruism.



Mrs. Richardson proves herself to be a master manipulator as the celebratory brunch commences. She plays off of Pearl’s insecurities about her own identity and her desire—of which Mrs. Richardson is well aware—to fit in with the Richardsons and to impress Mrs. Richardson herself. Though Pearl is unaware of what is going on, Mrs. Richardson’s manipulations nonetheless affect her deeply, causing her to question her relationship with her own mother and to her own identity.



Mrs. Richardson, working off of the information obtained from Pearl, contacts the San Francisco Office of Vital Records, and requests a copy of Pearl's birth certificate. It takes five weeks for the birth certificate to arrive; when it does, the space for Pearl's father's name is blank, but Mia's birthplace is listed on the certificate as Bethel Park, Pennsylvania. Mrs. Richardson believes there is "something unseemly about [Mia's] unwillingness to state [her] origins plainly." Mrs. Richardson contacts the Bethel Park directory assistance hotline, and receives a tip that someone named Mia Wright was born in 1962, and a boy named Warren Wright was born two years later. After researching Warren Wright, Mrs. Richardson finds that the boy died at 17 years old. She then finds his obituary, which lists his parents as Mr. and Mrs. George Wright and his older sister as Mia Wright. Mrs. Richardson, from the Bethel Park directory, obtains the Wrights' home address and phone number, almost disappointed with how easy it is to "figure out anything" about anyone.

Even in the midst of the Lewinsky scandal, the Chow/McCullough case remains prominent in the local news. As Shaker Heights is a "standard-bearer" in the larger Cleveland community, many people are paying attention to the case. Moreover, it has come to be seen as an issue of more than just who has the right to the child—it is, many feel, a race issue. Though some feel that the McCulloughs are "rescuing" May Ling, other members of the public interviewed on the news—including Serena Wong's mother—take issue with the fact that May Ling, if she stays with the McCulloughs, will "grow up not knowing anything about her heritage." The McCulloughs give a rare interview, showing off their large and warm home, and focusing on the Asian art that hangs throughout their house. The McCulloughs brag about May Ling's love of rice, "her first solid food," and their plans to raise her as a "typical American girl, exactly the same as everyone else."

The Richardsons continue to bicker back and forth about the case. Mrs. Richardson and Lexie side with the McCulloughs, as does Mr. Richardson, while Moody and Izzy, inspired by Pearl and Mia, take Bebe's side. Lexie and Brian also argue amongst themselves about May Ling—Brian's father has sided with the McCulloughs, but his mother is unsure. Lexie asks Brian what he thinks, and though he agrees with his father, he thinks that "there [is] something about the little brown body in Mrs. McCullough's pale arms that discomfit[s] him."

Mrs. Richardson is a tireless and patient researcher. She is a good journalist and she is once again, ignited by her desire to topple Mia, firm in her identity as a reporter. She has a clear goal in mind—to discover the truth about Mia in order to "bring her down"—and will do everything in her power to watch it come to fruition. Her disappointment in how easy it ultimately is to discover a large chunk of Mia's past is representative of her feelings of superiority and her inability to understand the things that truly make up one's identity—not just the hard, concrete facts of their lives, but who they are as a person.



Themes of order and disruption are at work in this passage, as the whole town of Shaker Heights—and the larger Cleveland community—begins to pay rapt attention to the case, waiting to see whether the "order" of the status quo or the disruption of that order will win in the end. Meanwhile, the McCulloughs prove themselves woefully unprepared to handle the media circus that has recently enveloped them, as well as the questions about identity and assimilation that arise around the issue of how they will handle raising their daughter with an awareness of her birth culture.



The case is shown to have the power to disrupt private familial and romantic relationships as well as public opinion. While the Richardsons continue to argue the nuances of the case and take sides, Lexie—who prefers (and has the privilege) not to "see" race—must reckon with the fact that there is more to the case than she is willing to admit in the wake of hearing Brian's opinion.



Meanwhile, Bebe Chow has attained visitation rights with her daughter, once a week for two hours, a development about which Mrs. McCullough is deeply distressed. Bebe, for her part, is upset that her visits with May Ling must be at the library or in another public place while a social worker hovers over her. The McCulloughs have invited Bebe to visit May Ling in their home, but Bebe refused, not wanting to “sit and smile while they steal [her] baby.” Mrs. McCullough confides in Mrs. Richardson that she hates giving “her” baby over to the social worker, and has begun to fear that they will not win custody of May Ling after all.

Mrs. Richardson’s anger at Mia over Mrs. McCullough’s pain continues to burn. She reflects upon her own family history, and the order that her grandparents and parents worked to instill in the community and abide by in their own lives, even as the world outside Shaker Heights was often divided and tumultuous. Mrs. Richardson has been brought up to believe that everyone is equal and that those in a position to do so should help those in need.

In her own youth, in the late sixties, Mrs. Richardson did not join the protests in Washington—“where would she sleep,” she remembers thinking. Though a college friend asked her to go to California with him, she refused: “passion, like **fire**,” she thought then and thinks now, is “dangerous.” Her thoughts circle back to Mia, who lives a disorderly life, “dragging” Pearl from place to place, and “heedlessly throwing sparks” throughout Shaker Heights. Fuming over the fact that Mia gets to do whatever she wants “when no one else” does, Mrs. Richardson resolves to take a trip to Pennsylvania to finally solve the mystery of Mia’s past.

CHAPTER 12

Pearl feels that everything around her lately is “saturated with sex.” The Lewinsky scandal has just broken, and all through school students are cracking jokes and telling stories about President Clinton’s affair. Pearl realizes that everyone around her knows more about sex than she does.

Bebe Chow’s visitation rights signal her ability to affect not just public opinion and private discussions, but the flow of the actual relationship between May Ling and Mrs. McCullough. The McCulloughs realize the power of this, and are frightened by it. Bebe is on the path to reclaiming her identity as a mother, and she hopes this is just the beginning of a reconnection with her daughter.



Mrs. Richardson’s new hatred of Mia is tied up in Mia’s ability to shirk the order that has defined Mrs. Richardson’s life. Mrs. Richardson’s reflections on all the times when she has, throughout her life, attempted to avoid chaos in favor of order displays clearly the profound differences in her and Mia.



Where so much of Mia’s identity is tied up in passion and independence, Mrs. Richardson avoids anything “fiery” or impulsive, believing it to be dangerous and selfish. Ultimately, Mrs. Richardson’s decision to move forward with her investigation of Mia (and to take the drastic step of going to Pennsylvania) stems not from her desire to avenge Mrs. McCullough, but to silence a woman who is more secure in her agency, identity, and lack of need for the order that has stifled Mrs. Richardson for so long—whether she can see she’s been stifled or not. In a way, then, Mrs. Richardson is almost jealous of Mia, though she would never admit this.



The presence of yet another scandal (President Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky and the impeachment proceedings accompanying it) results in Pearl having to reckon, in a unique way and independently of the other characters, with her own identity.



Pearl arrives at the Richardson household one afternoon to find it empty except for Trip. She is excited to be alone in the house with him: anything, she thinks, might happen. She joins Trip on the couch and helps him with his math homework, and then the two begin to kiss. Pearl takes Trip by the hand and leads him upstairs to his bedroom, and the two have sex. Pearl is eager and excited; it is her first time. She is “thrilled” by the effect she has on Trip. Shortly after it’s all over, the two of them get dressed and Pearl leaves, afraid that she will somehow look different to her mother and to her friends. Trip tells her that he’ll see her tomorrow.

That night, Pearl is relieved to find that Mia doesn’t seem to notice anything is different, though Pearl spent all afternoon checking her reflection in the bathroom mirror. As soon as she and Mia are done eating, Pearl goes to her bedroom to “mull” over her afternoon and what her and Trip’s status might be. The following morning, when Moody arrives at the house on Winslow to walk her to school, she cannot meet his eye.

Pearl feigns normalcy throughout the school day, both excited and afraid to run into Trip in the hallway. After school, Pearl tells Lexie and Moody that she isn’t feeling well, and goes home instead of to the Richardson’s house—she doesn’t want to see Trip again for the first time in front of the two of them. The following day after school, Trip approaches Pearl at her locker, and asks her what she’s up to. She tells him that she has plans with Moody, “unless [Trip] has a better idea.” Both of them run silently through all the places they could possibly go to be alone, and Trip quickly comes up with an idea. He pages his friend Tim Michaels, and Tim tells Trip that his basement is free if Trip wants to use it. Pearl intuits that Trip has brought many girls to Tim’s basement, but Trip assures her that she is the only one he wants to be there with now. Pearl decides she doesn’t care about the other girls anyway.

Once at Tim Michaels’s house, Pearl feels guilty, remembering that Moody will be waiting for her outside the science wing at school for their walk home together. However, as soon Trip opens the door and takes her hand, she forgets her worries. After the two have sex again, Pearl asks Trip if they’re dating, or if it’s “just a thing.” She wants to know, she says, what it is she’s “getting into.” Trip tells her that he doesn’t want to see anyone else, and Pearl believes he is being sincere. She tells him that Moody and Lexie will “freak out” upon hearing that they’re together, so Trip suggests they keep their relationship a secret, and Pearl agrees.

The beginning of Pearl and Trip’s relationship—and the fact that it is Pearl who initiates much of it—signals a moment of growth and shows the comfort she draws from being around the Richardsons. Pearl has been described by almost every character up to this point as “shy,” but the initiative she takes with Trip shows that there is much more to Pearl than meets the eye: she has manipulated a situation, and an entire relationship, based on her desires.



Pearl is relieved to realize that though having sex has been a pivotal experience for her, and has changed the way she perceived herself, it has not changed the way people see her. Her friendship with Moody, though, which has defined so much of her time in Shaker Heights, has experienced a disruption.



Pearl’s initial insecurity about seeing Trip again stems from her fear of confronting him in front of his family, and having to portray two identities at once: the Pearl the Richardsons know, and the Pearl that Trip now knows. When they do meet again, though relieved to find that the other is still interested and excited, Trip and Pearl are each fearful of disrupting the careful relationship that has formed between their families. The two units are so bound up in one another that the revelation of an even deeper intimacy between Pearl and Trip would surely upset those closest to each of them—especially Lexie and Moody, who each feel they have a claim on Pearl.



Pearl’s guilt almost seems to fuel her desire for Trip even more—she has witnessed, over and over, each of the Richardsons shamelessly taking what they want, and now is doing the same for herself. She longs to pin down the nature of her and Trip’s relationship, but ultimately decides that it isn’t worth disrupting the relationship she has built with the rest of the Richardson family.



Tim Michaels hounds Trip to tell him who the new “mystery” girl is as Trip sneaks off every day to meet Pearl at Tim’s house. Though Pearl longs to tell Lexie, she knows that the whole school would know “within a week.” Pearl thinks of Moody, and knows there is no way she could ever tell him—she is aware of his feelings for her, and remembers a moment when the two of them went to see *Titanic* and he took her hand. She begins lying to Moody, leaving notes on his locker telling him that she needs to stay late at school when really she’s sneaking off to meet Trip. Mr. Yang is the only person who sees Trip and Pearl together, one afternoon when they are making out in Trip’s Jeep. Mr. Yang recalls his own youth in Hong Kong, and thinks that “the young are the same, always and everywhere.”

The tension between Pearl and Moody, which existed, at least for Moody, from the very start of their friendship, has now become unbearable. Rather than disrupt the friendship she’s built with Moody, Pearl chooses to lie, manipulating the circumstances of their friendship to accommodate her dalliance with Trip without sacrificing her hold on Moody. Mr. Yang’s role as a silent observer of Trip and Pearl’s affair—the only observer, at this point—both demonstrates how well they’re hiding their relationship and allows for a commentary on the fluid nature of identity and the “sameness” shared by “the young.”



Lexie and Brian have been having sex as often as they can since Halloween, often at Brian’s house but occasionally in Lexie’s car beneath a quilt. Lexie dreams of a future with Brian. The two of them are irresponsible when it comes to condom use, and one day Lexie decides to take a pregnancy test—it’s positive.

Lexie’s “baby fever” from the previous chapters has not prepared her for the reality of a pregnancy. Though Lexie is inching toward adulthood, she is still irresponsible, and has created a major problem as a result.



At first, Lexie believes she’ll be able to keep the baby. After raising the subject of a baby with Brian, talking first about May Ling and then about their own future babies, Brian shuts her down quickly, telling her that “everybody would say, oh look, another black kid, knocked a girl up before he graduated.” Realizing that Brian is right, and that teen pregnancy is not at all the Shaker Heights way, Lexie concedes to herself that she must have an abortion.

Lexie realizes she won’t be able to fulfill her dream of attending Yale and her dream of being a mother at the same time—and, hearing Brian’s concerns, realizes there are layers to the issue that she’s selfishly never even considered. A baby would disrupt her and Brian’s entire lives, and Lexie knows that she must make a difficult decision.



At dinner, Mrs. Richardson tells her family that she’ll be traveling to Pittsburgh for research on an article she’s writing, much to Lexie’s relief. The following morning, Lexie pretends to be running late and then, when the house is empty, calls a local clinic and makes an appointment for the first day of her mother’s trip.

The Richardsons are quickly devolving, one by one, into a web of secrets and lies that they must keep from one another. Lexie and Mrs. Richardson, the two members of the family most alike, are especially mirroring one another’s behavior and falling into similar patterns.



The night before the appointment, and before her mother leaves for Pittsburgh, Lexie calls Pearl and tells her that she “need[s]” her—she is having an abortion. Pearl is in disbelief, but doesn’t judge Lexie, and agrees to accompany her. In the morning, Lexie picks Pearl up from the house on Winslow. Pearl has told Mia that Lexie is giving her a ride to school. Pearl asks Lexie if she is sure about her decision. Lexie experiences a moment of panic, but decides that she is.

Lexie is leaning heavily on Pearl and is making herself vulnerable. Pearl responds with altruism and open-mindedness, though she does question Lexie in the morning. Lexie is facing the biggest decision of her life thus far, and Pearl wants to make sure that she is secure in it—otherwise, it could derail her happiness in a big way.



At the abortion clinic, Lexie gives the receptionist Pearl's name—she has made the appointment for herself under Pearl Warren. Furthermore, she tells the receptionist that Pearl is her sister, and will be responsible for driving her home. Pearl is upset at the fact that Lexie used her as an alias, but Lexie tells her it's "just a name," and then Pearl begrudgingly agrees to help Lexie to fill out her intake forms. When it is Lexie's turn she heads back into the clinic. Pearl wishes that they really were sisters, and had nothing to hide from each other.

Lexie has thoughtlessly co-opted Pearl's identity for her own selfish reasons—to disguise herself from being stigmatized or seen as falling out of the order of Shaker Heights. A manipulator just like her mother, Lexie knows that Pearl will go along with whatever she asks of her, and Lexie feels entitled to Pearl's help and even her identity (in the form of her name). Pearl nonetheless feels a great tenderness for Lexie, and wishes that their identities and relationship to one another really were bound by blood.



Meanwhile, Mrs. Richardson has arrived at the Wrights' home in Pittsburgh after driving excitedly nonstop for three hours. She introduces herself using her real name, but claims to be writing an article on "promising teen athletes whose careers were cut short," and proceeds to interview them about Warren. Mrs. Richardson, finding the Wrights to be easy interview subjects, quickly turns the conversation to Mia, asking the Wrights to provide her with Mia's contact information—but the Wrights admit that they have been estranged from Mia for many years. The Wrights almost eagerly tell Mrs. Richardson that they cut ties with Mia when she came home for Warren's funeral pregnant, carrying a baby for a couple called the Ryans.

Mrs. Richardson, thrilled by the prospect of uncovering the truth about Mia, arrives at the Wright home, where she disrupts the order of their lives and reminds them of their difficult past. Mrs. Richardson lies to the Wrights in order to manipulate them into providing her with answers as to Mia's background. It is revealed that it was Mia's role as a mother—even as a surrogate mother—which destroyed her relationship with her family and drove a lasting wedge between them.



CHAPTER 13

The narrative jumps backward in time to the fall of 1980. Mia, newly eighteen, has just left Bethel Park for New York City, where she will enroll as a freshman at the New York School of Fine Arts. Mia has never been outside of Pennsylvania before, and did not tell her parents that she'd applied to art school until she was accepted. She has had keen observational skills and a sensitivity to things around her since childhood, and so her parents are not thrilled but also not surprised that she has chosen to pursue **photography**.

Mia has been an artist since childhood—it is an identity she has honed, practiced, and embraced since she can remember. In coming to New York for art school, Mia is about to fully nurture and realize that identity for the first time in her life, despite the friction it creates between herself and her parents, who believe staunchly in their own kind of order.



Mia had always believed in the power of transformation, and her brother, Warren, only a year younger than her, was the only one who understood the way she saw the world. Just shy of her twelfth birthday, Mia discovered **photography**, just as Warren discovered sports. She purchased a camera from a junk shop in town, and began to take "odd" photos of dilapidated houses and animal corpses. Her parents considered the prints she ordered from the pharmacy a "waste of money," as well as time, though Mia was beginning to understand how photographs worked. One of the Wright family's elderly neighbors, having noticed Mia taking pictures around the neighborhood, told her she had a "good eye" and lent her a Nikon camera. As the years went by, Mia continued to work hard at photography, save money, and eventually bought an even better camera, though her parents were reluctant to support her and her neighbor moved away abruptly after his wife's death.

This insight into the truth of Mia's past, and the origins of her family life, reveals the reasoning and motivation behind much of Mia's character in the present narrative. Her parents believed in the role of order, just like the Richardsons, and were reluctant to accept Mia's disruption of that order or her burgeoning identity as an artist. Only her younger brother and her neighbor behaved empathetically or altruistically toward her, teaching Mia that she didn't need to lean so heavily on the order that a traditional family—or traditional values—represented.



Throughout high school, Mia continued to experiment with doctoring **photographs**, though her parents never fully understood what it was she was doing, and found no use for art. Mia's parents disapprove of her decision to attend art school and refuse to pay her tuition, having hoped she'd go somewhere "practical," but Mia is able to accept the admission offer with the help of a tuition scholarship. Warren had offered her his savings—which he'd planned on using to buy himself a Volkswagen Rabbit—but she'd refused.

Mia takes a job at a diner in order to pay for her room and board, working a shift early each morning before class. In the afternoons, once classes are over, she heads to another part-time job at an art supply store, where the owners allow her to take home supplies that arrive damaged or otherwise unsellable. A few nights a week, she works as a bartender uptown. Though stretched thin, Mia enjoys her life in the city, and feels all her hard work is worth it to be able to pursue her passion.

In the esteemed photographer Pauline Hawthorne's class, Mia finds herself enthralled with Pauline, and is surprised and delighted to discover that Pauline soon takes a special interest in her work. Mia does not have the technical vocabulary to talk about her own **photographs**, but as the class goes on, she develops one. After several weeks, Pauline invites Mia to her home, offering to take a closer look at some of Mia's photographs. At Pauline's luxurious apartment, Mia meets Pauline's partner, Mal, and feels profoundly at home. Over the next several months, Pauline and Mal invite Mia over weekly and the three become very close. Pauline and Mal know that Mia is poor and working three jobs, and extend kindness and hospitality to her, but Mia is proud, and insists on bringing them small gifts each visit.

One day, Mia notices a man staring at her on the subway. Put off by his look of "recognition and hunger," she attempts to ditch him, but he pursues her, and eventually catches up with her. He begs to talk to her and apologizes for frightening her. His name is Joseph Ryan, he is a trader on Wall Street, and he and his wife have been searching for a surrogate to carry a child for them. Joseph tells Mia that he and his wife are prepared to pay generously for a surrogate, and that he would like for it to be Mia. Mia is confused, but Joseph hands her his business card, and invites her to meet him and his wife for dinner at the Four Seasons. He tells Mia that her help would "change [their] lives."

Mia's decision to attend art school is the first definitive moment in her life in which she consciously shirks the status quo to pursue own identity. Though close with her brother and the object of his admiration, Mia never would have attempted to manipulate him or take from him in order to make it to art school.



As Mia settles into life in New York, she experiences a small revelation when she realizes that there is more to "being an artist" than just making art, and that she is going to have to sacrifice her time in order to realize her dream. Nonetheless, she's excited to develop her identity as an artist even further, pushed ahead by her characteristic fiery passion.



Mia, never having been able to find artistic or emotional support at home, is thrilled and nervous in equal measure to find that support in Pauline, who quickly becomes her mentor and close friend. Pauline helps Mia to feel even more secure in her identity as an artist, and acts as a mother figure toward her, showing Mia what life as an artist can be like. This is especially important because Mia's biological mother seems to show little support for her interest in art.



This bizarre chance encounter disrupts the fragile order that Mia's life has settled into. Joseph Ryan's unabashed hunger for a child mirrors that of the McCulloughs years later. Mia's confusion and reluctance to accept Joseph's invitation is palpable, but the earnestness with which Joseph tells her she could "change" his and his wife's lives ultimately intrigues and moves her.



Mia meets the Ryans at the Four Seasons, not realizing that the evening will “change everything forever.” She is shocked to find that Madeline Ryan looks almost exactly like her. The Ryans explain their story: Madeline was born without a uterus, and the only way for them to have a child is via a surrogate. Joseph offers Mia ten thousand dollars to become pregnant and carry the baby, and, once the dinner is over, Mia struggles with what to do.

This disruption in Mia’s life dwarfs that of her decision to move to New York. She has unknowingly been placed on a course that will alter her world entirely, and is forced to suddenly confront some big questions about motherhood and her own identity.



Weeks later, Mia receives a letter saying that her scholarship will not be renewed for the coming school year due to budget cuts. Pauline and Mal are devastated, but Mia shrugs it off as no big deal, telling them she’ll “get another job.” However, as she quickly does the math in her head, she realizes only the job as the Ryans’ surrogate will allow her to afford to stay in school. Conflicted, Mia leaves Pauline and Mal’s apartment and steps out into the night.

The letter informing Mia of her scholarship’s termination, an even further disruption, certainly seems like it would immediately tip the scales of her decision, but she remains conflicted over large and difficult questions of whether or not she is prepared to abandon her identity as an artist and a student and take the drastic action of becoming a surrogate.



CHAPTER 14

Looking back, Mia realizes that by not consulting her parents, her roommates, or Pauline and Mal, “she had already made up her mind” to help the Ryans. Mia asks her boss at the diner for a raise, but is shot down. She dodges Pauline and Mal, unable to think of **photography**, or of anything but her tuition and the Ryans. She follows Joseph Ryan to work and visits the apartment building where he and Madeline live, observing their lives. She begins to believe that they are kind, genuine people. Mia tells herself that “the math” is the bottom line: the Ryans’ offer is enough to pay for three more semesters of school, and her way forward becomes clear. She picks up the phone to call them.

Though Mia is deeply in need of money and aware of the Ryans’ plight, it isn’t until she observes them behaving as kind, relatable people when she follows them throughout their days that she herself decides to behave altruistically toward them. Though Mia is primarily motivated by pure financial need, this aspect of the decision somewhat mirrors Mrs. Richardson’s renting of the apartment on Winslow Road: to do a “kindness” to someone who will really “appreciate” it.



After a check-up at the obstetrician three weeks later, Mia is deemed healthy. She applies for a leave of absence from school. In the last few weeks of classes, Mia goes to the Ryans’ apartment and allows Madeline to inject Joseph’s sperm into her with a turkey baster. For the entire summer, Mia goes back and forth from her home to the Ryans’ apartment to undergo these treatments, based on a fertility map that the obstetrician gave her, but for months she is unable to get pregnant. Mia begins to get nervous, knowing that if she is unable to get pregnant, she will have no other way to pay her tuition. Finally, in September, Mia misses her period. Madeline takes her to a pharmacy, and together they perform a pregnancy test. It is positive.

Mia’s hesitancy to accept the Ryans’ offer and her initial wariness and disbelief that she’s going through with it even after they’ve begun attempting to impregnate her melts away in the face of the fear that she might not actually be able to become pregnant. The logic and order of Mia’s life has been disrupted, and it is no longer the thought that she could get pregnant but the thought that it might not be possible for her that is now the fearful one.



Slowly, the people in Mia's life begin noticing what is going on. Her roommates tell her that she's gotten a "sweet gig." The Ryans move Mia into a small studio apartment closer to their own, and Mia quits her job at the art supply store, though she continues working at the bar and the diner. The Ryans give her gifts of maternity clothes and delight in each update from the obstetrician. Mia calls her parents to tell them that she won't be going home for Christmas, and, at the end of January, Mia confides in Warren about her pregnancy and about the Ryans. Warren is disappointed, and tells Mia that he thinks she'll have a hard time giving the baby up, though he agrees to keep her secret. After their phone conversation, Mia and Warren stop speaking, but soon Mia's mother calls her with the news that her brother has been involved in a car accident.

Mia's relationship with Warren has been the closest and most important in her life since she was just over a year old. The fact that her pregnancy—her identity as a surrogate and a mother—disrupts their relationship and forces a silence between them reflects the difficulty of transience and changing life situations in a sibling relationship. Mia and Warren know and love each other under one specific set of circumstances—but new ones put their friendship to the test, though it's a test whose outcome is never determined due to Warren's death.



Warren had been driving his friend's car late at night when they suddenly skidded on an icy road, crashed, and overturned. Warren's friend survived the incident, but Warren died in the crash. Mia immediately hops a flight home, taking the first plane trip of her life. At the sight of her enlarged belly, her parents fall silent. Mia tells her parents that it's not what they think—that she is a surrogate—but this news upsets the Wrights even more. Mia reveals that the Ryans are paying her, and her parents berate her for "sell[ing her] own child."

The Warren family's lives are disrupted in several ways, very quickly. Warren's death is the largest blow, but the revelation that Mia is pregnant completely disrupts and ultimately severs the relationship between her and her parents. They are unable to believe that she would use motherhood for profit, even though Mia insists she is helping the Ryans for reasons deeper than just money.



In the days leading up to the funeral, Mia's parents refuse to speak to her. They make all of the arrangements without her, and when they tell her that she's not permitted to attend the funeral, for fear of anyone "getting the wrong idea," Mia packs a bag, steals the keys to Warren's VW Rabbit, and drives back to New York City.

Mia is denied her identity as Warren's sister as a result of her new identity as a mother. Mia, unable to reconcile or accept this fact, flees her family altogether, creating another even larger disruption and beginning the erasure of her heritage.



Once back in her studio, Mia takes a nap, packs her belongings, and writes a note to the Ryans. She lies to them about having lost the baby, and repays them nine hundred dollars for wasting their time. She leaves behind all the gifts they gave her, not wanting to take anything that does not belong to her, and drives off into the night. She keeps going, "as if in a fever," until she reaches San Francisco, California, and can go no further.

Though Mia's abandonment of the Ryans is no doubt cruel, she attempts to approach it as tenderly and altruistically as possible by leaving behind everything that is not hers, and leaving them a monetary repayment that will be meager in their eyes but is enormous in hers. Mia then sets out and begins her life of transience.



Once in San Francisco, Mia settles into an apartment and soon gives birth to Pearl. She names her daughter after the child in [The Scarlet Letter](#)—Pearl, like her namesake, has been “born into complicated circumstances. Mia signs her name on the birth certificate as Mia Warren. After leaving the hospital, Mia struggles with her new role, is regretful of having lied to the Ryans, and even considers calling them to confess—but with the help of her landlady, she is able to get some rest, pull herself together, and care for Pearl. Her landlady continues to bring her leftovers, keeping a distant but watchful eye on her and the baby to ensure that both are thriving.

Pearl is only three weeks old when Mal calls Mia to tell her that Pauline has been diagnosed with a brain tumor, and that Mia needs to come back to New York right away if she wants to see her one last time. Mia flies back to New York with Pearl in tow to see Pauline, who photographs her with her newborn daughter and tells her she expects “great things” from her just before Mia returns to San Francisco.

A week and a half later, Pauline dies. A few weeks after her death a package arrives for Mia—there are ten signed prints inside, all of Mia and Pearl, along with a note from Pauline stating that her art dealer, Anita Rees, will sell the photos and allow Mia to keep the profits. Not only that, but Anita will take Mia on as a client whenever she is ready.

Mia begins taking **photographs** again “with a fervor that felt like relief,” and slowly sends her work to Anita. After many months of sending things back and forth, Anita sells one of Pauline’s photographs, buying Mia time, and then, eventually, one of Mia’s original photos. With that, Mia packs up her apartment in San Francisco to seek inspiration elsewhere, with Pearl by her side, cooing “as if she were sure that they [are] headed for great and important things.”

CHAPTER 15

Though the Wrights only know the basics of Mia’s story, they give Mrs. Richardson the business card of a lawyer working on behalf of the Ryans. The lawyer had contacted them years earlier in order to hopefully get in touch with Mia, but the Wrights have not heard from her since Warren’s funeral. Mrs. Richardson tells the Wrights that she is sorry for all they’ve been through, and asks them if they would ever want to be in touch with Mia again, if they could be. They tell her that they might, though they think that “if [Mia] wanted to be found, she’d have gotten in touch.” When Mrs. Richardson asks if the Wrights are still angry with Mia after all these years, neither one of them is able to answer her.

Mia knows that Pearl is born into difficult circumstances, and in order to save both of them from the pressures and pains of that, she erases her heritage and adopts a new identity for herself and for her daughter. Mia’s initial difficulty in mothering Pearl mirrors Bebe’s difficulty mothering May Ling. Mia is able to find support and keep her baby, revealing the narrative’s belief that Bebe’s abandonment of May Ling was not out of any lack of love, but due to dire circumstances beyond the norm.



Mia has begun to settle into a routine and an order, but experiences a major disruption with Pauline’s declining health. Pauline’s photos of Mia, though Mia doesn’t know it, will become gifts that sustain her financially throughout the years and allow her and Pearl to survive.



Pauline’s death hurts and shocks Mia, but the photos she leaves behind are a lasting symbol of her love for and belief in Mia. Symbolic of the love chosen families can bring, Pauline leaving the photos behind is a true act of altruism in a novel full of manipulation.



Mia settles further into the new order of her life in the wake of Pauline’s death, beginning a pattern of transience, renewal, and pursuit of her identity as an artist made possible through Pauline’s generous gift. The bond between Mia and her daughter, who she has gone through so much to keep, is already strong.



Mrs. Richardson wields a great deal of power in this encounter, though she chooses not to use it—she could, at any moment, blow her own cover and offer the Wrights access to Mia’s whereabouts, and this potential for manipulation fills the scene with tension. When Mrs. Richardson asks Mia’s parents if they are still angry with Mia, they cannot—or simply will not—answer her. The pain of what they see as a major betrayal of the rules and order they provided for her as a child has not yet faded away.



Though the number of the law firm the Wrights referred her to is very old, Mrs. Richardson calls it. The receptionist who answers the phone verifies that the Ryans still have a lawyer at the firm on retainer, and offers to put Mrs. Richardson through to him. Startled, she hangs up the phone. Mrs. Richardson then reaches out to one of her contacts at the *New York Times* to ask for his help with some research. Within a week, he's able to confirm that Joseph Ryan paid Mia's hospital bills at St. Elizabeth's in 1981 and 1982. Mrs. Richardson thinks about "what—if anything—[she should] do with this information." She feels an unexpected "twinge of sympathy" for Mia, and briefly wonders what she herself would have done in Mia's situation—but quickly ends that train of thought by deciding that she would never have let herself get into that situation in the first place. She plans to return to Shaker Heights the next morning.

Lexie is weak and woozy upon leaving the clinic, and is "having trouble processing what ha[s] just happened." Though the plan had been for Pearl to drive Lexie back to the Richardson house, Pearl, realizing Lexie is in "no condition" to face her home or family, offers to take Lexie back to her and Mia's house. Pearl promises that Mia will be able to keep Lexie's secret, and Lexie bursts into tears.

When Pearl arrives at the house on Winslow with a weakened Lexie in tow, Mia is shocked, but quickly intuits what is going on from Lexie's disposition and the discharge slip from the clinic she's clutching. Mia feels a "flood of deep sympathy," pulls Lexie into an embrace, then tucks her into bed and lets her rest. Mia has had "suspicions" about Lexie's care with her own body—while emptying Lexie's trash she found condom wrappers, and one afternoon, had arrived at the Richardson house to find Brian's shoes in the hall. She never wanted to think too hard about what Lexie "nor what—by extension—Pearl might be up to."

Lexie wakes up late in the afternoon—she is home alone with Mia, who feeds her chicken noodle soup. Lexie tells Mia that none of this was "supposed to happen," just as Pearl arrives home to check on Lexie. A few minutes later, Izzy arrives for her afternoon **photography** session with Mia. She sees Lexie inside, and, suspicious, asks what she's doing at the apartment. Lexie tells her that she came over to hang out with Pearl, and Pearl furthers the cover up by telling Izzy that they're working on one of Lexie's English papers. Mia tells Izzy that she's not working this afternoon, and tells Izzy she'll see her tomorrow.

Mrs. Richardson, having found concrete confirmation of the Wrights' story, is once again in a powerful position. She could manipulate Mia with the help of the new information she's obtained, and this allows her to feel she has regained a sense of order and control. However, the tiny bit of sympathy she feels for Mia delays her from acting on any of her impulses just yet. Mrs. Richardson attempts to empathize, rather than just sympathize, with Mia, by imagining what she herself would've done in Mia's situation, but is completely unable to imagine a version of her life in which she strayed so far from the order of things.



Even though Lexie has just manipulated and partially deceived Pearl, Pearl is still full of genuine love and sympathy for Lexie, and chooses to look out for her in an act of altruism that will save Lexie from having to confront her family just yet.



Mia's fear that Lexie's actions will inspire Pearl to follow a similar path rears its head again, even though Mia has been more involved in Pearl's life lately. She is not far off base—Pearl does imitate and mirror Lexie, and even with Mia working in the Richardson house, Pearl is up to much more than her mother knows about. Mia must also confront the ways in which Lexie's difficult decision mirrors her own past decisions, though Lexie's choice has taken her away from motherhood, not towards it.



Lexie, having disrupted the neat order of her life, is distraught and untethered. She is fearful of what her family—especially her mother—will say or do if they find out about her actions. Though Lexie hasn't yet seen Mia as a maternal figure in the same way Izzy does, she seeks the guidance and redemption from her now that she wishes she could seek from her own mother.



Mia sends Lexie back to bed, though Lexie is worried about missing school. Mia tells her that she already called in, pretending to be Mrs. Richardson, and excused Lexie from class for the following day as well. Lexie asks Mia if she's made the wrong decision by choosing to have an abortion. Mia tells her that she'll always be sad, but that she hasn't necessarily made the wrong choice—this is just “something [she'll] have to carry.” Lexie returns to bed.

The next morning, Lexie wakes up to find Mia gone, and Pearl home eating breakfast. Lexie is feeling better. She asks where Mia slept the night before, as she slept in Mia's bed. Pearl tells Lexie that her mother slept with her in her bed, but that they are used to sharing a bed. Lexie tells Pearl that she never thought Mia liked her, and wonders if she likes her now. Pearl teases Lexie, telling her “maybe.” Pearl recalls the night before—she and her mother slept in the same bed for the first time since moving to Shaker Heights, and Mia tried to talk to Pearl about sex, though it's implied that Mia has less experience where sexual relationships are concerned than Pearl does now. Pearl shrugged the conversation off and went to sleep, while Mia, lying awake, contemplated how her daughter, in her teenage years, has begun to slip away from her.

Lexie sleeps some more after Pearl leaves for school. In the afternoon, Mia comes home to work on her **photos**. Lexie overhears her speaking to Bebe on the phone, and when Lexie emerges from the room, the two discuss the case. Mia believes that, though some are calling her an “unfit mother,” Bebe deserves a second chance—she says that everyone makes mistakes and does things that they “regret.” Lexie, embarrassed, gathers her things. Mia asks her if she'll tell Mrs. Richardson about the abortion. Lexie tells her that she might, one day. She tosses her discharge slip from the clinic into the garbage can before she leaves.

CHAPTER 16

By the first day of the custody hearing, many news stories concerning Bebe's fitness as a mother have run on the television and in the paper. While some portray her as a hardworking immigrant, others depict her as unreliable. The hearing is kept private, and any “scrap” of information that emerges is valuable.

Further blurring the lines of motherhood and identity, Mia's call into school posing as Mrs. Richardson reveals the fluid role of maternal figures. Mia isn't Lexie's mother, but she knows how to mother someone, and can offer Lexie the support and comfort (and lack of judgment) she needs at this difficult time—in addition to a healthy dose of the truth, which is more than even Lexie's own mother might have been able to provide for her.



Several reversals, disruptions, and inversions are at work in this passage. Lexie, never having thought much of Mia's approval, now wants Pearl to give her the inside scoop, so to speak, on whether she's gotten it—on whether or not Mia genuinely likes her. Meanwhile, Pearl and Mia face a new chapter in their relationship—one in which Pearl “needs” Mia less and seems to know more than her when it comes to certain things. Mia, sensing that Pearl is growing up, worries that her daughter will soon outgrow their life together, as rich and full of joy as it has been.



Lexie has made a difficult choice about motherhood, and now sees Bebe Chow's choices in a different light. Mia, having also had to make a difficult choice about motherhood in the past, is able to see both Lexie and Bebe's choices clearly, and is unable to offer either of them any assurance or redemption beyond her support. Lexie's emotional journey in the wake of her abortion has led her to question the order of things.



Having already disrupted the atmosphere of Shaker Heights for weeks, the case for custody of May Ling now begins in earnest—the order of procedure is in place even in the face of such commotion.



The hearing begins, and Mr. Richardson and Ed Lim, in telling the “slow, painfully intimate story” of Bebe’s abandonment of May Ling, turn each other’s arguments on their heads over and over again. They debate and detail Bebe’s desperation, misery, and the complicated circumstances that led to her leaving May Ling at the **fire** station. Though May Ling was undernourished, Bebe had been unable to produce milk; though May Ling was covered in diaper rash, Bebe had been unable to afford diapers, and had done the best she could to keep her child clean and safe; though the baby cried for hours, the neighbors said, Bebe cried too. Bebe was unable to seek psychological help due to language barriers and red tape, such as the complicated welfare system.

Ed Lim describes Bebe’s leaving May Ling as “tucking her daughter onto a safe ledge while she herself plummeted.” Mr. Richardson suggests May Ling would really be better off in the care of the McCulloughs, who are able to provide a luxurious life for her. The case, over and over, comes down to what “ma[kes] someone a mother, biology or love,” with no clear answer in sight.

On the last day of the hearing, Mrs. McCullough is questioned, and Ed Lim establishes her insular upbringing in the largely white world of Shaker Heights, her insensitivity to the challenges of raising a Chinese daughter, and her blind acceptance of harmful stereotypes about Chinese people. Mrs. McCullough breaks down, wailing that “it’s not a requirement that we be experts in Chinese culture. The only requirement is that we love Mirabelle.” In the wake of this line of questioning Mr. Richardson, for the first time, feels doubt about the morality of the case, and whether the McCulloughs’ win is a sure thing. He confides this to his family at dinnertime, and everyone is surprised to hear that Lexie’s perspective has shifted—she feels a great deal of sympathy for Bebe now. Izzy is suspicious, and Moody describes the case as one which will tear families “all over Cleveland apart.”

After dinner, Mr. Richardson continues to question the morality of the case out loud to his wife. Mrs. Richardson tells him that “there are resources out there” for the McCulloughs to learn more about Chinese culture, and that she’d be happy to see “Mirabelle raised in a home that truly doesn’t see race.” Mr. Richardson considers the role of order and rules in the debacle, and realizes that “most of the time” there is no real right or wrong, just different ways of going through life.

The case for custody of May Ling is full of symbolic and thematic significance. Bebe’s abandonment of her child, and her desperate fight to reassert her “right” to motherhood, has parallels in both Mia’s story (her running away with Pearl) and Lexie’s (her difficult choice to have an abortion despite one day wanting to be a mother). The fact that Bebe left her child at a fire station ties in with the novel’s symbolic motif of fire, and “little fires everywhere”—the small disruptions of daily life that can easily burn out of control.



Themes of identity are brought to the forefront most clearly in passages dealing with this case, as the McCulloughs’ inability to raise May Ling in her birth culture raises deep and perhaps unanswerable questions about the nature of identity, the potential pitfalls of assimilation, and the importance of heritage.



The fault lines within the Richardson family, which were so clearly drawn earlier in the novel, begin to break down in a major way as Lexie, in the wake of her abortion, develops a deep sympathy for Bebe. Mr. Richardson, too, though officially on the McCulloughs’ team, realizes—after Ed Lim’s impassioned case against May Ling’s assimilation and the destruction of her heritage and cultural identity—that perhaps he has chosen the wrong moral alignment, and that his altruistic behavior on behalf of his friends, the McCulloughs, has not been in service of the right goal.



Mrs. Richardson remains staunchly on the McCulloughs’ side. She is unable to see her husband’s point of view, or even the naiveté, danger and falseness of her own views on race—“doesn’t see race” is essentially a euphemism for the erasure any non-white, non-American cultural identity. She is too attached to the significance of rules and order.



CHAPTER 17

Two weeks after the hearing, “it [is] clear that Mr. Richardson [is] not the only conflicted party.” The judge has still not made a decision in the case.

Lexie is due for a follow-up appointment at the clinic, and asks Mia to accompany her. Mia is surprised, but Pearl feels that there has been a reversal between herself and Lexie ever since Lexie’s abortion. After staying over, Lexie went home in one of Pearl’s t-shirt, and Pearl wound up in possession of the shirt Lexie had worn to the clinic; the shirts are like a spell, and Pearl now feels that she has some of Lexie’s confidence. She uses that confidence, even once the shirts are switched back days later, to invite Trip over to her house after school one afternoon while her mother works an extra shift at the Lucky Palace. Pearl tells Moody that she will be “helping her mother” with a project all afternoon, and she and Trip go back to the house on Winslow together. Pearl is thrilled to “lie down with [Trip] in a place of her own choosing.”

Back at school, Tim Michaels confronts Moody, asking if he knows who his older brother’s “mystery girl” is. Moody returns home and finds Izzy there—she tells him that Mia is working at Lucky Palace, despite Pearl having told him that they were working together on a **photography** project at home. Moody becomes suspicious, and rides his bike over to Pearl’s house. He sees Trip’s car parked on the street, and then spots him and Pearl leaving the house together, holding hands. Moody rides home, upset and embarrassed. All of his fury is directed at Pearl.

Pearl, later that afternoon, goes to the Richardsons’ to talk to Moody. She attempts to apologize, but Moody is acidic and cruel, and tells Pearl that she is a “slut” who is only being used by Trip. Angry and hurt, Pearl tells Moody that she was the one who seduced Trip, and says “at least someone wants [her].” Moody begins to cry, and tells Pearl that he doesn’t want to talk about it anymore. As a result, the two of them stop talking altogether. They walk to school separately the next morning, and during algebra Moody peeks into Pearl’s backpack while she is in the bathroom, only to find that she has never even opened the notebook he gave her. He steals it back, brings it home, and rips the pages out into the trash. In the next few days, she does not notice it has gone missing, and “this hurt[s] him most of all.”

The moral difficulties of the case are causing the delay of its resolution, continuing the disruption in Shaker Heights.



Lexie, just like Izzy, has begun to seek Mia out when she is in need of help, guidance, or emotional support. Pearl, meanwhile, continues to distance herself from her mother, entwining herself more and more with the Richardsons—especially Trip. The “reversal” that Pearl feels has occurred has grown out of her ever-growing confidence in her own identity, which she uses to further manipulate her relationship with Trip into being something that happens more and more on her own terms.



Pearl’s deceit of Moody comes to a head, finally, as he discovers her and Trip’s secret. Moody is heartbroken, and experiences a major disruption in what he’d thought of Pearl. His anger with her comes from the shock of this disruption, and the realization that she is not who he thought she was. Notably he takes out his anger on Pearl, not Trip, reflecting some of the misogynistic values of his society that he takes for truth.



Pearl and Moody’s friendship devolves into anger, acidity, and cruelty. Pearl has come into her own identity with the help of all of the Richardsons, but so much of her confidence has come from her relationship with Trip. When Moody attempts to tear that confidence down in anger (and with sexist, belittle language), Pearl reacts just as angrily. Moody’s discovery of the unused notebook—and Pearl’s failure to realize it’s gone once he’s stolen it back—symbolizes the one-sided affection Moody felt for Pearl, and how it went unfulfilled and unrecognized for so long.



Lexie is having “romantic troubles of her own.” She has been “skittish” about sleeping with Brian in the wake of her abortion, and has not told him about the procedure. When he confronts her, they bicker, and Lexie tells him that she wants space—since they are heading to two different colleges, she says, things are “better this way.” Lexie, distraught and dazed, walks to the house on Winslow. She finds Izzy and Mia sitting at the kitchen table, and she sits with them and tells them that she and Brian have broken up. Mia makes tea, and Izzy comforts her in her own way—by helping her fold an origami crane.

Lexie’s ability to be confident in her desires and independent from her boyfriend has grown after her procedure. Making such an enormous decision forced her to grow up a little more quickly, and to be better prepared to make other crucial decisions about her own agency, identity, and future. However, Lexie’s life has experienced two major disruptions now, and she seems momentarily shell-shocked and unsure of herself. Yet once again she seeks comfort in Mia, not her own mother.



The judge is still unable to make a decision, and Mrs. Richardson, visiting Mrs. McCullough at her home, asks if there is “anything else” she can think to tell the judge that might sway the case in her favor. Mrs. McCullough mentions that she thought Bebe looked pregnant a few months ago—she had gained weight and had thrown up on a visit with the social worker and May Ling—and then had suddenly seemed thinner a couple weeks later. Mrs. McCullough and Mrs. Richardson wonder if Bebe became pregnant and had an abortion—a scoop that would “turn public opinion against her,” effectively putting a nail in her coffin and ending the case entirely. Though Mrs. Richardson and Mrs. McCullough don’t know it, the narrator says, Bebe had gained weight from stress eating and then contracted food poisoning, losing all the excess weight she’d accrued.

Mrs. Richardson, a master manipulator, begins to put in motion yet another scheme to take down yet another woman who has shirked the social order and inhabited the role of disruptor—instead of Mia, her focus is now on Bebe Chow. The revelation that Bebe was never pregnant—Mrs. Richardson and Mrs. McCullough are simply searching for order and patterns, unable to account for any oddity or deviation—speaks to their manipulative, judgmental natures, but also Mrs. McCullough’s intense desperation to cling to her identity as a mother, which is not so different from what Bebe is going through.



Mrs. Richardson, telling herself that she wants to help Mrs. McCullough win the case, begins “searching for evidence.” She contacts one of her old college roommates Elizabeth Manwill, who now works at the only clinic in town that provides abortions. She asks Elizabeth if she can take a look at the clinic’s records to search for a specific person and Elizabeth, offended, refuses. Mrs. Richardson, thinking that Elizabeth “owe[s] her a great deal” since Mrs. Richardson had helped to “transform” her into a great beauty in college, and had also introduced her to her husband, suggests that she and Elizabeth go out on a lunch date—she implies to Elizabeth that if she came to pick Elizabeth up to take her out and “just happened” to catch sight of the appointment records, Elizabeth would not have to do anything at all other than stand by. Elizabeth begrudgingly agrees.

Mrs. Richardson continues to manipulate everyone around her—next on her list is Elizabeth, a woman who Mrs. Richardson feels she has, in a way, “made.” Just as Mrs. Richardson attempts to control her daughters and make them fall into a regimented order, Mrs. Richardson now tries to get Elizabeth to play by her rules, too. Though Mrs. Richardson tells herself she is doing all of this for the altruistic purpose of helping Mrs. McCullough, she really just wants the chance to manipulate and control whoever she can in her desperate attempt to convince herself of the value of rules and the existence of a “right” way of doing things.



CHAPTER 18

When Mrs. Richardson arrives to take Elizabeth to lunch, Elizabeth, put off by Mrs. Richardson's bragging about her life and her family, has a swift change of heart and tells Mrs. Richardson she cannot allow her to look at the records. Mrs. Richardson attempts to pressure her, confirming Elizabeth's suspicion that Mrs. Richardson has been "building up credit" in order to leverage it against her. Elizabeth remains staunch, telling Mrs. Richardson that there are "laws and ethics." Right at that moment Elizabeth receives a phone call, that requires her to step out of the office, and while she's gone, Mrs. Richardson, miffed that Elizabeth implied she was "unethical," snoops through the records. She finds Pearl's name in the appointments and is unable to think of anything else throughout her lunch with Elizabeth. Mrs. Richardson believes that Pearl and Moody have been sleeping together, and, enraged that all of this could have happened "right under her nose," tries to think of a way to confront Moody that evening.

Once she's back in her office after her lunch with Elizabeth, Mrs. Richardson receives a call from Mr. Richardson. He informs her that the judge has made a decision, and the McCulloughs have won custody of May Ling—or Mirabelle, as she will now officially be known. Mrs. Richardson feels a "snake of disappointment"—she had been looking forward to ferreting out Bebe's past." Mr. Richardson reveals that Bebe took the news "hard," screaming, crying, and needing to be escorted out by the bailiff.

A distraught Bebe seeks comfort at Mia's house. Her visitation rights have been terminated and no further contact between Bebe and May Ling will be allowed. Full custody of May Ling has gone to the state, "with the recommendation that the adoption by the McCulloughs be expedited." Izzy, who has not heard the news, arrives at Mia's as usual, and is frightened by Bebe's screams of anguish. When she asks Mia if Bebe will be okay, Mia tells her that she will, and to do so uses as a metaphor of a prairie **fire**, which scorches the earth and depletes "everything green," but leaves the soil richer after the burning is done.

The laws and ethics that Elizabeth Manwill lives by are actual laws and ethics—not the flimsy, control-hungry "rules" that Mrs. Richardson has constructed her life, and her family's lives, around. Elizabeth also sees through Mrs. Richard's falsely altruistic nature. Mrs. Richardson "builds up credit" with "generous" deeds, only to hold these over the head of the other person, who is supposed to be eternally grateful and "owe" Mrs. Richardson. In this way, her acts aren't generous at all—she expects compensation for them. Though Mrs. Richardson's attempts to manipulate Elizabeth fail, she takes her ability to go after what she wants in the name of "rules" to new heights by invading Elizabeth's—and the clinic's patients'—privacy. Her discovery of Pearl's name sets off a rage within her—rage at the idea that her precious rules have been broken right in front of her. Mrs. Richardson finds something she was not meant to see and cannot understand, and questions her role and her capabilities as a mother as a result. Notably, one thing she doesn't question is how "ethical" she is.



The court's decision to side with the McCulloughs leaves Bebe's life in disarray as it is, though Mrs. Richardson experiences no empathy for Bebe at all, lamenting only the fact that she won't be able to destroy her any further. Mrs. McCullough's identity as a mother has been confirmed by the state—order, as she and Mrs. Richardson perceive it, has been restored.



Bebe has been legally stripped of her identity as a mother—she has no legal right whatsoever to her daughter. Izzy, witnessing the pain this causes but unable to understand it, seeks answers from Mia. Mia's only reference for the intensity of the situation is a prairie fire, symbolic of renewal after destruction—she believes that Bebe will be able to find peace and even happiness eventually, though her life has just been burned to the ground.



Lexie and Moody learn the news from their mother, who leaves a message on the answering machine telling them that both she and their father will be home late—he is tying up the loose ends of the case, and she is reporting on it. Pearl does not learn the news until she arrives home from her afternoon with Trip to find Bebe still at her kitchen table. Pearl retreats to her room, and Mia tells Bebe that May Ling will “always be [her] child.” Bebe leaves, saying nothing, and the narrator explains that later, Mia will realize that Bebe heard these words as a call to action rather than a comfort.

The McCulloughs hold a press conference in which they remind the press that “Bebe abandoned [her child]” and that the court’s decision to place “Mirabelle” with the McCulloughs “speaks volumes.” Mrs. Richardson arrives home later that evening, and right away heads upstairs to confront Moody. When she begins questioning him about Pearl and “the baby,” Moody is at first confused, and then tells her snidely that Pearl and Trip are the ones who are “screwing.” In the room next door, Izzy sits in stunned silence and thinks about what she’s just overheard.

The next morning, Mrs. Richardson heads to work early “to avoid facing any of her children.” She wonders over and over what she should do. Rather than confront Pearl or Trip, she leaves work and drives to the house on Winslow to confront Mia instead. Mrs. Richardson “enter[s] without knocking; [it is] her house, after all.” Mia is surprised to see her. Mrs. Richardson notices Izzy’s jacket draped over a chair, and the sight of it here, “as if [this] were her home [and] she were Mia’s daughter”, enrages her. Mrs. Richardson bitingly reveals that she knows all about the Ryans, Warren, and Mia’s complicated past, and accuses Mia of having raised Pearl without order or morals. Furthermore, she reveals that she has known all along that Mia told Bebe Chow about May Ling’s whereabouts. As a final blow to Mia, she says that Pearl, if given the choice, would have stayed with the Ryans.

Even after it’s over, the trial continues to be a disruption in the Richardsons’ lives, and the Warrens’. Mia, who has, for reasons both selfish and altruistic, manipulated and aided Bebe’s search for her daughter for months, continues to do so—albeit unknowingly this time.



The McCulloughs’ falsely altruistic self-righteousness disregards the moral intricacies of the case they have just won. Mrs. Richardson, furious and frightened that the order her home once represented has been shattered, seeks to punish Moody to regain control. When the situation is not what she thought it was, though, she becomes aware that she is in a predicament over which she has absolutely no control.



Mrs. Richardson, desperate for any sense of order or control, chooses to lash out not at her unruly children but at Mia, who has always represented Mrs. Richardson’s inability to accept anything other than stringent order, as well as her fear of difference. Her manipulations of Mia’s world and investigation into Mia’s past has prepared her to disrupt Mia’s life in a major way, and she is almost grateful for the fuel to do so—even though her reasoning (her belief that Pearl aborted Trip’s baby) is false. The sight of Izzy’s jacket further enrages her, as she realizes that she has lost control over her daughter, who now sees Mia as a mother figure.



Mia responds to Mrs. Richardson's cruel tirade by accusing Mrs. Richardson of being not just "bother[ed]" by the fact that "anyone would choose a different life" from the one she leads, but also actively frightened of having missed out on something in favor of following the pattern of an ordinary, regulated existence. Mia asks Mrs. Richardson if there was a "boy," a job, or a "whole life" she ran away from in order to follow the "rules." Mrs. Richardson takes Izzy's jacket from the back of the chair and tells Mia to vacate the apartment by the next day. She leaves her a hundred dollar bill to "make up for the rent." When Mia asks Mrs. Richardson why she's doing all of this, Mrs. Richardson tells her to ask Pearl.

Mia, her life in Shaker Heights now completely disrupted by Mrs. Richardson's cruel manipulations, leans on the only defense she has left—Mrs. Richardsons' fear of difference, of passion, and of shirking order. She twists the knife by implying that Mrs. Richardson is secretly jealous of her and Pearl—an implication that seems to have merit. Mrs. Richardson, though, has the last word, insinuating that she knows more about Pearl than Mia does—knowing on some level that Mia has, for a long time, feared losing her grip on her daughter and is, in this way, attached to order in her own right. Mrs. Richardson also takes this moment of desperation to assert the power she has always held over Mia as both her landlord and employer. When Mia's criticisms strike too close to home, Mrs. Richardson can simply kick her out.



CHAPTER 19

That afternoon, as Pearl settles in for seventh period, she thinks of her plans to meet Trip after school, and to meet Lexie for a movie after that. She is sad about the end of her friendship with Moody, and wonders if things between them will ever return to "normal." Just then the classroom phone rings, and Pearl's teacher tells her that Mia is in the office, having come to school to pick her up. Pearl and Moody, despite the fact that they're not speaking, share a look of mutual confusion before Pearl leaves the classroom.

Mia's arrival at school signals a major disruption, one that Pearl had thought she was done with forever. The look they share shows that Pearl and Moody's relationship was more than just a one-sided attraction—in a moment of uncertainty they still look to each other for support and answers.



When Pearl leaves the building, she sees her mother's car parked outside—Mia is waiting for her. Mia asks her if she has anything important in her locker—she doesn't, and Mia tells her it's time to go; they have to leave Shaker Heights today. Pearl is distraught, and reminds Mia of her promise to stay. Pearl thinks of the Richardsons, and imagines that if she could get to their house, they would take her in as one of her own and "never let her go." Mia apologizes but insists, and Pearl follows her to the car.

Pearl had taken comfort in the fact that she and her mother were staying put in Shaker Heights—that comfort, and the joy of having formed friendships and relationships which allowed her to explore her identity, is disrupted completely by Mia's announcement that they are leaving. Pearl is desperate to stay not just in Shaker Heights, but within the halo of order, comfort, and familiarity that the Richardsons have provided her—she believes that they would accept her as one of their own, not knowing all of the many betrayals that have happened behind the scenes, and how cruel and "unmotherly" Mrs. Richardson has behaved.



Back at the house on Winslow, Pearl tearfully packs her belongings—in Shaker, the two of them have "acquired more things than ever before." She furiously reminds Mia of her promise that they would stay put, throwing a book against the wall. Pearl demands to know why they are leaving—she will not go, she says, unless her mother gives her a reason. Mia sits Pearl down and tells her the story of her past—she has been "thinking about how to tell [her]," she says, "for longer than [she] can imagine." Pearl is still, shell-shocked and excited, as Mia begins her tale.

Mia knows that her daughter deserves an explanation—for their departure, but also for the reason behind every departure they've ever made. Pearl has been waiting all her life, it seems, for the answer, and now that she is finally about to get it, she is both excited by the prospect of understanding her identity and fearful of the disruption in her life that finally knowing it might cause.



Mia finishes telling Pearl the “outline” of her past, knowing that the details will “trickle out” over later months and years. Pearl asks why Mia has decided to tell her now. Mia does her best to explain Mrs. Richardson’s fury and her threats, sad to ruin Pearl’s admiration of someone she “adored.” Mia concedes that Mrs. Richardson is right—the Ryans would have given Pearl a “wonderful” life. Mia offers to bring Pearl to New York to meet them, but Pearl decides that she is not yet ready. Pearl asks about her grandparents, and tells Mia that “someday” they should go see them together. Mia embraces Pearl, realizing that home is not a place, but her daughter. The two of them resume packing.

There is a knock at the door—Mia answers it, and finds that it is Izzy. Izzy is confused because the door has never been locked before. She asks if Bebe is still inside, but Mia tells her she has gone home. Izzy asks if Pearl is home—she has been trying to catch up with Pearl all day, after failing to reach her by phone the night before. She wants to warn Pearl of what Moody has said about her, and of the fact that Mrs. Richardson knows about her and Trip. Izzy can tell something is wrong with Mia, but isn’t sure what. Mia decides to neither lie to Izzy nor tell her the truth, instead promising that she’ll tell Pearl Izzy stopped by. Mia, fearing that she’s “failed” Izzy and unable to think of a proper way to say goodbye, reminds Izzy of what she told her about the prairie **fire** the other day, and asks her if she understands. Izzy “[i]sn’t sure” that she does, but nods anyway. Mia then embraces Izzy and sends her on her way.

Mia and Pearl continue packing, the familiarity of leaving making the act almost automatic. While Pearl packs up the car, Mia sets an envelope on the kitchen table. When Pearl asks what’s inside, Mia tells her that it’s a good-bye to the Richardsons; a set of **photographs**. “Some pictures,” she says, “belong to the person inside them.” Together Pearl and Mia shut off the lights and leave.

Across town, Bebe sits on the curb across the street from the McCulloughs’ house. She imagines Linda McCullough bathing May Ling and putting her to bed as she waits “for the light in her daughter’s room to go out.”

Pearl is overwhelmed by the truth of her past and her identity, and the reason for both her life’s constant disruptions and their current circumstances. Though Pearl is certainly interested in discovering more about her roots, the awful task at hand—leaving Shaker Heights and, by proxy, the Richardsons behind—takes all of her focus. When Pearl learns of Mrs. Richardson’s cruelty she loses a mother-figure she had looked up to, but in this moment Pearl and Mia reconnect and find a home in each other.



Izzy knows that there is some kind of disturbance going on; she and Mia have established an order to their days, and something isn’t adding up. Mia’s guilt over having to leave Izzy without being able to explain to her why causes her to attempt to leave things on a positive note. By reminding Izzy of the anecdote about the prairie fire, Mia is attempting to leave her with a bit of wisdom about the pain of loss and the beauty of renewal. Mia doesn’t realize, however, that Izzy will soon take her words literally and use them as fuel for her largest disruption yet. Pearl has just lost Mrs. Richardson as a mother figure, and now Izzy loses Mia.



Pearl and Mia are so used to their transient lifestyle that, paradoxically, it has become a kind of order to them. Snapping back into the routine is easy, hinting at the fact that the permanence and stability of Shaker Heights, was the real disruption for the two of them.



Bebe longs for her daughter and is unable to surrender her identity as a mother. She considers the order of the McCulloughs’ bedtime routine as she plans a disruption.



When Izzy returns home, she finds the house empty. Moody and Trip were home earlier; they fought over Pearl verbally and then physically. Trip left for a friend's house, while Moody headed to a nearby lake. Izzy calls her mother to tell her that Mia has not shown up to prepare dinner, and Mrs. Richardson tells her that Mia can't make it tonight. When Moody arrives back home, she asks him where everyone is. He tells her he doesn't know, but that Lexie might be at Serena's. Izzy asks him if what she overheard about Pearl and Trip is true. Moody tells her that it is, and that it's "not [his] job to lie for them."

Izzy tells Moody that she knows Pearl didn't have an abortion. She tries to think of whether Pearl had acted unusual at all in the past few months, and realizes that Lexie's behavior while their mother was out of town was odd—she puts the pieces of the puzzle together and realizes Lexie had the abortion. Izzy chastises Moody for having thrown Pearl under the bus by revealing her relationship with Trip. Moody tells her that Pearl deserved it for "sneaking around with Trip." Izzy tells Moody that Mrs. Richardson will blame Mia for everything. Moody says that Mia should have raised Pearl to be more "responsible." Izzy throws a soda can at Moody's head and leaves.

Izzy goes to Serena's house, where she confronts Lexie about her abortion. Izzy tells Lexie that Mrs. Richardson thinks Pearl had the abortion. Lexie thinks this is "funny," and tells Izzy that Pearl "didn't mind" that Lexie made the appointment under her name. She entreats Izzy to keep her abortion a secret. Izzy tells Lexie that she is selfish, and leaves. She sets off on foot for the house on Winslow, and knows before she goes inside that something is wrong. She rings the doorbell and Mr. Yang answers. He tells her that Mia and Pearl left just a few minutes ago. Izzy returns home, retrieves the key to their apartment, and then walks back over to Winslow Road, where she goes upstairs, unlocks the door to the apartment, and confirms for herself that Pearl and Mia are "gone for good."

By nine the next morning, the Richardson house has nearly emptied out. Mr. Richardson has gone to the office, Lexie is at Serena's, Trip has gone to play basketball, and Moody has gone to Pearl's house to apologize. Izzy believes her mother is at the rec center, swimming laps. Overwhelmed by the unfairness of Pearl and Mia's situation, and how they were "chased away by her family," Izzy runs through the many betrayals in her head. Izzy felt happy at Mia's house, and was allowed to be herself. She cannot "imagine going back to life as it had been before," stifled by the order and perfection of her home and her city.

Izzy senses that something major has occurred—both within her own family and within the Warren's family, and, perhaps, even between the two. As she attempts to get some answers out of Moody, his sullen attitude reveals that he has had more to do with whatever problem has occurred than he is letting on. Moody once again shows his immaturity and the jealous nature of his relationship with Trip and Pearl.



Izzy and Moody, who have often been on the same side, find themselves at odds when it comes to Mia and Pearl. Moody, his pride hurt by Pearl's rejection of him in favor of Trip, doesn't seem to really care what happens to the Warrens—even if he has been in some way responsible for the horrible miscommunication that has driven their families apart. In a time of conflict Moody also seems to fall back on his mother's self-assurances, judging that Mia and Pearl's problems stem from a lack of "responsibility" on their part. Izzy is then enraged by his lack of empathy.



Izzy realizes that Lexie effectively framed Pearl for her abortion, and, once she has found Lexie, chastises her sister for having manipulated Pearl without thinking of the consequences. Like Moody, Lexie seems indifferent to the hurt and confusion she has caused—particularly in comparison to her fear of getting herself in trouble—further upsetting Izzy. Izzy realizes that her entire family has manipulated the Warrens for selfish ends, with disastrous consequences. Izzy's determination to find out what is going on takes her all across town on a relentless quest for the truth—and when her worst fears are confirmed, she is devastated.



As Izzy runs through her family's many manipulations of Pearl and Mia, she feels her anger mounting. Mourning the loss of the first place where Izzy had ever felt a way of being that made sense to her and an identity she felt secure in, Izzy feels her entire life has been disrupted, and that she no longer fits even marginally into the strict order it had once followed. She then entirely blames her family for this situation, and feels helpless in the face of such a complex tangle of problems.



After having spent the entire night awake and planning, Izzy barely thinks at all as she retrieves a can of gasoline from the garage, pours neat circles of accelerant onto everyone's beds, sets the empty can outside her parents' bedroom, and retrieves a box of matches. She remembers Mia's words about the prairie **fire**, and lights the match and drops it onto Lexie's bed as she plans to attempt to catch up with Mia and Pearl.

Izzy feels there is no way backward or forward—she feels she is the only righteous person in a family of hypocrites, and that her place is with Pearl and Mia. Inspired by Mia's words about the prairie fire and her earlier encouragement of Izzy to take control of her circumstances, Izzy begins her biggest and final disruption.



CHAPTER 20

The **fire** trucks have left, and “the shell of the Richardson house [is] steaming gently.” Mrs. Richardson pulls her bathrobe tight and looks around. Mr. Richardson is in conversation with the chief of the fire department as well as two policemen, and her children are “perched” atop the hood of Lexie's car across the street. Mrs. Richardson knows that her husband is discussing Izzy's absence with the police, probably giving them a description of her and asking them to help search for her. She wonders aloud how Izzy could have done this to their family. The fire chief asks where the Richardsons will be staying, and Mrs. Richardson answers that they will go to their rental house—“it was vacated,” she tells her family, “yesterday.”

The Richardsons' lives have been completely overturned. The fire is the most concrete example of their inability to return to their previous lives and perceptions, and the destruction of any semblance of order. The tables have been completely turned—it is the Richardsons who are now forced to live a transient, orderless life (although they still have the resources and privilege to remain economically stable), and the rental house which once represented Mrs. Richardson's inclinations toward altruism and the manipulation of people she perceived to be less fortunate is now the only place she and her family have to live.



Once the Richardsons park their many cars in the driveway leading up to the rental house, Mrs. Richardson is seized by the fear that perhaps Mia and Pearl haven't left after all, or, worse, that Mia has desecrated the place in order to make a “statement.” She is relieved to find, though, that the apartment is in great shape, and empty except for a few pieces of furniture. Lexie remarks on how different the apartment looks, and all three of the Richardson children move through it, reminiscing on their times here with Pearl. Mrs. Richardson makes a plan, divvying up one bedroom for the adults, one bedroom for the boys, and the sleeping porch for the girls—she is “certain” that Izzy will be home “shortly.”

Mrs. Richardson, even among the literal ashes of her old life, is still attempting to assert a sense of order over the circumstances she now faces. Meanwhile, her children are lost in the memories that the house on Winslow holds for each of them, and the ways in which their time here with Pearl and Mia has shaped each of their identities over the course of the past year.



Lexie calls for her mother, and Mrs. Richardson joins her in the kitchen to find a large and thick manila envelope that Mrs. Richardson somehow knows has not been left behind by mistake. Her family gathers around her to see what is inside. In the envelope there is a series of **photographs**, one meant for each of the Richardsons. Each member of the family knows which is theirs instantly, and finds the portraits “unbearably intimate.”

By leaving behind the photographs for the Richardsons to discover, she has given them the gift—or the curse—of her point of view. Thus Mia really has the last word, reflecting the Richardsons back onto themselves through her art.



Lexie's **photograph** has been modified to feature part of the pink discharge slip from the abortion clinic. Trip's photo features a hockey chest pad poked through with holes—small "curling leaves" have started to grow, "soft[ness] emerging from the hard shell." Moody's photo features origami birds made from the torn pages of Pearl's notebook. Mr. Richardson's features his metal collar stays, shirt accessories which define and support a dress shirt collar's points, blurred by long exposure. Mrs. Richardson's is "a paper cutout of a birdcage, shattered, as if something very powerful inside had burst free." The cage is made of newsprint, and Mrs. Richardson is "sure" the text is from "one of her own articles." Izzy has already removed her print, which featured a black rose made from boot leather. Mia has left the negatives behind, as shorthand for the fact that she did not keep and does not intend to sell the photographs.

Later that afternoon, Mr. Richardson checks his voicemail to find a message from the distraught McCulloughs, in which they tell him that May Ling disappeared in the night—while they slept peacefully as "they hadn't for months," May Ling was taken by Bebe, and the two have absconded to China. The police have told them there is "almost no chance" of tracking Bebe or May Ling down. A year later, the narrator says, the McCulloughs will apply to adopt another baby directly from China, where the chances of a parent trying to reestablish custody are almost zero, and Mrs. McCullough will "tr[y] not to think about Mirabelle" while she feels "dizzy with love for this [new] child she has yet to meet."

The narrative flashes back to the previous night, when Pearl drops the keys to the duplex into the Richardsons' mailbox. She then rejoins Mia in the car and wonders aloud whether those are the pictures that were "going to make [Mia] famous." The narrator reveals that the Richardsons will never sell their **photos**; they will become "uneasy heirlooms" for future generations to find and wonder about. Mia puts the car in gear and begins driving toward the highway. Pearl wishes aloud that she'd had a chance to say goodbye to the Richardson children. The two of them lament "poor Izzy" being stuck in a place she wants to leave, and Pearl suggests going back for her. Mia tells her that "there are rules about that kind of thing." Mia nonetheless "allow[s] herself a brief fantasy" of encountering Izzy on the road.

Mia's identity as an artist and an disruptor—as well as her intimate role as their housekeeper—has enabled her to see the Richardsons more clearly than they could ever see themselves. She has a deep knowledge of each of their identities, even if the Richardsons themselves are mired in the struggle to identify themselves and each other. She was able to see Lexie's secret pain, Trip's sensitivity, Moody's rejection, Mr. Richardson's role as a provider and supporter, Mrs. Richardson's imprisonment within the "cage" of order and propriety, and Izzy's softness beneath her difficult exterior. By assuring the Richardsons that she will not sell, or even retain, the photographs, Mia reveals her good will toward them even in the face of all they have done to her and to Pearl.



Ng's decision to award "custody" to Bebe in the end, leaving the McCulloughs distraught but not totally disheartened (and they have the resources to simply "try again"), speaks not necessarily to the whole novel's decision on the issue of "what makes someone a mother" but to the ways in which order, altruism, and assimilation have failed the majority of its characters. Bebe regains control over her own circumstances in the end, though her methods are dubious and perhaps harmful.



Pearl, as always, believes in her mother's talent and capability, and she is concerned that Mia has just abandoned her own best shot at fame. Mia, meanwhile, is only focused on the road ahead, on getting out of Shaker Heights and resuming her and Pearl's transient life. Pearl and Mia are shown to be believers that love makes a family, not biology, as they feel sadness over leaving Izzy behind and wish they could bring her along.



At the same time as Mia and Pearl cross into Iowa, and the Richardsons gather at the duck pond near their burned house, Izzy, with “the smell of **smoke** still [in] her hair,” boards a greyhound bus for Pittsburgh. She has found the Wrights’ address in her mother’s files, and plans to track down Mia’s parents. She has another address, too—Anita Rees’s—and Izzy hopes that either Anita or the Wrights will help her find Mia. Even if she’s sent home, she vows to leave “again and again until she [is] old enough that no one c[an] send her back.” As she settles into her seat on the bus, she imagines a fantasy in which she finds Mia.

Mrs. Richardson tries to settle down for sleep, but is distracted by the duplex’s noises and the soundtrack of her own thoughts. She goes outside and sits on the front steps of the duplex in just her bathrobe. Though all day she has been angry with Izzy, now she is worried—Izzy has crossed a line, and “she might never [come] back.” A car drives by and Mrs. Richardson thinks she must look “crazy” to her neighbors, but “for once” she doesn’t care. She sobs, distraught, her heart “shatter[ing]” as she thinks of Izzy alone in the world. She thinks of Mia’s portrait and wonders if she was the bird within it “trying to batter its way free,” or if she was the cage which held it. Mrs. Richardson tells herself that if the police can’t find Izzy, she will look herself “for as long as it [takes,] for forever if need be.” She has a fantasy of herself searching for Izzy and “searching for familiarity in the faces of strangers.”

Izzy is unable to return to life as it was—too many “little fires” have disrupted her perception and changed her identity. Her actions argue that love and care, not biology, makes a family. Izzy’s determination to reunite with Mia, and to strike out on her own path no matter the consequences, mirror her mother’s worst fears about Mia’s “dangerous” influence—the idea that Izzy does not care what other people or society thinks of her.



Mrs. Richardson’s identity as a mother and her faith in the value of order have been broken. She vows to try and restore those things at any cost in a desperate, last-ditch effort to reassert her ability to wrangle a situation in her favor. Order and manipulation have backfired against Mrs. Richardson, but she still clings to them even as she mulls over what Mia’s photograph said about her obsession with rules and rigidity. Just as Mia and Izzy engage in their own fantasies in this chapter, Mrs. Richardson engages in one, too—yet hers, in a significant departure from her character, focuses on being plunged into the unknown and the unfamiliar.





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