# Of White Hairs and Cricket

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ROHINTON MISTRY

Rohinton Mistry was born in Bombay (now Mumbai), India to a Parsi family, Indian followers of the Iranian prophet Zoroaster. He lived out his youth in Bombay and eventually attended the University of Bombay (now the University of Mumbai), where he earned a degree in mathematics and economics. In 1975, he immigrated to Canada, and in the early 1980s, he attended the University of Toronto, where he pursued a degree in English and philosophy. While in Canada, he wrote short stories and won numerous literary competitions and prizes. His short story collection, *Tales from Firozsha Baag*—which contains "Of White Hairs and Cricket"—was published in 1987. The collection was met with critical acclaim, as were his three novels—1991's *Such A Long Journey*, 1995's *A Fine Balance*, and 2002's *Family Matters*—which all explore the lives of Parsi people in modern-day Mumbai. Mistry's writing is highly awarded, and in 2015, Mistry was appointed as a Member of the Order of Canada.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

India was occupied and ruled by Britain from 1612 to 1947. The British government and British companies exploited India for cheap labor, natural resources, and political power, generating an unbalanced society where some lived lavish lives while many others lived in poverty and struggled with famine. The British doubled down on the existing caste system in India, which separated Indian people into different classes based on ethnic groups. But in general, the Parsi community to which the narrator of "Of White Hairs and Cricket" belongs exists outside the caste system, making them generally more well-off since British colonials treated them better. However, the narrator's family's money troubles make clear that regardless of religion or caste status, Indian people in the mid-20th century were still coping with the ill effects of British colonialism on India's economy.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"Of White Hairs and Cricket" is part of a larger collection of short stories, *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, all set in the same building complex in Bombay. These other stories describe the narrator and his neighbors in fuller detail as they follow him throughout his life, including his eventual immigration to Canada. Rohinton Mistry's 1991 novel, *Such A Long Journey*, explores themes similar to the ones in "Of White Hairs and Cricket." It also takes place in Bombay and follows a Parsi man named Gustad as he attempts to keep his family out of poverty. Like Daddy, Gustad struggles to give his family a good quality of life, and because he is the man of the family, most of the responsibility for keeping the family afloat falls onto him. Other Indian authors who write about themes of identity and family include Jhumpa Lahiri (*Interpreter of Maladies*), Ruskin Bond (*The Room on the Roof*), and Arundhati Roy (*The God of Small Things*).

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Of White Hairs and Cricket
- **When Written:** 1980s
- **Where Written:** Toronto, Canada
- **When Published:** 1987
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** Bombay, India in the 1960s
- **Climax:** The narrator resolves to pluck out Daddy's white hair meticulously and without complaint.
- **Point of View:** First Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Time-Honored Tradition.** Cricket, the British bat-and-ball sport that the narrator and his father used to play in the story, has a long history. Though the first official historical record of cricket dates back to the 17th century, some have speculated that the sport was invented in the Early Middle Ages. Today, it is the world's second most popular spectator sport.

## PLOT SUMMARY

In the fictional Firozsha Baag apartment complex in Bombay, India, the narrator, a 14-year-old Parsi boy, has to pluck **white hairs** from his Daddy's head every Sunday morning. As he does so, his father searches the classifieds section of the paper for a new job. When Daddy shows signs of pain during the plucking, the narrator is surprised because his father has told him that he should always be tough. Once, when they were playing **cricket** together, the narrator blocked a shot with his bare shin, and Daddy was so impressed that told Mummy and the narrator's grandmother, Mamaiji, about it when they returned home. However, that had happened a long time ago, and now Daddy doesn't take the narrator to play cricket on Sundays anymore.

While Daddy searches the classifieds, the narrator looks around the room at the calendars covering holes in the wall plaster, particularly the Murphy Radio calendar with the smiling **Murphy Baby** on it. Although Mummy and Daddy like the

calendar, the narrator can see how its corners are curling with age while the smile remains unchanged.

Mamaiji enters the room. As she pulls out her spinning thread and spindle, she criticizes Daddy for making the narrator pluck out his white hairs, saying it will only bring bad luck. The narrator is angry with her for criticizing his father and thinks about all the times he has wished that her thread would break while she spun—but when it actually did break, he would feel immensely guilty and run to help her. Mamaiji spun a lot of thread after her husband's death, enough that the whole family had several kustis to wear during prayers.

Daddy cuts out a job ad that seems promising and tells Mamaiji that if plucking hairs would bring bad luck, then he wouldn't have found the ad. Mamaiji often argues with his parents about how they raise the narrator and their other, college-age son, Percy. Mainly, she thinks the narrator is underfed and that his parents have made him stomach weak by forbidding him from eating spicy food. When she could, she snuck spicy food to the narrator and to Percy, but it would make the narrator violently sick.

As Mummy enters with a plate of toast cooked over **the Criterion** stove, Daddy reads aloud the ad for a "Dynamic Young Account Executive" he has found. Although Mummy is normally encouraging, this time she stays silent. Daddy turns up his nose at the toast, saying that it smells like kerosene from the stove and that when he gets a new job, the first thing he will do is get a real toaster. He jokes that since the British left India 17 years ago, it is time for their stove to go, too. Looking at the narrator, he says that one day he will find the money to send him to the U.S. because there is no future in India. Daddy keeps excitedly imagining the things he will buy with a new job, like a refrigerator, but Mummy interrupts him and tells him that planning too much will only ruin everything.

The narrator likes the kerosene stoves and particularly likes looking into the Criterion's oil drum. He thinks about when he used to make sure the drum was full on Saturday nights, so that Mummy could make an early breakfast before cricket on Sunday mornings. He and Daddy had always left early, before almost anyone was awake, and walked through the city streets together, passing neighbors and homeless people and watching their antics. But he and Daddy don't play cricket anymore, nor do they fly kites. The narrator refuses to pluck Daddy's hairs anymore and leaves to read the comics, and he can tell Daddy is upset from the lines on his forehead. The lines remind him of his friend Pesi's father, Dr Mody, who used to be the building's go-to veterinarian before he died.

After reading the comics, the narrator walks outside and sees the complex's doctor, Dr Sidhwa, meeting his best friend Viraf at the door. They disappear inside. The narrator remembers how Daddy arranged the boys in the apartment complex into teams and captained one of them, running and playing with the younger boys. But one day, Daddy had needed to rest in the middle of the game, and the narrator thought he looked old and upset. After that, the cricket games stopped. When Viraf doesn't emerge after a long time, the narrator goes in after him. Viraf is visibly upset, and the narrator makes fun of him for being a crybaby. Viraf tells him that Viraf's father is very sick.

Viraf and the narrator sneak through Viraf's flat and the narrator sees Viraf's father lying in his sickbed with a needle in his arm. He overhears Viraf's mother talking about how her husband, despite his weight and chest pain, refuses to take breaks when climbing the stairs to their third-floor flat and refuses to switch flats with someone on the ground floor to preserve his health. Now he is terminally ill, and she doesn't know what she'll do when he dies. The narrator notices that the lines on Viraf's father's forehead look like Daddy's. Disturbed, he abandons Viraf and goes home.

Back in his own flat, the narrator looks around at his family and thinks that Daddy looks old and tired. He wishes that Daddy would ask him to pluck the white hairs from his head, but he doesn't. The narrator decides that from now on, he will help Daddy pluck the hairs whenever he asks. Throwing himself onto the bed, the narrator wants to cry. He feels guilty for being mean to Viraf and feels sad for Viraf's father, Mummy, and Mamaiji as they age. Finally, he laments that he never thanked his father for cricket and that he can't stop the white hairs from growing back.

## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**The Narrator** – The story's narrator and protagonist is a 14-year-old Parsi boy living in Bombay, India in the 1960s. He is Mummy and Daddy's son and Percy's younger brother. At the beginning of the story, the narrator is tweezing all of the **white hairs** out of his father's head while Daddy looks for a job in the paper, like he does every Sunday. The narrator finds the ritual disgusting—and his grandmother, Mamaiji, thinks it will bring bad luck—but he does it anyway to appease his father. The narrator just wants to impress Daddy, who thinks men should "always" be tough, and his old Sunday morning routine with his father, playing **cricket**, used to let him demonstrate how tough he is. But they have since stopped playing, and now the narrator often ends up caught in the middle of arguments between his parents and grandmother over whether he should be raised to assimilate into Western culture or maintain Indian traditions. Because he looks up to Daddy so much, the narrator often pretends that these sorts of conflicts and difficult emotions don't bother him in the hopes of impressing Daddy. For instance, he teases his best friend, Viraf, for crying and never lets on that his family's arguments upset him. But when the traumatizing sight of Viraf's father on his deathbed reminds the narrator that his own father is aging, he realizes that Daddy

is afraid of getting older and dying. Rather than learn from Daddy's stubbornness and accept aging, the narrator joins him in his prideful denial of the aging process, committing himself to plucking out the white hairs in the future and denying his own desire to cry and hug Daddy for fear of showing weakness.

**Daddy** – Daddy is Mummy's husband, Mamaiji's son-in-law, and the narrator and Percy's father. Daddy used to be a **cricket** player in school and can't accept that his body is declining as he gets older. While he used to organize cricket games with the boys in the family's apartment building, now he just makes the narrator pluck **white hairs** from his head to make himself appear younger. Appearing young and being tough are important to Daddy, and the narrator knows it—he often hides his physical and emotional pain just to impress his father. However, Daddy's attempts to appear young, tough, and successful are fairly transparent, surface-level solutions: he wants to lift his family out of poverty by getting a new job, appear prosperous by buying a new stove to replace **the Criterion**, and look younger by forcing his son to pluck all the white hair from his head. By stubbornly refusing to come to terms with his family's financial decline and his own physical decline, he creates an environment where his son learns to deny his feelings too. Ultimately, the narrator ends up burying all his feelings just to impress Daddy, and Daddy loses out on feeling his son's love. By attempting to live up to an image of ideal masculinity, Daddy ends up hurting himself and his son with his pride and his unrealistic expectations for himself and others.

**Mamaiji** – Mamaiji is the narrator and Percy's grandmother, Mummy's mother, and Daddy's mother-in-law. Although she was once "handsome," Mamaiji is now a very old woman with **white hair**, failing eyesight, and a stooped-over walk resulting from her weak spine and heavy stomach. Her body, in an advanced state of decline due to age, is one of the narrator's first impressions of mortality. Since her husband (the narrator's Grandpa) died, Mamaiji spends most of her time spinning thread to make into kustis for the family to wear to pray at the Parsi fire-temple. She often argues with the narrator's parents over how to raise their children: she thinks they don't feed the narrator enough and hates that they forbid him from eating spicy food, which she thinks has made his stomach weak. But since he is her favorite, she sneaks him spicy food when she can. Mamaiji good-naturedly teases the narrator for how his stomach can't handle traditional Indian cuisine, and her character generally represents the traditional Indian culture that the narrator's parents attempt to keep their sons away from. Mamaiji, Mummy, and Daddy's arguments boil down to the conflict between assimilating into Western culture and maintaining traditional practices.

**Mummy** – Mummy is Daddy's wife, Mamaiji and Grandpa's daughter, and the narrator and Percy's mother. When Mummy comes into the dining room with a plate of toast cooked over **the Criterion** stove in the kitchen, Daddy complains that the toast smells like kerosene and declares that he will get a new job and replace the stove. While Mummy is usually encouraging of Daddy's optimism, this time, she stays quiet until she eventually says that overthinking things will only hurt his chances. This characterizes Mummy as generally accepting of her lot in life and her role of serving her family, but her frustration with Daddy in this moment shows that the family's poverty does wear on her. The narrator's memories reveal that his parents have argued about money several times, particularly when Daddy used some of the family's money to buy a **cricket** kit. At the end of the story, the narrator pities his Mummy for being stuck in the kitchen that smells like kerosene.

**Viraf** – Viraf is the narrator's best friend; they used to play **cricket** together on Sunday mornings. After the narrator sees Viraf and Dr Sidhwa meet outside and then go into Viraf's flat, the narrator goes looking for Viraf when he doesn't emerge after a long time. Viraf is visibly upset, and after ribbing him for a while about being a "crybaby," the narrator learns that Viraf's father is dying. He overhears Viraf's mother talking about her husband's grim condition and is so disturbed by what he hears that he abandons his plans to play games with Viraf and sneaks back to his own flat. Confronted by his own parents' mortality, the narrator lies on his bed, upset. He feels particularly guilty for trying to seem tough by being mean to Viraf when he had no idea his father was sick.

**Viraf's Father** – Viraf's father is a fat, older man whom the narrator sees on his sickbed with a needle in his arm and a tube in his nose. The narrator overhears Viraf's mother talking about how her husband is in this condition because he refuses to take breaks while walking up the three flights of stairs to their flat, which causes him chest pain, and refuses to switch for a first-floor flat because he doesn't want to give up "paradise" on the third floor. Now that he is dying, only intensive care could help him, but there is no room for him in the hospital. Seeing Viraf's father makes the narrator realize that his Daddy is getting older and will die someday, too, so he runs back to his own flat and hopes that his father will ask him to keep plucking **white hairs** from his head so that he can help him fight back against aging.

**Viraf's Mother** – The narrator overhears his friend Viraf's mother talking about how she has tried for years to convince her husband (Viraf's father) that since he is older and overweight, he needs to take breaks when walking up the stairs to their third-floor flat, especially since the stairs cause him chest pain. She has also tried to convince him to trade their third-floor flat for a first-floor flat so he doesn't have to climb stairs, but he refuses to give up their third-floor "paradise." Now that her husband is terminally ill and in need of intensive care, the hospital has no available beds and she feels lost. Hearing Viraf's mother talking makes the narrator realize that his parents will die someday, too. It disturbs him so much that

he abandons the idea of playing games with Viraf and runs back to his own flat.

**Dr Sidhwa** – Dr Sidhwa is the doctor who lives closest to the Firozsha Baag building complex and regularly makes house calls for sick people in the building. He is known as a pious Parsi man, and the narrator respects him. Dr Sidhwa comes to the building to attend to Viraf's father, who is terminally ill.

**Pesi** – Pesi is one of the narrator's friends and Dr Mody's son. Pesi used to make the narrator laugh by talking about his father passing gas, making the narrator wish that he felt comfortable telling personal stories about Daddy. At the time of the story, Dr Mody has died, and Pesi is off at boarding school.

**Percy** – Percy is the narrator's older brother. Percy is in college, and because Daddy thinks he needs to focus on his studies, he never has to pluck **white hairs** from his father's head like the narrator does. When Mamaiji sneaks spicy food to her grandchildren, Percy's stomach handles it much better than the narrator's does.

### MINOR CHARACTERS

**Dr Mody** – Dr Mody was the narrator's friend Pesi's father and, formerly, the apartment building's resident veterinarian. The narrator compares the crow's feet at the corners of Dr Sidhwa and Daddy's eyes to Dr Mody's before his death.

**Najamai and Tehmina** – Najamai and Tehmina are two old women who live in the Firozsha Baag building complex. They accused an employee of the building, Francis, of stealing, and now he doesn't work in the building anymore. The narrator resents them because he believes they wrongly accused Francis.

**Grandpa** – Grandpa was Mamaiji's husband and Mummy's father. Since Grandpa's death, Mamaiji has spent most of her time spinning thread.

## TERMS

Parsi – Parsis are religious followers of the Iranian prophet Zoroaster. Parsis in India largely descend from Iranian Zoroastrians who fled religious persecution. Bombay (now Mumbai), India is home to the largest community of Parsis in India.

Kustis – Kustis are part of part of the Zoroastrian—thus, Parsi—sacred dress. The *kusti* is made of 72 fine, white, wool threads that represent the 72 chapters in the Yasna, the primary Zoroastrian liturgy. The *kusti* is worn wound around the waist as a girdle, tied in a specific pattern. The ritualistic tying and untying of the *kusti* is supposed to be performed multiple times a day while reciting a prayer for the defeat of all evil, the confession and renunciation of sins, and the reaffirmation of the person's commitment to Zoroastrianism.

## 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.

### TIME, DECAY, AND MORTALITY

The characters in "Of White Hairs and Cricket" stubbornly resist the signs of age and decay that that surround them. For instance, the apartment building where the 14-year-old narrator and his family live is crumbling, but his parents ignore this by covering the gaps in the plaster with old calendars. The narrator's parents and grandmother are also visibly getting older, and his father asks him to pluck out all the white hairs from his head every Sunday—a routine that has replaced their old Sunday morning ritual of playing **cricket** together. Seeing his best friend, Viraf's, terminally ill father drives home for the narrator that his time with his own loved ones is limited—he becomes more committed to plucking his father's **white hairs** after this, even though he admits that he's "powerless to stop" his father from aging. Indeed, the only thing in the narrator's life that seems frozen in time is **the Murphy Baby**'s eerily enduring smile on the old Murphy Radio calendar in the narrator's apartment, which gives the sense that the family is trying to cling to the past through this outdated calendar rather than accept that time is moving forward. Together, the characters' vain attempts to stop time suggest that while it's perhaps natural to resist mortality and decay, it's ultimately futile to do so, because these processes are inevitable for everyone and everything.

The narrator and his family remain stuck in the past and try to cover up signs of aging and decay—but they are only avoiding reality and ignoring the inevitable. Outdated calendars cover the crumbling wall plaster in the narrator's home, serving as constant reminders of the past for him and his family. All of them seem to remember the past more fondly than they experience the present, and they aren't hopeful or optimistic. In fact, Daddy tells the narrator outright that there is "no future" in India, and the narrator spends much of the story longing for the days when he and Daddy used to play **cricket** together instead of focusing on his present or future. Daddy's focus on the past seems to make him less able to contend with the present: the narrator describes how every weekend Daddy goes through the same routine of looking for a job in the newspaper and having his son pluck out white hairs from his head to make himself appear younger. But he never seems to make any progress in his job search and starts the process all over again the next weekend. This ritual suggests that Daddy wants to believe that he's still a young man and that he has unlimited time to get a job—but his persistent white hairs prove

that this isn't true. And by treating time as an unlimited resource, Daddy is avoiding the truth and failing to meet his family's present needs. Daddy's attempts to stave off aging are like his strategy for covering holes in the wall with calendars: only temporary and purely aesthetic. Beneath the surface, the problems the characters refuse to face persist.

In particular, the photo of the Murphy Baby on one of the old calendars suggests that stopping time is impossible, and that the characters' efforts to do so are wasted. Since the Murphy Baby is suspended in a permanent state of infancy in the photo on the calendar, it is an exaggerated symbol of the kind of youth-preservation that Daddy is after. But the narrator doesn't seem to find the baby adorable or likeable—instead, he mostly notices the cracks in the wall plaster spreading out from behind the Murphy Radio calendar's curling edges. The Murphy Baby's youth clashes with this underlying decay, suggesting that decay will always set in, even if one tries to stop it. Moreover, when the narrator's parents compare the narrator's own smile as a baby to the Murphy Baby's "innocent and joyous" smile, their observations only serve to emphasize that the narrator has since grown up and lost his former innocence. He notes that the baby "would now be the same age as me," again suggesting that the family's attempts to live in the past and stave off aging and decay are in vain.

But even though the narrator eventually recognizes that it's impossible to stop aging and decay, he adopts the same stubbornness as Daddy by the end of the story. After the narrator sees his friend Viraf's father on his deathbed, the signs of his own father's aging stand out to him more: "The lines on his forehead stood out all too clearly, and the stubble flecked with white[.]" That the narrator notices these features just after the traumatizing sight of Viraf's father dying suggests that the experience has made him realize that Daddy is getting older despite his attempts to cheat his own mortality. Rather than learning from his father's stubbornness, the narrator instead resolves to pluck out Daddy's white hairs with newfound intensity—"as if all our lives were riding on the efficacy of the tweezers." And rather than accepting that his father's mortality is a fact of life, he continues the cycle of trying to stop time from passing, even though he knows his efforts are futile. This suggests that even when people logically know that aging and decay are inevitable, it is perhaps natural and expected for them to resist these forces anyway.

At the end of the story, the narrator collapses onto his bed and feels like crying when he thinks about how tired his grandmother Mamaiji looks, and how Mummy is "growing old" and giving up on her dreams. He regrets not being grateful enough for happy moments in his past, and he knows that he is "powerless to stop" Daddy's white hairs from growing back. That the story ends on this note suggests that although the passage of time is inevitable, it is perhaps also inevitable that people will cling to the past and dread the future—even to their own detriment.

## ASSIMILATION VS. TRADITION

From 1858 to 1947, India was under British colonial rule, and the British exploited India's labor and natural resources. As a result of this long occupation, many elements of British culture became commonplace in India. "Of White Hairs and Cricket" takes place in India 17 years after the country gained its independence from Britain, and the 14-year-old narrator and his family members have very different relationships to Indian culture and Western influence. The narrator's grandmother, Mamaiji, is more aligned with traditional Indian culture: she loves spicy food from street vendors, for instance, and encourages the narrator to eat it too. But Mummy and Daddy are more aligned with British influences: they eat "tasteless" Western food and try to keep the narrator from eating traditional spicy dishes, so those foods make him violently ill when he tries them. Moreover, Daddy wants the narrator to eventually immigrate to the U.S. because there is "no future" in India, and he instills a love of **cricket** (a British sport) in his son. Mamaiji and Daddy's different expectations of the narrator reflect the conflict between preserving tradition and conforming to outside influences that colonized people are forced to navigate. The narrator's physically painful experiences with traditional symbols of both Indian and British culture (spicy food and cricket, respectively) suggest that there is no clear solution to this dilemma, and that trying to fulfill the expectations of either culture will involve some level of suffering.

Although the narrator and his family members all hold onto some Indian traditions, Mamaiji's and Mummy and Daddy's different views of Indian cuisine reflect how different generations respond to colonialism in different ways. The entire family comes together in their devotion to the Parsi faith, wearing the traditional kustis that Mamaiji spins thread for and regularly attending prayers. By maintaining their religious beliefs, the family resists total assimilation into Western culture. Yet the adults' relationships to British and Indian cultures also differ in some ways. For instance, Mamaiji largely rejects Western culture, carrying on the tradition of spinning thread and insisting on cooking traditional spicy meals and eating street food from vendors that travel door to door. Her habits represent a further resistance to assimilation and a desire to keep her own culture alive. Mummy and Daddy, on the other hand, try to keep spicy food out of the house and forbid the narrator and his brother Percy from eating it, thinking that it is unhealthy for their stomachs or somehow contaminated. This suggests that they have, to some extent, conformed to Western culture and now see certain elements of Indian culture as inferior, and even dangerous or dirty—a worldview that was common among British colonizers.

As a result of these clashing attitudes, the narrator is caught

between his parents' and grandmother's expectations of how he should embody Indian and British cultures. When the narrator was younger, Daddy taught him to play cricket, a British game that was only introduced to India because of colonization. On the other hand, Mamaiji seems to want the narrator to stay in touch with his Indian roots by learning how to haggle with vendors and eating traditional foods. But Daddy doesn't see this as worthwhile, because he believes India as a lost cause. He tells the narrator that the narrator should eventually move to the U.S. because there is "no future" in India, suggesting that his push for the narrator to assimilate to Western culture is partly for his own good (though he doesn't appear to consider what the narrator might want for himself). The conflict between these different sets of expectations comes to a head through food: the narrator often gets caught in the middle of the arguments between his parents and grandmother over what, and how much, he should be eating. Mamaiji wants him to eat spicy Indian food (which represents keeping tradition alive) while Mummy and Daddy do their best to keep him from eating it (which represents assimilating to Western culture). These arguments give the narrator headaches, and his literal pain is symbolic of the more figurative pain of trying to navigate one's identity in a postcolonial society.

Beyond headaches, the narrator suffers in various ways while trying to meet both Mamaiji's and Mummy and Daddy's expectations, which suggests that navigating the conflict between tradition and assimilation is painful, no matter how a person goes about it. When the narrator plays cricket with his father, he knows that putting himself in harm's way and enduring pain—like he did when he blocked a shot with his bare shin—will gain his father's approval. But it comes at his body's expense, and he doesn't enjoy the pain. The physical suffering he experiences while playing this British sport represents the idea that although Daddy wants the narrator to assimilate to Western culture, the process would be emotionally and psychologically difficult, because it would mean giving up part of his identity. Conversely, the narrator's actually *enjoys* eating Mamaiji's spicy food even though it makes him violently sick. This subtly suggests that the narrator may feel more connected to Indian culture than British culture, but that trying to preserve one's traditions in an environment that's hostile to those traditions can be just as painful as assimilating. Importantly, cricket causes the narrator external pain (much like British colonialism is an external influence) while the Indian food causes him internal pain (which corresponds with the idea that his Indian identity is something inborn). This suggests that there is no clear way out of the conflict between British and Indian cultures that the narrator feels, because the conflict exists both around him and within him. Whether he assimilates, resists colonial influence, or chooses a combination of the two, he will have to endure some form of personal suffering and will inevitably disappoint some of the adults in his life.

## GENDER, MASCULINITY, AND PRIDE

The men and women in "Of White Hairs and Cricket" respond to challenges differently. On the one hand, the men in the story are afraid of showing weakness. For instance, rather than face aging (even resignedly), Daddy forces the narrator to pluck all the **white hair** out of his head every Sunday. He even stops playing **cricket** with his son seemingly because he doesn't want to be seen as weak when he gets tired. Similarly, Viraf's father, an overweight man, is now terminally ill because walking up the three flights of stairs to his flat taxes his heart so much, and he refuses to give up his upper-floor "paradise" even to save his own life. On the other hand, the narrator's grandmother Mamaiji, whose mobility and eyesight are deteriorating, accepts aging gracefully and warns Daddy against trying to fight time. And Viraf's mother describes how she tried to reason with her husband to take breaks between floors on the steps or move flats, but he refused her. With these differences—plus the narrator's description of how his father taught him "to be tough, always," despite any physical or emotional pain he might be experiencing—the story suggests that teaching men to be strong and silent actively harms the men who try to embody this ideal.

Daddy's and Viraf's father's struggle against being perceived as weak ends up harming them (and the people around them) in the long run. Daddy is so fixated on appearing tough and fit—both of which are stereotypically masculine qualities—that rather than adapt to his aging body by resting during cricket games, he stops the games altogether. This decision negatively impacts the narrator's life: he misses cricket but can't share his feelings with his father about it, because his father has taught him "to be tough, always." In other words, the narrator is afraid of appearing weak or emotionally vulnerable in front of his father because these traits don't fit into Daddy's idea of masculinity. Viraf's father's struggle to admit when his body is declining likewise causes problems. However, his problems are physical: because he refused to take care of what seems like a heart condition, he is now dying. And, as a result, he cannot be physically strong or provide for his family. In this way, trying to embody a masculine ideal actually make Viraf's father *less* stereotypically masculine, as it weakens his body and makes him dependent on other people to care for him. And, more importantly, it makes him terminally ill, thereby putting his family in the position of losing a husband and father.

Unlike the men in the story, Mamaiji, Viraf's mother, and Mummy accept their circumstances and encourage the men in their lives to do the same—but the men don't take the women seriously, and so their advice falls on deaf ears. While Daddy can work outside the home, the narrator describes how Mummy is trapped in the kitchen all day preparing food for the family, and how Mamaiji spends her days housebound, spinning thread. However, rather than resist their circumstances, both

women make the best of their situations. Because they don't face the same expectations of looking "tough"—and because there are greater restrictions on their movements, abilities, and responsibilities as women—the women in "Of White Hairs and Cricket" face reality without pride getting in the way. Mummy, Mamaiji, and Viraf's mother each warn the men in their lives against ignoring their body's demands as they age. But since men aren't expected to listen to women in the society of the story, their pleas go ignored—and in the end, it is too late for Viraf's father.

At the end of the story, the narrator chooses to follow in his father's footsteps and pursue a similarly prideful masculinity, suggesting that these sorts of ideals will likely persist as long as men pass them onto their sons. Although the narrator knows how Viraf's father's pridefulness has made him terminally ill, he cannot break free from Daddy's—and society's—expectations of him to be "tough," which includes denying the natural decline and decay of the human body. For this reason, he commits himself to plucking out Daddy's white hairs, something that Daddy enlists him to do in a vain effort to remain young and strong forever. The narrator makes this commitment in spite of the fact that trying to appear tough has literally hurt him in the past. For instance, when he got hit in the shin during one of his and his father's cricket games, he resisted the urge show pain in order to gain his father's approval. Now, he applies the same strategy to emotional pain: rather than face his father's morality directly or talk to his father about his fears, he lets Daddy's expectations dictate his behavior and sinks into denial. The narrator admits to himself that he knows he cannot stop the white hairs from growing on his father's head, suggesting that at least his denial of the aging process is not as complete as his father's. But he does not go so far as to face aging head-on, leaving the reader questioning whether he will turn out just like his father or be able to learn from his mother and Mamaiji to accept weakness and vulnerability as parts of life.

## COLONIALISM, EXPLOITATION, AND POVERTY

"Of White Hairs and Cricket" takes place 17 years after India gained its independence from British colonial rule, but the damage that Britain caused to India's economy is still evident. For one, the narrator's family is poor enough that they can't afford to move out of their apartment building with crumbling plaster walls. In addition, there are hints throughout the story that India as a whole is similarly in economic decline, at least in part because British companies previously exploited India's natural resources and continue to compete with Indian companies. As a result, the narrator's father, whom he calls Daddy, continually tries and fails to lift his family out of their current financial state by finding a new job. Through the family's dire financial straits, the story shows how colonial powers wreak economic havoc on the places they colonize. Moreover, Daddy's fruitless aspirations to be wealthy and successful suggest that even after a country is no longer under colonial rule, formerly colonized people may be left disenfranchised and powerless to improve their lives.

Both the British company calendars and the British kerosene stove in the family's home represent colonialism's detrimental impact on India's economy. The Murphy Radio calendar in the family's apartment advertises the British-made radios, and it features a photo of a baby with a wide-eyed smile. This ad is meant to associate the radio it's selling with the ideas of youth, happiness, and prosperity—things that the narrator's family is running short on. So, although the narrator's parents say that **the Murphy Baby** brightens the place up, it's also darkly ironic in that it reminds them of what they don't have—at least in part as a result of how Britain has crippled India's economy. The Lifebuoy Soap calendar (from another British-owned company that makes medicated soap) likewise reminds the family of what they lack: a lifebuoy, something that will suddenly appear to save them or keep them healthy. The fact that both of these calendars are advertising British companies suggests that this sort of advertising in an offshoot of Britain's former colonial control of India, as Britain still plays a large part in Indian culture and commerce. Yet Britain has not brought the sort of prosperity that the companies promise in these advertisements. Instead, Indian families like the narrator's are struggling to survive in the aftermath of nearly a century of oppression under colonialism. Similarly, Daddy aligns the family's British-made **Criterion** kerosene stove with the British themselves, casting it as an inadequate interloper in their family home—particularly since the stove is now old and barely functional. When he declares that he will replace it with an Indian-made Bombay Gas Company stove, his statement further links the economic strife his family (and India as a whole) is experiencing with Britain's former colonization.

Because the effects of British colonialism still linger, Daddy is largely powerless to raise his family up out of poverty, even though India has ostensibly achieved independence. Notably, the narrator characterizes Daddy's search for a better job as a kind of ritual that he repeats every week. His lack of success despite continuous effort suggests that India as a whole is in decline, and that there aren't many jobs available. This is likely because India's economy is crippled as a result of Britain exploiting the country's labor and resources for so long, and because British companies are now competing with Indian companies (as evidenced by the ads on the calendars in the family's apartment). And given Daddy's weathered appearance and defeated demeanor, it seems that he has lost hope for earning more money and bettering his family's situation. Nevertheless, Daddy feigns enthusiasm over his job prospects and declares that he will buy the family a new stove as soon as he gets hired. While this purchase would perhaps make the family *appear* and *feel* wealthier than they are, it wouldn't

actually change the family's class status or meaningfully help their money problems (nor would replacing their British stove with an Indian one make India as a whole any more prosperous). Daddy's impulse to consume is similar to how the family hangs calendars on the wall to cover up the crumbling plaster, or how Daddy plucks **white hairs** from his head to cover up the fact that he's getting older. In each case, the family is superficially covering up a problem because they are helpless to solve the root issue. Together, Daddy's fruitless search for a job and resultant self-destructive impulse to buy nicer appliances suggest that even after a colonized country has achieved independence, formerly colonized people still suffer and have few viable options to improve their lives. In this way, although the India of the story is an independent nation, it is not truly free, as the country is still paralyzed by the after-effects of colonialism.

## SYMBOLS

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

### WHITE HAIR

White hair symbolizes the narrator's father, Daddy's, fear of growing old and weak. Daddy forces the narrator to pluck the white hairs from his head every Sunday morning, though the narrator's grandmother, Mamaiji (who has a head full of long, white hair), thinks that the ritual will only bring bad luck. She openly criticizes Daddy for making the narrator pluck out his white hair instead of doing things children should do, and the narrator does indeed find the task disgusting. As the story progresses, the narrator begins to register the signs of the people around him aging, like the wrinkles on Dr Sidhwa's forehead and Mamaiji's stooped walk and bad eyesight. Finally, when he sees his friend Viraf's father on his sickbed, he connects Daddy's white hairs to aging and fully realizes that they mean that one day, Daddy will die—and that Daddy wants to remove his white hairs because he's afraid of dying. After this epiphany, the narrator privately resolves to join Daddy's crusade to pluck all the white hairs out so that he won't have to face aging and the decline of his body.

While the narrator seems to view Daddy's white hair purely as a sign of aging, from Daddy's perspective they also seem to indicate an approaching period of weakness. When he yelps while his son plucks hair from his head, he breaks his own rule to "be tough, always." Rather than the "tough," masculine **cricket** player he was when he was younger, Daddy is an older man who can't always push his physical limits, and his encroaching white hairs display that to the world. Not only does Daddy resist aging by plucking out white hairs, then, but he pridefully resists seeming less masculine.

### CRICKET

Cricket represents the social pressure that the story's male characters feel to appear tough and masculine, as well as Britain's colonial influence on Indian culture. The narrator and his Daddy once bonded over playing cricket (a British bat-and-ball sport) together every Sunday morning. At that time, Daddy used his experience playing cricket in school and his enthusiasm for the game to galvanize all the boys in the Firozsha Baag apartment complex to join them and form teams that competed against one another. Cricket was the narrator's primary opportunity to impress his Daddy by proving that he was tough. He recalls how proud his father was when the narrator once blocked a cricket shot with his bare shine (which saved his team in the game) and, although the blow caused him immense physical pain, acted like it didn't hurt. This incident suggests that cricket is an important determiner of masculinity for the narrator and Daddy: during the game, they are able to display how tough they are, in line with their culture's stereotypically masculine expectations of men. Daddy and the narrator both see cricket as an important part of their youth and their manliness. But since Daddy is getting older and struggles to keep up with the younger boys, slowing down in the game not only shows him that he's aging, but makes him feel weak as a man. And, as a result, he stops the games altogether.

Moreover, since cricket is a traditionally British game, the narrator and his father's love of cricket is also associated with Britain's long colonial rule over India (which ended 17 years before the story takes place). Although the narrator and his Daddy genuinely enjoy cricket, it only became popular in India because British colonizers introduced it to the country. The importance of cricket in the narrator and his Daddy's lives shows how centuries of colonization that only recently ended leave a major cultural impact on (formerly) colonized people, sometimes even splitting their identities between their traditional and colonial cultures.

### THE MURPHY BABY

The Murphy Baby represents the inevitability of aging and decay. At the beginning and toward the end of "Of White Hairs and Cricket," the narrator takes note of the Murphy Baby mascot on the old, fading, and curling Murphy Radio calendar that hangs over the crumbled plaster on his family's dining room wall. The calendar's age, and the decaying building beneath it, contrast with the Murphy Baby's eerily enduring innocent, youthful smile. Using the Murphy Radio calendar to cover up the crumbling plaster is just as surface-level a fix for age and decay, similar to how Daddy forces the narrator to pluck the **white hairs** from his head in an effort to stave off aging. The baby thus represents the idea that everything and everyone deteriorates, regardless of people's

efforts to cheat time or live in the past. It's eventually revealed that the narrator's parents submitted their son's photo to the Murphy Baby contest when he was a baby, because his smile was so innocent and joyful, just like the baby's smile on the calendar in their dining room. But the narrator thinks to himself that the baby on the calendar is the same age as him now, which again speaks to the unavoidability of aging. The narrator is no longer that joyful, smiling baby—not even the Murphy Baby itself is.

## THE CRITERION STOVE

The Criterion kerosene stove in the narrator's apartment represents Britain's lingering presence and influence in post-colonial India. When the narrator's Mummy and Daddy get into a disagreement about the British-made Criterion stove in the family's kitchen, whose wick browns toast unevenly and makes the bread smell like kerosene, their conversation highlights the terrible circumstances the British left Indians in after centuries of colonialism. The British took control of India first through a beneficial trade alliance that quickly turned into a total trade monopoly and, ultimately, colonial rule. This transition meant that a system that once benefitted Indian people rapidly turned to exploit their labor and resources, disrupt their daily lives, and cripple their economy in the long term. Indeed, even though the story takes place 17 years after India gained its independence, Indian people are still feeling the after-effects of colonialism as they live in poverty and struggle to make sense of their cultural identities. Daddy's comment that since the British are gone, the British Criterion stove can go, too, emphasizes the stove's symbolism as a marker of outdated colonial influence lingering in India.

However, the narrator's fondness for the Criterion,—particularly his thought that its oil drum reminds him of the stars—suggests that younger generations of Indian people are more open to aspects of colonial culture that linger in India. The narrator and Daddy's love of **cricket**, a British sport, bears this idea out as well. The fact that the narrator's father loves cricket but despises the stove demonstrates how people who have lived under colonialism face internal conflict as they try to determine which aspects of colonial culture they want to embrace and which aspects they're better off rejecting.

## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Cambridge University Press edition of *Stories of Ourselves: Volume 1* published in 2018.

## Of White Hairs and Cricket Quotes

His aaah surprised me. He had taught me to be tough, always. One morning when we had come home after cricket, he told Mummy and Mamaiji, 'Today my son did a brave thing, as I would have done. A powerful shot was going to the boundary, like a cannonball, and he blocked it with his bare shin.' Those were his exact words. The ball's shiny red fury, and the audible crack—at least, I think it was audible—had sent pain racing through me that nearly made my eyes overflow. Daddy had clapped and said, 'Well-fielded, sir, well-fielded.' So I waited to rub the agonised bone until attention was no longer upon me.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator , Daddy (speaker), Mummy, Mamaiji

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 337

### Explanation and Analysis

The narrator remembers playing cricket with Daddy and resisting the urge to cry when he blocked a ball with his shin. This passage introduces Daddy's belief that the most important quality in a man is "toughness." This mandate to be tough shapes the narrator's entire attitude towards his own, and other people's, physical and emotional suffering. Just as he pretended that getting hit by the cricket ball didn't hurt, he also pretends that other unpleasant aspects of his life (like his parents' arguments with his grandmother, or the idea of his parents aging and dying) don't affect him either. The narrator looks up to his father, and by setting the example that hiding one's pain will result in a reward—in this case, being called "brave"—the narrator continually suppresses his emotions in the interest of impressing his father and appearing masculine.

However, later in the story, Daddy shows he own weakness when he yelps as the narrator is plucking out Daddy's white hairs. This begins to highlight his hypocrisy: although Daddy has taught the narrator to "be tough, always," he isn't able to silently endure the relatively minor pain of having a few hairs pulled out. With this, the story implies that Daddy's standards of masculinity are impossible to meet (even for Daddy himself), and that showing pain and emotion is natural.

On another note, the fact that the narrator and his Daddy are playing cricket gestures toward the British colonial influence that subtly pervades the story. Cricket was introduced to India during Britain's colonial rule over the

country, which lasted from 1858 to 1947. Although India achieved independence 17 years before the events of the story, the British sport remains popular among Indian people and therefore represents Britain's lasting influence on Indian culture. Therefore, Daddy's interest in instilling a love of cricket in the narrator symbolizes his desire for the narrator to assimilate to Western culture. The physical pain that the narrator endures when he plays cricket thus represents both the struggle of trying to appear tough and manly and the emotional struggle that comes with navigating a dual cultural identity.

narrator's family of the past, which the narrator remembers as happier and more prosperous than the present. By placing these reminders of the past all around the walls, Mummy and Daddy refuse to acknowledge their present state of decline, instead choosing to live in the past. Moreover, the calendar doesn't even provide much comfort, as it is also in a state of decline with edges that "curl and tatter." Overall, then, the calendar actually *emphasizes* the inevitability of aging and decay rather than covering up this reality, suggesting that trying to resist time the way the narrator's parents do is an exercise in futility.

By angling the tweezers I could aim the bulb's light upon various spots on the Murphy Radio calendar: the edges of the picture, worn and turned inward; the threadbare loop of braid sharing the colour of rust with the rusty nail it hung by; a corroded staple clutching twelve thin strips—the perforated residue of months ripped summarily over a decade ago when their days and weeks were played out. The baby's smile, posed with finger to chin, was all that had fully endured the years. Mummy and Daddy called it so innocent and joyous. That baby would now be the same age as me. The ragged perimeter of the patch of crumbled wall it tried to hide strayed outward from behind, forming a kind of dark and jagged halo around the baby. The picture grew less adequate, daily, as the wall kept losing plaster and the edges continued to curl and tatter.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Mummy, Daddy

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 338

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, the narrator gets distracted from plucking out Daddy's white hair and looks at the room around him, ultimately settling on the image of the Murphy Baby on the Murphy Radio calendar. The narrator's description of the Murphy Baby highlights the contrast between the photo and what lies underneath: while the joyful baby itself is a symbol of youth, innocence, and optimism, the wall plaster in the narrator's apartment is crumbling beneath the calendar. This contrast makes the baby seem like a surface-level fix for deeper problem at hand: the poverty and decay that surrounds the narrator and his family.

Furthermore, the calendar serves to continually remind the

Daddy finished cutting out and re-reading the classified advertisement. 'Yes, this is a good one. Sounds very promising.' He picked up the newspaper again, then remembered what Mamaiji had muttered, and said softly to me, 'If it is so *duleendar* and will bring bad luck, how is it I found this? These old people' and gave a sigh of mild exasperation. Then briskly: 'Don't stop now, this week is very important.' He continued, slapping the table merrily at each word: 'Every-single-white-hair-out.'

**Related Characters:** Daddy (speaker), Mamaiji, The Narrator

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 339

**Explanation and Analysis**

When Daddy finds a job posting that he optimistically thinks will lift his family out of poverty, he believes that this is good luck, and so he points out that Mamaiji's superstition that plucking out his white hairs is "bad luck" must be wrong. With this perspective, he also doubles down on his belief that removing white hairs will somehow stave off the aging process. But by outright dismissing Mamaiji's ideas about bad luck as an outdated superstition for "old people," not only does he refuse to entertain other perspectives that might help him in accepting aging more gracefully, but he also dismisses the more traditional belief systems that Mamaiji represents in the story.

Expressing these views in front of his son implicitly pushes the narrator to accept the more assimilationist ideas that his parents advocate and to dismiss his grandmother, too. So, not only does Daddy continue to resist aging by having his son pluck out all the white hair from his head, but he also

works to ensure that Mamaiji's traditional beliefs will die with her. In doing so, Daddy refuses to accept his own decline and also plays a role in the decline of Mamaiji's generation's impact on the narrator's generation.

> My guilty conscience, squirming uncontrollably, could not witness the quarrels. For though I was an eager partner in the conspiracy with Mamaiji, and acquiesced to the necessity for secrecy, very often I spilled the beans—quite literally—with diarrhoea and vomiting, which Mamaiji upheld as undeniable proof that lack of proper regular nourishment had enfeebled my bowels. In the throes of these bouts of effluence, I promised Mummy and Daddy never again to eat what Mamaiji offered, and confessed all my past sins. In Mamaiji's eyes I was a traitor, but sometimes it was also fun to listen to her scatological reproaches: '*Mua ugheeparoo*! Eating my food, then shitting and tattling all over the place. Next time I'll cork you up with a big *bootch* before feeding you.'

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Mamaiji, Mummy, Daddy

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 340

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, the narrator describes how sick he feels watching his grandmother Mamaiji argue with his parents over how best to raise him. Their conflict gets at the heart of the larger conflict between assimilation to Western culture and adherence to traditional Indian culture. Since Britain colonized India up until 17 years before the events of the story, colonial influences (like the sport cricket, the British-made appliances in the narrator's kitchen, the English-Parsi calendar on the family's wall, and the bland, Westernized food that Mummy cooks) are normal features of the narrator's life. But Mamaiji's presence is also an important part of his life, and she maintains strong connections to traditional Indian practices (like spinning thread for *kustis* and eating spicy food from street vendors) and wants the narrator to do the same.

Mummy and Daddy, on the other hand, want to distance themselves and their children from Indian culture. Later in the story, Daddy reveals that he thinks there is "no future" in India, which partly explains his reasoning for keeping the narrator from eating spicy food with Mamaiji and eating a more Westernized diet instead. But as the narrator describes his body's violent rejection of traditional Indian foods (despite enjoying the taste), the story suggests that keeping the narrator from his own culture in this way has fundamentally alienated him from it in a way that causes him suffering.

The narrator ends up caught between two sets of expectations. His parents want him to assimilate to Western culture, which makes him suffer because he likes to connect with his Indian roots; but fulfilling Mamaiji's desire for him to carry on her traditional beliefs and practices is also difficult and uncomfortable. Ultimately, then, the narrator is stuck in a situation where he can't win—and where he can't voice his frustrations about this conflict, since his father's mandate to "be tough, always" prevents him from openly expressing his feelings.

> 'Listen to this,' Daddy said to her, 'just found it in the paper: "A Growing Concern Seeks Dynamic Young Account Executive, Self-Motivated. Four-Figure Salary and Provident Fund." I think it's perfect.' He waited for Mummy's reaction. Then: 'If I can get it, all our troubles will be over.' Mummy listened to such advertisements week after week: harbingers of hope that ended in disappointment and frustration. But she always allowed the initial wave of optimism to lift her, riding it with Daddy and me, higher and higher, making plans and dreaming, until it crashed and left us stranded, awaiting the next advertisement and the next wave.

**Related Characters:** Daddy (speaker), The Narrator , Mummy, Mamaiji

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 340

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Daddy finds a job he wants to apply for in the hopes that it will pay him enough to bring his family out of poverty—or at least replace the stoves in the kitchen to make the family *appear* wealthier. Although Daddy refers to his job prospect as "promising," it is obvious to the reader that he is ill-suited for the job. Unlike the ad specifies, Daddy is no longer young, nor is he "dynamic." Because Daddy stubbornly refuses to acknowledge his own aging, he does not apply for jobs he has a chance of getting based on his age and experience. Therefore, he always gets him hopes up based on unrealistic expectations, then never gets anywhere in his search. In this way, by refusing to accept his

own age, Daddy repeatedly creates a situation that sets him up to fail.

Mamaiji considers Daddy's stubborn attempts to appear younger "bad luck"—a superstitious belief that nevertheless rings true: by refusing to age gracefully or at least accept his own age, Daddy presents a false image of himself that he can't convince anyone else to believe in. His bluster about being able to end all his family's problems with a new job stems from his pride, and since he is the only person in the family who can work outside the home, he ends up stringing Mummy's hopes along with him. In a rare moment of insight into Daddy's denial, the narrator recognizes the pattern that his father has set: he always finds a new opportunity that will "fix" everything, then watches it fail, then starts the process all over again.

> 'It's these useless wicks. The original Criterion ones from England used to be so good. One trim and you had a fine flame for months.' He bit queasily into the toast. 'Well, when I get the job, a Bombay Gas Company stove and cylinder can replace it.' He laughed. 'Why not? The British left seventeen years ago, time for their stove to go as well.'
>
> He finished chewing and turned to me. 'And one day, you must go, too, to America. No future here.' His eyes fixed mine, urgently. 'Somehow we'll get the money to send you. I'll find a way.'
>
> His face filled with love. I felt suddenly like hugging him, but we never did except on birthdays, and to get rid of the feeling I looked away and pretended to myself that he was saying it just to humour me, because he wanted me to finish pulling his white hairs.

**Related Characters:** Daddy (speaker), The Narrator

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 340

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Daddy complains about the Criterion kerosene stove in their kitchen and urges the narrator to immigrate to the U.S. rather than staying in India. The Criterion, a British-made stove, used to serve the family well, but now has grown old and outdated. This process mirrors Britain's colonial conquest of India: an economic agreement that benefitted India quickly turned sour for the Indian people as the British gained more and more control and India was left nearly powerless to stop them. The way that the British exploited India's labor and natural resources left the country in a state of poverty that the narrator's family situation mirrors, as they are nearly powerless to improve their situation.

However, India did gain its independence from Britain, and Daddy, too, hopes to be free of the poverty and exploitation that he faces by getting a new job that makes him more money. His desire to replace the Criterion with a Bombay Gas Company stove suggests that Indian independence is important to him. The story takes place 17 years after India gained political freedom from Britain—although the fact that the narrator and Daddy played cricket together and many of the wall calendars around the apartment make clear that Britain and India are still economically tied in the story. Nevertheless, Daddy wants Indian-made products in his home in part to represent his own freedom.

However, Daddy's attitude towards India becomes more complicated when he tells the narrator that he wants him to go to the U.S one day. Despite India's independence, he still does not see a future in the country for his children, suggesting that his desire for a new stove is just another surface-level, temporary solution to the deeper problem of India's economic decline.

The fact that the narrator can see Daddy's love for him in his face makes this passage a rare moment of affection in the present—not just in the past—between father and son. But it still doesn't make any kind of a breakthrough in Daddy's idea that men should "be tough, always": he has passed on that idea so thoroughly to the narrator that the narrator can't even accept his love. Instead, he pushes his reciprocal feelings of love away and tries to convince himself that Daddy just wants something from him, showing how damaging Daddy's ideas about masculinity have been to his son.

> I thought of the lines on Daddy's forehead, visible so clearly from my coign of vantage with the tweezers. His thinning hair barely gave off a dull lustre with its day-old pomade, and the Sunday morning stubble on his chin was flecked with grey and white.
>
> Something—remorse, maybe just pity—stirred inside, but I quashed it without finding out. All my friends had fathers whose hair was greying. Surely they did not spend Sunday mornings doing what I did, or they would have said something. They were not like me, there was nothing that was too private and personal for them.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Daddy

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 342

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, the narrator thinks about Daddy growing older but fails to deal with his emotions surrounding this reality. The narrator imagines the signs of aging on Daddy's face: his greying hair, the lines in his forehead, and even the pomade that tries to make him look better but loses its shine over time. As a result, he begins to feel emotions stirring within him. While he goes so far as to try and label the emotions to himself ("remorse, maybe just pity"), a first step toward facing his own feelings, he "quashe[s]" them down.

Daddy's idea that men should "be tough, always" has made the narrator unable to examine his own emotions until they are completely overwhelming for him. So, these early musings about aging and death don't end up helping the narrator when, at the end of the story, he must confront his loved ones' mortality all at once. By comparing himself and his father to his friends and their fathers, the narrator feels like the odd man out because he has something (Daddy's resistance toward aging and denial of his emotions) that he can't talk about with other people. He can't seem to work out whether or not his friends would be able to talk to him if they were struggling with similar problems. The story thus suggests that trying to appear stereotypically masculine and strong does more harm than good, as it leaves people unable to cope with their emotions or confide in other people for fear of seeming weak.

❝ Cricket on Sunday mornings became a regular event for the boys in Firozsha Baag. Between us we almost had a complete kit; all that was missing was a pair of bails, and wicket-keeping gloves. Daddy took anyone who wanted to play to the Marine Drive *maidaan*, and organised us into teams, captaining one team himself. We went early, before the sun got too hot and the *maidaan* overcrowded. But then one Sunday, halfway through the game, Daddy said he was going to rest for a while. Sitting on the grass a little distance away, he seemed so much older than he did when he was batting, or bowling leg breaks. He watched us with a faraway expression on his face. Sadly, as if he had just realised something and wished he hadn't.

There was no cricket at the *maidaan* after that day.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Daddy, Mummy

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 343

**Explanation and Analysis**

When the narrator describes his old routine of playing cricket with Daddy on Sundays, he explains that the games brought the boys in their apartment building together. Notably, cricket is a British sport that became popular in India because Britain colonized India from 1858 to 1947, which led to certain aspects of British culture becoming normalized in India. The boys' mutual love of cricket suggests that British colonial influence isn't all bad, since everyone genuinely enjoys the game. The narrator's love of cricket adds nuance to his ongoing struggle between assimilating to Western culture and aligning himself with Indian traditions, as he finds himself enjoying aspects of both. This suggests that there's no one correct way to navigate a dual cultural identity, and that one doesn't necessarily have to make a choice between one culture or the other.

This passage also introduces Mummy's perspective on the cricket games for the first time. In her eyes, buying the cricket kit was frivolous spending when the narrator's family could have used the money elsewhere, inviting the reader to question whether the cricket games were just another way for Daddy to appear young, prosperous, and virile when he really wasn't. Even though he truly does enjoy cricket, the sport has implicit connections to wealth, assimilation, and masculinity that Daddy can't completely shake with his investment in the game.

The narrator's recollection of the past paints the ideal image of his father as an athletic leader, surely the image that Daddy would like his son to remember. But his memory of his father's face when he had to rest during one game stands out as Daddy fails, before his eyes, to come to terms with the fact that he is growing older. Rather than accepting his weakness and working around it so that his son can continue to enjoy cricket, Daddy instead chose a surface-level solution: stopping the games entirely, so that no one can see him in a vulnerable state. His pride affected him and his son negatively, and his fear of appearing weak as a leader caused him to walk away from being any kind of a leader at all.

Viraf was standing at the balcony outside his flat. 'What's all the *muskaa-paalis* for the doctor?'

He turned away without answering. He looked upset but I did not ask what the matter was. Words to show concern were always beyond me. I spoke again, in that easygoing debonair style which all of us tried to perfect, right arm akimbo and head tilted ever so slightly, 'Come on *yaar*, what are your plans for today?'

He shrugged his shoulders, and I persisted, 'Half the morning's over, man, don't be such a cry-baby.'

'Fish off,' he said, but his voice shook. His eyes were red, and he rubbed one as if there was something in it. I stood quietly for a while, looking out over the balcony.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator , Viraf (speaker), Daddy, Viraf's Father

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 343-344

**Explanation and Analysis**

When the narrator's friend Viraf is upset, the narrator tries to act casual and even tease Viraf. This mirrors the way that Daddy deals with conflict and emotion: rather than face serious problems head-on and with compassion, Daddy gets angry or makes a joke of the situation, blending denial and pride in his efforts to appear tough. In this passage, the reader can see the narrator following in his footsteps: he doesn't really want to deal with Viraf's feelings, even though it is clear that there is some sort of medical emergency going on in his house, so he tries to ignore the problem—and get Viraf to ignore the problem, too.

While Viraf does not seem to be as good at hiding his feelings as the narrator, he still turns away when the narrator notices how upset he is, suggesting that Daddy's beliefs about masculinity and toughness are more widespread than just the narrator's family. Viraf can't show emotion to his friend, and when he does, the narrator demonstrates that he can't deal with Viraf's emotions, anyway. Overall, by following the examples that their fathers set, Viraf and the narrator continue the cycle in the story of men choosing to appear tough rather than supporting one another through hard or scary situations.

'*Puppa* is very sick,' whispered Viraf, as we passed the sickroom. I stopped and looked inside. It was dark. The smell of sickness and medicines made it stink like the waiting room of Dr Sidhwa's dispensary. Viraf's father was in bed, lying on his back, with a tube through his nose. There was a long needle stuck into his right arm, and it glinted cruelly in a thin shaft of sunlight that had suddenly slunk inside the darkened room. I shivered. The needle was connected by a tube to a large bottle which hung upside down from a dark metal stand towering over the bed.

**Related Characters:** Viraf (speaker), Viraf's Father, Dr Sidhwa, The Narrator , Mamaiji, Daddy, Viraf's Mother

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 344

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage describes the narrator's view of Viraf's father on his deathbed, a sight that the narrator finds traumatizing. Though Viraf's father is relatively young (not nearly as old as the narrator's grandma Mamaiji), he seems to be in an advanced state of decline, which shocks the narrator. The sensory details in the room—the darkness, the smell of sickness and medicine—make the image stand out to the narrator in the most vivid way possible.

In this moment, the narrator slowly realizes that his own father is getting older, and that his loved ones could be taken from him at any moment. And the fact that the needle in Viraf's father's arm appears "cruel" to the narrator suggests that he views the things that work to extend life as somehow sinister for attempting to prolong the inevitable.

Moreover, Viraf's father's position lying flat on his back with numerous machines keeping him alive is the ultimate image of weakness. And, importantly, he is in this state because he didn't take his wife's advice to slow down and stop pushing himself physically. Now, because he didn't accept his weakness and make appropriate accommodations, he has become even more weak in that he has completely lost his independence.

Viraf's mother was talking softly to the neighbours in the dining-room. '. . . in his chest got worse when he came home last night. So many times I've told him, three floors to climb is not easy at your age with your big body, climb one, take rest for a few minutes, then climb again. But he won't listen, does not want people to think it is too much for him. Now this is the result, and what I will do I don't know... to exchange with someone on the ground floor, but that also is no. Says I won't give up my third-floor paradise for all the smell and noise of a ground-floor flat. Which is true, up here even B.E.S.T. bus rattle and rumble does not come. But what use of paradise if you are not alive in good health to enjoy it?'

**Related Characters:** Viraf's Mother (speaker), Viraf's Father, The Narrator , Daddy

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 344

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, the narrator overhears Viraf's mother describing her attempts to protect her husband's health, which demonstrates how little the men in the story listen to the women—even when women are acting for the good of their husbands. Viraf's mother's story shows that Viraf's father, like Daddy, refused to accept the reality of his situation—in his case, not only his age but also his weight and overall poor health that suggests some kind of heart condition. Her explicit description of her husband's pride at wanting to appear strong shows that he, too, is concerned with appearing tough, masculine, and prosperous at all costs. Yet his pride and his self-imposed expectations to live up to an image of ideal masculinity have backfired to result in such extreme weakness that he won't be able to live much longer.

Viraf's parents' relationship mirrors the narrator's parents' relationship, in that the husband isn't able to face reality in the way that the wife can. And since he dismisses her concerns, he ends up worse off than if he had only listened. This parallel alarms because it makes him realize that his father, too, lives in a state of denial about his own physical condition. As a result, he runs home to avoid the way it makes him feel—something that backfires on him, too, as returning home and seeing his loved ones only makes their mortality all the more obvious.

Daddy looked up questioningly. His hair was dishevelled as I had left it, and I waited, hoping he would ask me to continue. To offer to do it was beyond me, but I wanted desperately that he should ask me now. I glanced at his face discreetly, from the corner of my eye. The lines on his forehead stood out all too clearly, and the stubble flecked with white, which by this hour should have disappeared down the drain with the shaving water. I swore to myself that never again would I begrudge him my help; I would get all the white hairs, one by one, if he would only ask me; I would concentrate on the tweezers as never before, I would do it as if all our lives were riding on the efficacy of the tweezers, yes, I would continue to do it Sunday after Sunday, no matter how long it took.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Daddy, Viraf's Mother, Viraf's Father

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 345

**Explanation and Analysis**

When the narrator commits to helping Daddy resist aging and appear younger in this passage, he shows that rather than learning his lesson from Viraf's mother and father, he has decided to join in the denial of the natural aging process.

While the narrator's resistance to aging is partly natural—no one likes to think about their loved ones dying—he decides to help his father reject reality rather than help him accept it (or work on accepting it himself). This suggests that he has absorbed his father's lessons about pride and masculinity to the extent that not even a traumatic experience, like seeing his friend's father dying, can reverse his perspective. The narrator loses his innocence and gains perspective on his father's emotions, but he still can't talk to his father about his feelings even as the signs of age on his father's face make him increasingly distressed. Without being able to openly discuss his feelings, the narrator and his family end up stuck in the same routine as always.

> I felt like crying, and buried my face in the pillow. I wanted to cry for the way I had treated Viraf, and for his sick father with the long, cold needle in his arm and his rasping breath; for Mamaiji and her tired, darkened eyes spinning thread for our kustis, and for Mummy growing old in the dingy kitchen smelling of kerosene, where the Primus roared and her dreams were extinguished; I wanted to weep for myself, for not being able to hug Daddy when I wanted to, and for not ever saying thank you for cricket in the morning, and pigeons and bicycles and dreams; and for all the white hairs that I was powerless to stop.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), Daddy, Mummy, Mamaiji, Viraf, Viraf's Father

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 345

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, the final lines of the story, the narrator thinks about all of his loved ones in their varied states of physical decline and age. Although he feels like crying, he doesn't allow himself to, still keeping up with the expectation that he, as a young man, should always appear tough. He fixates on the decay all around him, and although he makes it one step further than his father in accepting that decay, he still doesn't go far enough. Departing from his father's denial, he acknowledges to himself that he is "powerless" to stop Daddy's white hairs from growing back no matter how much he plucks them, suggesting that he has learned some small thing from the traumatic sight of Viraf's father. However, he faces this truth not with acceptance, but with resistance.

The narrator's response is natural—it is difficult to accept the reality of decay and death. But his solution to the problem is extreme and, ultimately, as he himself acknowledges, futile. As he laments his inability to communicate his feelings with Daddy, the tragedy of the story comes through in both the narrator's realizations about mortality and in the difficulty of living with unrealistic expectations that make expressing love for the people that one cares about nearly impossible. The narrator regrets that he never thanked his father for the cricket games they used to play, yet he doesn't seem to plan on thanking him in the present. In this way, the narrator's loss of innocence and refusal to face reality makes him regretful of the past and afraid of the future, with no knowledge of how to cope with his newfound realizations.

# 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.

## OF WHITE HAIRS AND CRICKET

The narrator sits at the table with his Daddy and plucks a **white hair** from his father's head with tweezers. His father exclaims in pain and tells the narrator to only pluck one hair at a time. Annoyed, the narrator tries to tell his father that he *did* only pluck one hair, but his father doesn't really look at him, instead staying focused on the classifieds section in the *Times of India*.

*Daddy's job search provides the first hint that the narrator's family is struggling financially, and that the pressure falls on Daddy to provide for the household. By plucking the white hairs from Daddy's head, the narrator reluctantly assists his father's resistance to the natural aging process. However, at this early point in the story, the narrator does not seem to understand* why *the white hairs bother his father so much—he only plucks the hairs because Daddy wants him to. While the reader can likely intuit Daddy's reasoning, the fact that the narrator is still in the dark about Daddy's reasons highlights how innocent and naïve the narrator still is.*

A light from the light bulb overhead glints off the tweezers in the narrator's hand, drawing his eye around the room and over to the Murphy Radio calendar on the wall. The narrator takes note of **the Murphy Baby** on the calendar while his Daddy sighs and keeps reading the paper.

*The Murphy Baby represents youth and innocence, and the fact that the narrator notices it in this moment suggests that it sharply contrasts with Daddy's own advancing age.*

Every Sunday, the narrator has to pluck **white hairs** from his father's head. Every time he does, it takes him longer than the Sunday before, and Daddy jokes that it is the narrator's laziness that makes it take longer. The narrator's brother, Percy, never has to pluck hairs from his father's head, and if the narrator asks his father why, he only tells him that Percy's college schoolwork is more important.

*When Daddy jokes about his son's laziness, he further buries his real emotions about aging. Rather than face his fears about getting older head-on and admit that white hair is a natural part of the aging process, he instead shifts the blame for his aging onto the narrator. His nonchalance about something that really scares him demonstrates the kind of strong and silent masculinity that he models for his son. He refuses to admit his fears and laughs them off instead. Daddy's investment in his elder son Percy's education demonstrates how he strives for upward mobility (increased wealth and social status) for himself and his family. Daddy's insistence that Percy shouldn't be disturbed while he is studying shows that he really does care about his family and their future prospects—he just can't seem to be honest with them about how he feels.*

The narrator's Daddy relies on the narrator, who is 14 and has agile fingers, to "uproot the signposts of mortality" that show up on his head every week. And, since the narrator has to comb through his father's hair while it is still greasy with pomade, he finds the task pretty disgusting. Each time, the narrator singles out the purely **white hairs** and the hairs that are just starting to turn white—the half-white hairs disgust him—and has to decide whether to pluck the half-white hairs or leave them for next week, by which time they will be fully white.

*The narrator's comment about the "signposts of mortality" seems to come from a retrospective look at the situation—in the present timeline of the story, the narrator still does not seem to understand why Daddy wants all the white hairs gone. However, he does seem to understand that in reality, he has very little control over the white hairs. His observation that the only thing he can control is whether to pluck the half-white hairs or wait until they are fully white shows that aging will continue regardless of Daddy's and the narrator's attempts to stop it. The only thing they can do is choose to accept it or refuse to face it.*

The Sunday edition of the *Times of India* has a comics section, which includes Mandrake the Magician, The Phantom, and Maggie and Jiggs in the comic "Bringing Up Father." The colors in comics make the narrator's family's drab tablecloth look brighter and more cheerful, as if it's dressed up for Sundays—although the tablecloth still smells like musty plastic. The narrator thinks that the cloth is impossible to clean because dirt accumulates in its grooved floral design.

*The way dirt stubbornly accumulates in the old tablecloth is similar to how Daddy's white hairs stubbornly grow back every week. Both of these phenomena reflect that idea that decay (of inanimate objects and of the human body) will set in regardless of people's efforts to avoid it. On another note, the* Times of India *is an English-language newspaper, and the comics in it are American, which begins to hint that India has adopted certain elements of Western culture.*

As the narrator's Daddy reaches up to scratch his head, the narrator is surprised that his father yelped when he plucked the **white hair**, because his father has taught him "to be tough, always."

*Daddy's yelp contrasts with his idea that it is always important to appear "tough." In this moment, the narrator seems to notice that this standard is somewhat hypocritical, since not even Daddy is always tough. Still, though, the narrator doesn't realize the full extent of his father's refusal to face reality (and his own emotions) in an effort to appear invincible.*

One day when the narrator and Daddy were coming home after a **cricket** game, Daddy told Mummy and Mamaiji that his son had done something "brave" like he himself would have done: a "powerful" cricket shot was heading toward the boundary, and the narrator blocked it "with his bare shin." The narrator remembers his father's exact words, and also how the red ball had collided with his shin so hard that it made a cracking sound that the narrator thought was audible. It hurt so much he nearly cried. But since his father clapped for him, the narrator waited to rub the sore spot until he wasn't looking.

*The fact that Daddy and the narrator played cricket, a British game, shows how colonial influence has worked its way into Indian culture. (India was under British colonial rule from 1858 to 1947). The pain the narrator experiences when he blocks the shot suggests both the pain that Indian people experienced under Britain's exploitative rule and the pain (both physical and emotional) that the narrator will endure if he continues to act "brave" to impress his father and fulfill stereotypically masculine ideals.*

After his **cricket** save, the narrator's best friend, Viraf, was impressed. The narrator wishes that Percy had been there to see, but he had lost interest in cricket by then. Now, months have passed since that day, and Daddy doesn't take him to cricket on Sunday mornings anymore.

*The narrator's nostalgia for cricket contributes to the story's overall focus on the past as an idyllic time. The cricket games were the narrator's opportunity to bond his father and impress the men in his life. The fact that Daddy no longer takes the narrator to play cricket suggests that his priorities have changed—he is now focused on staving off the future (by having the narrator pluck out his white hairs) rather than enjoying the present.*

The narrator stops looking for **white hair** on his father's head for a moment and instead uses the tweezers to direct the light from the light bulb onto the Murphy Radio calendar. Because Daddy is focused on something he sees in the classifieds, he doesn't notice. The narrator notices how old and worn the calendar is—it has been on the wall for over a decade—but **the Murphy Baby**'s smile remains unchanged.

*A calendar is, of course, typically used to keep track of the present and plan for the future. So, the fact that this calendar has been hanging on the wall for over a decade creates the sense that the narrator's family is using it for a different purpose. Particularly since this calendar features a photo of a smiling baby, it seems like the family is trying to cling to the happiness and innocence they associate with the past rather than facing their troubles in the present or looking forward to the future.*

The narrator's Mummy and Daddy think that **the Murphy Baby** is "innocent" and "joyous," even though the baby would now be about the same age as the narrator and the crumbling wall plaster is now visible around the edges of the calendar. Every day, the calendar does a worse job of covering the crumbling spot in the wall, as the plaster keeps falling away and the calendar curls with age.

*While Mummy and Daddy think the Murphy Baby is "innocent," the calendar itself is worn, and it's covering up glaring problems in the building's structure, which makes the smiling baby seem eerie and out of place. Again, the narrator's family seems to be trying to ignore the decay surrounding them and fight the inevitable reality that everything and everyone will eventually grow old and break down.*

Around the kitchen, many other old calendars from the Cement Corporation, Lifebuoy Soap, and an English and Parsi calendar cover crumbling wall plaster, the "broken promises" of the building management company. Mummy and Mamaiji consult the English-Parsi calendar when they pray. Presently, Daddy taps the newspaper and asks for the scissors.

*Again, the calendars on the wall keep the family stuck in the past and cover up the crumbling plaster, a very literal sign of the narrator's family's poverty as well as the inevitability of aging and decay. Notably, it seems like most of the companies whose ads are on the calendars are British. The only Indian company is the Cement Corporation, which subtly represents stagnancy (being cemented in place) as opposed to happiness and innocence (like the Murphy Baby) or being saved and brought back to good health (like a lifebuoy). But much like the building management's "broken promises," these British companies haven't brought the happiness and prosperity that they promise in their advertisements. Instead, Britain's former colonial presence, as well as British companies' continued competition with Indian companies, has left India's economy crippled and Indian people poor and lacking in opportunities (hence why Daddy can't find a job). In addition, the English-Parsi calendar on the wall is a symbol of the family's religious devotion as well as the crossroads the family finds itself at regarding assimilation and tradition, as the English on the calendar is a reminder of Britain's former colonial presence in Indian.*

Mamaiji walks through the kitchen and sits in her chair on the porch. The narrator notices that when she is sitting, he can't see the ailment that makes her walk bent over: according to her doctors, her large stomach and weak spine make it difficult for her to stand upright. However, the narrator knows from his Mummy's old photographs that Mamaiji had been a large, attractive, even majestic woman when she was younger.

*Mamaiji's physical deterioration is yet another example of age and decay in the story. Her transformation from robust and beautiful to old and frail can be read as a sign of what's to come for Daddy as he ages, in spite of his attempts to stave off this process.*

On the porch, Mamaiji pulls out her spindle and wool, defying the doctor's orders to rest her eyes after a recent cataract surgery, and notices the narrator with the tweezers. Under her breath, she mutters about Daddy making the narrator pluck **white hair** from his head, saying that it will bring "bad luck." She compares Daddy to "a slaughtered chicken" and laments how he still makes his son pull out the hairs every Sunday despite her warnings. She says that the narrator ought to be playing or learning how to haggle with grocery shopkeepers, keeping her voice low enough that Daddy won't confront her even if he hears her.

*Mamaiji's thread-spinning and superstitions about Daddy's hair-plucking connects her to traditional Indian culture. Her desire for the narrator to have the time and space to still be a kid demonstrates how much she cares for him—but her love also comes with implicit expectations. She wants him to play or learn to haggle with shopkeepers (a traditional practice in India). The fact that Mamaiji doesn't want Daddy to hear her talking about this suggests that Daddy disapproves of such things, and that perhaps he is more aligned with Western culture than with Indian traditions.*

The narrator resents Mamaiji criticizing Daddy and resents being called a child. And as Mamaiji works her spindle and wool, the narrator wishes that the thread would break. Sometimes after he wishes so, the thread *does* break, and then his grandmother seems so surprised and upset that he guiltily runs over to pick it up for her. As Mamaiji spins her thread, the narrator compares the thread to "snow white," tangled hair.

*The narrator's disdain for Mamaiji's criticism reveals how he has picked up on some of his father's misogyny, as he seems to respect his grandmother less than he respects his father. His wish that Mamaiji's thread would break suggests the Fates from Greek myth, who spin the "thread" of human fate and eventually cut it to bring about death. Mamaiji's outsize reaction to the break bears this out, as if the thread breaking signals Mamaiji's impending death. Moreover, the narrator's description of Mamaiji's white hair further contrasts her with Daddy: she accepts her age and allows her white hair to grow freely, whereas Daddy stubbornly resists his white hair and the aging process it represents.*

Mamaiji spins enough thread for everyone in the family to have a kusti. And, since Grandpa died, she's spun so much that everyone has an extra *kusti*. The *kustis* themselves were woven by a professional weaver who praises the good-quality thread, and when the narrator's family wears them to the fire-temple, other people look at them covetously.

*Mamaiji's thread-spinning for the family's kustis binds everyone in the family together with shared religious traditions. Although they disagree about how to raise the narrator, they all come together in their faith.*

The narrator admires Mamaiji's spinning—everything that spins mesmerizes him, like the bucket descending into the Bhikha Behram Well for the people who go there to pray on holy days. He imagines himself holding onto the spindle and going into the well, certain that Mamaiji would pull him up before he drowned and praying that the thread will not break. He also likes watching records spin, particularly a record with a blue and gold label, so he plays it over and over just to watch it spinning. As he watches it, he leans his cheek on the gramophone to smell the wood and feel the comforting vibrations.

*The narrator's fixation on spinning, cyclical things suggests that he is comforted by the idea of things that remain the same and don't deteriorate or die—like a strong thread that is continuously spun and never snaps, or a spinning record that always looks and sounds the same. In this way, he is like his parents, who prefer to cling to the past rather than accept change. On another note, the image of Mamaiji lowering the narrator into the Bhikha Behram Well (a Parsi holy site in India) is symbolic of her guiding him through Indian religious and cultural traditions. The narrator seems both comforted and afraid of this—confident that his grandmother will keep him safe but also terrified that he'll drown in the well. In this way, the image represents the narrator's conflicting feelings about immersing himself in Indian traditions (as opposed to assimilating to Western culture).*

Daddy cuts out the classified advertisement he found and says that it seems promising, then says quietly to the narrator that if plucking the **white hairs** is bad luck like Mamaiji says, then he wouldn't have found the advertisement. He sighs about old people and tells the narrator to make sure he gets every white hair out of his head. The narrator thinks that Daddy and Mamaiji really like each other, but that Daddy doesn't like living with her because he and Mummy often disagree with Mamaiji about how to raise the narrator.

*By teasing Mamaiji about her superstition (which is presumably rooted in Indian tradition), Daddy is subtly dismissing her cultural beliefs and instead pushing the narrator toward more assimilationist ideas. His comment about old people suggests that Mamaiji's ideas are generational—the kind of traditional beliefs she represents are dying out with the people who hold them.*

In particular, Mamaiji believes the narrator is underfed. Because Mamaiji is housebound, she can only eat food from vendors that go from door to door, or the food she cooks for herself. Mamaiji thinks that Mummy's cooking is disgustingly bland, and because the narrator is Mamaiji's favorite, sometimes he gets to eat her spicy food (which he likes but his parents don't allow him to eat) while Daddy is at work and Mummy is "in the kitchen."

*Mamaiji, Mummy, and Daddy's arguments over food are a key aspect of the debate between tradition and assimilation in the narrator's life. Mummy rejects her mother's traditional Indian foods, instead choosing blander Western foods. Moreover, the detail that Mummy spends most of her time in the kitchen and Mamaiji spends all her time in the house, while Daddy is able to work outside the home, highlights the different gender roles Indian men and women have at this time. It further thrusts all the responsibility for providing for the family financially onto Daddy, which perhaps contributes to his desire to feel young and capable.*

When Percy was around, he also got to eat Mamaiji's spicy food, and Percy's stomach is more inclined toward spice. But when the narrator's parents found out what their children were eating, Mamaiji would get in trouble for burning their stomachs or exposing them to diseases that the oils in the street foods might carry. But Mamaiji would argue back that the narrator's parents were not feeding their children enough, so she had to feed them. When the narrator's parents argue with Mamaiji, he pretends that it doesn't bother him. Instead, he says the shouting is giving him a headache and walks away.

*The narrator's love of spicy food suggests that he appreciates traditional Indian culture more than his parents do. But because he is from a younger generation that is more Westernized than his grandmother's generation, his body isn't used to spicy food. This more broadly represents his inability to fully immerse himself in Indian culture, largely because his parents are pulling him in the opposite direction. Indeed, the narrator's parents' ideas that the food is unhealthy or dirty echoes common British colonial ideas about Indian food that are rooted in racism. By arguing against this point of view, Mamaiji defends her culture. Although these arguments bother the narrator, rather than directly communicate his discomfort to his parents, he denies the feelings and lies about the real problem, mimicking his father's example of not facing problems head-on.*

Watching the arguments makes the narrator feel guilty, especially since every time he and Mamaiji conspire against his parents and eat spicy food, he gives the secret away through diarrhea and vomiting. Mamaiji thinks his sickness proves that Mummy and Daddy have made his stomach weak, and the narrator always promises his parents he will never eat Mamaiji's food again. When he makes his promises, he betrays Mamaiji, but he likes how she makes fun of him when he gets sick and admits his wrongdoing, saying that next time, she'll cork him up before feeding him.

*The way that the narrator's body violently rejects spicy food suggests that no matter how he may feel toward Indian or British culture, his body has already partly assimilated into Western culture in a way he can't reverse. In this sense, meeting his grandmother's expectations of carrying on Indian traditions will cause him suffering, just like playing cricket (a symbol of British culture) to appease his father will make him suffer. This suggests that navigating a dual cultural identity will always be difficult, regardless of whether a person chooses to assimilate or hold onto their native culture.*

Mummy comes into the room from the kitchen, moves the comics on the table, and sets down a plate of unevenly cooked toast that she made using **the Criterion**. Daddy reads the classified ad for a "Dynamic Young Account Executive" aloud and says that it is perfect for him and, if he gets the job, the family's troubles will be over. Mummy listens to him say things like this every week and, despite her initial optimism, always ends up disappointed. But this time, she is silent, surprising the narrator.

*As Daddy reads aloud the classified ad, it becomes obvious that the job is not right for him—his is not young, nor does he seem particularly "dynamic." Instead, he is getting older and growing increasingly stubborn about his own abilities, refusing to accept that he isn't the young man he used to be. In this way, Daddy denies reality for the sake of his own pride. Mummy probably stays silent on the matter because she recognizes how fragile Daddy's confidence is regarding his age and abilities. He wants to provide for the family, but by chasing opportunities designed for much younger men, he repeatedly creates situations where he can't fulfill his own expectations.*

Daddy grabs a piece of toast and dips it in his tea, then says that the toast smells like kerosene from **the Criterion**, but when he gets a new job, he'll get a toaster. Mummy tells him that she doesn't smell the kerosene, and Daddy angrily shoves the toast in her face, telling her to smell it. He complains about how the Criterion has declined in quality and jokes that since the British left India 17 years ago, the British stove can go, too.

*The aging Criterion stove is yet another example of decay in the story. Daddy reveals that it is a British-made product, which implicitly links British influence with a decline in quality. This suggests that the family's poverty is at least in part due to the long history of colonial exploitation in India.*

Turning toward the narrator, Daddy tells him that someday, he has to go to the U.S. because there is no future in India—he'll get money for him to go somehow. Daddy's face becomes affectionate, and the narrator wants to hug him, but he doesn't because hugs are reserved for birthdays. To make this urge go away, the narrator pretends that his father is only being loving because he wants him to keep plucking his **white hair**.

*Daddy's wish for the narrator to go to the U.S. reveals the final frontier of his hope for the narrator's assimilation: after denying Mamaiji's beliefs and refusing to feed the narrator traditional spicy foods, Daddy ultimately wants his son to leave India behind entirely. Although he does so out of love for his son—love that the narrator can clearly see, a display of affection that's uncharacteristic for Daddy—his desire to send young people out of the country contributes to the overall sense of decay and decline in India. The narrator's desire to hug his father, and his reasoning for why he doesn't, demonstrate the impact of Daddy's model of masculinity: the narrator is unable to express his feelings for fear of not appearing "tough."*

Daddy says that they might be able to get a fridge when he gets this new job, which would make it so they didn't have to ask favors of their upstairs neighbor and kill rats for her in exchange. The narrator can see that his Daddy wants him and Mummy to be excited, too, but Mummy tells her husband that planning too much will ruin his chances. Daddy gets angry and accuses her of thinking he will never get a better job and throws his toast onto the plate in front of him, then calms down and jokes that he'll prove them wrong the day he throws out the kerosene stoves.

*Here, Mummy reaches her limit when it comes to supporting Daddy. She seems to have a more realistic idea of what her husband is capable of, but Daddy interprets her hesitancy as an insult—certainly to his pride and his masculinity—rather than a reality check. Still, he does not linger on his feelings and turns his anger into another joke, much like the way he turned his anxiety about aging into a joke at the narrator's expense earlier in the story.*

Despite Daddy's claims, the narrator likes the kerosene stoves. He likes looking into **the Criterion** to see the kerosene because it reminds him of looking at the stars, and he likes the way the flame reminds him of low fires in the fire-temple. He also likes the Primus stove, which is much hotter; Daddy is the only one who lights it, because many women die in explosions from Primus stoves. Daddy says that many of the deaths are not accidents, particularly "the dowry cases."

*Like cricket, the Criterion is an artifact of British colonialism that has become an important part of the narrator's childhood. By comparing it to nature (the stars) and to the fire in the fire-temple (where Parsi people pray), the narrator creates an image of the Criterion that blends British colonial, traditional Indian, and natural imagery. This suggests that it may be natural for his generation to draw from the traditional beliefs of their grandparents' generation as well as the assimilationist beliefs of their parents'. The distinction between Daddy and Mummy lighting the Criterion draws more gendered lines between who can perform what role in the family. In addition, the detail that some men may weaponize the Primus stoves against their prospective wives reveals that women in the society of the story are at risk of gendered violence.*

Mummy goes back into the kitchen and the narrator eats his toast, not minding the kerosene smell. He tries to imagine the kitchen without its current stoves and although he doesn't like the look of new stoves, he figures his family will get used to them. At night, he goes outside to look at the stars, but he prefers the look of them from the beach. On Saturday nights, he always fills the kerosene stoves, because Mummy used to make the narrator and Daddy early breakfast before **cricket**.

*The narrator's affinity for the past strengthens as he tries to imagine new stoves in the kitchen. He likes the existing stoves the way they are, and more importantly, they remind him of better times. In this way, the narrator is mimicking his parents' tendency to cling onto the past rather than accepting the inevitable changes that will happen as time moves forward.*

The narrator and Daddy always left for **cricket** before seven, while the rest of the building residents were just waking up and going about their morning routines—shaving, praying, and sweeping. If the sweeping woman happened to pass the praying woman, the praying woman would curse violently at her for "polluting" her prayers, which even made Daddy laugh.

*The narrator's nostalgic memory of he and Daddy's old cricket routine again demonstrates his focus on the past. His description of the praying woman creates a meeting-point between traditional Indian and colonial practices, where both prayer and cricket seem to be familiar aspects of the narrator's life.*

As the narrator and his Daddy hurried along toward **cricket**, the homeless people would be waking up and looking for someplace to "relieve themselves" before they had to move their cardboard beds away from the traffic and street sweepers. Some made breakfast while others begged for food; some mornings, Mummy would give the narrator and Daddy food to give them. But it has been a long time since the narrator and his father last played cricket.

*The homeless people in the narrator's memories highlight how widespread poverty is in the society of the story. Historically, a great deal of this poverty resulted from British exploitation of Indian people's labor and natural resources during colonialism. This context adds complexity to the narrator and his father's pastime, as they enjoyed one aspect of British culture (cricket) but also saw firsthand the negative effects of Britain's interference in India.*

The narrator and Daddy don't fly kites anymore either, and the narrator thinks everything he loves is leaving him. He misses Francis and wishes he still worked in the building, but Najamai and Tehmina, two old women who live in the building, accused Francis of stealing from them. The narrator thinks Najamai just forgot where she left her money.

*The narrator is listing things from the past that he misses, which creates the sense that he is gradually realizing his childhood is ending, and that the happiness and innocence he associates with the past can't be recreated.*

The narrator puts down the tweezers and reaches for the comics, but Daddy tells him not to stop plucking because his hair has to be perfect for his interview "or something." Without looking at him, the narrator declares that he will read the comics and walks away. As he goes, Daddy's face reminds him of Mamaiji's when her thread breaks, but he keeps walking out of "pride" and because he had to do what he said he would. But the comics don't take long to read, and the narrator finds himself missing when he and Daddy used to race to read the comics and pretend to fight over who got to read them first.

*Daddy's vagueness about the reason he needs his hairs plucked suggests that he isn't as invested in the job interview as he'd like his family to think—it's more likely that he just wants to create the superficial appearance of youth and success. When the narrator refuses to pluck his hair anymore, he exhibits the toughness that his father wants him to. But once he sees how much it hurts Daddy, he regrets acting this way. By exhibiting the tough, masculine demeanor his father wants him to, the narrator only ends up hurting his father's feelings and not being able to talk to him about the things he misses from the past.*

As the narrator thinks about Daddy's forehead wrinkles and thinning, **white hair**, he feels something between guilt and "pity," but pushes the feeling away. None of his friends have to pluck their fathers' greying hair, and none of them have anything that's so "personal" they can't talk about. His friend Pesi used to talk about his father passing gas, but his father is dead now, and Pesi is at boarding school.

*As the narrator thinks about his father's hair, he again forces down his stirring emotions. Comparing Daddy to Pesi's dead father foreshadows the realizations that the narrator will come to about mortality.*

Looking across the compound, the narrator sees Dr Sidhwa drive by and wave. He thinks Dr Sidhwa looks like Pesi's father, Dr Mody; they have the same crow's feet. But Dr Mody treated pets, whereas Dr Sidhwa treats people, and most everyone in the building had seen Dr Sidhwa at some point because his house is nearby. Dr Sidhwa is a pious Parsi and always drives to his house calls—everything anyone could want in a doctor, the narrator thinks. As Dr Sidhwa exits the car with his bag, the narrator figures it must be an emergency if someone called him on a Sunday.

*Ruminating on Dr Mody, who has passed away, makes the narrator take note of all of the older or aging people around him, including Dr Sidhwa. This again suggests that deterioration is inevitable for everyone and everything, in spite of the narrator and his family's impulse to resist time and hold onto the past. The fact that there seems to be a medical emergency in the complex contributes to the building tension around death in the story.*

The narrator sees Viraf, his best friend, come out of the building Dr Sidhwa went into. Daddy used to take them to the beach to practice riding bikes early in the morning before it got crowded. He taught them to ride bikes and to play **cricket**, and when he had first bought the bat and ball, Mummy was angry with him for spending money. Daddy's specialty on his school cricket team had been bowling, and he told them about how the best bowler had been born with a "defective" wrist perfectly made for spin bowling, which intimidated batsmen.

*As the narrator reflects on the past once more, the reader gains insight about how Mummy felt about the narrator and Daddy's cricket games. She felt that they were a waste of the family's money and didn't seem to understand that cricket was both a way for the narrator to fulfill his father's expectations and a way for him to immerse himself in Western culture. The fact that the family could barely afford a cricket kit begs the question of whether cricket was yet another tactic that Daddy used to distract from deeper problems. Centering Mummy's feelings highlights the gender disparity in the narrator's parents' relationship: Mummy must be pragmatic, while Daddy can dream and spend money without consequences.*

On Sunday mornings, the boys in the building always played **cricket**, and they almost had a complete cricket kit. Daddy took anyone who wanted to play and was the captain of one of the teams he had arranged. But one day in the middle of a game, he had said he needed to rest. The narrator thought he seemed much older than he was while he sat on the grass looking far away, like he had "realized something and wished he hadn't." After that day, they didn't play cricket anymore. The narrator and some other boys had tried to play in the compound, but it was poorly suited for the game.

*When Daddy sits down in the middle of the game, the moment marks a key transition in his aging process, when he realized he could no longer keep up with the young boys. Reflecting on this moment makes the narrator realize that Daddy is afraid of something (that he "realized something and wished he hadn't"), but he still seems uncertain of what that "something" is. The fact that Daddy stopped the cricket games after he had to sit down is yet another testament to his pride: he would rather end this pastime altogether than appear weak in front of the boys.*

The narrator waves to Viraf again and calls their secret signal to him, and Viraf waves back before taking Dr Sidhwa's bag. Smiling, the narrator thinks that Viraf knows just what to do to make grown-ups like him, and waits for Viraf. After half an hour, he heads upstairs to see what Viraf and the doctor are doing and meets Dr Sidhwa on his way down. He greets him respectfully and asks Viraf what the doctor is doing, but Viraf doesn't answer and turns away, looking upset.

*Like the narrator, Viraf attempts to hide his emotions, turning away to hide his tears rather than talk through his feelings with his best friend. This suggests that Viraf's father, too, has passed down the expectations that men be "tough," and that this attitude may be mainstream in Indian culture.*

Not knowing how to express his worry, the narrator tries to act casual and ask Viraf what his plans are. When Viraf shrugs silently, the narrator makes fun of him for crying. Viraf tells him to "fish off," and as his voice breaks, the narrator looks out onto his balcony. He looks into Viraf's door and listens to people talking quietly around Viraf's mother, then tries to convince Viraf to play a game. If he shrugged, the narrator would leave. Viraf agrees but says they have to be quiet or else his mother will send them outside.

*Because the narrator has no idea how to talk about emotions, he can't be there for his friend. Like Daddy does when something is bothering him, he tries to make a joke at Viraf's expense. However, the joke doesn't land, and the narrator must sit with the consequences of making his friend feel even worse.*

As Viraf and the narrator walk through the flat, Viraf says that his father is very sick. The narrator peeks inside the sickroom and smells sickness and medicine. He sees Viraf's father with a tube in his nose and a needle in his arm. Viraf's mother talks quietly to her neighbors about how her husband's chest gets worse when he climbs stairs now that he is older and has a big body. He has ignored her directions to take breaks between floors out of pride. She says that she doesn't know what she'll do now, and that Viraf has been brave.

*The signs of age and illness on Viraf's father's body are the most jarring examples of decline and decay in the story, as it's clear that he's very close to death. Viraf's mother's story about her husband's refusal to appear weak again suggests that Daddy's attitudes about masculinity and toughness are widespread. But Viraf's father's illness demonstrates the consequences of this mindset: when men refuse to show weakness, they only become weaker and more vulnerable. And, in this case, it hurts both Viraf's father and his family, who must now watch him deteriorate.*


The narrator looks at Viraf's father lying down and can't tell he is fat from that angle. He regrets calling Viraf a crybaby and decides to apologize. Daddy is thin, but his stomach is starting to grow. He used to run during **cricket**, and the one time Viraf's father took them to the field to play, he had just sat on the grass breathing heavily, unevenly, even painfully. He had lines on his forehead like Daddy, but Daddy's weren't as deep.

*The narrator makes greater strides than his father in recognizing his own pride when he identifies his own wrongdoing and decides to apologize to Viraf. But the more he compares Daddy to Viraf's father, the more upset he becomes, seemingly because he's beginning to realize that his own father is growing old in spite of his efforts to cheat time. By thinking about how the lines on Daddy's forehead aren't as deep as Viraf's father's, he tries to reassure himself that Daddy isn't as old and weak as Viraf's father appears to be.*


Viraf's mother talks about how Viraf's father refuses to exchange his third-floor flat for a ground-floor flat, because the third floor is "paradise." But she questions what good "paradise" is if he isn't alive and healthy in it. She says the doctor recommends intensive care, but the hospital has no beds. As the narrator listens, he looks at Viraf's father and, rather than join Viraf for games, sneaks out of the flat and down the stairs.

*Again, pride has gotten in the way of Viraf's father's health. Like Daddy, he wants to appear prosperous—he refuses to give up his third-floor apartment. But by prioritizing appearances over what is best for his health, he has put himself in a much worse state. Now, he can't enjoy the "paradise" he so desperately wants, nor can he look prosperous or masculine as his condition declines and he becomes increasingly dependent on other people to care for him.*


Back in his flat, the narrator hears Mummy in the kitchen over the Primus stove and sees Mamaiji sitting by the window wearing her cataract-surgery glasses. Daddy is still at the dining table reading the paper, and the narrator looks at **the Murphy Baby** and wonders how he looks now. When the narrator was two, his parents entered his photo into a Murphy Baby contest, and they think he should have won because his smile was so "innocent and joyous."

*The narrator's smile was once "innocent and joyous," just like the Murphy Baby's, but this passage implies that he no longer has that sense of youthful happiness and innocence. In this way, the narrator himself is an example of how time inevitably moves forward, and how people will change both physically and mentally in spite of their efforts to resist these changes. The narrator realizes that even the Murphy Baby, whose unchanging presence on the calendar makes him seem like a symbol of perpetual youth, has grown older in the years since the calendar was printed.*

The narrator picks the tweezers up from the table and sees them gleam like the needle in Viraf's father, and he drops them loudly, making Daddy look up. The narrator hopes "desperately" that he will ask him to keep plucking **white hair**, but he doesn't want to offer. The narrator peeks at the lines on Daddy's forehead, which stand out, and his white stubble that he "should have" shaved by now, and decides never to tell his father he won't pluck his white hairs again. Instead, he'll do it whenever he's asked—as if his family's lives depend on it, no matter how long it takes.

*Rather than talk to his father about his fears of mortality, the narrator follows in Daddy's footsteps and decides to symbolically resist aging and death. Having seen Viraf's father on his deathbed, the narrator is now hyper-focused on the features that mark Daddy's age.*

As Daddy rubs his eyes and walks to the bathroom, the narrator notices for the first time how tired and defeated he looks. He wishes Daddy would talk to him, but he doesn't. The narrator's throat closes up, and as he hears Daddy get ready to shave, he wants to go talk to him and watch him make funny faces while he shaves. But instead, he goes to his room and lies on the bed.

*The narrator continues to push down his feelings as Daddy goes about his morning routine and, for the first time, sees his father as he is: old, tired, and defeated by repeated failed attempts to turn his family's situation around. To appear "tough," the narrator acts like he doesn't care about his father, something that only hurts him as he remembers a happier past once more.*

On the bed, the narrator wants to cry because he was mean to Viraf and because Viraf's father is sick. He also wants to cry for Mamaiji's "tired, darkened eyes," and for Mummy, who has to be in the kitchen that smells like kerosene. He wants to cry because he can't hug Daddy when he wants to, and because he never thanked him for **cricket** or anything else he did for him. And, finally, he wants to cry because he knows he can't stop the **white hairs** from growing.

*The narrator runs through all the signs of old age and decline in his loved ones. But even when no one is looking, he does not cry, as the idea that he must "be tough, always" makes it difficult for him to release his emotions. Finally, although he recognizes that he can't stop his father from aging, he still wants to try. This suggests that although time inevitably moves forward, it is perhaps also natural and inevitable that people will try to resist mortality.*

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