

The Bonesetter's Daughter



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF AMY TAN

Amy Tan was born in 1952 in Oakland, California, to Chinese immigrants. Tan lived with her family in the Oakland area until high school, when her older brother and father died of brain tumors within a year of each other. Fearing a curse, Tan's mother uprooted Tan and her younger brother from their home, and the three of them traveled throughout Europe, eventually ending up in Switzerland. Tan has spoken publicly about her fraught relationship with her mother, who was often suicidal. When Tan was a teenager, her mother attempted to kill Tan, her brother, and herself so that they could reunite with Tan's deceased father and brother. Tan returned to the U.S. to attend college, graduating from San José State University with degrees in English and linguistics. She then worked as a freelance business writer and began writing fiction in 1985. Her first story was published in 1986 in the literary magazine *FM Five*. She eventually received multiple offers to publish a collection of her short stories. This project developed into a novel, [The Joy Luck Club](#), which was published in 1989. A film adaptation of [The Joy Luck Club](#), for which Tan served as co-producer and co-screenwriter, was released in 1993. Tan's other novels include *The Kitchen God's Wife*, *The Hundred Secret Senses*, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, *Saving Fish from Drowning*, and *The Valley of Amazement*. Her works draw from her own experiences and her mother's life in China, and she often explores the tensions between American daughters and their immigrant mothers. Tan's essays and short stories are frequently anthologized, and she has been nominated for numerous awards throughout her career, including the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. She has lectured internationally at universities and appeared as herself on *The Simpsons* and *Sesame Street*. Tan lives with her husband and their dogs near San Francisco.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Bonesetter's Daughter incorporates numerous historical events into its narrative. One such event was the booming market for oracle bones that developed in China in the early 20th century. Oracle bones were pieces of animal bone, typically ox shoulder or turtle shell, used for divination in the Shang dynasty (1600 BC to 1041 BC). Diviners would carve questions for deities into the bits of bone. They would then apply heat until the bone cracked, at which point they would decipher the gods' answers from the formations that appeared on the bone's surface. The diviners wrote their questions in oracle bone script, which is the earliest known form of Chinese

writing. Scholars believe that local farmers likely would have come across oracle bones as early as the Han dynasty (202 BC to 220 BC), though they would not have realized their archaeological significance. Villagers in the 19th century who unearthed bones often used the unearthed artifacts as "dragon bones," a then-popular medicinal practice that involved grinding the bones into a powder to treat numerous afflictions, including malaria. Official interest in discovering and preserving oracle bones began in 1899, when the philologist Wang Yirong of the Imperial Academy in Beijing supposedly came across some bones marketed as "dragon bones." Wang's friend, the scholar and archaeologist Liu E, published a book about Wang's findings in 1903, which instantly created a market for oracle bones among foreign scholars and collectors. The booming market led antique dealers to peddle fakes to unwitting collectors. Meanwhile, the few dealers who knew the true source of the bones were careful to conceal its location. It wasn't until 1910 that scholars confirmed that a small village outside Anyang, Henan Province, was the site of Yin, the last Shang dynasty capital and source of the oracle bones. The discovery of oracle bones was controversial, and some regarded the bones as a hoax. In the early 1900s, scholars questioned both the authenticity of early Chinese historical records and the very existence of the Shang dynasty. Nevertheless, archaeological digs begun in 1928 by the Chinese Academy of Sciences confirmed the bones' authenticity. Today, scientists have unearthed around 200,000 bone fragments, around 50,000 of which contain oracle script.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many of Amy Tan's novels explore the relationships between Chinese immigrant mothers and their American daughters. [The Joy Luck Club](#) (1989) is Tan's best-known novel and shifts between early 20th-century China and present-day San Francisco to explore the lives of four Chinese women and their American daughters. *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991) has a similar theme. The novel is set both in 1990s San Francisco and in China during World War Two. It explores the relationship between an American woman, her Chinese immigrant mother, and the secrets they keep from each other. Tan draws inspiration from her experiences with her own mother. In her latest memoir, *Where the Past Begins: A Writer's Memoir* (2017), she ruminates on her own life and the process of translating those experiences into fiction. Other notable works of Chinese American literature published in the late 20th-century include Gish Jen's *Typical American* (1991), which follows a family who flees China to escape Communist rule in the late 1940s. Lisa Ko's [The Leavers](#) (2017) is a more recent novel that follows Deming Guo, a Chinese American boy, as he reconnects with

his mother, an undocumented Chinese factory worker who was deported following an ICE raid.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Bonesetter's Daughter*
- **When Written:** 1990s/early 2000s
- **Where Written:** California and New York
- **When Published:** 2001
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Literature
- **Genre:** Literary Fiction, Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** China and San Francisco, California
- **Climax:** Ruth finally reads LuLing's manuscript and starts to view her mother in a new light. While Ruth is happy to know the truth about LuLing's life, she can't help but feel they've lost precious years to secrecy, and she wishes LuLing would have told her about her life sooner.
- **Antagonist:** Chang, unhealed trauma
- **Point of View:** Third Person, First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Based on a True Story. Amy Tan frequently draws from her or her family's personal experiences for inspiration in her writings, and *The Bonesetter's Daughter* is no exception. In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, Ruth, the protagonist, inexplicably loses her voice each year in August. When Amy Tan was in college, her roommate was murdered, and Tan had to identify the body. The experience was so traumatic that it rendered Tan temporarily mute, a condition she claims would recur on the anniversary of the incident in the years that followed.

Based on a Novel. Tan wrote the libretto for the opera adaption of *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. The opera was composed by Stewart Wallace and premiered by the San Francisco Opera in 2008.



PLOT SUMMARY

LuLing Liu Young remembers a significant moment from her childhood in China. When she was six, her nursemaid, Precious Auntie, took her to pray in a temple and burned a piece of paper on which she'd written her family name. In the present, LuLing, now an elderly woman, struggles to remember the name Precious Auntie wrote on the burned paper. She begs Precious Auntie's spirit for forgiveness and reveals a startling truth: Precious Auntie is her mother.

The narrative shifts to the perspective of Ruth Young, LuLing's daughter. Ruth is a shy, subdued Chinese American woman in her mid-40s who works as a ghostwriter. She lives in a flat in San Francisco with Art Kamen, her long-term partner, and Art's

teenage daughters, Dory and Fia, who spend every other week with him. Ruth isn't completely satisfied with her life. She longs to write a book of her own one day but lacks the confidence to do so. She also has doubts about her relationship with Art, which has become strained over the years. The couple has yet to marry despite being together for a decade. Unable to sleep one night, Ruth sits in her home office and studies a manuscript LuLing gave her several years ago, an account she wrote about her life in China. Ruth's busy schedule and limited understanding of written Chinese have caused her to put off translating the manuscript. Ruth and LuLing have a complicated relationship. They fought a lot when Ruth was growing up due to LuLing's combative personality and suicidal tendencies. As an adult, Ruth struggles to understand and relate to her mother. Furthermore, LuLing has begun to show signs of confusion and memory loss.

Ruth takes LuLing to Dr. Huey, who suspects that LuLing has dementia. Dr. Huey's preemptive diagnosis prompts Ruth to reflect on her childhood. In a flashback, Ruth recalls breaking her arm when she was six years old. The shock of the injury rendered her mute. LuLing gave Ruth a **tea tray** filled with wet sand and a chopstick to write with so that Ruth could communicate without speech. One day, a misunderstanding caused LuLing to believe that Precious Auntie was trying to communicate with her through Ruth's sand-writing. Ruth played along and pretended to transcribe the words of LuLing's deceased nursemaid.

The narrative returns to the present. Ruth hosts a family reunion at the Fountain Court restaurant to celebrate the Full Moon Festival. During dinner, Ruth's present to LuLing and Auntie GaoLing (a framed photograph of the women as young girls posing beside their mother) leads LuLing to make the startling claim that Precious Auntie was her mother—not the woman in the photograph. Ruth assumes that LuLing's dementia is to blame for this confused remark.

Three months pass. LuLing's worsened condition forces Ruth to back out of her and Art's vacation to Hawaii, and Art takes the trip alone. One night, LuLing runs away from her home. Although she returns unharmed, the event forces Ruth to accept the seriousness of her mother's condition. GaoLing takes LuLing to her house to give Ruth a break. Ruth walks to Land's End, a beach near her mother's house, and reflects on traumatic childhood memories.

Ruth returns to LuLing's house to clean and continues to ruminate on her unhappy childhood. She remembers how LuLing attempted suicide when Ruth was 16 in response to a cruel journal entry Ruth had written about her. When Ruth uncovers stack of calligraphy papers that she recognizes as part of the manuscript LuLing gave her many years ago, Ruth vows to translate her mother's story and get to know her while they still have time.

Part Two relays the contents of LuLing's manuscript, which is

conveyed in the first-person from LuLing's perspective. Born in 1916 in Immortal Heart, a village near Peking, China, she grows up in the Liu family, which has operated a renowned ink business for centuries. Although LuLing grows up amongst her extended family, it's Precious Auntie, her nursemaid, who raises her. Precious Auntie cannot speak due to severe facial scarring, but she and LuLing communicate through writing, gestures, and sounds. LuLing adores Precious Auntie and understands her in a way others cannot.

At this point, LuLing refocuses her story on the subject of Precious Auntie's tragic past, the details of which LuLing later learns from reading the manuscript Precious Auntie leaves for her before her death by suicide. The narrative picks up before Precious Auntie's accident, when she is a beautiful, intelligent, and confident woman growing up in a village near Immortal Heart. Precious Auntie is the sole remaining child of a famous Bonesetter and healer who teaches her to read, write, and care for patients. Two of these patients—Chang, a coffin maker, and Baby Uncle, the youngest Liu son—fall in love with and propose to Precious Auntie. Precious Auntie rejects Chang's proposal, recognizing him as a dishonest, evil man. But she falls in love with Baby Uncle, and they make plans to marry. When news of the engagement reaches Chang, he vows to punish Precious Auntie for rejecting him. On the day of the wedding, Baby Uncle and the Bonesetter escort Precious Auntie to Baby Uncle's village, where the ceremony will take place. They carry with them the dowry the bonesetter put together for Precious Auntie, which includes the valuable “**dragon bones**” that are found in nearby caves and used in traditional healing practices. Chang, armed and disguised as a bandit, attacks the wedding party, stealing the precious dragon bones and killing the Bonesetter in the process. Afterward, Baby Uncle vows to avenge the Bonesetter's death and fires his gun into the air, which spooks his horse, causing the animal to kick him, killing him instantly.

The Lius take in Precious Auntie, who is deep in mourning for her fiancé and her father. One day, Precious Auntie tries to kill herself by swallowing boiling ink. She survives, but the incident results in severe facial scarring and renders her unable to speak. Furthermore, the Lius soon discover that Precious Auntie is pregnant with Baby Uncle's child. In order to hide the scandal of a child conceived out of wedlock, the Lius pass off Precious Auntie's child (LuLing) as their own. They allow Precious Auntie to stay and serve as LuLing's nursemaid, but they forbid her from telling LuLing that she is her mother.

LuLing's narrative flashes forward and picks up when she is 14. Now that she's older, she starts to desire the approval of her extended family; the Lius are more important to her than Precious Auntie, who is a lowly nursemaid. When Chang, the coffinmaker, invites LuLing marry his fourth son, Fu Nan, LuLing jumps at the opportunity to bring honor to her family and earn their respect. Precious Auntie forbids the marriage, knowing

Chang's true character, but LuLing ignores her concerns. In a final attempt to convince LuLing to reject Chang's proposal, Precious Auntie writes LuLing a manuscript detailing her life story, ending with the admission that she is LuLing's mother. LuLing doesn't read the manuscript and remains ignorant of the truth Precious Auntie wanted her to learn: that she's LuLing's mother. Unable to cope with LuLing's betrayal, Precious Auntie kills herself. After Precious Auntie dies, LuLing reads the manuscript and learns the truth, but it's too late.

After Precious Auntie's death, the Lius send LuLing to live in an orphanage run by American missionaries. She becomes a teacher at the orphanage and eventually falls in love with and marries her first husband, Kai Jing. GaoLing later joins LuLing at the orphanage after running away from Fu Nan, whom she married after the Changs rescinded their proposal to LuLing. Meanwhile, World War Two begins and makes life at the orphanage unsafe. One day, Japanese soldiers capture and kill Kai Jing. LuLing and GaoLing manage to flee to safety in Peking. After the war ends, GaoLing travels to the United States with Ruth Grutoff, the American missionary who ran the orphanage. GaoLing leaves LuLing behind but promises to sponsor her as soon as she can. In the meantime, LuLing lives a miserable, lonely existence in Hong Kong. She works hard to save enough money to emigrate to the U.S. GaoLing eventually meets two brothers, Edmund and Edwin Young, who agree to marry the sisters, which allows LuLing to join GaoLing in the U.S. LuLing marries Edwin, the older brother, and gives birth to Ruth. However, Edwin dies when Ruth is only two years old, leaving LuLing to raise Ruth as a single mother. While GaoLing enjoys a luxurious lifestyle, LuLing struggles to support Ruth, and she continues to mourn Precious Auntie, tormented by her complicity in the suicide and unable to find closure.

Part Three returns to the present. Ruth hires a scholar named Mr. Tang to translate LuLing's manuscript. In the meantime, she moves in with LuLing full-time. Two months later, Mr. Tang finishes his translation. Ruth invites him to LuLing's house to deliver the manuscript and have dinner. When Mr. Tang arrives, it's clear that he has fallen in love with the woman whose life story he translated. LuLing instantly likes Mr. Tang, who patiently and intently listens as she talks about her life in China. After Mr. Tang leaves, Ruth finally reads her mother's manuscript. Knowing about LuLing's life gives Ruth a newfound appreciation for the sacrifices her mother has endured, though she feels sad about the years they've wasted knowing so little about each other. Ruth resolves to get to know her mother with what little time she has left.

At the same time, Ruth and Art take steps to repair their relationship. Art offers to finance LuLing's stay at an assisted living facility. LuLing enjoys her new life at the facility, much to Ruth's surprise. She continues to see Mr. Tang, who visits her often and takes her on outings on the weekends. On one such outing, Mr. Tang, LuLing, Ruth, and Art go to a museum to see a

special exhibit on Chinese archaeology. The exhibit features an oracle bone that resembles the bones LuLing inherited from Precious Auntie but had to leave behind when she emigrated to America. In the end, Ruth learns Precious Auntie's name from GaoLing, who excitedly recalls that the woman's name was Gu Liu Xin. Learning her grandmother's name allows Ruth to reclaim her past and find her voice. In the final scene, Ruth sits at her desk and prepares to write her own story.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Ruth Young – The novel's protagonist, Ruth is a ghostwriter who lives in San Francisco with her partner, Art. At the start of the novel, Ruth is dissatisfied with her life. She and Art have grown apart, and they're unmarried despite being together for nearly a decade. While Ruth's work as a ghostwriter is interesting, she longs to write her own book. She acknowledges that she's in a rut, but she lacks the confidence to take control of her life, and her desire for acceptance often leads her to fulfill others' needs at her own expense. The biggest tension in her life, though, is her complicated relationship with her mother, LuLing, who was miserable and combative throughout Ruth's upbringing. Ruth's father died when she was very young, and LuLing struggled to support her. While Ruth can appreciate the sacrifices LuLing made to provide for her, she also fixates on the ways LuLing has disappointed and harmed her. LuLing rarely talks about her life in China, which deprives Ruth of a sense of cultural belonging. She was also overly demanding and rarely gave Ruth the affection and compassion she needed. Furthermore, LuLing experienced erratic, unpredictable mood swings and often threatened suicide if Ruth disappointed her. Ruth's resentment dissipates after LuLing is diagnosed with Alzheimer's, however, as she decides to forgive her mother's past transgressions so they can repair their relationship in the time they have left. This decision compels Ruth to take control of her own life in a way she never has before. She also finally reads her mother's manuscript, learning about LuLing's life. This is a profound experience for Ruth, who mourns the years she and LuLing lost by failing to open up to each other. Reading the manuscript enables Ruth to be more compassionate, gentle, and understanding of LuLing. After she finishes her mother's story, she comes to see herself as the descendant of a family of brave, resilient women, and this gives her the confidence she needs to make positive changes in her life.

LuLing Liu Young – LuLing Liu Young is an elderly Chinese American woman who struggles to move beyond her traumatic past. She feels especially guilty for playing a role in the suicide of her mother, Precious Auntie, who died when LuLing was only 14. From the beginning, trauma and grief upend LuLing's dreams for her new life in the U.S. Her second husband, Edwin Young, dies only a few years into their marriage, and LuLing

struggles to support her daughter, Ruth, as a single mother. Over time, she becomes convinced that she's being punished for failing to respect her mother and honor her memory by giving her **bones** a proper resting place. LuLing feels she must remain miserable to atone for her betrayal of Precious Auntie. At the same time, she chooses not to share much information about her life in China with her daughter, Ruth, only hinting at the traumas she endured there. Nonetheless, LuLing's efforts to protect Ruth inadvertently drive a wedge between them. In a manner that parallels LuLing's relationship with Precious Auntie, Ruth remains ignorant of critical details about her mother's past—details that would allow her to understand and sympathize with her mother. But LuLing's dementia is a turning point for her and Ruth, adding renewed urgency to LuLing's need to open up to her daughter and make peace with her traumas while she still can. Just as Precious Auntie did for her so many years before, LuLing writes a manuscript for Ruth, ultimately outlining her formative experiences for her daughter. Reading LuLing's manuscript helps Ruth understand her mother and better appreciate the sacrifices she has made for her. Consciously reflecting on her past also shows LuLing how much love and good fortune she has had in her life. She's able to see the larger picture and recognize that she's not cursed and deserves love, compassion, and forgiveness. Mr. Tang, the Chinese American scholar Ruth hires to translate LuLing's manuscript, sees LuLing as the brave, resilient woman she depicted in her manuscript, and he helps LuLing see herself in this way, too. When LuLing finally uncovers Precious Auntie's real name after having forgotten it for so many years, it symbolizes the healing she undergoes through confronting and reclaiming her past.

Precious Auntie – Precious Auntie is LuLing's mother and Ruth's grandmother. LuLing grew up thinking that Precious Auntie was her nursemaid, a ruse devised by the Liu family to conceal the scandal of LuLing's illegitimate birth. Even though LuLing spends most of her childhood ignorant of Precious Auntie's true identity, she still adores her. When Precious Auntie was a young woman, she attempted to kill herself by swallowing boiling ink. She survived, but the incident left her scarred and unable to speak. While the rest of the Liu family loathes Precious Auntie for her disfigured appearance and cursed past, LuLing and Precious Auntie share a special bond, communicating through writing, sounds, and gestures. Precious Auntie grew up in a village near Immortal Heart. She was the sole remaining child of a famous Bonesetter and healer. The Bonesetter adored his daughter, taught her to read and write, and showed her where to find the valuable "**dragon bones**" used in traditional healing. As a result, Precious Auntie grew into an intelligent, thoughtful, and self-assured young woman. She also developed a respect for tradition. When she rejects a marriage proposal from Chang in favor of Baby Uncle, Chang's violent retaliation—which results in the deaths of the Bonesetter and Baby Uncle—shows her what little power she

has as a woman in a patriarchal society. Precious Auntie's resultant suicide attempt suggests her grief and her inability to accept her powerlessness. The entire experience ultimately causes her to be overly protective of LuLing. When Chang arranges for LuLing to marry his fourth son, Precious Auntie pleads with LuLing to reject the proposal, but LuLing stubbornly refuses. The betrayal of her daughter—the only person she has left—devastates Precious Auntie, and she kills herself. Her suicide conveys her despair, but it also illustrates her fierce desire to protect her daughter from becoming trapped in an unhappy marriage. After Precious Auntie's death, LuLing reads her manuscript and learns that the old woman was her mother. She spends the rest of her life unable to forgive herself for the suffering Precious Auntie endured because of LuLing's ignorance.

GaoLing Young – GaoLing is married to Ruth's uncle, Edmund Young, so Ruth knows her as Auntie Gal. GaoLing and LuLing are roughly the same age and grew up thinking they were sisters, though they're technically cousins. After Precious Auntie's death, they discover they're not biological sisters. Despite this shocking revelation, GaoLing continues to treat LuLing as a sister, and they support each other during the war and after they emigrate to America. Growing up, LuLing is often jealous of the attention and praise GaoLing receives from Mother, and she envies GaoLing's good fortune as the girls enter adulthood. GaoLing's life is objectively easier than LuLing's: she is not as haunted by her past, and her husband Edmund's prosperous career enables her to live a comfortable, stable life. While GaoLing had to endure an unhappy marriage to Fu Nan, Chang's fourth son, she manages to escape her husband and start fresh in America with minimal emotional baggage. Still, like LuLing, GaoLing keeps some aspects of her past a secret from those closest to her. LuLing is the only person in GaoLing's life who knows that she was married in China before she emigrated to the U.S. and married Edmund. In turn, GaoLing is also the only person in LuLing's life who knows the truth about Precious Auntie. Despite their occasional squabbles, the sisters' lifelong commitment to keeping each other's secrets and looking out for each other shows how the traumatic experiences they endured in their youth renders their bond indestructible. Lastly, it is GaoLing who eventually remembers Precious Auntie's name and passes down this information to Ruth, enabling Ruth and LuLing to find closure and reclaim their lineage.

Art Kamen – Art Kamen is Ruth's partner. He's a linguist who works at the Center on Deafness at the University of California, San Francisco. Ruth lives with Art at his flat in San Francisco, and Art's daughters, Dory and Fia, join them every other week. Ruth loves Art but has many doubts about her relationship, often feeling as though Art takes her for granted and is unwilling to accommodate her needs. Meanwhile, Ruth's emotionally distanced demeanor and unwillingness to voice her

needs frustrates Art, though he, too, fails to address this. For example, the fact that she and Art have never married, despite being together for a decade, makes Ruth feel disposable and temporary, yet she never conveys her unhappiness to Art. Compounding Ruth's insecurity is that Art's ex-wife, Miriam, is such a permanent part of his life by virtue of the two children they co-parent. After Ruth moves out of Art's flat to take care of LuLing full-time, Art realizes the extent to which he has taken Ruth for granted and makes an effort to show her how much he values her, as well as expressing how much it hurts him when Ruth cuts herself off from him emotionally. The couple's ultimate fate remains unknown, but the novel strongly suggests that they will continue to repair their relationship, and Art even floats the idea of marriage. Most meaningfully, he insists on financing LuLing's stay at the Mira Mar Manor assisted living facility, which practically and symbolically shows his acknowledgment that Ruth's struggles are his struggles, too.

Dory – Dory is Art and Miriam's 13-year-old daughter. She and her older sister, Fia, live with Art and Ruth part-time, and Ruth functions as their stepmother, though she and Art aren't technically married. Although the girls talk back to Ruth, as teenagers often do, she's been a part of their lives for many years, and they love her. Dory demonstrates this by expressing how much she and Fia miss Ruth, who has moved out of Art's flat to take care of LuLing fulltime. Dory's remark shows Ruth that Fia and Dory care about her, even if they don't always show it.

Fia – Fia is Art and Miriam's 15-year-old year old daughter. She and her younger sister, Dory, live with Art and Ruth part-time, and Ruth functions as the girls' stepmother, though she and Art aren't technically married. Ruth's relationship with the girls becomes strained once they become rebellious teenagers. They carelessly (though not maliciously) disrespect Ruth, who fails to defend herself. Ruth's complicated relationship with LuLing seems to leave her uncertain about how to mother Art's daughters.

Edwin Young – Edwin Young is LuLing's second husband and Ruth's father. He and his younger brother, Edmund, agree to marry GaoLing and LuLing, enabling LuLing to emigrate to the U.S. and helping both sisters attain U.S. citizenship. Edwin dies in a hit-and-run accident when LuLing is just two years old. LuLing believes Edwin would have been more successful than Edmund, had he lived long enough to become a doctor. Edwin is the second of LuLing's husbands to die, and she sees his death as evidence of the family curse.

Edmund Young – Edmund Young is GaoLing's second husband, LuLing's brother-in-law, and Ruth's uncle. He and his older brother, Edwin, agree to marry GaoLing and LuLing, allowing LuLing to emigrate to the U.S. and presenting the sisters with a path toward citizenship. GaoLing's marriage to Edmund, a successful dentist, affords her a life of happiness, ease, and financial security. The happy marriage is one example of how

GaoLing has managed to move beyond her past while LuLing remains miserable, beholden to her past, and plagued by tragedy. While GaoLing comes to the U.S. and settles into a comfortable, stable life, LuLing almost immediately suffers the loss of a second husband and must struggle to make ends meet as the single mother of a young daughter.

Mother (Liu) – Mother is the woman LuLing grows up thinking is her mother. She's married to Liu Jin Sen, the eldest Liu brother, whom LuLing grows up believing is her father. In reality, this couple is LuLing's aunt and uncle, but LuLing doesn't discover this until after Precious Auntie's death. Mother and Father have a daughter, GaoLing, whom LuLing continues to see as her sister, even after the truth about her parentage comes to light. Growing up, LuLing is often jealous of the favoritism Mother displays toward GaoLing. Mother resents Precious Auntie and blames her for the misfortunes that befall the Liu family. She only allows Precious Auntie to remain in the house to respect the wishes of Great-Granny, who is highly superstitious and fears that Baby Uncle's (LuLing's biological father) ghost will haunt them if they throw out Precious Auntie and her illegitimate child. After Great-Granny dies, Mother becomes the matriarch of the Liu family and, no longer beholden to Great-Granny's superstitious beliefs, sends LuLing to live in an orphanage.

Great-Granny – Great Granny is the matriarch of the Liu family. She is the mother of Liu Jin Sen, Big Uncle, Little Uncle, and Baby Uncle. She's also the grandmother of LuLing and the great-grandmother of Ruth. Great-Granny gradually loses her memory as she ages, foreshadowing the dementia that will affect LuLing in old age. Great-Granny is the main reason the Liu family agrees to support Precious Auntie and LuLing in the aftermath of Baby Uncle's death. Great-Granny is highly superstitious and fears that Baby Uncle's ghost will haunt the family if they do not care for his scarred fiancé and their illegitimate child. When Great-Granny dies, Mother replaces her as the family's matriarch and sends LuLing to live in an orphanage.

Baby Uncle (Liu Hu Sen) – Baby Uncle is the youngest of the Liu sons. He is LuLing's father (though she grows up believing that Liu Jin Sen is her father) and was Precious Auntie's fiancé. He falls in love with Precious Auntie when she heals an injury of his at the Bonesetter's shop. He is a handsome, charming man who wins over Precious Auntie by writing her poetry. Baby Uncle and Precious Auntie have sex before the wedding, resulting in LuLing's conception. However, Baby Uncle dies after Chang attacks their wedding party. When he dies, Precious Auntie sees it as evidence of her family's curse. She is so distraught after Baby Uncle's and the Bonesetter's deaths that she attempts suicide by drinking boiling ink. Precious Auntie survives, but injuries she incurs from the incident leave her permanently scarred and mute.

The Bonesetter – The Bonesetter is Precious Auntie's father.

He is a famous bonesetter and healer who runs a local shop. After the Bonesetter's wife and sons die, Precious Auntie becomes his whole world. He funnels all his energy into raising her, teaching her to learn to read and write and letting her help him treat patients in his shop. The Bonesetter's love leads Precious Auntie to grow into a headstrong, confident, and intelligent young woman. He dies, however, after an embittered Chang attacks Precious Auntie's wedding party as it travels to the ceremony. Chang also steals the valuable **"dragon bones"** the Bonesetter included as part of Precious Auntie's dowry. Precious Auntie sees her father's death as evidence that her family is cursed. She is so distraught over the Bonesetter's and Baby Uncle's deaths that she attempts suicide by swallowing boiling ink. Although she survives, the incident leaves her permanently scarred and mute.

Pan Kai Jing – Pan Kai Jing is LuLing's first husband. She meets him while working as an assistant for his father, Teacher Pan, at the orphanage. Kai Jing is a geologist who works with other scientists in the quarry to find **"dragon bones,"** which are extremely valuable since Westerners discovered that the bones are likely ancient human remains. Pan Kai Jing is a kind, gentle man who admires LuLing's calligraphy skills and strength. Their relationship is loving and romantic. Kai Jing respects and sympathizes with LuLing's past but urges her not to be so beholden to it, insisting that there are such things as curses and that tragedy can strike arbitrarily. After World War Two breaks out, Kai Jing and two of his fellow scientists are captured and executed by Japanese soldiers. LuLing mourns Kai Jing's death and initially contemplates suicide. However, she doesn't tell Ruth about Kai Jing, and Ruth only learns that her father, Edwin Young, was LuLing's second husband after she reads LuLing's handwritten account of her life in China.

Chang – Chang is a wealthy, dishonest, and cruel coffin maker who lives in the same village as the Lius. Precious Auntie humiliates him when she accepts Baby Uncle's marriage proposal over Chang's. To retaliate, Chang disguises himself as a bandit and ambushes Precious Auntie, Baby Uncle, and the Bonesetter as they transport Precious Auntie's belongings and dowry to Baby Uncle's village. Chang steals the valuable **"dragon bones"** the Bonesetter assembled for Precious Auntie's dowry, eventually becoming rich when Western archaeologists offer to purchase such artifacts for enormous sums of money. Chang's attack ends up killing both the Bonesetter and Baby Uncle, and Precious Auntie this as evidence of her family's curse. She attempts to die by suicide after the attack, and this is how she gets her facial scarring. Precious Auntie is the only member of the Liu family to believe that Chang is responsible for what has happened. Even if the others suspect Chang's involvement, his important status in the village motivates them to keep quiet and look the other way. To procure the remaining dragon bones and add to his wealth, Chang later extends a marriage proposal to LuLing, offering to

marry her to his fourth son, Fu Nan. Precious Auntie ultimately kills herself to dissuade the Changs from going through with the wedding, threatening to haunt them if they accept LuLing as a daughter-in-law. The Changs call off the engagement, and Fu Nan marries GaoLing instead. Marrying into the Chang family shows GaoLing that the family is not as wealthy as they claim to be, and several family members—including Fu Nan—use their fortune to finance their opium addictions.

Chang Fu Nan – Chang Fu Nan is Chang the coffin maker’s fourth son. The Chang family originally arranges for Fu Nan to marry LuLing. However, they rescind the offer after Precious Auntie’s suicide, fearing that her ghost will haunt their family if LuLing marries into it. After the Lius send LuLing to live in an orphanage, the Changs arrange for Fu Nan to marry LuLing’s sister, GaoLing. Fu Nan is an incompetent opiate addict, and GaoLing is so miserable being married to him that she eventually runs away to live with LuLing at the orphanage. After the war, GaoLing puts further distance between Fu Nan and herself by emigrating to the United States. LuLing remains in Hong Kong and encounters Fu Nan several times as she waits for GaoLing to send for her. During these encounters, Fu Nan threatens to publicly announce the fact that GaoLing and LuLing aren’t really sisters, which would jeopardize GaoLing’s ability to sponsor LuLing’s visa. He also threatens to alert American officials to the fact that he and GaoLing are still legally married, which would compromise her ability to become an American citizen by marrying Edmund Young. However, Fu Nan’s incompetence and debilitating drug addiction ensure that he never actually acts on these threats.

Liu Jin Sen (Father) – Liu Jin Sen is the eldest of the Liu sons. He is the man LuLing grows up referring to as Father, though Baby Uncle is her real father. Jin Sen is married to Mother, and they have GaoLing, a daughter together. Jin Sin runs the family’s ink shop in Peking.

Catcher of Ghosts – The Catcher of the Ghosts is a traveling priest the Liu family hires to cleanse their home of Precious Auntie’s spirit, which the Lius believe is responsible for starting the fire that destroyed the family’s ink shop in Peking. The Catcher of Ghosts and his assistant perform a ceremony that involves chanting and humming and culminates in them trapping Precious Auntie’s ghost in a jar. The family is satisfied with the Catcher of Ghost’s work, particularly after the magistrate reveals that the family no longer owes money to the owners of the other shops destroyed in the fire for which the Lius are technically responsible. However, GaoLing later reveals to LuLing that the Catcher of the Ghosts was exposed as a fraud.

Teacher Pan – Teacher Pan is a teacher at the orphanage where LuLing lives after Mother banishes her from the Liu home. LuLing works as his assistant and later becomes his daughter-in-law when she marries his son, Kai Jing. Teacher Pan shows LuLing kindness, love, and respect, praising her intelligence and

calligraphy skills. He treats her like family even after Kai Jing’s death.

Sister Yu – Sister Yu is one of the teachers at the orphanage where LuLing lives after Mother banishes her from the Liu home. She is a small, bossy, and opinionated woman who has a habit of mocking the orphans she supervises, many of whom have physical disabilities. Sister Yu loathes self-pity and believes there is always someone whose situation is worse than one’s own. Sister Yu’s impoverished childhood has made her resilient but not particularly gentle or compassionate. Still, LuLing admires Sister Yu’s strength and partially names Ruth after her (Ruth’s full name is Ruth Luyi Young).

Ruth Grutoff – Ruth Grutoff is an American missionary who serves as the nurse and headmistress of the orphanage LuLing works at after Precious Auntie’s death. She is a brave, compassionate woman who puts her life on the line to protect the girls who live at her orphanage. LuLing names her only child, Ruth, after Miss Grutoff. During World War Two, the Japanese remove Miss Grutoff from the orphanage and send her to a prisoner-of-war camp. She survives, but the imprisonment takes a toll on her health and necessitates hospitalization in the U.S. Miss Grutoff arranges for her church to sponsor someone to accompany her on her journey back to the U.S., which is how GaoLing is able to travel to the U.S. Sadly, Miss Grutoff dies shortly after returning to the United States.

Mr. Tang – Mr. Tang is the elderly Chinese American scholar Ruth hires to translate LuLing’s manuscript. He falls in love with LuLing after reading her story. Understanding the hardships LuLing has endured allows Mr. Tang to look beyond LuLing’s age and dementia and see her as the strong, resilient woman she was in her manuscript. Mr. Tang patiently listens to LuLing’s remembrances and discerns the authentic meaning beneath her occasionally confused, jumbled words. Sharing her memories with Mr. Tang brings LuLing the closure she needs to make peace with her past. Her relationship with Mr. Tang brings LuLing happiness, which is something she has vehemently denied herself ever since Precious Auntie’s suicide.

Lance Rogers – Lance Rogers is the young man who owns the bungalow that LuLing rents when Ruth is 11. Although outwardly friendly, he is emotionally manipulative and frequently cheats on his wife, Dottie Rogers. Ruth has a crush on Lance and innocently believes that he has gotten her pregnant after she sits on the toilet he used before her. Dottie reports Lance for rape, but Ruth’s misunderstanding comes to light before Dottie can call the police. Still, Lance harbors lingering feelings of resentment toward Ruth. He takes advantage of her emotional vulnerability by luring her into his empty house and touching her inappropriately.

Dottie Rogers – Dottie Rogers is married to Lance Rogers, who rents a bungalow to LuLing when Ruth is 11. Dottie supports Ruth after Ruth mistakenly (but innocently) insinuates that Lance has raped and impregnated her. However, Dottie turns

on Ruth when she learns the truth and accuses the 11-year-old of maliciously attempting to send an innocent man to jail.

Wendy – Wendy is Ruth’s best friend since childhood. In many respects, Wendy is Ruth’s opposite: she is extroverted, loud, confident, and self-assured, and she isn’t shy about confronting her husband, Joe, about things that bother her about their relationship. Ruth loves her unafraid friend for pushing her to do things she would otherwise avoid. For example, Wendy convinces Ruth to attend the yoga class where Ruth first meets Art.

Ted – Ted is one of Ruth’s clients. He hires her to write a book about “internet spirituality” and unreasonably expects Ruth to set aside all her other projects to focus on his book. Ruth gives in to Ted’s demands and finishes the book ahead of schedule, only to have Ted fire her when he is dissatisfied with her work. Ruth’s unhealthy relationship with Ted illustrates her tendency to bend to meet others’ needs while neglecting her own.

Agapi Agnos – Agapi Agnos is one of Ruth’s clients. She is a psychiatrist for whom Ruth is writing a book called *Righting the Wronged Child*, which explores how parents (sometimes unwittingly) impart beliefs and traits onto their children. Agnos’s ideas aptly describe how LuLing has raised Ruth to be secretive, fearful, and emotionally reserved.

Miriam – Miriam is Art’s ex-wife and mother to Dory and Fia. She is the opposite of Ruth: outspoken, confident, and flashy. Ruth thinks she might have liked Miriam, had they met under different circumstances. However, she feels intimidated by Miriam’s formerly intimate relationship with Art and resents how being co-parents makes Miriam and Art permanent fixtures in each other’s lives.

Arlene and Marty Kamen – Arlene and Marty Kamen are Art’s parents. They love Art’s ex-wife, Miriam, and have never quite warmed up to Ruth, even though she has been in a committed relationship with Art for a decade. They are sophisticated people who have a refined taste in fashion, and Ruth often feels like an outcast when she is around them.

Edward Patel – Edward Patel is an employee who works at Mira Mar Manor, the assisted living facility where LuLing eventually goes to live. He gives Ruth and Art a tour of the facility before Ruth sends LuLing to live there when her dementia makes it too difficult for Ruth to care for her on her own.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Big Uncle – Big Uncle is one of Baby Uncle’s brothers and LuLing’s uncle. He works at the family’s prosperous ink business.

Little Uncle – Little Uncle is one of Baby Uncle’s brothers and LuLing’s uncle. He works at the family’s prosperous ink business.

Old Widow Lau – Old Widow Lau is a relative of the Liu family who lives in Peking. She is frequently involved in arranging marriages and contacts Mother to inform her of the Changs’ interest in securing LuLing as a daughter-in-law.

Gideon – Gideon is Ruth’s agent. He likes Ruth but thinks she’s a pushover who allows her clients to take advantage of her.

Francine – Francine rents the lower-level duplex of LuLing’s building. She is impatient with LuLing’s erratic behavior (much of which, in retrospect, can be explained by LuLing’s dementia) and failure to make repairs to the building.

Miss Towler – Miss Towler is an American missionary, and the director of the orphanage LuLing works at after Precious Auntie’s death. She dies during World War Two.

Dong – Dong is one of Kai Jing’s colleagues. The Japanese execute Dong, Chau, and Kai Jing during World War Two.

Chau – Chau is one of Kai Jing’s colleagues. The Japanese execute Chau, Dong, and Kai Jing during World War Two.

The Flowers Family – The Flowers family is a wealthy English family living in Hong Kong. LuLing works for them as a maid to save up money while she waits for the opportunity to join GaoLing in America.

Dr. Huey – Dr. Huey is the doctor who diagnoses LuLing with dementia.

Sally – Sally is GaoLing and Edmund’s daughter, and Ruth’s cousin.

Billy – Billy is GaoLing and Edmund’s son, and Ruth’s cousin.

Joe – Joe is Wendy’s husband.

Teacher Wang – Teacher Wang is one of the teachers at the orphanage.

Mr. Wei – Mr. Wei is a delivery man who transports medicine and supplies around Peking and its surrounding villages.



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.



SECRECY AND MISUNDERSTANDING

The Bonesetter’s Daughter features many characters whose lives remain secretive and mysterious, even to those who are—or who ought to be—closest to them. When LuLing Liu Young immigrates to the United States as a young woman, she leaves behind a complicated, traumatic life in China, much of which she refuses to share with her daughter, Ruth Young, who was born in the United States.

Throughout Ruth's life, LuLing makes frequent references to her nursemaid Precious Auntie, whose horrific suicide has haunted LuLing for much of her life. Yet LuLing fails to tell Ruth an essential truth about Precious Auntie: that she was actually LuLing's mother. Nor does LuLing detail the specific circumstances that led to Precious Auntie's suicide, or why LuLing believes she was complicit in the death. As a result, Ruth knows little about suffering, loss, and grief her mother experienced during her formative years in China. Repressing her guilt about Precious Auntie's suicide leaves LuLing haunted by the past and unable to heal from her trauma, and LuLing's secrecy, in turn, hurts herself and her daughter. By refusing to discuss her history with her daughter, LuLing denies Ruth the opportunity to understand and sympathize with LuLing's prolonged suffering.

Furthermore, Ruth's ignorance leads her to unwittingly hurt LuLing in ways she can't begin to appreciate. For example, as a teenager, Ruth responds to her mother's repeated threats to kill herself with cruel indifference. Although Ruth feels remorse for her behavior, she fails to understand that her coldness hurts LuLing because it parallels LuLing's callous disregard for her own mother in the days before her death. Similarly, Ruth makes light of her mother's obsession with death, curses, and ghosts because LuLing hasn't given her the details that Ruth needs to understand that LuLing's fears are much deeper than mere superstition. Ruth's ignorance about her mother's life leads her to misunderstand and invalidate LuLing's experiences repeatedly. As a result, a permanent distance persists between Ruth and her mother, and it's not until LuLing writes down her life story and shares it with Ruth that Ruth can begin to understand the circumstances that shaped the woman who became her mother. In this way, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* suggests that secrecy is damaging and antithetical to healthy, authentic, and organic relationships.



MEMORY, CULTURE, AND THE PAST

The Bonesetter's Daughter often depicts critical personal, cultural, and familial histories as in danger of slipping away if characters fail to remember, honor, and preserve them. LuLing's dementia diagnosis, for example, invigorates her daughter, Ruth's, interest in her mother's life and motivates LuLing to share her past with Ruth—something she's purposefully concealed for all of her life. LuLing's compromised memory thus serves as an impetus to strengthen cultural traditions and family ties. At the same time, though, the novel warns against over-focusing on the past, and it closely aligns memory with curses, ghosts, and superstition. Several characters fear that their ancestors will harm them if they fail to remember, honor, or atone for past transgressions, which ensures that they remain tied to a past that has no possibility of a future. For example, LuLing's mother, Precious Auntie, believes that an ancestor who was crushed to death

cursed her family for removing his **bones** from their initial resting place. LuLing inherits her mother's anxieties about this potential family curse and even passes them on to her own daughter, Ruth, whom she conditions to be hypervigilant to threats of death and disaster in a way that holds Ruth back in her adult life. Ruth's unwillingness to be vulnerable and assertive in personal and professional relationships stems from the ingrained fear of danger and retribution that LuLing hammered into her since childhood.

Similarly, LuLing lives in the past by essentially depriving herself to make up for the cruel way she treated Precious Auntie as a young girl, before Precious Auntie committed suicide. After Ruth has found out the whole truth of her mother's past, she discovers that the elderly LuLing has a substantial stock portfolio that she's never touched. Rather than being excited about the surprise fortune, however, Ruth feels only "hurt to know that her mother had denied herself pleasure and happiness." She reaffirms how her mother's commitment to the past hurts her chance for a happy future. *The Bonesetter's Daughter* thus suggests that while it is essential to preserve cultural, familial, and personal memory, it's critical that memory functions to enrich and expand a person's new experiences rather than trapping them helplessly and stagnantly in the past.



STORYTELLING

The Bonesetter's Daughter is a story about stories. Specifically, it emphasizes the power of storytelling to imbue one's experiences with authenticity and meaningfulness and the value of sharing those stories to grow and connect with others. Ruth Young (one of the protagonists) works as a ghostwriter, translating her clients' often jumbled, incomprehensible ideas into polished, coherent stories. Ruth also descends from a long line of storytellers: several years before the novel's present, Ruth's mother, LuLing, writes the story of her complicated and traumatic childhood in China. She gives the manuscript to her Ruth, hoping that the story will help her better understand her mother and the family history that has shaped LuLing and Ruth's lives. Similarly, Precious Auntie painstakingly chronicles her own life's hardships in order to profoundly reshape LuLing's reality, concluding her story with the revelation that Precious Auntie is actually LuLing's mother. Precious Auntie's story is further significant because it allows her to regain her voice, literally and figuratively. Precious Auntie loses her physical ability to speak after swallowing boiling ink as a failed suicide attempt. She further loses her voice when the social stigma surrounding illegitimate births forces her to relinquish her identity as LuLing's mother and assume the role of subservient nursemaid. Although Ruth, LuLing, and Precious Auntie come from vastly different places, time periods, and circumstances, their purpose in writing is the same: to give meaning to what is misunderstood, shed light on

what is hidden, and immortalize what's otherwise fleeting. *The Bonesetter's Daughter* thus illustrates storytelling's power to forge connections and inspire meaning and understanding. Furthermore, it even portrays storytelling as a humanitarian feat, giving a voice to those who have been silenced by gendered oppression and trauma.



WOMEN'S SOLIDARITY

Like many of Amy Tan's books, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* is, at its core, a story about mothers and daughters. More than this, however, it is a broader

study in the transformative power of women's solidarity as a bulwark against the generational trauma and social alienation that threaten women and girls—but also how a *lack* of solidarity can compound these issues. At certain points throughout the novel, mothers and daughters fail to accept, understand, or support one another. For instance, Ruth's shame about not fitting in with kids at school causes her to disown her Chinese immigrant mother, claiming not to know her when LuLing cries out to Ruth on the playground. Similarly, LuLing's desire to fit in with the larger family at the compound in Immortal Heart, who she believes to be her nuclear family—Mother, Father, and GaoLing—causes her to (unknowingly) dismiss her birth mother, Precious Auntie. In both cases, feelings of shame and fear prevent these women from fully appreciating their connection to their mothers. Compounding this, these mothers unintentionally continue the cycle of pain and guilt when they lash out at their own daughters in misguided attempts to protect them from the same systems and mistakes that have entrapped them. The fierceness with which they want their daughters to live a life free from trauma ends up projecting that trauma right back onto their daughters.

It is not until Ruth begins a process of repairing and improving her relationship with her mother that Ruth is finally able to find her voice. By finally embracing and harnessing the collective voices of her mother, her grandmother, and herself, Ruth discovers the strength to write her own story and author her own future, freeing herself from the cycles of generational trauma. The book thus presents a broader message of the empowerment, inner strength, and personal growth that are possible when women stand in solidarity with one another rather than turning inward and giving in to conflict, insecurity, and bitterness. Yielding to trauma—closing oneself off from the world, retreating into grief and resentment, and refusing to reach out—undermines women and compromises what they can achieve. The novel shows that when women instead open themselves up to vulnerability and treat one another with compassion and understanding, they can achieve great things.



SYMBOLS

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



BONES

The oracle bone symbolizes tradition, the past, and the power of storytelling. Oracle bones connect Precious Auntie to her family after her father, the famous Bonesetter, dies. When Precious Auntie becomes LuLing's nursemaid, she loses her identity as the daughter of a revered, famous bonesetter and healer. Furthermore, because Precious Auntie cannot claim LuLing as her daughter, she is also unable to pass down her family lineage to LuLing, who is its rightful inheritor. Precious Auntie cannot explicitly pass down her father's wisdom to LuLing, but she *can* give LuLing the oracle bone to symbolize LuLing's rightful place among the family of bonesetters.

Oracle bones also symbolize the power of storytelling and writing to preserve tradition and immortalize memory. In ancient China, diviners would inscribe questions into the surface of oracle bones for the gods to answer. Because diviners often carved their questions into the bones with a sharp tool, the writing survived the ravages of time. The written language on the oracle bones shows how documenting history in writing can transmit messages across time and immortalize the past. After all, it is through writing that Precious Auntie shares her life story with LuLing—it's also through writing that LuLing later passes down *her* life story to Ruth. The novel ends as Ruth sits in her office and prepares to begin her own written contribution toward documenting her family's heritage.

However, bones also carry negative connotations. Precious Auntie believes the bones her family has removed from the Monkey's Jaw cave belong to their ancestor, who has placed a curse on the family as revenge for disturbing his grave. After Precious Auntie's suicide, Mother orders for the body to be thrown into the quarry behind the Liu compound. A central part of LuLing's guilt over Precious Auntie's death—and the reason Precious Auntie has cursed LuLing—is that she failed to retrieve the bones and honor Precious Auntie with a proper burial. So, while the oracle bone symbolizes the rich cultural lineage that Precious Auntie passes down to LuLing, bones in general also reflect how inherited curses, traumas, and anxieties from the past that can continue to haunt people.



THE TEA TRAY/SAND

The tea tray symbolizes generational trauma and the many ways it can manifest itself in a person's life. When Ruth is six years old, she breaks her arm while playing at the school playground, and the shock of the injury

causes Ruth to lose her voice. LuLing gives her a tea tray filled with wet sand in which she can trace letters with a chopstick. There is a clear parallel between Ruth's tea tray and the chalkboard LuLing used to communicate with Precious Auntie, who was also mute. The reappearance of this specific type of communication device symbolizes how family members can pass down certain behavior patterns, beliefs, and responses to trauma across generations.

The tea tray also symbolizes Ruth's complicated relationship to her voice and how her tumultuous formative years with LuLing taught her to silence herself. Although Ruth quickly regains her ability to talk, she chooses to remain silent after seeing how differently LuLing treats her when she doesn't speak. Suddenly, LuLing cares about Ruth's opinions and doesn't mind when she "talks" back. When Ruth silences herself, LuLing rewards her with the affection and approval Ruth so desperately craves. When Ruth spells "B-U-R-G-E-R" in the tray, her mother cooks hamburger—unhealthy, unacceptable American food—for dinner, which she would never do under normal circumstances. By honoring Ruth's request, LuLing implicitly teaches her daughter to associate silence with reward and outspokenness with punishment. Furthermore, much of Ruth's experience with the tea tray occurs when she is physically capable of talking but chooses not to speak. By honoring the requests Ruth demands via the tea-tray, LuLing implicitly teaches her that she can avoid punishment if she lies convincingly enough—and that, in some circumstances, it is even advantageous to lie.

Lastly, the tea tray symbolizes Ruth's struggle to connect with LuLing. After a misunderstanding causes LuLing to believe that Precious Auntie is trying to communicate with her through Ruth's tea-tray writing, Ruth plays along and pretends to be Precious Auntie, trying to write the things she guesses LuLing would want Precious Auntie to say. Ruth doesn't wholly understand her mother's relationship with Precious Auntie (LuLing only alludes to her own complicity in the tragic nursemaid's horrific fate), but she *wants* to understand. More importantly, she wants to make her mother happy. However, Ruth's instinct to connect with her mother through clear-cut deception also shows how unapproachable LuLing is. Ruth's tea-tray hijinks show that it is easier for her to pretend to be the spirit of her mother's deceased nursemaid than to ask LuLing about her life.



HAWAIIAN PEARL NECKLACE

The Hawaiian pearl necklace symbolizes the secrecy and misunderstanding at the heart of Ruth and LuLing's relationship. Years back, toward the beginning of Ruth and Art's relationship, the couple vacationed in Hawaii, and Ruth forgot LuLing's birthday. In a desperate attempt to redeem herself, Ruth repackaged the cheap "Tahiti-style glass pearls" she had bought for herself in a gift shop in Kauai and

gave them to LuLing, hoping to convey that she'd been thinking about her. Unfortunately, Ruth messes up a second time when she tells LuLing the pearls are "nothing much," which LuLing takes as a gesture of false modesty, alluding to the pearls' pricelessness. From that point forward, whenever LuLing proudly brings out the pearls to impress her friends and family, Ruth feels ashamed about lying to her mother and being an inadequate daughter. The pearls thus represent how engrained secrecy and deception are in Ruth and LuLing's relationship—after all, LuLing is so accustomed to deception that she automatically assumes Ruth's comment about the pearls is untrue.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Ballantine Books edition of *The Bonesetter's Daughter: A Novel* published in 2003.

Truth Quotes

Why can't I see it now? I've pushed a hundred family names through my mouth, and none comes back with the belch of memory. Was the name uncommon? Did I lose it because I kept it a secret too long? Maybe I lost it the same way I lost all my favorite things—the jacket GaoLing gave me when I left for the orphan school, the dress my second husband said made me look like a movie star, the first baby dress that Luyi outgrew. Each time I loved something with a special ache, I put it in my trunk of best things. I hid those things for so long I almost forgot I had them.

Related Characters: LuLing Liu Young (speaker), Precious Auntie, Ruth Young, Pan Kai Jing, GaoLing Young

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

In the present day, LuLing, now an elderly woman, remembers the day Precious Auntie wrote down their family name on a piece of paper and told her always to remember it. So many years into the present—and likely already being affected by the onset of dementia—LuLing laments having broken her promise to Precious Auntie (LuLing's mother) and forgotten their family name.

This passage is important because it introduces the novel's central themes of memory, the past, and secrecy. These themes drive the central conflict LuLing wrestles with throughout the novel: she needs to remember the name that binds her to her family lineage, a memory that will allow

her to make peace with her traumatic, unhappy past. LuLing places her memories “with a special ache [...] in [her] trunk of best things” because, while she knows they are essential and central to her identity, it is too painful to meditate on them directly. Furthermore, because LuLing has lost so much of what she has loved openly—Precious Auntie and her first husband, Kai Jing, for example—she believes that storing these memories away is the only way she might ultimately hold on to them. But hiding her cherished things away (both in her mind and metaphorically) in her “trunk of best things” backfires on LuLing. In keeping her past to herself, she forgets the things that matter most to her when her health begins to fail, and she can no longer rely on her memories.

This tragic dilemma is echoed throughout the novel, especially because LuLing’s attempt to protect her daughter, Ruth, ends up driving a wedge between mother and daughter and harming their relationship. LuLing hides their shared family history from her American-born daughter, futilely hoping to spare her shame and hardship. In both cases, the novel suggests that it is only in confronting the past directly that people will be able to move on from it and grow.

This passage reflects the strained status of Ruth’s relationship with LuLing at this early point in the book. Now in her 40s, Ruth is still hung up on the way LuLing’s erratic behavior and foolish fixation with danger, curses, and ghosts made her unapproachable and incapable of giving Ruth the love she needed as a child. While Ruth will later become more sympathetic toward LuLing’s behavior once she sees how it stems from unresolved guilt about the role LuLing played in her own mother’s death, at this point, LuLing’s motives are a mystery to her, and she regards them as inane, burdensome, and embarrassing.

Ruth makes a significant effort to distance herself from LuLing and be a more lighthearted, unworried, and “practical” adult because she doesn’t want to repeat her mother’s mistakes. In the early chapters of the novel, what Ruth fails to grasp is that she has inherited many traits from her mother—this habit being one of them—and that her stubborn desire to distance herself from LuLing only worsens their relationship and puts her more out of touch with herself and with the family that has made her the woman she is today.

☞ In an odd way, she now thought, her mother was the one who had taught her to become a book doctor. Ruth had to make life better by revising it.

Part One: Chapter Two Quotes

☞ To Ruth, however, the counting was practical, not compulsive; it had to do with remembering things, not warding off some superstitious nonsense.

Related Characters: Ruth Young, LuLing Liu Young, Wendy, Precious Auntie

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

Ruth thinks about her habit of making numbered lists—a habit her best friend, Wendy, considers to be “compulsive” and reason enough to go to therapy. However, Ruth defends herself, reasoning that “the counting [is] practical, not compulsive.” Ruth’s conclusion implicitly differentiates her from her mother, LuLing, who engages in similar habits but for different reasons. Ruth believes that her “practical” reason for counting, which is to “remember[] things,” makes the habit defensible. At the same time, LuLing’s reasoning, which is to search for evidence of curses, signs, and other “superstitious nonsense,” is indefensible.

Related Characters: Ruth Young, LuLing Liu Young, Art Kamen, Precious Auntie

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

Ruth does some work for clients and thinks about how her childhood experiences translating for LuLing, whose grasp on English has always been far from perfect, has led her to become a professional ghostwriter, or “book doctor,” as Art calls it.

As a child, Ruth was responsible for making LuLing’s confusing, fragmented English sound more comprehensible and refined to the various doctors, bankers, or ministers to whom LuLing wanted to convey a message, usually concerning some (in Ruth’s mind) unreasonable criticism. As an adult, Ruth works with clients who rely on her to make their equally disorganized ideas more compelling and organized on paper.



Ruth considers her skills metaphorically, observing how

what she really does is “make life better by revising it.” Like LuLing’s broken English or her clients’ scattered thoughts, life presents a person with disorganized and unpredictable situations that are often difficult to explain, particularly when such events are tragic. Because people are the authors of their own lives, then, it’s in their best interest to “make life better by revising it,” thinking introspectively about the things that happen to them.

Ruth’s observation spells out one of the book’s central themes, which is the power of storytelling to make life meaningful. Many characters in the book, including LuLing and Precious Auntie, turn to the literal act of writing to document their lives and pass down their histories to their daughters. At the same time, these characters don’t extend the same level of introspection to the lives they live out in the real world—that is, off the page. They hold on to tragedy and remain absorbed in the past rather than “revising” their histories to allow for a “better,” happier present and future.

☞ Ruth had to remind her to take her newly found purse, then her coat, finally her keys. She felt ten years old again, translating for her mother how the world worked, explaining the rules, the restrictions, the time limits on money-back guarantees. Back then she had been resentful. Now she was terrified.

Related Characters: Ruth Young, LuLing Liu Young

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

Ruth arrives at LuLing’s house to drive her mother to a doctor’s appointment. She’s horrified to see that the confused, strange behavior her mother has been exhibiting as of late has worsened. She fears that LuLing has suffered a stroke or is experiencing symptoms of dementia.

This passage illustrates Ruth’s habit of turning to childhood memories to contextualize the experiences she grapples with as an adult. Here, Ruth compares her current experience of helping LuLing complete simple tasks such as remembering to put on her coat and take her house keys to the way she had to “translat[e] for her mother how the world worked, explaining the rules, [and] the restrictions.”

As a child, Ruth was embarrassed by LuLing’s ignorance about what Ruth saw as obvious, self-evident facts about daily life. Despite having emigrated from China years before, LuLing never managed to assimilate into American

life without needing Ruth’s help, and LuLing’s helplessness embarrassed Ruth, who detested the aspects of her life that made her different from her peers. However, Ruth’s attitude toward helping LuLing is vastly different as an adult: “Back then she had been resentful. Now she was terrified.” Ruth sees LuLing’s current helplessness as a sign that she is losing the mother with whom she has never quite managed to connect.

This newfound fear of losing her mother indicates Ruth’s primary conflict in the book: how to make peace with LuLing and the fraught past they share before LuLing—whose health and mental state is steadily declining—is no longer around.

Part One: Chapter Three Quotes

☞ “I hope you will still forgive me. Please know that my life has been miserable ever since you left me. That is why I ask you to take my life, but to spare my daughter if the curse cannot be changed. I know her recent accident was a warning.”

Related Characters: LuLing Liu Young (speaker), Ruth Young, Precious Auntie

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

Ruth recalls the first time she pretended to speak on behalf of Precious Auntie using the tea tray filled with sand LuLing gave her to communicate with after a childhood injury rendered Ruth temporarily mute. An innocent misunderstanding causes LuLing to believe that Ruth is actually conveying the thoughts of Precious Auntie, who died by suicide when LuLing was just 14. This passage highlights the desperate plea LuLing offers to “Precious Auntie.”

This moment is important because it shows Ruth (and the reader) the profound impact Precious Auntie’s death had on LuLing. LuLing expresses how she feels directly responsible for the suicide, evidenced by her plea for forgiveness. It also shows how that guilt impacts LuLing’s life today: “Please know that my life has been miserable ever since you left me.” After Precious Auntie dies, LuLing believes she is cursed for her role in causing Precious Auntie the hurt that propelled her to kill herself, and for her failure to find and bury Precious Auntie’s bones.

LuLing's guilt and obsession with the curse render her unable to make a better life for herself, blinding her to the reality that she deserves happiness and redemption. Furthermore, her superstitious attitude causes her to view every misfortune that befalls her in life—Ruth's recent accident included—as evidence of Precious Auntie's curse.

This passage establishes just how all-consuming LuLing's guilt is, keeping her stuck in the past and making it nearly impossible for her to communicate directly with her daughter. This moment of deep but indirect connection—between a bereaved mother and a mute daughter pretending to be a ghost—highlights how LuLing and Ruth struggle with the same central conflict: to make peace with the past and to forgive and be forgiven by mothers with whom they can no longer communicate directly.

Part One: Chapter Four Quotes

☝ They were nice to her, certainly. They had given her lovely birthday presents, a silk velvet scarf, Chanel No. 5, a lacquered tea tray, but nothing she might share with Art or pass on to his girls—or any future children, for that matter, since she was beyond the possibility of giving the Kamens additional grandchildren. Miriam, on the other hand, was now and forever the mother of the Kamens' granddaughters, the keeper of heirlooms for Fia and Dory. Marty and Arlene already had given her the family sterling china, and the mezuzah kissed by five generations of Kamens since the days they lived in Ukraine.

Related Characters: Ruth Young, Arlene and Marty Kamen, Art Kamen, Miriam, LuLing Liu Young, Dory, Fia

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

Ruth greets the guests as they arrive at the Full Moon Festival dinner that she hosts. Miriam (Art's ex-wife and the mother of his children) and Art's parents arrive, and Ruth laments how unimportant she is to the Kamens compared to Miriam.

This passage is important in establishing how replaceable, underappreciated, and out of place Ruth feels at this point in her life. LuLing's secrecy about her past leaves Ruth in the dark about her familial lineage, and this sense of rootlessness extends to her relationship with Art and Art's family, as well. Because Art and Ruth never married or had

any children together, Ruth feels that nothing ties her to his life in a meaningful, permanent way. In contrast, as the mother of Art's children, Miriam achieves a permanent place in the Kamens' lives and ancestral history.

This passage thus highlights the central role family plays in giving people a sense of belonging and transmitting values and traditions across time. Ruth feels alienated because her ignorance about LuLing's past denies her the stability of cultural ties and inherited traditions. Her decision not to have children means that whatever cultural significance she has inherited from LuLing ends with her: she has no one to share her history with nor anyone to pass down important traditions.

☝ This was the crazy woman who had cared for her mother since birth, who had smothered LuLing with fears and superstitious notions. LuLing had told her that when she was fourteen, this nursemaid killed herself in a gruesome way that was “too bad to say.” Whatever means the nursemaid used, she also made LuLing believe it was her fault. Precious Auntie was the reason her mother was convinced she could never be happy, why she always had to expect the worst, fretting until she found it.

Related Characters: Ruth Young, LuLing Liu Young, GaoLing Young, Precious Auntie, Mother (Liu)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

At the Full Moon Festival dinner, Ruth gives LuLing and GaoLing framed photographs of the sisters and their mother when the girls were young. LuLing responds to the gift with the shocking claim that Mother is not her mother. She pulls a photograph of Precious Auntie from her wallet and insists to Ruth that this is her real mother.

Ruth's assessment of Precious Auntie in this passage reflects her disbelief in LuLing's claim (even though, in the end, the claim turns out to be true). The passage also underscores the resentment Ruth holds toward Precious Auntie at this stage of her life. Ruth associates Precious Auntie with LuLing's unceasing fear of ghosts, curses, and other “superstitious notions” that Precious Auntie beat into LuLing since birth.


Because Ruth doesn't know Precious Auntie as her grandmother and doesn't understand the depth of LuLing's

guilt about Precious Auntie's death, she sees her as little more than "the crazy woman who had cared for her mother since birth, who had smothered LuLing with fears and superstitious notions," and who taught her "to expect the worst, fretting until she found it." She thus sees Precious Auntie as the cause of her mother's unhappiness: as the person who turned LuLing into the harsh woman who, in turn, caused Ruth herself much unhappiness, too.

☝ A lot of her admonitions had to do with *not* showing what you really meant about all sorts of things: hope, disappointment, and especially love. The less you showed, the more you meant.

Related Characters: Ruth Young, LuLing Liu Young, Precious Auntie, Art Kamen

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

At the Full Moon Festival dinner, LuLing gives Ruth a gift: the souvenir pearl necklace Ruth hastily gave LuLing years ago to disguise the fact that she had forgotten LuLing's birthday while she and Art were vacationing in Hawaii. Ruth claimed that the necklace wasn't a big deal, which backfired when LuLing assumed Ruth's modesty was feigned, thinking that this meant the gift was actually expensive. Now, Ruth considers how LuLing's misunderstanding about the necklace aptly exemplifies her typical method of emotional communication, which is never to show how she really feels.

Ruth's description of LuLing's emotional communication as "the less you showed, the more you meant" shows how deeply engrained secrecy is in LuLing and Ruth's relationship. LuLing's consistent failure to show Ruth her feelings ultimately damages their relationship and compromises Ruth's ability to show emotion herself, as evidenced by her instinct to lie to her mother about the necklace rather than come clean and apologize for forgetting her birthday.

But Ruth and LuLing hide their emotions as an act of self-preservation. Both women have experienced hurt and disappointment from their mothers. As a result, they have learned to hide their true feelings to avoid the possibility of future betrayal, humiliation, or disappointment. The

countless tragedies LuLing has experienced throughout her life, such as the death of Precious Auntie and her two husbands, teach her to be untrusting of unchecked happiness. In turn, her unaffectionate demeanor, volatile temper, and perpetual disappointment in Ruth teach her to keep her needs and wants to herself, lest she risk punishment or emotional unfulfillment.

While as an adult Ruth has come to accept that LuLing's lack of outward affection reflects her immense, unexpressed love, not knowing this as a child hurt her. Even as an adult, while she understands LuLing's harsh personality on an intellectual level, she still feels hurt and unsatisfied with LuLing's inability to show her daughter that she loves her.

Part One: Chapter Five Quotes

☝ Maybe there was a reason her mother had been so difficult when Ruth was growing up, why she had talked about curses and ghosts and threats to kill herself. Dementia was her mother's redemption, and God would forgive them both for heaving hurt each other all those years.

Related Characters: Ruth Young, LuLing Liu Young, Precious Auntie

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

After learning about LuLing's dementia diagnosis, Ruth tries to process what LuLing's illness means in terms of the likelihood that they'll ever be able to repair their broken relationship or make peace with each other. Ruth contemplates how dementia spares Ruth and her mother from the uncomfortable task of atoning for the past.

Ruth frames the diagnosis in cosmic terms: "Dementia was her mother's redemption, and God would forgive them both for heaving hurt at each other all those years." Dementia is her "redemption" for two reasons. First, it sets LuLing free from the cursed past she has spent her entire life fearing and obsessing over. Counterintuitively, the horrific disease will be a welcome respite for LuLing, who can enjoy her final years free from the demons that have plagued her for her entire life—namely, her guilt about her complicity in Precious Auntie's suicide.

The dementia is also a "redemption" because it allows LuLing to forget the harm she inflicted on Ruth. LuLing was a harsh, cold mother all Ruth's life. She was often too concerned about Precious Auntie's ghost to have much time

for Ruth, and Ruth resented her for it. Ruth, too, behaved cruelly toward LuLing and prompted LuLing's suicide attempt. Ruth also repeatedly refused to show interest in LuLing's life in China, even on the rare occasions when LuLing seemed ready to tell Ruth about it. Not only has neither woman ever apologized for the harm they inflicted on the other, but they've also never even talked about these traumatic events with each other.

When Ruth claims that dementia is a kind of "redemption," she means that, in a strange way, the dementia offers a new opportunity for both of them to put their painful pasts behind them. Their history will no longer be something to avoid in shame. Instead, it will simply melt away, leaving them alone with nothing else to do but care for and love one another.

symbolically, asking for the past to help her make sense of the present rather than the other way around.


That Ruth achieves this sense of agency through the act of writing is significant. It shows how taking ownership over one's life is a matter of authorship, and it marks the beginnings of Ruth's plan for how she will deal with LuLing's dementia diagnosis—by actively getting to know her mother, interrogating and investigating the past in writing before it is "carried [...] to another world." After this, Ruth returns to LuLing's home to straighten up. While cleaning, she discovers the remaining pages of the manuscript LuLing gave her so many years before. Perhaps taking her discovery of this manuscript as a sign that her plea for "help" has been answered, Ruth decides to translate the manuscript and uncover the truth of LuLing's past.

Part One: Chapter Six Quotes

☝ She recalled that when her younger self stood on this same beach for the first time, she had thought the sand looked like a gigantic writing surface. The slate was clean, inviting, open to possibilities. And at that moment of her life, she had a new determination, a fierce hope. She didn't have to make the answers anymore. She could ask. Just as she had so long before, Ruth now stooped and picked up a broken shell. She scratched in the sand: *Help*. And she watched as the waves carried her plea to another world.

Related Characters: LuLing Liu Young, Ruth Young

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 138

Explanation and Analysis

When Ruth was 11, she used a tea tray to convince LuLing that Precious Auntie wanted them to move to Land's End, hoping for a fresh start away from the bungalow. Ruth realized then the power she had to take control of her life, and she was full of optimistic hopes for the future. As she returns to Land's End as an adult, Ruth tries to recapture her younger self's confidence and sense of hope.

In deciding she doesn't have "to make the answers anymore," Ruth suggests that she doesn't have to assuage her mother's pains by pretending to be Precious Auntie. Instead, she can take control of her life and her relationship with LuLing by asking the questions herself. When she writes "help" in the sand, she addresses Precious Auntie

Part One: Chapter Seven Quotes

☝ That was how dishonesty and betrayal started, not in big lies but in small secrets.

Related Characters: Ruth Young, LuLing Liu Young, Precious Auntie, Pan Kai Jing

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

While LuLing is at GaoLing's house, Ruth straightens up LuLing's house, which has become quite disheveled as LuLing's illness steadily worsens. As Ruth cleans, she reflects on her childhood diary, which LuLing resented because she thought Ruth should keep no secrets from her, which is why she proceeded to read it. Ruth retaliated against LuLing's snooping by finding clever ways to write in code or complex language to confuse her mother.

Now, Ruth meditates on the broader notion of secrets, how they begin, and how they develop over time. "That was how dishonesty and betrayal started," she muses, "not in big lies but in small secrets." Ruth's observation outlines the way inconsequential fibs can amass over time, growing in significance until they morph into complete "betrayal." Ruth's observation refers specifically to the way LuLing's snooping pushed teenage Ruth further and further away until Ruth retaliated with a full-on "betrayal" by writing a horrible message she knew her mother would read to teach her a lesson about snooping, which ultimately led LuLing to attempt suicide.

Ruth's observation about the nature of secrets applies to the book's other instances of secrecy and deception, as well. For example, Precious Auntie's one secret she keeps from LuLing—that LuLing is her child—eventually leads to Precious Auntie's suicide. LuLing, in turn, keeps Precious Auntie's true identity a secret from Ruth for much of her life. She also doesn't disclose the hardships she endured after leaving her childhood home in Immortal Heart: being sent to an orphanage, the backdrop of war that characterized her time there, and the fact that she was married to a man before Ruth's father, who was killed during the war. LuLing's secrets damage her relationship with Ruth, as the two learn not to trust or confide in each other. Ultimately, Ruth's ignorance about LuLing's past leaves her unable to sympathize with her mother or meaningfully understand the sacrifices she endured to give her a better life than the one LuLing herself had.

☝ And each day, several times a day, Ruth wanted to tell her mother that she was sorry, that she was an evil girl, that everything was her fault. But to do so would be to acknowledge what her mother obviously wanted to pretend never existed, those words Ruth had written. For weeks, they walked on tiptoe, careful not to step on the broken pieces.

Related Characters: Ruth Young, LuLing Liu Young, Precious Auntie

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ruth reflects on a particularly traumatic childhood experience that happened when she was 15 years old. Knowing that LuLing would read her diary, Ruth wrote a cruel entry in which she claimed she wouldn't care if LuLing killed herself. LuLing's response to the entry is far more extreme than Ruth could have anticipated: she attempts to kill herself by jumping out a window. As Ruth reflects on the incident as an adult, Ruth realizes that almost as upsetting as the incident itself was how LuLing refused to speak about it in the aftermath.

Ruth's shame and guilt about how her thoughtless cruelty led to LuLing's suicide attempt parallel the shame and guilt LuLing experienced as a girl when her own similar behavior contributed to Precious Auntie's suicide. This is true down to the language they use to describe their actions. In her manuscript, LuLing describes the year she turned 14 as the

year she became "evil," just as Ruth describes herself here as "an evil girl." These parallels indicate how LuLing unwittingly passes down her unresolved guilt to her daughter in a cycle of inherited trauma. LuLing's guilt over her "evil" arrogance causes her to respond harshly when Ruth displays similar characteristics, which, in turn, instigates Ruth and pushes her to become even more arrogant and resentful of her mother.

This passage also outlines one of the main factors that drives Ruth and LuLing apart: their lack of open communication. Instead of apologizing or making peace with one another, "they walk[] on tiptoe, careful not to step on the broken pieces." Failing to address this traumatic event might not create more "broken pieces," but it prohibits them from moving forward and beginning to put those broken pieces together. In this way, LuLing's silence plays a similar role as Precious Auntie's suicide did to LuLing: in both cases, the daughter is deprived of an opportunity to make amends and move on from trauma.

☝ She carefully crossed out the last sentences, running her ballpoint pen over and over the words until everything was a blur of black ink. On the next page, the last page, she wrote: "I'm sorry. Sometimes I wish you would say you're sorry too."

Though she could never show her mother those words, it felt good to write them.

Related Characters: Ruth Young (speaker), LuLing Liu Young, Precious Auntie

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

Ruth recalls a traumatic childhood incident in which she wrote a cruel diary entry about LuLing that caused LuLing to attempt suicide by throwing herself from a window. LuLing survives the incident but refuses to talk about it with Ruth and acts like it never happened.

Deprived of the opportunity to make peace with her mother by apologizing directly, Ruth writes in her diary to atone for her sins: "I'm sorry. Sometimes I wish you would say you're sorry too," she writes. Ruth's message conveys the real remorse she feels for hurting her mother and causing her to inflict harm on herself. At the same time, she expresses the hurt she feels when LuLing fails to acknowledge the many ways in which her erratic behavior, threats of suicide, and

inability to show Ruth outward signs of love have harmed Ruth, as well.

Even as a teenager, Ruth seems to realize that she and her mother are too guarded to be emotionally vulnerable and honest with each other. LuLing suffers from the emotional consequences of decades of unresolved traumas, including the suicide of her mother and the deaths of two husbands. In turn, Ruth learns to hide her emotions as an act of self-preservation after years of growing up with an emotionally unavailable mother.

☝ Her hands would always be full, and finally, she and her mother could both stop counting.

Related Characters: Ruth Young, Dory, Fia, LuLing Liu Young, Art Kamen

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

LuLing goes missing on an evening Ruth scheduled to have dinner with her. She returns unharmed, but the incident frightens Ruth and forces her to acknowledge the severity of her mother's illness.

As Ruth cleans her mother's house that evening, she stumbles upon some pages of LuLing's manuscript. This discovery leads Ruth to commit to caring for LuLing and learning about her life while they still have time. Although Ruth's decision will mean that "her hands would always be full," she decides that the undertaking is worth it, because only after she commits to learning about LuLing will they "both stop counting."

"Counting" references Ruth's habit of making numbered lists in her head to remember things. Although she justifies the habit as a practical method to remember the things she needs to do, she seems to acknowledge here that it is also a manifestation of her anxiety, as she tries to enforce a false sense of order and control in an uncertain world. Listing banal errands she has to do—dropping off Art's girls at school, grocery shopping, calling her agent—allows Ruth to ignore more important issues, like her strained, broken relationship with LuLing, whom she can never manage to please. LuLing also counts, using her fingers to keep track of the many ways Ruth has disappointed her and failed to live up to her impossibly high expectations throughout her life.

Ruth's desire to end her and LuLing's "counting" reflects her desire for her and her mother to make peace with each

other. She sees uncovering the mystery of her mother's past and understanding her mother's motivations as a path that will lead toward healing and redemption. When she and LuLing stop "counting"—when they stop ignoring or chastising each other and instead earnestly try to understand each other—they will finally be able to forgive each other and enjoy the remaining time they have together.

Part Two: Heart Quotes

☝ These are the things I must not forget.

Related Characters: LuLing Liu Young (speaker), Ruth Young, Precious Auntie

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

This is the opening line of Part Two, which consists of the manuscript LuLing prepares for Ruth to tell her daughter about her life in China. In the manuscript, LuLing flashes back to her childhood growing up in the village of Immortal Heart and provides details about her mother, Precious Auntie's, youth.

This passage is important because it outlines the main conflicts LuLing grapples with as she struggles with the onset of dementia: to commit the details of her history to writing so that she may remember them herself and pass them down to her daughter, Ruth. She wants to justify—or at least, explain—to her child why she grew to be a complicated, depressed woman who often acted in ways that harmed her daughter. The onset of her disease instills in LuLing an urgency to document her past and make peace with her troubled relationship with Ruth while she still has time. She also longs to make peace with her own past, which has haunted her for her entire life.

To do these things she needs to construct a story that presents the past in a way that allows her to make peace with it. For much of her life, LuLing is beholden to superstitious beliefs about curses and ghosts. She believes that the harm she inflicted upon Precious Auntie when she was a young girl has cursed her and sentenced her to a life of infinite misery and misfortune. LuLing's project of telling the story of her past is her way of moving on from this curse and beginning a more active and introspective process that, in enabling her to forgive herself and Precious Auntie,

might, in turn, help Ruth extend that same forgiveness to her.

☞ In this way, Precious Auntie taught me to be naughty, just like her. She taught me to be curious, just like her. She taught me to be spoiled. And because I was all these things, she could not teach me to be a better daughter, though in the end, she tried to change my faults.

Related Characters: LuLing Liu Young (speaker), Precious Auntie, Ruth Young, The Bonesetter

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

In her manuscript, LuLing explores her relationship with her mother, Precious Auntie. Recounting a time when the rest of her extended family scolded her for speaking her mind during dinner, LuLing remembers how Precious Auntie raised her to be confident and “curious.” However, Precious Auntie’s efforts later backfire when LuLing’s inflated sense of self-assurance leads her to disobey Precious Auntie and inflict irreparable harm upon her, which ultimately leads to Precious Auntie’s suicide.

Precious Auntie’s decision to raise LuLing to be “naughty,” “curious,” and “spoiled” was her way of passing down traits that her own father, the Bonesetter, taught her—even though LuLing doesn’t even know that the Bonesetter was her grandfather (or, for that matter, that Precious Auntie is her mother). Still, the Bonesetter loved and respected Precious Auntie and taught her to be confident, intelligent, and certain of her self-worth. Because Precious Auntie was the Bonesetter’s sole remaining child, he gave her freedoms typically reserved for sons. Even though Precious Auntie can’t claim LuLing as her daughter and explicitly pass on her family’s traditions to her, she can keep her father’s love and respect alive by instilling in LuLing a defined sense of empowerment and self-worth.

Although Precious Auntie’s teachings end up benefiting LuLing by making her resilient enough to survive a challenging life at the orphanage and, later, in the U.S., LuLing can only see the characteristics Precious Auntie instilled in her as negative. This illustrates LuLing’s struggle to make peace with the guilt she feels for unwittingly hurting the woman who gave up so much to help her. It also explains why LuLing punishes Ruth for exhibiting similar

traits as a young girl: she wants to prevent Ruth from making the same mistake of arrogantly taking her mother’s selflessness and sacrifices for granted.

☞ “I am your mother,” the words said.

I read that only after she died. Yet I have a memory of her telling me with her hands, I can see her saying this with her eyes. When it is dark, she says this to me in a clear voice I have never heard. She speaks in the language of shooting stars.

Related Characters: LuLing Liu Young (speaker), Precious Auntie

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs at the end of “Heart,” the first section of LuLing’s manuscript. As LuLing becomes a teenager, she wants to establish an identity separate from Precious Auntie and begins to resent the nursemaid’s attempts to control her life. LuLing eventually betrays Precious Auntie, leading to her suicide. Before she dies, Precious Auntie presents LuLing with a manuscript that spells out the secrets of her life, including the essential admission, “I am your mother,” though LuLing fails to read the manuscript until it is too late, and she loses her mother before she ever knew who she was.

In this passage, LuLing voices her regret for not having respected Precious Auntie while she was alive. What is particularly painful for LuLing to realize is that although she only reads Precious Auntie’s manuscript after the suicide, she now sees that Precious Auntie gave her plenty of signs to indicate her maternal love. “[...] I have a memory of her telling me with her hands, I can see her saying this with her eyes,” remembers LuLing. After Precious Auntie dies, LuLing realizes that the profound love Precious Auntie showed her every day of her life should have been proof enough that she was LuLing’s mother.

Of course, Precious Auntie didn’t tell LuLing this—not literally. “When it is dark, she says this to me in a clear voice I have never heard. She speaks in the language of shooting stars,” recalls LuLing, perhaps describing how Precious Auntie visits her in her dreams even after her death. LuLing’s heart-wrenching memories of Precious Auntie emphasize LuLing’s unresolved grief and guilt about her role in Precious Auntie’s death.



At the same time, this passage also implicitly points to the


unreliability of memory. LuLing remembers Precious Auntie telling her she was her mother, yet she knows this cannot be. Her false memory reflects the way guilt manipulates her sense of the past, making her feel that she should have known Precious Auntie was her mother and should have worked harder to reciprocate her love. In reality, LuLing's parentage was a closely guarded secret all her life. Her retrospective sense that she should have known otherwise is only a reflection of her regret that things didn't turn out differently.

Part Two: Ghost Quotes

☹️ I searched for her until dusk. By then, my eyes were swollen with dust and tears. I never found her. And as I climbed back up, I was a girl who had lost part of herself in the End of the World.

Related Characters: LuLing Liu Young (speaker), Precious Auntie, GaoLing Young, Mother (Liu)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 222-223

Explanation and Analysis

GaoLing tells LuLing that Mother demanded that Precious Auntie's remains be thrown over the cliff and into the quarry behind their compound, which the children refer to as the "End of the World." Desperate to atone for her poor treatment of Precious Auntie in the only way she can, LuLing unsuccessfully tries to find her mother's bones so that she can give her a proper burial.

LuLing is so upset about her failure because she sees it as the second time she hasn't lived up to her obligations to Precious Auntie, whom she has only just discovered is her mother. Precious Auntie often spoke of the curse that an ancestor placed on her family for removing his bones from the Monkey's Jaw, a cave the family would visit to search for dragon bones. Knowing that she is a descendent of this cursed family instills in LuLing a fear that now she, too, will be cursed for her failure to honor the bones of her mother.

LuLing's inability to honor Precious Auntie's memory by finding her bones and giving her a proper burial is one of the main reasons she becomes so consumed by curses and superstitions. It's her failure to complete this task that convinces her she will be doomed to remain unhappy for the remainder of her life. LuLing's description of herself as "a

girl who had lost part of herself in the End of the World" is hardly an exaggeration, since LuLing spends the rest of her life consumed by grief and guilt over the role she played in Precious Auntie's death. And this, in turn, prevents her from seeing her own self-worth, ultimately making her feel undeserving of love and happiness. She remains tied to the past and consumed by memories of the mother she feels she betrayed.

Part Two: Destiny Quotes

☹️ Yet in time I did become less unhappy. I accepted my life. Maybe it was the weakness of memory that made me feel less pain. Perhaps it was my life force growing stronger. All I knew was, I had become a different girl from the one who had arrived at the orphanage.

Related Characters: LuLing Liu Young (speaker), Precious Auntie

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 249

Explanation and Analysis

Despite her fear that she is destined to be eternally miserable for the role she played in Precious Auntie's suicide, LuLing finds that her wounds begin to heal as time goes on. At the orphanage she is sent to live at after Precious Auntie's death, she secures a job as a teacher's assistant, and she makes a fulfilling life for herself despite a backdrop of war and personal trauma.

This passage is important because it shows that it's not necessarily a curse that causes LuLing's unhappiness, but her unresolved grief and guilt over the role she played in Precious Auntie's death. Her misery results from her fixation on the past rather than destiny, and she acknowledges this in her manuscript. In this passage, she observes how her decision to "accept[] her life" and allow her memories to fade into forgetting causes her to "feel less pain." At the same time, her "life force grow[s] stronger," and she becomes "a different girl from the one who had arrived at the orphanage" years before. Her decision to move on from the past and embrace her new life gives her the strength to persevere and even find some happiness in life.

LuLing also implicitly acknowledges here that the resilience Precious Auntie instilled in her has played a positive role in her life. So much of LuLing's misery stems from the story she tells herself to atone for her grief: that she was an evil girl who betrayed and killed her mother with her arrogance

and strong headedness. It's only through telling herself another version of that story—the version in which she honors her dead mother by moving forward in her life without becoming consumed by “memory” and by things she can't change—that she manages to find happiness and peace in her life.

In short, this passage illustrates how obsessively ruminating on the past stunts LuLing's personal growth while accepting her life and choosing to author her story more positively allows her to move forward and begin to heal the wounds of her traumatic upbringing.

Part Two: Effortless Quotes

☝ “There are no such things as curses,” Kai Jing later told me. “Those are superstitions, and a superstition is a needless fear. The only curses are worries you can't get rid of.”

“But Precious Auntie told me this, and she was very smart.”

“She was self-taught, exposed to only the old ideas. She had no chance to learn about science, to go to a university like me.”

“Then why did my father die? Why did Precious Auntie die?”

“Your father died because of an accident. Precious Auntie killed herself. You said so yourself.”

“But why did the way of heaven lead to these things?”
“It's not the way of heaven. There is no reason.”

Related Characters: Pan Kai Jing, LuLing Liu Young (speaker), Precious Auntie

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 267-268

Explanation and Analysis

The day after LuLing's marriage to her first husband, Pan Kai Jing, they light incense and drink tea around a makeshift altar to Precious Auntie, taking part in a tradition in which newlyweds visit their in-laws after their wedding. As they undertake this ceremony, LuLing feels a cold gust of air at her neck and immediately assumes it's Precious Auntie's ghost. Later that night, Kai Jing tries to reassure her that “there are no such things as curses.” However, LuLing is resistant to Kai Jing's logic because it goes against everything Precious Auntie taught her as a child.

While choosing not to believe in curses could set LuLing

free from her past and allow her to experience happiness in her life, she is hesitant to do so, as these beliefs connect her to Precious Auntie. Choosing to uphold Precious Auntie's beliefs is LuLing's way of continuing the family traditions she wasn't able to knowingly or adequately take part in while her mother was alive, since she spent all of her life up to Precious Auntie's death unaware of the fact that Precious Auntie was her mother. Kai Jing correctly diagnoses what is actually haunting LuLing: “worries [she] can't get rid of.”

Kai Jing argues that LuLing's superstitious beliefs compound her misery, since they make her anguish not only over tragedy itself, but over identifying a cause to that tragedy. In reality, there are often no reasons why tragedy strikes. To search for a cause or to blame oneself only ensures that the survivors of tragedy and trauma cannot enjoy the life they've been lucky enough to hold on to. When Kai Jing tells LuLing that “there is no reason,” he encourages her to let go of the past, take back her life, and admit that she is worthy of love, forgiveness, and redemption.

Part Two: Fragrance Quotes

☝ I sailed for America, a land without curses or ghosts. By the time I landed, I was five years younger. Yet I felt so old.

Related Characters: LuLing Liu Young (speaker), GaoLing Young, Ruth Young

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 307

Explanation and Analysis

This passage articulates and casts doubt on LuLing's hopes for the future: to start afresh and cleanse herself of her past and all the trauma, hardship, and superstition she associates with it. Unfortunately, as LuLing is well aware as she writes these final lines of her manuscript, her life will be anything but harmonious in America. In America, she will lose a second husband, suffer economic hardship from raising a daughter alone, and remain haunted by the ghosts and guilt she desperately wished to leave behind.

LuLing's statement that she is “five years younger” refers to the choice LuLing and GaoLing make to falsify their ages upon emigrating to America, believing officials will be more lenient towards them if they think they're younger. The younger age LuLing is on paper, though, directly contrasts with how old, worn, and exhausted she feels inside. Tragedy and trauma have aged her irreparably.

The disconnect between her “new” birthdate and how she

feels inside symbolizes the superficiality and futility of a fresh start. A new life in America is an idealized, fantastical hope LuLing has for the future. In reality, a new start cleanses her of her traumatic past exactly as effectively as a falsified birth certificate makes her younger—that is, not at all.

Part Three: Chapter One Quotes

☝️ Ruth listened with fascination. It was as if Mr. Tang had known her mother years before. He easily guided her to the old memories, to those that were still safeguarded from destruction.

Related Characters: Ruth Young, LuLing Liu Young, Mr. Tang

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 321

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Tang, the man Ruth hires to translate LuLing’s manuscript, comes to LuLing’s house to join her and Ruth for dinner and deliver the completed translation. Ruth can tell that Mr. Tang is in love with her mother when she speaks with him on the phone before he even arrives, so enchanted is he by the resilient, remarkable woman whose story he has just translated.


Now, Ruth watches “with fascination” as Mr. Tang draws out a side of LuLing that Ruth has not seen for years. Ruth’s observation about Mr. Tang seeming as though he “had known her mother years before” speaks to the power of storytelling to immortalize the past; LuLing has not simply documented a period in history in her manuscript—she has captured the essence of the woman she once was and the visceral experience of what it was like to be her.

This moment is significant in LuLing’s character development because it’s the first time she has spoken candidly and happily about her past. The lighthearted conversation that seems to take place between two old friends bears little resemblance to the past LuLing conjured throughout Ruth’s childhood: a frightful, mysterious past occupied by curses and ghosts. Mr. Tang helps LuLing feel like the author of her past instead of someone who is simply beholden to that past. He allows her to *choose* what she wants to remember rather than feeling terrified by the things in her past that haunt her so intensely.

☝️ She understood more clearly why her mother had always wanted to find Precious Auntie’s bones and bury them in the proper place. She wanted to walk through the End of the World and make amends. She wanted to tell her mother, “I’m sorry and I forgive you, too.”

Related Characters: Ruth Young, LuLing Liu Young, Precious Auntie

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 321

Explanation and Analysis

Ruth finally reads LuLing’s manuscript and understands LuLing in a way she wasn’t able to before. Ruth has spent much of her life distancing herself from LuLing and her superstitious beliefs in ghosts and curses. She has resented the way LuLing lived in perpetual fear of Precious Auntie’s vengeful ghost and the way that fear often prevented LuLing from being a loving and attentive mother to Ruth.

Now, though, reading the manuscript and understanding her mother’s past helps Ruth see LuLing’s superstitious beliefs from a more sympathetic perspective. Most importantly, the manuscript confirms for Ruth the critical detail that Precious Auntie was more than LuLing’s nursemaid: she was her mother. Knowing this key detail allows Ruth to understand many of the harsh behaviors LuLing exhibited throughout Ruth’s childhood—these behaviors, she realizes, were responses to unresolved trauma and grief. The manuscript humanizes LuLing and even allows Ruth to draw direct parallels between herself, her mother, and their similarly fraught and complicated maternal relationships.

Both LuLing’s and Ruth’s guilt about how they have wronged their mothers is perpetuated by their inability to apologize to the women they have harmed directly. For LuLing, Precious Auntie dies before LuLing can even know that she is her mother. Furthermore, her inability to locate her bones means she cannot even honor her memory in death. Similarly, even though Ruth has read her mother’s story while she is still alive, LuLing’s dementia prevents her from engaging in any meaningful discourse about their lives. When Ruth observes that LuLing must have wanted to tell Precious Auntie, “I’m sorry and I forgive you too,” she references the apology that she (Ruth) wanted to tell LuLing but was never able to. In understanding and accepting her mother’s unspoken apology, Ruth’s own inexpressible apology is symbolically accepted, allowing her and her


mother to move on in their relationship.

Part Three: Chapter Three Quotes

☹️ Ruth began to cry. Her grandmother had a name. Gu Liu Xin. She had existed. She still existed. Precious Auntie belonged to a family. LuLing belonged to that same family, and Ruth belonged to them both. The family name had been there all along, like a bone stuck in the crevices of a gorge. LuLing had divined it while looking at an oracle in the museum. And the given name had flashed before her as well for the briefest of moments, a shooting star that entered the earth's atmosphere, etching itself indelibly in Ruth's mind.

Related Characters: Ruth Young, LuLing Liu Young, GaoLing Young, Precious Auntie

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 364-365

Explanation and Analysis

GaoLing calls Ruth on the phone and confirms that Precious Auntie's name is Gu Liu Xin—the name LuLing remembered at the museum a few days earlier. This resolves two of the novel's central conflicts: LuLing's quest to honor her mother by recovering their lost family name, and Ruth's goal to get to know LuLing before she succumbs to dementia. That GaoLing is the one who confirms this name to Ruth (who at the museum initially assumed her mother was just confused) is significant as a moment of female solidarity, as she has supported LuLing across decades of familial struggle and change.

That LuLing remembers Precious Auntie's name while looking at the oracle bone in the museum symbolizes how preservation of the past doesn't always have to trap people in traumatic personal histories: it can also spur new life and growth. Meditating on this artifact engraved with writing stirs LuLing and causes her to remember the name she had forgotten. This highlights the importance of writing as something that transmits cultural and personal history.

While "shooting star" is a nickname some people attributed to Precious Auntie (Liu Xing, the Chinese term for a shooting star, is very close to Liu Xin), the comparison also emphasizes the fleetingness of memory. At this point in her life, LuLing's memory is gradually decaying. In the face of this finitude, acts of personal and cultural immortalization like writing and storytelling are all the more important,

speaking to the profound ways that life can continue to affect and be meaningful to one's descendants long after one has passed.

Epilogue Quotes

☹️ And side by side, Ruth and her grandmother begin. Words flow. They have become the same person, six years old, sixteen, forty-six, eighty-two. They write about what happened, why it happened how they can make other things happen. They write soties of things that are but should not have been. They write about what could have been, what still might be. They write of a past that can be changed. After all, Bao Bomu, says, what is the past but what we choose to remember? They can choose not to hide it, to take what's broken, to feel the pain and know that it will heal. They know where happiness lies, not in a cave or a country, but in love and the freedom to give and take what has been there all along. Ruth remembers this as she writes a story. It is for her grandmother, for herself, for the little girl who became her mother.

Related Characters: Ruth Young, LuLing Liu Young, Precious Auntie

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 367-368

Explanation and Analysis

These are the final lines of the book. Ruth's new knowledge about her mother and grandmother and their shared history restores her confidence. It also helps her find the inner voice she needs to finally write her own book rather than revising other people's words as a ghostwriter. Happy and energized by her new sense of purpose, Ruth sits down at her desk to write the story of her family.

In this passage, Ruth celebrates the newfound power she has to find happiness and become the author of her own life. When Ruth explains how "happiness lies, not in a cave or a country, but in love and the freedom to give and take what has been there all along," she means that happiness isn't contingent on curses and superstitions, as her mother and Precious Auntie believed. The idea here is simply that happiness comes from taking control of one's own life instead of passively resigning oneself to hardship and sorrow.

For Ruth, this means writing her story "side by side" with Precious Auntie, and for "the little girl who became her mother." This allows Ruth to reimagine her mother's life with understanding instead of resentment, as a story of a

girl whose traumatic childhood robbed her of the happiness she so deserved. In doing so, and in seeing herself as a descendent of her mother and her grandmother, Ruth can

finally contextualize her own voice and begin to write—literally and metaphorically—her own chapter in this larger story.



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.

TRUTH

LuLing Liu Young explains the things she “know[s] are true.” Her husbands, who are both dead, were Pan Kai Jing and Edwin Young. Her daughter, Ruth Luyi Young, was born in a Water Dragon Year. However, there’s one thing from her childhood she can’t remember.

In a flashback to her childhood, LuLing wakes up in the room she shares with her nursemaid, Precious Auntie. She wakes and finds Precious Auntie scribbling something on a scrap of paper, but it’s still too dark in the room to see. Precious Auntie can’t speak and communicates with LuLing by writing on a little chalkboard and sharing sounds and gestures. She calls LuLing by a special nickname, “Doggie.”

As Precious Auntie begins the day’s chores, LuLing goes through her aunt’s “box of treasures” and pulls out a beautiful ivory comb with a carved rooster at either end. She asks Precious Auntie to wear it, thinking it will make her pretty and make LuLing’s mother like her more. Her aunt gestures toward her face to say, what’s the point? A fire disfigured the lower half of Precious Auntie’s face many years ago, and it was after this accident that Precious Auntie became LuLing’s nursemaid. The rest of LuLing’s family thinks Precious Auntie is hideous, but LuLing doesn’t see her this way. She’s also the only one who can understand the way her aunt communicates.

Precious Auntie tells LuLing many stories, including ones about Precious Auntie’s father, a Famous Bonesetter, and a made-up story about how she burned her face when she used to be a fire-eater. In another story, LuLing’s aunt claims that a star fell from the sky and burned her mouth.

Today, Precious Auntie tells LuLing there’s no time for stories and leads her to the ancestral temple to pray. In the temple, there are many scrolls with couplets that scholars have written as gifts to her family, whose ink they’ve used for 200 years.

This opening passage establishes memory as a central theme. LuLing’s mention of two late husbands suggests that she has had a troubled, unhappy past.



Precious Auntie’s method of communicating via writing introduces the theme of storytelling. LuLing’s flashback underscores how important the past is to her. That a nursemaid raised her also introduces the novel’s interest in relationships between women and the kind of support they give (or don’t give) each other.



LuLing’s compassion sets her apart from the rest of her family. She’s different from them in more ways than one, since she’s being raised separately by her nursemaid, Precious Auntie. This scene further establishes the importance of storytelling: words and storytelling allow LuLing and Precious Auntie to communicate and connect despite Precious Auntie’s muteness.



Precious Auntie tells fantastical stories to make light of whatever horrific accident scarred her face. However, her stories also keep the actual cause of her scarring a secret from LuLing.



The ancestral temple underscores how important honoring the past is in LuLing’s culture, since it’s a place devoted to showing respect to deceased ancestors.



Precious Auntie takes the piece of paper she wrote on earlier and shows it to LuLing. With her eyes, she tells her: never forget my family name, the name of the bonesetters. But in the present, when LuLing is an elderly woman, she finds that she can't remember the name, no matter how hard she tries. LuLing thinks about all the special things she's lost over the years: the jacket her sister GaoLing gave her when LuLing left to live at the orphan school, or a baby dress that Luyi outgrew. She's since learned to hide the things she loves in the special chest.

LuLing mourns the sad truth that even the most critical memories fade over time. In her old age, she struggles with not being able to uphold her promise to Precious Auntie to remember her name. Since LuLing is an old woman in the novel's present day, it's reasonable to assume that Precious Auntie has long since died. This scene's emphasis on loss also suggests that LuLing has lived a difficult life full of much suffering since the time during which her childhood memory takes place.



Back in the present, LuLing remembers the special chest that morning when she puts away a birthday present from Ruth: a **pearl necklace**. When she opens her own "box of treasures," moths fly out. Inside the chest is a fabric of knitted holes: almost all the fabric's embroidered flowers are gone. Despite having lost almost everything that ever mattered to her, the worst thing LuLing has lost is Precious Auntie's name. She pleads with Precious Auntie's ghost to visit her, asking the ghost if she recognizes who LuLing is: her daughter.

The moth-eaten fabric in LuLing's special chest symbolizes how time erodes memory. Time has even damaged the remnants of LuLing's past that she has tried to preserve in her special chest. The destruction of these items is especially tragic for LuLing, whose life, it seems, has been defined by loss: not only has she lost people who are important to her, but she has lost, too, objects that might aid her in remembering them. This moment is also important because it establishes that Precious Auntie is LuLing's mother, though she fails to explain why she refers to her mother as "Precious Auntie," which is a peculiar detail that likely contributes to LuLing's inability to remember their family name: she can't remember the name because she never used it to refer to her mother in the first place.



PART ONE: CHAPTER ONE

Ruth has been losing her voice on August 12 for the past eight years. Her partner, Art, jokes that her laryngitis is psychological. She thinks back to their second anniversary when they visited the Grand Tetons. She'd read a pamphlet that described the shooting stars visible in the park around August 12. Ruth recalls something her mother, LuLing, told her about shooting stars being a sign that a ghost is trying to contact you, though she doesn't think much of it since LuLing believes everything is a sign.

Part One picks up around the same time "Truth" leaves off: LuLing is an elderly woman who has an adult daughter, Ruth. Ruth's recurrent laryngitis parallels Precious Auntie's muteness. Their similar condition symbolizes how families pass down afflictions, trauma, and behaviors from one generation to the next. That LuLing connects shooting stars to ghosts shows how haunted she is by Precious Auntie, since the shooting stars connect back to Precious Auntie's story about a falling star having caused her facial scarring.



Next August, Ruth plans ahead and tells her friends and clients she's taking a retreat into silence to better understand the significance and necessity of words. One of her clients is a New Age therapist and thinks Ruth's retreat is a great idea. From then on, Ruth's silence becomes an annual tradition—something she almost chooses for herself—and Ruth even begins to enjoy it.

Ruth takes advantage of her silence to appreciate the critical role writing and language play in self-expression and the transmission of ideas. This scene also paints Ruth as an introspective, resilient person who weathers her hardships without complaint and tries to make the best of her situation.



This year marks the ninth year Ruth, Art, and the girls, Dory and Fia, have driven to Lake Tahoe for the “Days of No Talk.” Unfortunately, however, this year’s trip doesn’t go exactly as planned: the mosquitos are overpowering, and they spend most of their time watching rented horror movies in their motel room.

When they return home to San Francisco, they discover their hot water has broken. Ruth doesn’t offer to pay to fix it and feels bad for being petty. When Art tries to initiate sex with her later that night, she rejects him. Ruth wants to explain what’s bothering her but realizes she doesn’t know herself. Ruth stays awake late into the night. She realizes her voice will return soon. She walks into her home office gazes out the window at fog surrounding the Golden Gate Bridge. It’s too misty to see “ghost bodies.” Ruth remembers LuLing telling her the mist comes from fighting dragons.

Ruth walks to her desk and instantly feels like there’s something she’s supposed to remember but can’t figure out what. She finds a stack of papers LuLing gave her years ago, which her mother explained told the story of upbringing in China. The papers are written in Chinese, which Ruth can’t read very well. She remembers when she first set about the arduous task of translating the important file. The first line of LuLing’s story reads, “These are the things I know are true.” Back when she started to interpret the story, Ruth had been shocked to learn that her mother had been married to a man before her father.

Ruth wishes LuLing would translate the story for her, but her mother had scolded her for not knowing Chinese well enough the last time she asked her for help. She’d also gone on long tangents about the Chinese language itself. For example, the word “secret” can refer to something one hides from others or something that can curse or harm the beholder of that secret if they tell anyone. Furthermore, LuLing would get mad at Ruth if she showed any sign of impatience or frustration with LuLing’s stories. Finally, LuLing always ended the argument by claiming that none of it mattered because she’d be dead soon, anyway. Ruth promises her mother she’ll translate the story soon, but something with work or her family always comes up, and LuLing accuses Ruth of not having time for her mother. She urges Ruth not to wait too long to translate the story.

Ruth, Art, Dory, and Fia’s annual trip to Lake Tahoe reaffirms the importance of family traditions.



Ruth and Art’s failure to be intimate with each other suggests that the couple has grown apart. Perhaps Ruth is withdrawn in ways that extend beyond her annual, temporary period of muteness. LuLing’s talk of “ghost bodies” reaffirms how tied to the past LuLing is. She seems to be haunted by demons and ghosts from her past.



Like LuLing, Ruth has trouble remembering things. This scene further develops memory as a central theme. That forgetting becomes a shared trait between Ruth and LuLing also suggests that families—specifically mothers and daughters—pass down certain behaviors or afflictions. The opening line of LuLing’s story comes from the novel’s opening section, “Truth,” which is told from LuLing’s perspective. This detail supports the theory that the story LuLing describes in that opening section and the papers Ruth has in her desk perhaps come from the same manuscript. Ruth’s inability to read Chinese symbolizes how generational differences and an abandonment of cultural traditions prevent future generations from sufficiently honoring and understanding the past.



Ruth wants to connect with her mother, but her ignorance about written Chinese and her cultural background more broadly prevent her from doing so. LuLing’s lack of sympathy and understanding of her daughter’s struggles leave her unwilling to meet Ruth halfway. LuLing’s combative, unsympathizing personality drives a wedge between mother and daughter as much as Ruth’s ignorance. LuLing’s tangent about the many meanings of the word “secret” further emphasizes the theme of secrets and deceptions. There are many things LuLing is willfully keeping from her daughter, or that their language barrier keeps Ruth from knowing.



The following day, Ruth's voice returns. Dory and Fia are fighting over the TV. Art and his ex-wife share custody of the girls. On the weeks Art has the girls, the apartment feels cramped. Ruth can barely lock herself in the bathroom before someone starts pounding on the door. It's Dory, who tells Ruth she has a phone call. Ruth picks up the phone and hears the voice of her best friend, Wendy, who is crying. Ruth initially fears the worst—that Wendy is getting a divorce or dying. But Wendy's real news is that her 64-year-old mother has married her 38-year-old personal trainer. Ruth recalls her own mother's old boyfriend, T.C. She'd hoped they would marry, but T.C. had been 80 and died of a heart attack. Ruth comforts her friend and tells her she'll call her back after finishing her day's work.

Ruth hangs up with Wendy and runs through the list of 10 things she has to do today, such as dropping the girls off at skating school and buying groceries. But she can't recall number nine on the list, which troubles her, especially because LuLing has always said nine is a significant number. Art appears in the doorway and asks Ruth to call about the broken water heater. Ruth tells Art she's busy, and they argue a bit, but Ruth ultimately gives in and agrees to call about the repair after Art accuses her of being difficult. He tells her he loves her before he heads out, but Ruth says nothing in response.

Ruth drives Dory and Fia to skating school and continues to worry about Nine. Ruth drops off the girls at skating school and watches as they exit the car. They both have long hair, which is in style. Ruth had wanted to grow out her hair when she was a little girl, but LuLing had forbidden it, arguing that long hair reminded her of the "suicide maiden," LuLing's nursemaid who had killed herself when LuLing was young.

Alone in the car, Ruth thinks about her relationship with Art and wonders if they've grown apart. Ruth recalls how they'd met 10 years ago in a yoga class Ruth had attended with Wendy. In a flashback, Ruth notices a ring on Art's right hand and assumes he is gay, since wearing a ring on the right hand is common in the gay community.

Wendy's exasperation with her mother's love life emphasizes the central role mother-daughter relationships play in The Bonesetter's Daughter. But, of course, Wendy's gripe with her mother is considerably more harmless and comical than Ruth's situation. Ruth might feel isolated because her experiences prevent her from relating to her friends, who haven't had to deal with the experiences Ruth and LuLing have had as first and second-generation immigrants.



Ruth uses lists to remember her many daily responsibilities. Again, memory and forgetting figure prominently even in small, inconsequential situations, such as running through everyday tasks. Even though Ruth and LuLing seem to have a tense relationship, Ruth still references LuLing's wisdom—such as the symbolic significance of the number nine—in her observations about daily life. Lastly, this brief interaction between Ruth and Art provides further evidence of their unhealthy relationship. It's unreasonable of Art to call Ruth difficult here, yet she almost immediately gives in and submits to his request. She's overly accommodating, and he seems to take advantage of that part of her personality.



Ruth looks at Dory and Fia and sees all the relative freedom they have compared to her experience growing up under LuLing's care. Precious Auntie's suicide explains why LuLing feels so haunted by ghosts and so guilty about forgetting Precious Auntie's real name. Interestingly, LuLing calls Precious Auntie the "suicide maiden" to LuLing, effectively obscuring the reality that Precious Auntie was actually LuLing's mother. She is actively choosing to hide this detail from Ruth for unknown reasons.



Ruth worries about her relationship with Art. So far, however, she remains incapable of voicing these concerns to Art and keeps them to herself. In so doing, Ruth allows the problems in their relationship to persist and grow. She remembers the origins of their meeting as a way of reflecting on happier times and reminding herself that she is with Art because she loves him—or, at least, she used to love him.



Wendy eventually ditches the class, but Ruth remains enrolled, and she and Art start hanging out at a coffee shop after class. Art tells her he has a doctorate in linguistics from Berkeley. His focus had been American Sign Language (ASL), and he now works at the Center on Deafness at UCSF. Ruth asks Art what his favorite word is, and he replies, “vapors,” noting the sensory depth and shifting quality of the word and what it represents. When he asks her the same question, she can’t think of anything serious and interesting to say.

Ruth tells Art she works as a ghostwriter, helping authors put their ideas into writing for publication. Art calls Ruth a “book doctor,” which she likes, since nobody else really understands how difficult and meaningful her work is. Art asks Ruth if she’s ever wanted to write her own book. Inwardly, she rejects that she has wanted to write a book but is afraid of making her thoughts and desires so vulnerable. Ruth reflects on how meaningful her conversations with Art are. When she talks with Wendy, they mostly talk about what annoys them. But with Art, she talks about her hopes and dreams and learns more about him and herself.

Eventually, Ruth’s conversations with Art become more personal, and they talk about living with partners. She confides in him about her failed relationship with Paul, whom she’d been with for many years and almost married. However, they eventually grew apart and separated when he accepted a job in Manhattan. When Ruth asks about Art’s love life, he reveals that he’s single and takes care of his two daughters. Ruth fumbles, and Art realizes she’d mistakenly thought he was gay, which amuses him. He reveals the gold ring he wears on his right hand was made for him by his friend Ernesto who died of cancer. As Ruth investigates the ring, she thinks about Art’s gentleness and realizes she loves him.

Back in the present, Ruth picks up Art’s dry cleaning. She remembers she has to call Wendy back and reflects on her friendship: they’ve known each other since they were six. Though they are opposite each other (Wendy is extroverted and optimistic, and Ruth worries nonstop), Ruth is glad to have her as a friend. She calls Wendy back and commiserates about Wendy’s mother’s new husband. Worrying about mothers makes Ruth remember what Nine is: she’s supposed to take LuLing to a doctor’s appointment at 4:00. LuLing had been acting confused and out of sorts lately, which has concerned Ruth, who immediately suspects the worst: Alzheimer’s, a tumor, a stroke.

Art’s mention of “vapors” indirectly references the ghost or spirit motif that has appeared multiple times thus far, mainly concerning LuLing’s preoccupation with ghosts and the past. Ruth’s instinct to doubt herself further develops her as an insecure woman whose self-doubt holds her back.



Ruth’s occupation as a ghostwriter points to the novel’s themes of secrets and the importance of storytelling. A ghostwriter works behind the scenes, helping to develop and refine the author’s ideas. In this way, ghostwriters are a secretive, undercover force that does the invisible grunt work necessary to turn the author’s ideas into a compelling, comprehensible story. Ruth’s initially happy, rewarding relationship with Art shows how unjustified her self-doubt is: although she’s clearly an intelligent woman who can operate on his level, she refuses to see herself as capable and equal.



Ruth’s recollection of her relationship with Paul shows that growing apart is a recurring theme in her love life. One has to wonder if Ruth’s propensity to self-doubt causes this, or if she’s inherited her mother’s tendency to keep secrets—perhaps this introverted, deceptive character trait pushes her partners away. That Ruth is drawn to Art’s gentleness suggests an unfulfilled need for tenderness and compassion in her life. It seems possible that Ruth hasn’t quite received this from LuLing, who is needlessly critical and harsh.



Ruth has inherited LuLing’s propensity toward anxiety and worrying. This new detail about LuLing experiencing heightened confusion helps explain the urgency to remember her past and her family name that LuLing conveyed in the novel’s opening chapter. Perhaps LuLing’s failure to remember her past is caused by something more severe than old age—maybe she is suffering from something more serious, such as Alzheimer’s.



PART ONE: CHAPTER TWO

Ruth browses the turnip selection at the supermarket. She used to love the spicy turnips LuLing would make for the annual family reunion dinner each September. Ruth would eat them until her mouth burned, and she has a taste for them today. Art tolerates the turnips in small doses, but his girls hate the smell. Ruth selects a large sea bass to prepare for that night's supper, suddenly deciding to invite LuLing to join them after her doctor's appointment.

Ruth returns home and settles down in her office to work. She calls her newest client, Ted, for whom she's writing a book called *Internet Spirituality*. Ted badgers her about publishing the book as soon as possible. Ruth tries to tell Ted she's not in charge of publishing dates, and Ted accuses her of not trying hard enough and not being suitable for the project. She hangs up, annoyed at the amount of work she'll need to do to appease Ted and keep up with her other projects. Ruth gazes at the shelf that contains projects she's collaborated on, most of which are in the self-help, wellness, and new-age genres. She wishes she could write books about philosophy, science, and medicine instead.

Ruth reminds herself that she's good at her job, which can sometimes be quite difficult. It irritates her when people—even Art—don't take her work seriously, though she admits this might be because she tends to downplay her efforts. She remembers how once, LuLing had defended her work to Auntie Gal. Ruth was surprised at but grateful for her mother's remarks. Recently, though, LuLing has criticized how little time Ruth has for her.

Ruth scans her notes for another project, Agapi Agnos's *Righting the Wronged Child*. Agapi is a psychiatrist, and she's charming and approachable. When Ruth calls her to discuss updates that day, Agapi laughs at Ruth's habit of organizing concepts in the book into lists. After talking with Agapi, Ruth plays back a tape of one of their previous meetings, during which they'd discussed how a parent willingly or unwillingly imposes a worldview on their child. Agapi had repeatedly sensed that Ruth was confused or unreceptive to the idea. Ruth had never been to therapy, having written for enough therapists to know that they, too, are full of their own problems and need help.

Even though Ruth can't read Chinese very well, a love of traditional Chinese dishes such as the spicy turnips LuLing prepares for their annual family reunion dinner shows that she connects to her culture in other ways. Her culture also sets her apart from Art and his daughters, who don't share Ruth's personal connection to the food.



Ted's requests are unreasonable, but Ruth can't bring herself to tell him this directly. Instead, she keeps her frustrations to herself and fails to defend herself by informing Ted of the limitations of their professional relationship. Ruth's books all fall into the soft-science category. When Ruth admits to longing to write about subjects like philosophy, science, and medicine, she's implying that she would prefer to write about more serious, intellectually rigorous subject matters. Nevertheless, she continues to write these less-than-serious books anyway, which suggests that Ruth undervalues her abilities.



As irritating as it is when people underestimate Ruth, she realizes that her lack of confidence and accommodating personality do little to help her. At the same time, she remains incapable of changing her behavior to improve her situation. LuLing defending Ruth shows that LuLing does care about her daughter, even if she is more often critical and has difficulty showing her affection.



Agapi Agnos's book depicts Ruth's situation with LuLing, as it's relatively apparent by this point that Ruth has inherited her mother's nervousness and emotional evasiveness. However, Ruth doesn't explicitly address this connection; to the contrary, she expresses explicit skepticism about therapy. These details show how Ruth lacks the introspection or emotional resources necessary to work through her tense relationship with her mother and become more assertive and confident in herself.



Ruth works some more and then calls her agent, Gideon, to complain about Ted. She predicts Ted will fire her soon, but Gideon claims this will never happen, since Ruth will give in to him like she always does. Ruth realizes Gideon is calling her a pushover and wonders if there's any truth to this. It's true that she doesn't see any point in arguing, but this is only because LuLing has been argumentative her whole life, and Ruth has seen how counterproductive it is. Ruth wonders how LuLing got to be so angry and unhappy.

Ruth considers that LuLing's poor English is what makes her get into fights, as well. It's always seemed odd to her that LuLing hasn't been able to improve her English, since she and her sister, GaoLing, emigrated around the same time, and GaoLing's English is excellent. In contrast, LuLing can't even pronounce Ruth's name correctly and refers to her as "Lootie." As a child, Ruth was LuLing's "mouthpiece" and was in charge of translating for her mother in all kinds of situations, changing her fragmented, confusing words into thoughts the outside world could understand. In a way, reflects Ruth, it was her mother who inspired her career as a book doctor.

Ruth finishes paying the plumber, faxes an updated outline to Agapi, and rushes to LuLing's house in San Francisco's Sunset district to drive her to the appointment. At 77, LuLing is unusually healthy, so her recent confusion has concerned Ruth. LuLing has been mixing up words. Last March, she got in a car accident, which she blamed on a pigeon that flew near her windshield.

Ruth arrives at LuLing's two-unit house. She looks at the lawn and remembers how LuLing used to make her go to neighbor to complain about the neighbor's dog, which would urinate on the lawn and create brown spots. The task mortified Ruth, even more so after her mother continued to force it on her during Ruth's visits home from college. When Ruth mentioned the unwanted tradition to her roommate, the roommate was shocked that Ruth let her mother push her around like she was a small child. Determined to stick up for herself, Ruth told LuLing to complain to the neighbor herself if she was so upset. Ruth's disobedience upset LuLing, who accused Ruth of wishing she was dead.

When Gideon points out Ruth's accommodating personality, he frames her submissiveness as one of her central characteristics. Almost everyone in Ruth's life sees her as someone they can manipulate or take advantage of. Ruth inherited LuLing's anxiety and secretive nature, but she tries not to be combative like her mother. This, however, has hurt Ruth throughout her formative years, as she overcorrects and becomes too submissive to the point that she gets in her own way as an adult.



LuLing's poor English shows how difficult it is for her to adjust to life in America compared to her sister, GaoLing. Her difficulty assimilating into Western society could also stem from being overly preoccupied with the past—unlike GaoLing, who has an easier time embarking on a fresh start. This scene also shows how Ruth came to be disinterested in her family's lineage: her embarrassment about having to translate for her mother as a child taught her to be ashamed of her Chinese heritage.



LuLing's confusion suggests that she could be suffering from dementia. Her (suspected) medical condition reflects the novel's central theme of memory and the past.



Ruth's memory about having to confront the neighbor about their dog helps explain the submissive nature she has assumed as an adult: she's learned to associate confrontation with shame, which is why she goes out of her way to be accommodating and passive as an adult. Additionally, LuLing's extreme response when Ruth defended herself seems to have taught Ruth to associate assertive behavior with punishment, shame, and guilt.



As Ruth approaches the house, the downstairs tenant, Francine, intercepts her to complain that LuLing has been bugging her about paying rent even though she's already paid. Francine often complains about the building needing repairs. Although Ruth knows the woman is right, LuLing refuses to make the repairs, and Ruth usually ends up secretly resolving them herself. Ruth defuses Francine's current complaint, promising to discuss the subject with LuLing. Francine's complaint worries Ruth, who sees it as further evidence of LuLing's declined mental state.

Ruth enters LuLing's home. LuLing believes her appointment was at 1:00 accuses her of being late. Ruth knows the appointment is at 4:00 but goes along with LuLing's accusation to avoid escalating the tension. She scans her mother's face for signs of a stroke but can't detect anything. Ruth walks to the back of the home and looks at her mother's calligraphy supplies, noting how LuLing appears to have abandoned the poem-painting she'd been working on mid-character. LuLing is an exceptionally talented calligrapher who is exceptionally careful about caring for her supplies, so it's odd that she's left them out like this.

LuLing practiced calligraphy to supplement the household income when Ruth was a child. She sold signs for stores and wrote good-luck couplets for Chinese restaurants. Ruth grew up watching her mother write, and she admired how calm and controlled her mother appeared when she practiced calligraphy. LuLing told Ruth that Bao Bomu (Precious Auntie) taught her to write. She tried to teach Ruth, too, but she quickly grew impatient when Ruth struggled to learn the complicated, intricate characters.

Making sure LuLing is out of earshot, Ruth calls the doctor's office to voice her concerns about LuLing's condition, though she feels like a traitor. When Ruth gets off the phone, LuLing tells another concerning story about losing her purse. She accuses GaoLing of stealing her purse out of jealousy.

Francine's complaint about LuLing forgetting she's paid rent worries Ruth because it's another example of LuLing being more forgetful and confused than usual. That Ruth would rather secretly fix the problems herself than confront LuLing about her dissatisfied tenant shows how unapproachable LuLing seems to Ruth.



LuLing's confusion and stubbornness further establish that something is wrong with her memory. In turn, Ruth decides to simply go along with LuLing's thought process, which is an effective way to manage someone who has dementia. However, it also reflects the submissive personality Ruth has assumed in order to deal with her mother's combative behavior. From the memories Ruth has shared thus far, one gets the sense that LuLing has been stubborn and unapproachable for Ruth's entire life.



LuLing's decision to continue practicing calligraphy is another example of how she holds on to the old way of life despite moving to a new country. She also chooses to write calligraphy because it connects her to Precious Auntie. Furthermore, Ruth's lack of talent frustrates LuLing because it compromises her ability to honor her family by passing down an important tradition.



Although Ruth feels terrible for deceiving her mother by going behind her back to talk to the doctor, she remains unable to confront LuLing about her forgetfulness. LuLing's accusation that GaoLing stole her purse is another symptom of dementia: paranoia is typical among Alzheimer's patients.



LuLing and GaoLing have always had a contentious relationship. They came to the U.S. around the same time and married two brothers who were the sons of a grocer. LuLing's husband, Edwin, attended medical school and was destined for success. GaoLing's husband, Edmund, was in dental school and considered lazy. However, everything changed when Edwin was killed in a hit-and-run when Ruth was only two. Edmund grew up to be a successful and respected dentist. When the grocer and his wife died, most of the inheritance went to Edmund, with very little left to LuLing, who had only been married to Edwin for a brief time. While LuLing could only afford to buy a two-unit house with her inheritance, GaoLing and Edmund moved to a big house in Saratoga.

Ruth searches LuLing's house for the missing purse and is excited when she finds it under a mound of junk mail that has piled up on top of the dining table. Ruth notices a stack of magazines, and LuLing smiles as she presents Ruth with a sweepstakes coupon resembling a check that she'd clipped from a magazine. Excitedly, LuLing informs Ruth that she's won \$10 million. Ruth says nothing and tells LuLing she should show her doctor the check. LuLing tells Ruth that all the money is for her, and Ruth feels a sudden urge to hug and protect her mother.

LuLing's accusation that GaoLing stole her purse seems to be a symptom of her declining memory. However, it also hints at the legitimate feelings of guilt and resentment LuLing feels toward her sister, who seems to have lived a much luckier, happier life than LuLing has lived.



Seeing the sweepstakes coupon pains Ruth because it simultaneously reflects LuLing's deteriorated mental state and her deep love for her daughter. It's difficult for Ruth to accept the interconnected relationship between her mother's erratic behavior and her displays of love and affection. This juxtaposition of love and hurt characterizes many of Ruth's interactions with her mother. More than anything, Ruth wishes she could simply accept and be grateful for the love LuLing gives her, but she remains unable to ignore the ways LuLing's love has hurt her.



PART ONE: CHAPTER THREE

Ruth and LuLing sit in the hospital waiting room. LuLing asks about Art's kids and gets defensive when she confuses Fia with Dory. She asks Ruth about Fu-Fu, Ruth's cat, seemingly not remembering that Fu-Fu died a few months ago after getting attacked by a dog. It's difficult for Ruth to think about Fu-Fu's death, but she tries to remain composed for her mother. Meanwhile, LuLing has started to talk loudly, and other patients are beginning to stare at them. Ruth is happy when the receptionist calls them back to meet with the doctor.

Anger and aggression in response to being corrected are common symptoms of dementia. LuLing's confusion forces Ruth to relive the painful memory of Fu-Fu's death. Because LuLing's confusion is likely the consequence of her (probable) dementia, it's pointless for Ruth to correct her or explain that her words have hurt Ruth's feelings.



The nurse takes LuLing's vitals, all of which appear normal. Dr. Huey arrives and exchanges a knowing look with Ruth, who updated him on LuLing's situation before they arrived. Dr. Huey's Mandarin isn't great, so he communicates with LuLing in English. Dr. Huey asks LuLing a series of questions to test her memory, many of which she fails to answer correctly. Inwardly, Ruth convinces herself that LuLing's poor English has caused her confusion, not a poor memory, and longs to defend her mother. However, she remains silent. Finally, LuLing claims to have witnessed O.J. Simpson kill his wife. After this, Dr. Huey asks to speak with Ruth alone while LuLing changes out of her hospital gown.

Ruth tries to rationalize LuLing's forgetfulness because acknowledging that she will lose her mother to illness before she's had the chance to get to know her is too painful to accept. LuLing's story about witnessing O.J. Simpson kill his wife alludes to the infamous and highly controversial O.J. Simpson trial that took place in the 1990s. Simpson, a former professional football player, was accused (but acquitted) of murdering his ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and her friend, Ronald Goldman. Although LuLing's claim is obviously false, it's possible that some event from her past reminds her of the Simpson trial.



Dr. Huey addresses LuLing's memory problems and tells Ruth she'll need to bring LuLing back for future testing. Ruth tries to defend her mother, but it's harder for her to ignore the seriousness of LuLing's confusion. Dr. Huey says LuLing's problem might be depression, but he fears it's more likely something worse, such as Alzheimer's.

At dinner that night, LuLing complains to Ruth that the fish is too salty. Meanwhile, Fia and Dory aren't eating. When Ruth confronts them, they admit they had Burger King before dinner. In Chinese, LuLing scolds the girls for eating junk food. When Ruth tries to scold the girls about spoiling their appetites, they accuse her and LuLing of "talking like spies" in Chinese. When Art doesn't defend Ruth, LuLing berates Ruth in Chinese, telling her that Art never bothered marrying her because he doesn't respect her. Ruth wishes she could be mute again.

Ruth remembers when she was six and playing in the schoolyard while LuLing, who worked as a teacher's assistant, was at the other side of the yard watching the younger children. In a flashback, just as Ruth is about to tumble down the slide, her mother screams at her in Chinese to stop. The other children mock LuLing's "gobbledy-gook-gook," which embarrasses Ruth. In response, she screams that LuLing isn't her mother before throwing herself headfirst down the slide. She hits the ground hard, biting her lip, hitting her nose, and breaking her arm.

The accident sends Ruth into shock, and she almost feels as though she's dead. When she tries to speak, no words come out. LuLing scolds Ruth all the way to the hospital. Still, she brags to the doctor about Ruth's stoic response to being hurt, insisting that all the teachers and students were impressed with Ruth's bravery. Ruth stays silent when she returns home, even as her mother desperately asks her what she can cook to make Ruth feel better. Auntie GaoLing, Uncle Edmund, and their children, Sally and Billy, come over with gifts for Ruth. Still, Ruth is silent, fearing that once she talks and shows everyone she's okay, she'll stop receiving special treatment from everyone.

LuLing's potentially serious medical condition means Ruth will have to accept that she will always have to pull more than her fair share of the emotional burden in her relationship with her mother. Just as LuLing's combativeness prevented her from giving Ruth the affection she needed, her dementia further inhibits her from providing Ruth with emotional stability.



Even Dory and Fia, who are only children, can't be bothered to respect Ruth: they knowingly spoil their appetites on junk food, ensuring that they won't be able to enjoy or appreciate the dinner Ruth has prepared for them. Furthermore, Art can't be bothered to defend his partner against his daughters. Everyone takes Ruth for granted. Ruth's failure to defend herself perpetuates the lack of respect her family has for her, too. To make matters worse, Ruth can't even turn to her mother for support, since LuLing implicitly blames the disrespect on Ruth's failure to marry Art.



This scene illustrates how Ruth grew to resent and be ashamed of her Chinese heritage: the other children made fun of LuLing's "gobbledy-gook-gook," which is a racist way of describing LuLing's Chinese-English patois. Embarrassed, Ruth tried to disown her mother by pretending she didn't know her. But then she badly injured herself, ultimately symbolizing how her rejection of LuLing and their shared Chinese heritage ended up harming her more than anything.



This memory helps contextualize the accommodating personality Ruth develops as an adult. The special treatment Ruth receives after her injury renders her mute and teaches her to associate silence and submissiveness with reward and acceptance.



When Ruth finally returns to school, a special banner bearing the words “Welcome Back, Ruth!” greets her in Miss Sondegard’s classroom, and the class applauds as she walks through the door. Suddenly, even the popular girls want to be her friend, and everyone signs her cast. When LuLing arrives to pick her up, Miss Sondegard expresses concern that Ruth still hasn’t spoken. She advises LuLing to convince Ruth to start talking again, before her muteness becomes a real problem.

After dinner that night, LuLing gets her calligraphy supplies and writes. When she finishes her work, she offers Ruth a brush and teaches her to write her name. The lesson is slow and arduous, but Ruth eventually makes improvements. The next night, LuLing gives Ruth a tea tray filled with wet **sand** and a chopstick she can use to practice calligraphy without wasting so much ink and paper. Ruth enjoys drawing in the sand and begins to communicate with LuLing with her new device, writing the letters for English words in the sand to communicate with her mother. When LuLing asks Ruth what she’d like for dinner, Ruth writes B-U-R-G-E-R. LuLing laughs.

Ruth brings the tea tray and chopstick to school the next day, fascinating her classmates when she answers the teacher’s questions by writing in the **sand**. Ruth soaks up the admiration. She also realizes that writing in the sand gives her a new power over LuLing. When Ruth writes that the bean curd dish LuLing has prepared for dinner that night is too salty, LuLing agrees. Ruth is shocked: her mother never asks for or respects her opinion. To Ruth’s delight, LuLing begins asking for her input about things.

Ruth decides to test her luck one day and tries to ask LuLing for a dog by writing the word “Doggie” in the **sand**. Suddenly, LuLing’s demeanor shifts as she proclaims that her Precious Auntie has returned to her. LuLing asks “Precious Auntie” if she’s forgiven her and begins to sob. Ruth is confused. LuLing continues to plead with her deceased nursemaid, claiming that she’d rather die than continue suffering without her. She wishes she could have found her body and given her a proper burial. She asks if the curse is over. Realizing the miscommunication she’s caused, Ruth draws a random shape in the **sand** to get her mother to stop. By coincidence, Ruth has drawn the character for “mouth,” which LuLing interprets as a sign. Ruth wants to protest but reminds herself that she’s not supposed to be able to talk.

Ruth’s peers are more accepting of her when she is silent. In contrast, her teacher takes issue with Ruth’s silence and seems to recognize it for the faulty coping mechanism it is.



Ruth’s silence makes LuLing more patient with her, even though she’s slow to learn calligraphy. The tea tray that LuLing gives Ruth evokes the chalkboard she used to communicate with Precious Auntie. Perhaps LuLing is so happy about Ruth’s muteness because it makes her feel like she has a second chance to interact with her deceased mother.



Ruth’s silence makes her classmates accepting of her Chinese culture, even though they previously dismissed her cultural heritage in a racist way. While they earlier mocked LuLing’s accent, the chopstick and traditional tea tray now fascinates them. Ruth’s ability to command LuLing’s respect through the written word garners her a heightened appreciation for language and storytelling. She learns that her words can be her voice.



Doggie was Precious Auntie’s nickname for LuLing, which is why LuLing believes that Precious Auntie communicates with her from beyond the grave through Ruth’s tea-tray-writing. This scene is important because it provides additional insight into Precious Auntie’s death and LuLing’s resultant shame. The core of LuLing’s guilt stems from the fact that she didn’t honor her mother’s death and give her a proper burial. Whether this was a choice on LuLing’s part or something over which she had no power remains unknown. At any rate, this scene illustrates how profoundly guilty LuLing feels about doing wrong by her mother, and how this guilt manifests as an obsessive belief in curses, ghosts, and other superstitious beliefs.



LuLing begs Precious Auntie's ghost to forgive her. She pleads with her to spare Ruth's life and take her instead if she refuses to call off the curse. Ruth realizes her accident on the slide must have been the dead nursemaid trying to kill her. She drops the chopstick in shock and refuses to write. Finally, Ruth speaks, telling her mother that Precious Auntie has ended the curse and restored her voice. LuLing cries tears of relief.

LuLing believes whatever wrongs she has committed against Precious Auntie will doom Ruth's future. In reality, though, LuLing's fixation on curses seems to have a more significant impact on her ability to be happy than a curse itself: her superstitious anxiety breeds resentment in Ruth, who lacks sufficient context to see LuLing's behavior as anything other than foolish and embarrassing. LuLing's anxieties also prevent her from being able to provide Ruth with adequate emotional support. This scene even reverses Ruth's and LuLing's roles as child and parent, with Ruth assuming the role of the adult and reassuring LuLing.



Back in the present, Ruth drives LuLing home from dinner and realizes she hasn't completed one task on her to-do list: calling Miriam, Art's ex-wife, to ask if the girls can attend the family reunion dinner. Things are awkward between Ruth and Miriam. Ruth dislikes hearing about the formerly intimate life that Art and Miriam shared, though she never expresses her insecurities to Art. Wendy makes her husband, Joe, tell her everything about his past, but Ruth doesn't feel comfortable doing this with Art.

Ruth's childhood experiences growing up with a harsh, often disapproving mother have taught her to be guarded with her emotions. She feels threatened by Art's close bond with Miriam because her own lingering psychological baggage prevents her from getting too close to Art herself.



LuLing asks Ruth about Fu-Fu again, and Ruth pretends the cat is still alive. She tells Ruth to be careful, recalling someone she knows whose cat was killed by a dog, Ruth swallows her pain and remains silent.

Again, LuLing forces Ruth to disregard her own emotions. Whereas LuLing's fixation on the past previously made her unable to be an affectionate, open mother to Ruth, now her (probable) illness makes her physically incapable of giving Ruth the emotional support she needs.



PART ONE: CHAPTER FOUR

It's the night of the Full Moon Festival, and the Fountain Court restaurant is packed. Ruth picked the restaurant for the family reunion because it's one of the few places her LuLing actually likes. Today, Ruth is on edge because Miriam, her husband, and their two sons, Andy and Beauregard, will be joining them. Ruth had initially protested when Art broached the subject with her. Still, Art said Miriam was insistent and claimed it was "just a dinner," which offended Ruth, who had taken great pride in hosting what is essentially Chinese thanksgiving for the first time. Reluctantly, Ruth called the restaurant to adjust the headcount and order more food for four people who don't even like Chinese food.

The Full Moon Festival (or the Moon Festival or Mid-Autumn Festival) is a holiday celebrated in China to celebrate the end of the harvest. It's one of Chinese culture's most important holidays. Hosting the family reunion dinner means a lot to Ruth, yet she quickly acquiesces to Art's request that Miriam attends, even though she doesn't want her there. Ruth's immediate surrender shows how overly accommodating she can be: she's willing to compromise on the things she cares about in order to please others. In this way, she silences herself by putting others' needs above her own.



Art's parents, Arlene and Marty Kamen, arrive first and exchange polite cheek kisses with Ruth. In the casual restaurant, the Kamens' fancy clothing stands out. Ruth realizes that Miriam also dresses this way and feels alienated from this side of Art's life. While the Kamens adore Miriam, they never quite took to Ruth, and Ruth suspects they blame her for Art and Miriam's failure to reconcile years back. Meanwhile, while Miriam and Art's children make her forever a part of the Kamens' lives, Ruth has no such permanent ties. Ruth forces herself to greet Miriam and Stephen warmly when they arrive, though she feels slightly awkward. Ruth's cousin, Billy, and his second wife, Dawn, arrive next, accompanied by their four children.

Sally, a loud and extroverted aeronautical engineer, arrives next. Her husband George, a violinist, and their two boys follow her. George is a nice but passive man who mostly follows Sally's lead in social situations. Wendy and Joe arrive next, followed by Gideon, who is immaculately dressed and carrying a bouquet of expensive flowers. LuLing, GaoLing, and Uncle Edmund arrive next. As LuLing beams at Ruth from across the restaurant, Ruth feels suddenly sad that their relationship can't be like this all the time.

Ruth wishes LuLing, Auntie Gal, and Uncle Edmund a Happy Full Moon. Fia and Dory arrive just as everyone settles down at the table. They hug Art's parents but not LuLing. Soon, the appetizers arrive. When the plate of seasoned jellyfish, LuLing's favorite, reaches Art's children's side of the table, they mock it loudly, claiming it's a platter of worms. The other dishes, too, fail to impress them. Ruth had thought the kids would like the glutinous rice cakes, but she was wrong. When Sally's son, Nicky, knocks over a water glass, LuLing scolds him. Ruth wishes her mother could be more compassionate. She also notices that Art is on his second glass of wine and engaged in a lively discussion with Miriam.

The main dishes arrive, which go over better than the first round of dishes. Auntie Gal tells Ruth that she and LuLing were almost arrested when they went to lunch last week after LuLing incorrectly insisted that they'd already paid their bill. Auntie Gal laughs and tells Ruth that she gave LuLing ginseng root to cure her confusion. Ruth remains silent as Auntie Gal laughs and recounts other recent instances of LuLing's absentmindedness. Inwardly, she anguishes over her mother's affliction and tries to make herself believe it's only depression.

Art's parents greet Ruth kindly but impersonally, emphasizing the fact that Ruth has been unable to establish a close bond with them. Her anxieties about her impermanent place in Art's life reflect the high value she places on culture and family, but she remains somewhat of an outsider when it comes to Art's family.



Like LuLing's relationship with Precious Auntie, Ruth's relationship with LuLing is primarily characterized by guilt and regret. Seeing LuLing's smiling face from across the restaurant makes Ruth admonish herself for not trying harder to make her mother happy.



Even though Art's family members are guests of Ruth's, they fail to show her the proper respect, as Fia and Dory make fun of the Chinese dishes, ultimately demonstrating an overall lack of tolerance for other cultures and traditions. Ruth has faced similar experiences throughout her life, and though one might assume that such things would make her angry, she seems to have a different way of responding: namely, by accommodating others and overlooking the many ways in which the people around her demonstrate cultural insensitivity and racism.



Auntie Gal intends for her story about LuLing forgetting to pay the restaurant bill to be amusing, but Ruth sees it as further confirmation of LuLing's dementia, though her mother is yet to be officially diagnosed by the doctor. Still, Ruth continues to minimize LuLing's condition because it's too difficult for her to accept that her mother will become severely ill before Ruth has had the chance to work on their relationship.



Later, during dessert, Ruth stands up and speaks about family, traditions, and the past. Even though the gathering has been stressful for Ruth, she knows it's essential to maintain her ties to her cousins. Next, Ruth presents her gift to LuLing and Auntie Gal: a restored photo of the sisters as girls posing with their mother. When Sally teases LuLing about looking sad in the photo, LuLing calmly replies that she was sad because her mother had just died. Ruth assumes her mother had misheard Sally and reminds her that she's standing next to her mother in the picture, but LuLing insists that the woman isn't her mother, and GaoLing isn't her sister.

Everyone tries to laugh off LuLing's obvious mistake, but LuLing refuses to drop the subject. Instead, she pulls a photo of Precious Auntie from her wallet and tells Ruth that this is her (LuLing's) mother. Ruth looks intently at the photo, which was taken before Precious Auntie's accident had disfigured her face, and before she'd committed suicide when LuLing was 14. Ruth tries to reason with her mother, but LuLing won't budge: Precious Auntie was her real mother.

LuLing changes the subject to give Ruth her gift, which turns out to be Hawaiian **pearls** that Ruth had hastily given LuLing after forgetting her birthday while she and Art were vacationing in Hawaii. The pearls are cheap costume jewelry, but LuLing had believed they were expensive and bragged about them to everyone. Her false pride made Ruth feel ashamed. Ruth's shame returns when LuLing passes the cheap necklace around the table to show everyone her prized pearls. She winces, suspecting that everyone, especially Miriam and the Kamens, must recognize that the pearls are phony.

Art returns the **pearls** to LuLing after they've made their way around the table. LuLing notices Ruth's pained expression and asks what's bothering her in Mandarin. Dory accuses them of using "spy talk." Ruth hesitates before whispering to her mother that she's bothered by Miriam's presence at the dinner. LuLing consoles her daughter, telling Ruth not to talk to Art tomorrow and make him buy her a gift as lovely as the pearls. Ruth's eyes fill with tears as she grips the pearls in her hands.

LuLing's probable illness and the threat of losing her seems to have reminded Ruth of the importance of maintaining ties to her extended family. Even though LuLing's shocking remark about Precious Auntie is true, Ruth doesn't know this and assumes the claim is yet another example of the confused, erratic behavior LuLing has exhibited as of late. Ruth's ignorance illustrates how little she knows of her mother's life.



LuLing reaffirms the claim she made in the novel's opening section about Precious Auntie being her mother. Ruth's unwillingness to believe the claim is reasonable, given the forgetfulness LuLing has suffered lately. There's an element of tragedy in the fact that LuLing's decision to speak the truth about her past coincides with the onset of her dementia. She has taken too long to tell the truth, and now her psychological state prevents her from being taken seriously.



The pearls are a visceral, glaring reminder of how readily Ruth deceives LuLing to avoid confrontation and disappointment. Just because lying comes naturally to Ruth doesn't mean she enjoys it. Her shame weighs on her, reminding her of her persistent failure to be a better daughter to LuLing. LuLing's pride in the junk jewelry and the daughter who gifted it to her compounds Ruth's shame, for it's a glaring reminder of the truth she has kept from LuLing: that neither the pearls nor the daughter who gifted them are as authentic as LuLing believes them to be.



Dory's derisive phrase, "spy talk," demonstrates the lack of respect Dory and Fia have for Ruth, even though she is their (unofficial) stepmother. It also shows Dory's cultural insensitivity. Still, LuLing's show of solidarity touches Ruth. She cries because she wishes LuLing could be supportive like this more often. In reality, though, most of what LuLing has offered Ruth over the years has been harsh criticism or silent disappointment.



PART ONE: CHAPTER FIVE

Ruth holds LuLing's hand as she walks her back to the hospital parking garage. She tries to wrap her head around her mother's diagnosis: dementia. Dr. Huey told Ruth that the results of LuLing's MRI were consistent with Alzheimer's and that the disease had likely begun to progress years ago. LuLing jokingly asks Ruth if the doctor said she'd die soon. Ruth struggles to explain the diagnosis in a way LuLing will understand. When Ruth cautiously tells her mother the doctor is concerned about her memory, LuLing scoffs, claiming she can remember many things.

This was three months ago. Since then, LuLing has come for dinner at Ruth and Art's house almost every night. Tonight, LuLing nearly spits out the salmon Ruth prepared, claiming it's too salty. Dory tells LuLing that Ruth didn't add any salt to the salmon, but Fia kicks her underneath the table. Since Dr. Huey's diagnosis, Ruth sees what she'd previously regarded to be her mother's stubborn personality in an entirely new light and realizes signs of her worsening dementia had been there all along.

Fia asks Art if they can get a new cat, mentioning her friend Alice's new Himalayan. Art says maybe. Ruth remains silent but feels betrayed: she'd already told him she wasn't ready to get a new cat so soon after Fu-Fu's death. Suddenly, LuLing interjects to recall when she drove to Himalaya, which confuses the whole table. It's clear that simple word association prompted LuLing to tell this story, but Ruth wonders where LuLing's delusion about driving to Himalaya came from. Finally, she realizes the connection and mentions the documentary about Tibet she and her mother watched last week. LuLing loses her temper, upset by everyone insinuating that she's crazy.

After Fia and Dory retreat to their bedroom to do homework and LuLing leaves to use the bathroom, Ruth confronts Art to voice her concerns about LuLing's worsened condition and her hesitation to leave her alone when they go to Hawaii. Art asks Ruth what she—not *they*—plan to do about it. Since the Full Moon Festival dinner, it's become more evident to Ruth how she and Art have failed to become a family, though she knows she can't blame Art, who had been upfront from the beginning about not wanting to marry again. Art suggests that Ruth hire someone to keep tabs on LuLing while she's away and call Meals on Wheels to deliver food to her. He continues, suggesting that Ruth begin the meal delivery service right away—not that LuLing isn't welcome for dinner, of course.

LuLing's dementia diagnosis is bizarre for Ruth to accept because LuLing has spent so many years using her death as a threat to guilt Ruth into behaving. Now that LuLing's death is a real possibility, Ruth can't help but feel that she is being punished, even though she knows this reasoning is illogical, more akin to the superstitious foolishness she associates with LuLing's fear of curses and ghosts.



Inviting LuLing for dinner more often is Ruth's way of atoning for her feeling that she has been an inadequate daughter for most of her life. At the same time, LuLing's diagnosis prompts Ruth to regard her mother's stubborn behavior more sympathetically.



Art's tepid agreement to get a new cat is another instance in which he disrespects Ruth, who previously expressed her desire not to get a new cat until she's finished mourning Fu-Fu. It's impossible to know whether LuLing's remark about Himalaya contains a kernel of truth or is merely a moment of confusion brought on by her dementia. Ruth's ignorance about her mother's life causes her to overestimate the extent to which LuLing's degenerative disease impacts the truthfulness of what she says. For example, Ruth assumes LuLing's dementia is what prompted her to identify Precious Auntie as her mother at the family reunion dinner, but readers know that LuLing was, in fact, telling the truth.



In referring to LuLing as Ruth's problem, Art distances his life from Ruth's. Ruth has made countless efforts to ensure that Art's life fits into her own; after all, Art's two daughters from his previous marriage live with them part-time, and Ruth has become a stepmother to the girls, despite not being married to Art. And yet, Art doesn't seem willing to take on the burden of Ruth's challenges. However, Ruth doesn't seem to have actually confronted Art about this imbalance in their relationship, so it's possible that he would rectify his insensitivity if she brought it to his attention.



LuLing rejects the idea of hiring a housekeeper when Ruth mentions it to her later on, complaining about the cost. Ruth lies, claiming the service is a free training program that gives immigrants work experience. She feels guilty when LuLing immediately accepts this explanation and agrees to the arrangement. However, the housekeeper quits in response to LuLing's constant complaining. Ruth begins to check on LuLing a few times a week while she desperately tries to find a replacement. She makes excuses about being in town for a work assignment, and LuLing accuses her of putting work before family.

The housekeepers continue to quit. Ruth grows increasingly tired and irritable, and she finally tells Art to go to Hawaii without her. She tries to work in the empty house but feels anxious and unsettled. Gideon calls to tell her that the *Internet Spirituality* author fired her. Ruth feels relieved, though she knows she should be angry. Gideon expresses concern about her being so careless lately.

Later that evening, when Ruth calls LuLing to remind her that she'll be picking her up to go to dinner at Fountain Court, LuLing doesn't answer the phone. After more unanswered phone calls, Ruth drives to her mother's house, anxiously imagining the worst-case scenarios for LuLing's silence. When Ruth arrives, LuLing is nowhere in sight. An annoyed Francine explains that LuLing stormed out of the house dressed in pajamas sometime before.

Ruth calls the police, but LuLing returns before the officer finishes his report. Ruth spends the night at LuLing's. She inspects the place more closely and is horrified at the disarray. Ruth calls Art in Hawaii but gets no answer. She calls GaoLing, who refuses to believe the Alzheimer's diagnosis, insisting that LuLing will get better if she continues to take ginseng. Even though GaoLing downplays the seriousness of LuLing's condition, Ruth is relieved when she offers to come over and watch LuLing for her.

While Ruth recognizes that lying to LuLing has damaged their relationship, LuLing's dementia now gives Ruth no choice but to lie in order to protect her mother and keep her safe.



Ruth's decision to tell Art to go to Hawaii without her marks a distinct shift in her priorities: in the beginning, she seemed more concerned about her relationship with Art. Knowing that her time with LuLing is limited, though, she now prioritizes caring for her sick mother. Gideon's criticism of Ruth's supposed carelessness confirms what Ruth has long feared: if she fails to accommodate others—even if it means overextending herself and being a pushover—they will reject her.



LuLing's dementia has drastically worsened over the past few months. Ruth has inherited LuLing's predisposition to worry, and now, her fears are finally warranted.



Cultural differences lead GaoLing to dispute the severity of LuLing's condition. In Chinese culture (as well as other Asian cultures), ginseng, the root of a plant, is used to treat various illnesses, from memory problems like LuLing's to diabetes.



PART ONE: CHAPTER SIX

Ruth walks to Land's End to unwind. As she walks along the beach, she recalls when she was a teenager and had a fight with LuLing. LuLing ran to this beach in the middle of the fight and threatened to drown herself in the ocean. The unknown aspect of death leaves Ruth with no desire to die by suicide. However, in a flashback, she recalls one occasion when she did try.

Ruth is 11. She and LuLing move into a small, run-down bungalow in Berkeley. Ruth hates how little privacy the small house affords her: she's always in the same room as her mother, who never stops nagging her. Ruth develops a crush on Lance Rogers, the husband of the couple who rents the bungalow, which is an in-law suite of the larger house, to LuLing. Ruth can't understand what Lance sees in his wife, Dottie, who is bossy and loud. She often hears Dottie nagging and accusing Lance of vague indiscretions. LuLing thinks the couple is crazy, but Ruth sympathizes with getting yelled at all the time and sees herself and Lance as blameless victims of LuLing's and Dottie's respective reigns of terror.

That October, LuLing orders Ruth to drop off the rent check at the Rogers' house. The couple is unpacking a color TV—something Ruth has only seen in stores—to watch *The Wizard of Oz*. Lance invites Ruth to watch the movie with them and tells her she can ask LuLing, too. When Ruth tells LuLing about the invitation, LuLing scoffs, insisting the couple is only being polite. Suddenly, an idea strikes Ruth, who pulls down the tea tray. At first, Ruth is too afraid to trick her mother and can only sit motionlessly with the chopstick in her hand. She usually writes in the **sand** to appease her mother, trying to scribble the things she thinks LuLing wants to hear. Sometimes, she even manages to write something that turns out to be accurate, such as tips for stock market investments.

Ruth begins to write, attempting to spell out the word "Good." After she writes G-O-O, LuLing becomes excited. Goo means "bone" in Chinese, and she thinks "Precious Auntie" is trying to talk about the bone-doctor family. This appeases LuLing, and Ruth is delighted that her guesswork has miraculously paid off.

Land's End is a park located along the Pacific shoreline in San Francisco. Although water often symbolizes rebirth and renewal across many works of art and literature, Ruth has far more negative associations with water, connecting it to one of the many suicide threats LuLing made throughout Ruth's childhood. The narrative now slips into one of its many flashback sections, as Ruth remembers her difficult childhood, emphasizing the central role memory plays in the novel.



Ruth's longing for privacy is common among teenage and pre-teenage children, but it also shows how, from a young age, Ruth grew accustomed to keeping things from LuLing. Ruth's dislike of Dottie is a projection of her dislike of LuLing: she sees herself and Lance as victims of unreasonably domineering women. Whether or not Ruth's projection is warranted remains to be seen.



Apparently, Ruth's tea-tray-writing has persisted for the past five years. As was the case with the pearl necklace Ruth gave LuLing for her birthday, Ruth tells a small fib to make life momentarily easier for herself, only to watch it grow into a complicated web of deception from which she cannot escape.



Using her tea tray to pretend to be Precious Auntie communicating from beyond the grave began as a harmless misunderstanding Ruth used to comfort LuLing and ensure her Precious Auntie has forgiven her for whatever wrongs LuLing imposed on her. Now, though, Ruth exploits her mother's superstitiousness to use the tea tray for personal gain, using "Precious Auntie" to manipulate LuLing into letting her watch a movie with Lance.



Ruth returns to Lance and Dottie's at 7:00 to watch the movie. When she knocks on the door, she hears Lance grumble, "God damn it." Ruth is mortified as she realizes that LuLing was right—they didn't actually want her there. But before she can run away, Lance opens the door and greets her with a friendly smile. Ruth comes inside to watch the movie but is too humiliated to feel comfortable and pay attention. She's also uncomfortable because Lance and Dottie are drinking alcohol and being overly affectionate with each other on the couch.

Dottie, who is now drunk, gets up to make popcorn in the kitchen during a commercial break. Alone with Lance, Ruth feels like she's on a date. Dottie returns with popcorn, and Ruth realizes she desperately needs to pee. After using the toilet, Ruth realizes the seat of her pants is wet—Lance hadn't lifted the seat before he used it. Her disgust turns to happiness as she reasons it's "romantic" to be covered in her crush's germs.

In school, a few days later, Ruth watches a movie about the reproductive system. All the girls squeal in embarrassment, thinking about eggs floating around inside their bodies. When the movie ends, Wendy asks the teacher how the supposed "miracle of life" begins in the first place. The teacher scowls at Wendy and tells her they have to be married, but Ruth knows all it takes is love and "the right chemistry." Before class ends, the teacher passes out sanitary pad belts for the girls to use during their periods, which are due to start soon.

Walking home from school that day, Wendy, who is more worldly than Ruth, fills Ruth in on all the graphic details the teacher left out of the presentation that day. When Wendy explains to Ruth how babies are actually made (she claims that a boy pees in a girl), Ruth screams runs and away. Wendy's words haunt Ruth, who now fears she'll get pregnant from accidentally sitting in the pee of the man she loves.

When Ruth fails to start her period, she becomes convinced she's pregnant. She doesn't tell LuLing, knowing that this unwelcome news could be what finally inspires her mother to go through with her threats of suicide. Seeing Lance makes her seize with anxiety, and she starts to wish she'd die. She tries to slash her wrist with a dinner knife one night, though she doesn't draw any blood. Ruth finally confides in Wendy, who tells her she has to tell Lance—or Wendy will tell him herself. Ruth begins to cry, fearing that Lance and Dottie will kick them out of the bungalow. Wendy ensures Ruth that Lance will love her once she tells him about the baby. After fantasizing about a romantic future with her crush, Ruth agrees to let Wendy tell Lance.

Lance's initial annoyance shows Ruth that LuLing was right about Ruth being a nuisance to Lance and Dottie. A lot of Ruth's humiliation stems from the fact that her miscalculation about Lance makes her feel young, stupid, and in over her head. She shouldn't be hanging out with these adults who are drinking alcohol, she thinks—she's a young girl who should have listened to her mother.



Accidentally sitting in Lance's pee is decidedly unromantic, but Ruth is so starved for affection—which she's not receiving from LuLing—that she's willing to find intimacy and human connection anywhere.



Ruth is in her 40s in the novel's present action, which takes place in the late 1990s. This places this childhood memory sometime during the 1950s or 1960s, which explains the remarkably uninformative quality of the reproductive health documentary Ruth watches in school. The air of secrecy society assumes when forced to talk about subjects it considers taboo (human sexuality, sexually intimate relationships out of wedlock, etc.) leaves Ruth and her classmates ill-equipped to understand anything about sex or their changing bodies.



Society's decision to withhold information about sex leaves Wendy and Ruth woefully ignorant about human sexuality. Wendy's mistaken belief about how pregnancy works harms Ruth by convincing her that she is pregnant from sitting on the toilet at Lance and Dottie's house the other day.



LuLing's combative behavior leaves Ruth unwilling to confide in her about her supposed "pregnancy," so she remains ignorant to the fact that she's not really pregnant, thus unnecessarily perpetuating her anxiety. LuLing's depressive episodes and erratic behavior has also taught Ruth that suicide is a reasonable response to despair, which is why Ruth is so quick to consider suicide as an appropriate way to solve the problem of her unwanted pregnancy.



That afternoon, Wendy accompanies Ruth to the bungalow. LuLing is still at work. Wendy enters the Rogers' cottage and exits five minutes later, followed by Dottie, who approaches Ruth with a stunned look on her face. Ruth breaks down, and Dottie mumbles "that dirty, filthy bastard" under her breath. Ruth is shocked to realize that Dottie is mad at Lance, not her. Dottie offers to help Ruth take care of the situation, confiding in Ruth that she was in the same situation several years ago.

Later that night, Ruth takes the garbage out and hears Dottie screaming at Lance for taking advantage of defenseless young girls. Later that night, the shouting stops suddenly. Ruth looks outside and sees Lance throw a large duffel bag into his trunk and drive off. The following day, Ruth feels sick and barely touches her breakfast. After LuLing leaves for the Laundromat, Ruth creeps outside to investigate. She runs into Dottie, who greets her happily and tells her Lance will go to jail for what he did to her. Ruth tries to explain that it was an accident and that she should've been more careful, but Dottie insists that Ruth talk to the police about the rape.

Dottie is horrified when Ruth explains what really happened and accuses Ruth of framing an innocent man for rape. She storms inside, leaving Ruth alone to cry. Lance returns home sometime later. Ruth is too frightened and ashamed to go to school, and LuLing suspects that Precious Auntie's ghost is trying to kill her daughter.

Unable to bear LuLing's constant fussing, Ruth finally tells her mother she's well enough to go to school. Before she can leave, Lance intercepts her and demands that they talk. Ruth nervously follows him inside the cottage. The room goes dim. Lance tells her he kicked Dottie out of the house after realizing she'd been cheating on him. Lance is friendly to Ruth at first but grows irritated when she won't smile at him. Ruth looks at Lance and realizes she was never actually in love with him.

Dottie acts in solidarity with Ruth by believing Ruth rather than defending Lance. This would be admirable if Ruth were really pregnant, but Ruth and Wendy's ignorance about human sexuality creates a misunderstanding that could have dire consequences for Lance, who is innocent of the crime the girls' claims have led Dottie to believe he has committed.



Dottie further demonstrates her commitment to protecting Ruth by kicking Lance out of the house and insisting they report him to the police. The possibility that Lance could go to jail horrifies Ruth, who now has yet another reason to associate being truthful with punishment. Had Ruth kept her supposed "pregnancy" to herself, she could have avoided this colossal misunderstanding and the grave consequences it might present for Lance.



Dottie's angry response to Ruth's side of the story further shows Ruth that the world doesn't reward honesty and emotional vulnerability. Returning home to LuLing provides Ruth with little comfort. LuLing's fixation with curses and superstition renders her willing to accept that Ruth's subdued demeanor is caused by Precious Auntie's curse rather than something or someone in Ruth's life. Furthermore, LuLing's superstitious beliefs prevent her from communicating with her daughter to find out what's bothering her and giving her the comfort she needs.



Ruth's realization about Lance shows that she now sees him in a different light. His irritation when Ruth won't smile at him shows her that he's another adult who expects her to perform emotional labor for which she will receive nothing in return. On a certain level, she sees her crush on him for what it was: an attempt to seek out love and attention to replace the love she wasn't receiving at home—though she doesn't necessarily have the language to fully articulate this to herself.



Lance jokes with Ruth about how silly it was for her to believe babies are made with pee. She giggles, and he begins to tickle her. The tickling makes Ruth's body spasms instinctively, and she falls to the floor. Lance asks Ruth if she thought it was funny that she almost sent an innocent man to jail. Ruth tries to protest, but she can't escape Lance's grasp. He begins to touch her inappropriately. Ruth screams and breaks free just in time. Lance insists he wasn't doing anything wrong, since Ruth was laughing only minutes before. Ruth runs out of the cottage.

Later that night, Ruth tries to tell LuLing about what happened with Lance, but LuLing doesn't understand what her daughter is saying and insists that Lance is only mad at Ruth because she often bothers him. Out of options, Ruth uses the tea tray to convince her mother that Precious Auntie wants them to move to Land's End.

Back in the present, Ruth recalls the first time she'd walked along the beach at Land's End. Thirty-five years after the sexual assault, she wonders why she chose to live. When Ruth was 11, she had looked at the **sand** and realized it was like a giant tea tray for her to write in. The thought had made her know she didn't have to imagine made-up answers for LuLing any longer: she could ask the questions for herself. Today, Ruth scrawls "Help" into the sand.

PART ONE: CHAPTER SEVEN

Ruth returns to LuLing's apartment and begins to throw away all that trash. However, when she starts to clean out her mother's room and finds that she cannot part with a make compact and bottles of unused perfume, Ruth realizes she shares LuLing's sentimental attachment to objects from the past.

Ruth's misguided belief that she was pregnant by Lance ends up almost becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy when he touches her inappropriately. The entire experience further teaches her that there are hazards that come along with being honest and emotionally vulnerable, as her childish crush on Lance elicits violence and trauma rather than emotional fulfillment.



This is a heartbreaking moment for Ruth. She risks opening up to LuLing about her incredibly traumatic experience and receives nothing but LuLing's usual criticism in return. When Ruth uses the tea tray to convince LuLing that they should move, it shows how Ruth has learned that deception and trickery are the only way she can actually get through to LuLing. It also indicates that Ruth understands that LuLing is more open to listening to Ruth's needs when they come from "Precious Auntie" rather than Ruth herself, which shows how even at a young age, Ruth knows that LuLing is too fixated on the past to be there for her.



As a child, Ruth associated the move to San Francisco with freedom and empowerment, since the move came about when she used her voice (through the tea tray) to instruct LuLing to move. Using her voice allowed Ruth to escape a traumatic situation and offered her the opportunity to start anew. In the present day, she tries to recapture the sense of hope and self-assurance she had as a child but has since lost. Ruth's renewed realization that she has the power to ask her own questions perhaps alludes to the power she has to communicate with LuLing as herself, Ruth, rather than using Precious Auntie as an intermediary. Ruth writes the word "help" in the sand to symbolize the reversal of roles she will undertake to learn about LuLing: she will ask questions about Precious Auntie now instead of pretending to be her to appease LuLing. She will take it upon herself to get to know her mother while there is still time.



Ruth has spent years trying to distance herself from LuLing only to find that she has unconsciously absorbed certain aspects of LuLing's personality.



Hours later, Ruth assembles a bag of things to give away. As Ruth assesses the place for repairs needed to ensure LuLing's safety, she peels back the rug to uncover the area underneath the floorboard where LuLing hoards her most valuable possessions. Ruth lifts the floorboard and finds her mother's gold serpentine bracelet. Ruth searches for her mother's other hiding places. She removes a brick from the unused fireplace and discovers a roll of bills there. Ruth remembers how she used to take from this money when she was younger, thinking she deserved it for all the chores she did for LuLing.

Ruth thinks back to her childhood. Growing up, she'd vowed to be the opposite of her miserable, anxious mother. She'd expressed these thoughts in a diary that Auntie Gal gave her. Ruth loved writing in her diary, feeling as though the book immortalized her and gave meaning to her life. However, it soon became apparent that LuLing was reading the diary when Ruth was out of the house.

Ruth began hiding her diary, but LuLing would always find it and claimed a daughter shouldn't keep secrets from her mother. Ruth began to rebel by writing in pig Latin and Spanish and using complicated language to confuse LuLing. She wondered if LuLing realized that it was her need to know the truth all the time that drove her daughter away from her.

Suddenly, Ruth remembers the last place she hid her diary. She runs to the kitchen and retrieves the book from its position on top of one of the cabinets. Upon opening the diary, Ruth feels suddenly 16 again. Slowly, Ruth opens the book to a page near the end—to the words that had almost killed her and LuLing.

The weeks before Ruth had written these words were chaotic. In a flashback, LuLing catches Ruth smoking one night, and a horrible fight ensues. Ruth tells LuLing she wouldn't care if she died. Later that night, Ruth writes in her diary, composing a detailed, cruel passage about how much she hates her mother, knowing that LuLing will read it. She writes that LuLing should kill herself, since it's all she can talk about anyway.

LuLing's impulse to hide her special items shows how guarded she is about her past. It also suggests a life characterized by loss: she hides her treasured items because she has learned that there are no limits to the losses one may endure. LuLing is well acquainted with loss, having lost two husbands and Precious Auntie.



Ruth has long vowed to be different from LuLing, yet she has still inherited LuLing's anxiety. Ruth's diary also ties her to LuLing: both women document the important events of their lives in writing.



LuLing's snooping is hypocritical. She withholds so much from Ruth yet expects Ruth to keep no secrets from her. While LuLing's secrecy adversely affects her relationship with Ruth, it's also true that having no secrets can be harmful in a relationship, as evidenced by Ruth's adverse reaction to LuLing's snooping.



Ruth's life story—documented by her teenage self—transports her back to her childhood. Her remark about this particular entry almost killing LuLing reflects Ruth's awareness of the power of words to bring about real, lasting consequences.



Ruth unwittingly wishes onto herself the very same tragedy that LuLing had to endure—namely, the suicide of her mother. But because she doesn't know that Precious Auntie is LuLing's mother, she has no way of knowing how profoundly the diary entry will affect LuLing.



The next day, Ruth takes her time coming home from school, anticipating a massive fight to ensue as soon as LuLing reads the diary. But when Ruth returns home, Auntie Gal greets her, not LuLing. Auntie Gal explains that LuLing suffered a massive head injury after falling from a window. She's in the hospital, and the doctors aren't optimistic. Ruth breaks down, knowing she is to blame for her mother's injuries.

LuLing's suicide attempt teaches Ruth that her words have the power to elicit real change. When Ruth successfully used her voice (through her tea-tray-writing) to convince LuLing to move to San Francisco when she was 11, she realized that having a voice allowed her to exercise control over her life and saw this power as a solely positive thing. Now, she sees how her voice gives her the power to inflict harm, too. At the same time, this scene shows how LuLing's unresolved guilt over Precious Auntie's death negatively affects her ability to be a good mother to Ruth. Ruth's words might be cruel, but many teenagers express an immature (and often untrue) hatred of their parents. For LuLing to respond to Ruth's diary entry in such an extreme way is equally cruel, since she's willfully inviting Ruth to experience the same guilt and shame that she herself endured after Precious Auntie's suicide.



In the end, the doctors determine that LuLing has suffered some broken bones and a concussion. They let her return a few days later. Auntie Gal sticks around to help out, and Ruth is terrified that LuLing will tell her sister the truth about what happened. However, Auntie Gal never looks angry. Her mother doesn't look mad, either, to Ruth's surprise, only sad and weak. Ruth wonders why her mother has given up fighting with her. Ruth tries to apologize to her mother, but she keeps quiet after she realizes LuLing wants to pretend the evil words never existed in the first place.

In pretending that her suicide never happened, LuLing prevents Ruth from working through the traumatic experience and finding closure. Her refusal to communicate forces Ruth to take on guilt and shame similar to the guilt and shame LuLing experienced in the aftermath of Precious Auntie's death. It's cruel for LuLing to impose this fate onto Ruth, particularly since she knows firsthand how profoundly painful it is to believe that one drove one's own mother to commit suicide.



On Ruth's 16th birthday, LuLing buys her Ruth's favorite foods. Ruth interprets the gesture as a peace offering. Next, LuLing shows Ruth her gift: a black book, a small purse, and a ring of LuLing's, gold and accented with jade, that Ruth had always loved. Next, Ruth opens the black book, which is a Chinese Bible. Inside the book is a photograph of a young Chinese woman. LuLing explains that the woman is her mother, but Ruth is too distracted by the ring to pay much attention. Afterward, and much to Ruth's disappointment, she takes back the presents, explaining to Ruth that she will return them to her later, after she can better appreciate them. LuLing then places the items in a space beneath the cushion of a chair.

LuLing's gifts are her attempt to tell Ruth about the past that remains too painful for her to discuss in words. When LuLing shows Ruth the photo of Precious Auntie and explains that the photo depicts her mother, Ruth is too distracted by the ring to pay attention to the significance of the information LuLing has just disclosed to her. LuLing takes back the gifts because she is hurt: she tried to share one of her most carefully guarded secrets with Ruth, but Ruth wasn't interested.



Ruth wonders whether her mother had shown her the ring to torment her and resolves to pretend that she doesn't care about it. A few days later, LuLing accuses Ruth of going to the beach without telling her, and their vicious fights resume. Ruth considers throwing away her diary—evidence of her cruelty—but refrains. Instead, she crosses out the fateful entry. Ruth writes an apology on the next page and voices her wish that LuLing apologize, too. Knowing that she could never show LuLing these words, she places her diary on top of the cabinet, where she knows LuLing will never find it.

Back in the present, Ruth realizes she and LuLing have never spoken about this traumatic period of their past. Suddenly, she remembers how LuLing had mistakenly identified Precious Auntie as her mother at the Moon Festival. She removes the Bible from its hiding place underneath the cushion and sees the same photo of Precious Auntie that LuLing had shown her at the dinner. Ruth wonders if LuLing is delusional or if Precious Auntie really was her mother. Ruth pulls out a stack of calligraphy papers from the same hiding place beneath the cushion and realizes they are part of the papers marked “Truth” that LuLing had given her six years ago.

Ruth finds a dictionary and translates the first line: “These are things I should not forget.” She wonders if LuLing has known about her fading about memory for years. She resolves to call Art in Hawaii to help her find a translator, and to ask her mother about her life.

PART TWO: HEART

In the papers that begin with “These are things I should not forget,” LuLing explains that she was born to the Liu clan and raised in the Western Hills near Peking, in a village called Immortal Heart. Precious Auntie teaches LuLing to write the name of their village on her chalkboard. The village is an old but sacred place. According to local legend, a visiting emperor planted a tree in the middle of the valley to honor his dead mother 3,000 years ago. People would make pilgrimages to visit the tree. However, the pilgrims would take bark from the tree as souvenirs, killing it. After the tree died, people stopped visiting Immortal Heart.

Ruth doesn't understand why LuLing took back the gifts, and she mistakenly assumes she did so to be cruel. Ruth's misunderstanding causes her to pull away from LuLing and pretend that she has no interest in her life in China. Misunderstanding and secrecy thus prevent Ruth and LuLing from bonding after LuLing's suicide attempt. In the end, it's as though the traumatic experience is all for nothing, since Ruth resumes her rebellious streak and the relationship returns to the way it was before LuLing's suicide attempt.



The urgency of Ruth's current situation allows her to appreciate the important gifts LuLing tried to give her before: LuLing's dementia severely restricts the time Ruth has left to get to know her mother, and Ruth realizes she won't have many more chances to show LuLing that she is interested in her life, family, and history. With this in mind, Ruth examines the photo of LuLing's supposed mother more closely than she had 30 years ago and sees that the woman LuLing claimed was her mother is, indeed, Precious Auntie.



The first line of LuLing's manuscript reflects the key role storytelling and language hold in preserving and honoring the past. Ruth realizes that showing LuLing that she has read the manuscript is the only way she can atone for the years she has spent being an inadequate daughter.



Part Two is an extended flashback that covers the information LuLing conveys in her manuscript. In allowing LuLing to tell her story in her own voice, the novel explores the rich, inner life that LuLing otherwise hides from the world, and the person she wants Ruth to know before she dies.



Nearly 2,000 people live in Immortal Heart during LuLing's childhood. The village is a lively place with a primary school and many peddlers roaming the street. The Liu clan has lived in the same compound for several centuries. The family runs a successful ink business, and they always have money for new clothes and good meals. All the women stay home and make the ink in the ink studio, and the family earns a reputation for their high-quality product.

Each of the women is responsible for one stage of the ink-making process. Precious Auntie's job is to carve good-luck words into the finished ink sticks. Because of this, her calligraphy becomes better than Father's. The women claim that the black, sticky ink keeps their hair dark. Great-Granny jokes that her hair is as black as a chestnut's shell and her flesh as white and wrinkled as the nut inside. She pauses and then adds that this is better than the opposite: having white hair and a black, scorched face. Nobody seems to care that Precious Auntie is around to hear the jokes. Later in life, Great-Granny's memory goes, and she begins to ask for Hu Sen, seemingly forgetting that her grandson has been dead for years.

The compound where LuLing and her family live is located on Pig's Head Lane. There's a cliff behind the compound, which has deepened over many years of heavy rainfall, its edge growing ever closer to the compound with each passing year. The cliff makes the Liu clan feel that they constantly have to look behind them, and they refer to it as the End of the World. LuLing and her siblings often throw spoiled fruits over the cliff's edge and imagine them hitting the bones of "unwanted babies, suicide maidens, and beggar ghosts" that lie at the bottom of the ravine.

Many generations of Lius live in the compound. Liu Jin Sen is the oldest of Great-Granny's four sons and is the man LuLing calls Father. LuLing calls her father's brothers Big Uncle and Little Uncle. The fourth son, Baby Uncle, whose real name was Liu Hu Sen, was LuLing's favorite. He was also her real father and would have married Precious Auntie, had he not died on their wedding day.

Knowing that LuLing's extended family operates an ink business recasts LuLing's talent for calligraphy as a personal talent and as something with roots in her family's heritage.



LuLing's talent for calligraphy ties her to Precious Auntie, who, so far, seems to be the most important person from LuLing's past. This scene also demonstrates the cruelty the rest of the family exhibits toward Precious Auntie. Their derision could stem from Precious Auntie's lower-class status (the Lius are a wealthy, respected family, while Precious Auntie is only a nursemaid), but it seems that their hatred has deeper roots.

"The End of the World" parallels Land's End, the shoreline near Ruth's childhood home: both names describe a place where the land ends and something else begins. Both locations also have connotations specifically tied to death: Ruth associates Land's End with LuLing's suicide attempt, and LuLing associates The End of the World with "unwanted babies, suicide maidens, and beggar ghosts," seemingly referring to Precious Auntie with the phrase "suicide maidens." The parallels between these two locations show how history repeats itself, and how Ruth inherits certain aspects of her life from her mother.



At this point in LuLing's life, she doesn't know that Precious Auntie is her mother. Given that Precious Auntie never married Baby Uncle, it's possible to deduce that the Liu clan has obscured the truth of LuLing's parentage to hide her illegitimate birth, which society would have deemed shameful at the time. .



Precious Auntie was born in a bigger town called Zhou's Mouth of the Mountain, about 10 kilometers from Immortal Heart, though the path there is dangerous, especially during the rainy season, when the dry ravine fills with floodwaters. Everyone in the Mouth of the Mountain searches for dragon bones, which can be taken to Peking and sold for high prices as a cure for many ailments. Precious Auntie's family had been bonesetters for centuries. In addition to the skills of the trade, they also passed down the knowledge about the Monkey's Jaw, a cave where one can go to find the best dragon bones.

On one occasion, Precious Auntie tells LuLing about a bone she has that's covered in strange writing. It probably comes from a turtle, and her father almost ground it down for medicine before noticing the scratches that ran along its sides. Today, this type of bone is called an **"oracle bone"** and is very valuable, though bone diggers used to file them down before selling them to medicine shops. This type of bone is inscribed with "questions to the gods" that the ancient people thought were important enough to be remembered through the ages.

Precious Auntie frequently takes LuLing to the Monkey's Jaw. They go down into the End of the World to get there. Precious Auntie and LuLing would crawl into the cave with only a lantern to light their way. The cave floor contains tools left behind by Precious Auntie's ancestors. Precious Auntie and LuLing would use the tools to chip away at the earth in the cave to dig for dragon bones. Hours later, they'd emerge from the cave with a sackful of dirt. If they were lucky, the earth would contain a couple of dragon bones.

Walking home, Precious Auntie would tell LuLing stories about the miracles her father, the bonesetter, would perform for injured, desperate people. She groups her father's remedies into three categories: modern, to appease the Western missionaries; try-anything, which consists of spells and chants; and traditional, which is the category to which the dragon bones belong.

"Dragon bone" was the term local villagers used to refer to the bone fragments they unearthed to use in treating various illnesses using traditional Chinese medicine. In reality, the bones were likely oracle bones, a special type of bone used in divination practices in the China Bronze Age during the Shang dynasty. Diviners would carve questions into the oracle bones, apply heat to the bones until they formed cracks, and then divine the gods' answers to their questions from the cracks. Therefore, the bones are important within China's history, but they are also specifically significant to Precious Auntie, whose family has a long history of bonesetting, or joint manipulation.



The words carved into oracle bones are written in oracle bone script, which is the oldest known form of Chinese writing. The language carried on the surface of oracle bones immortalizes ancient history, enabling the traditions of the distant past to persist long after its inventors have passed.



The Monkey's Jaw is another way in which Precious Auntie honors and keeps alive her family's traditions. Bringing LuLing there to search for dragon bones is a way for Precious Auntie to immerse LuLing in the traditions of their shared ancestors despite being forbidden from outwardly claiming LuLing as her daughter.



Sharing stories with LuLing about the Bonesetter also helps Precious Auntie pass down family memories to LuLing even as LuLing remains ignorant to the fact that these memories are about her family. The Bonesetter assumes an almost mythic status in Precious Auntie's stories about him, conveying the respect Precious Auntie has for her father and their tradition.



Still, despite the bonesetter's reputation as a great healer, he couldn't prevent all hardship. When Precious Auntie was very young, her mother and brothers died of a horrible disease. In his grief, the bonesetter spoiled Precious Auntie, his only remaining child, affording her all the opportunities customarily reserved for sons, including learning to read and write. The bonesetter also taught Precious Auntie the practices of his trade. In time, she became knowledgeable about healing, too, and could assist her father's bonesetting.

One day, at dinner, Precious Auntie tells LuLing a story about a woman who came to her father and asked him to unbind her feet. Forgetting that she and Precious Auntie aren't alone, LuLing asks aloud if bound feet look like white lilies, the way romantic books say they do. Mother and the aunts scold her for talking so openly about such a private subject. Precious Auntie pretends to scold LuLing, but in the secret language that only the two of them speak, she tells LuLing that bound feet are knotty, callused, smelly, and look like rotten ginger roots. LuLing fondly recalls this as an example of the ways Precious Auntie taught her to be "naughty" and "curious, just like her." LuLing considers how the tradeoff for being curious and naughty was that she never learned how to be a good daughter.

LuLing's story shifts to information she gleaned from a manuscript Precious Auntie wrote, which LuLing only read after Precious Auntie's death. When Precious Auntie is 19, two new patients come to the Bonesetter. One is a crying baby, and the other is Baby Uncle. The baby belongs to Chang, a rich coffin-maker who earns his fortune by selling overpriced, poorly made coffins. Chang's wife, who has accompanied her husband, claims that one of these coffins fell on the baby and dislocated its shoulder. Still, Precious Auntie suspects Chang is responsible, recalling how Chang's wife came to the bonesetter years before with a broken jaw. Precious Auntie gives the baby a mixture of opium, herbs, and dragon bone, and he ceases his crying. Chang eyes Precious Auntie lewdly before they leave.

Baby Uncle limps into the shop after Chang's leave. He explains how his horse got spooked on a journey from Peking to Immortal Heart and stepped on his foot. When Precious Auntie smiles at Baby Uncle, he forgets his pain and immediately decides to marry her. He returns the next day with lychees for Precious Auntie as a sign of his gratitude. He also recites a poem she wrote for her. Later that afternoon, Chang stops by with a watermelon to express his thanks.

The liberties the Bonesetter afforded Precious Auntie would have been unusual in a time when women in rural villages like Precious Auntie's would have been denied an education and had their feet bound. His love for her gave her self-assurance and confidence that she could do anything she wanted. That most of Precious Auntie's family died when she was young shows that loss and hardship span generations of LuLing's family. This detail also helps explain why Precious Auntie and, later, LuLing, maintain superstitious beliefs about curses and ghosts.



Precious Auntie speaks frankly about the ugly realities of the practice of foot binding to ensure that LuLing is "curious, just like her" and willing to interrogate and challenge the world around her. She raises her daughter to be strong, wise, and empowered. Precious Auntie's parenting technique gets LuLing in trouble with the rest of her family, however, which shows how the rest of society isn't as accepting of "curious" women and girls and sees them as "naughty." LuLing's comment about Precious Auntie's encouragement eventually backfiring and teaching her to be a bad daughter suggests that her own curiosity and stubbornness will get her into trouble in the future. Perhaps she is alluding to the role she plays in Precious Auntie's suicide.



The detail about Precious Auntie writing a manuscript about her history for LuLing contextualizes the manuscript LuLing will later write for Ruth. It's her way of teaching Ruth her past through a familial storytelling tradition. Chang's disreputable business practices imply that he is an untrustworthy, nefarious character. Furthermore, LuLing insinuates that he has caused the injuries his family has incurred over the years. Finally, Chang's suggestive glance toward Precious Auntie ominously foreshadows that she may well be his next target.



Baby Uncle is Chang's opposite: he is kind and demonstrates emotional honesty by sharing his poem with Precious Auntie. In committing his feelings to paper, he symbolically pledges his eternal devotion to her.



Later that week, Chang and Baby Uncle go to separate fortune-tellers to see how their birthdates line up with Precious Auntie's. Chang's fortune-teller informs him that he'll have a lucky future with Precious Auntie. However, Baby Uncle's fortune-teller sees only chaos in his future. Baby Uncle gives the fortune-teller more money until he eventually reverses his assessment and predicts a lucky future for marriage between Baby Uncle and Precious Auntie.

Chang proposes to Precious Auntie first. The fortune-teller arrives at the bonesetter's shop to laud the coffin-maker's vast wealth and respected reputation. The bonesetter isn't crazy about Chang but considers the offer anyway, fearing what will happen to Precious Auntie after he dies. He knows that Precious Auntie is too curious, vocal, and argumentative to interest most suitors. But Precious Auntie stubbornly refuses to accept the horrible man's proposal, and the bonesetter has no choice but to reject the coffin-maker's offer. To protect his daughter, he lies and tells Chang's matchmaker that Precious Auntie can't bear to leave her helpless father behind. However, the bonesetter's lie backfires after Precious Auntie accepts Baby Uncle's proposal the following week.

After Precious Auntie's marriage is announced, Chang confronts her at the Mouth of the Mountain and vows to punish her for insulting him. Precious Auntie brushes off Chang's threats and doesn't tell her father or Baby Uncle about the encounter.

Precious Auntie's wedding is supposed to happen right after the start of the new Dragon Year. A photographer whom the bonesetter treated the month before arrives at the shop to take wedding photographs of Precious Auntie as payment for his treatment. Precious Auntie thinks about her future as she stares into the camera. She feels a mysterious premonition of dangers to come.

Precious Auntie dons her bridal costume and begins the journey to Immortal Heart, where the wedding will occur. The bonesetter rents mule carts to carry Precious Auntie's things to her new husband's home, including her dowry, which consists of opium and the finest **dragon bones**, and a sedan chair for Precious Auntie to sit in, and four sedan carriers. He also hires bodyguards to accompany them on the trip. Midway into their journey, two bandits intercept the travelers. The larger of the two proclaims himself to be "the famous Mongol Bandit," but Precious Auntie immediately recognizes his voice as Chang's.

The fortune-tellers' visions don't bode well for Baby Uncle. Since the novel has already revealed that he dies sometime before LuLing turns 14, one might predict that he dies pursuing Precious Auntie. Chang's supposed lucky future is unclear at this point, since he doesn't appear to be part of Precious Auntie's life when LuLing is a young girl.



The bonesetter is torn between respecting his daughter's agency and having a realistic idea about the life society will afford her as an unmarried woman after he passes. Although he has raised Precious Auntie to be self-empowered, the reality of her situation is that their patriarchal world affords her little power. Still, his love and respect for his daughter win, and he honors her decision to reject Chang's marriage proposal. Knowing the fortune-teller's ominous prediction about Baby Uncle's future with Precious Auntie, one can predict that Chang will retaliate against Precious Auntie's rejection.



Precious Auntie's self-assurance prevents her from taking Chang's threat seriously. She believes she has the agency to overpower whatever misfortune Chang or the universe have in store for her.



Precious Auntie's mysterious premonition suggests that, while she might feel in charge, she ultimately acknowledges that forces beyond her control dictate the trajectory of her life. Her nervous feeling is likely warranted, given what the novel has already revealed about Baby Uncle's death and Precious Auntie's horrific accident.



The valuable dragon bones the Bonesetter assembles for Precious Auntie's dowry reflects his great love for her. He spares no expense to ensure his daughter's happiness. Chang's attack signifies the fulfillment of Precious Auntie's premonition of danger. Precious Auntie is highly superstitious and wary of curses by the time LuLing is a child, suggesting that Chang's attack traumatized her and irreparably altered her sense of personal power and agency.



The guards drop their pistols before Precious Auntie can comprehend what's going on. The carriers drop the sedan, causing Precious Auntie to fall to the floor and lose consciousness. When she comes to, the bandits are gone, and the wedding trunks have been looted. The Bonesetter is lying in a ditch, and his neck is broken. Baby Uncle promises to punish the cowards who caused his wife such grief and fires a pistol into the sky. But the gunshot startles Baby Uncle's horse, who kicks Baby Uncle, killing him instantly. Overwhelmed with grief, Precious Auntie decides that she must be cursed.

For three nights after her father's and husband's deaths, Precious Auntie goes to their corpses and touches their mouths, though the act is forbidden. The women in her household fear that the men's ghosts might come back to haunt Precious Auntie. When Chang arrives with coffins for the men, Precious Auntie tries to hit him with a fire poker. Baby Uncle's brothers subdue her and apologize to Chang for her "lunacy." Precious Auntie's grief consumes her, which eventually forces the women to restrain her with strips of cloth. Great-Granny forces her to drink medicine that sedates her.

When Precious Auntie comes to, she's unbound and alone in the house. She searches for the corpses and finds that Baby Uncle's family buried the bodies while she was unconscious. At that moment, Precious Auntie resolves to join them in the ground. She goes to the ink studio and heats some ink on the stove. Then, she brings the ladle of boiling ink to her mouth and swallows it.

The women enter the ink studio and find Precious Auntie flailing on the floor, her mouth a darkened mess of blood and ink. Mother thinks it's better that they let her die, but Great-Granny fears that Precious Auntie's ghost will haunt them. Fearing a curse, the women tend to Precious Auntie's wounds, crushing **dragon bones** and sprinkling the powder into her mouth. Around this time, they discover that Precious Auntie is pregnant. Precious Auntie recovers, but her face is now so disfigured that nobody can bear to look at her.

Chang's attack on Precious Auntie gives her the impression that her empowerment is just an illusion. She thought she was free to reject his marriage proposal, but his attack suggests that this is what happens when women try to think for themselves and control their destinies. Of course, Precious Auntie sees Chang's horrific attack as an indication that she is cursed rather than oppressed. This implies a certain resignation on her part. She chooses to believe that a curse has caused her misfortune because it's easier to accept her fate if she feels there's nothing she can do to prevent it.



Just as Precious Auntie interprets Chang's attack as evidence that she is cursed, Baby Uncle's family is also beholden to their spiritual beliefs. They keep Precious Auntie away from the corpses of Baby Uncle and the Bonesetter out of their fear that the dead men's ghosts will return to haunt Precious Auntie. But keeping her away from her loved ones inhibits her from working through her grief. In this way, tradition actually keeps Precious Auntie from moving forward with her life.



Precious Auntie's suicide attempt is as much an expression of her grief for her father and husband as it is her grief for her sense of empowerment. Chang's actions suggest to her that she doesn't have as much power to control her destiny as her father had raised her to believe she had. She thus tries to take control of her life—by ending it. She decides to swallow ink and be in control of the silencing of her voice rather than have others silence it for her.



Superstition and traditional belief save Precious Auntie when Great-Granny moves to let her remain at the compound for fear that her ghost will haunt the Liu clan if they turn her to the streets. That the Lius use dragon bones to heal Precious Auntie suggests that the bonesetter is looking out for his daughter from beyond the grave. Precious Auntie's pregnancy, the result of her premarital sexual encounter with Baby Uncle, will lead to the birth of LuLing.



Baby Uncle comes to Great-Granny in a dream and tells her to keep Precious Auntie and her baby in the household. He orders First Sister (Mother) to raise the baby as a Liu, and for Precious Auntie to assume the role of nursemaid. GaoLing, Mother's actual child, is born in 1916, but the family keeps the birth a secret to maintain the illusion that she mothered GaoLing and Precious Auntie's child—LuLing. The adults know the truth about the births, but LuLing doesn't know that Precious Auntie is her mother until Precious Auntie writes the words on paper and shows them to her.

Once more, Great-Granny's respect for traditional beliefs and her fear of the dead ensures Precious Auntie's survival and, ultimately, LuLing's birth. For as much as LuLing's belief in curses will bring her much misery in the years to come, the fact that she is allowed to exist because of superstition explains—if only indirectly—why she places so much value in it. Finally, this section of LuLing's narrative is important because it conveys information that LuLing did not have when Precious Auntie was alive: namely, the critical fact that LuLing is Precious Auntie's child. The novel has already established how Ruth's ignorance about LuLing's past leads her to hurt LuLing in ways she can't begin to understand. Likewise, one may infer that LuLing's ignorance about Precious Auntie's life will lead her, too, to form misunderstandings that have grave consequences.



PART TWO: CHANGE

LuLing claims that she “became an evil person” in 1929, when she turned 14. That year, scientists come to Dragon Bone Hill at the Mouth of the Mountain to dig in the quarries and caves. They also buy all the old bones in the medicine shops. A rumor begins to spread that the scientists have discovered that some of the supposed **dragon bones** are actually human teeth. Soon, people stop buying bones from the medicine shops.

The novel has already revealed that Precious Auntie died when LuLing was 14 and that LuLing feels responsible for the death. LuLing's admission that she “became an evil person” when she was 14 suggests that the death might occur soon, perhaps in this chapter. The excavation of dragon bones suggests an ideological shift from past to future—from the traditional to the modern. The dragon bones that LuLing's family has used for generations as medicine suddenly take on a new role as instruments of research and scientific advancement.



Precious Auntie still has a few bones from her trips to the Monkey's Jaw. One night, her father comes to her in a dream and tells her the bones belong to an ancestor who died in the cave. The ancestor has cursed their family for using his bones, and that the only way to stop the curse is to return the bones to the cave.

Precious Auntie's dream about the curse contextualizes the beliefs that will rule over LuLing in her old age. The dream is the origin of LuLing's fear that Precious Auntie's ghost haunts her for not returning her bones to their proper resting place.



Precious Auntie leaves early the following day and is gone for the entire day. When she returns, she appears relieved. However, her good mood vanishes when the scientists working near the cave announce that the human teeth belong to a skullcap from one of humanity's oldest ancestors, the one-million-year-old “Peking Man.” Determined to find the rest of Peking Man, the scientists offer rewards in exchange for villagers willing to give them their **dragon bones**. Soon, the whole village is obsessed with the possibility of new wealth, and nobody can buy the bones for medicinal use any longer.

This section incorporates real historical events into the novel. “Peking Man” refers to the remain of a Homo erectus, a subspecies of archaic human that scientists uncovered in a small village near Peking in the 1920s. The juxtaposition of Peking Man, which represents scientific discovery and empirical research, with Precious Auntie's traditional beliefs about dragon bones emphasizes the way some of Precious Auntie's wisdom clashes with the increasingly modern world in which LuLing comes of age.



LuLing recalls the **bones** Precious Auntie returned to the cave and suggests they retrieve and try to sell them, thinking the family will like Precious Auntie better if she makes them rich. Precious Auntie scoffs at the idea, reasoning that the curse will return if they remove the bones from the cave. She makes LuLing promise not to touch the bones.

Meanwhile, LuLing grows increasingly jealous of GaoLing, who repeatedly receives more attention and praise than she. At this point, LuLing still doesn't know that she is not Mother's daughter and can't understand why she favors GaoLing, who is younger. Furthermore, the older LuLing grows, the more she begins to regard Precious Auntie as a simple, powerless servant. She also begins to hate Precious Auntie's ongoing talk of curses. As LuLing's respect for Precious Auntie dwindles, her respect for Mother grows.

One day, sometime before Spring Festival, Old Cook comes by the compound and announces that Chang would soon be rich from the bones he sold to the scientists, who had verified that the **bones** were indeed human. The rest of LuLing's family sits in the ink studio and praises Mr. Chang, who sells them wood. They believe Chang helped Precious Auntie after the bandits killed Baby Uncle.

When Precious Auntie enters the studio and realizes who they're talking about, she flails about and tells LuLing about Chang's evil deeds. However, LuLing thinks Precious Auntie is lying. Precious Auntie tries to make LuLing believe her and tell the others the truth about Chang, but LuLing refuses to comply. Precious Auntie runs from the room, and LuLing feels horrible. Mother and the aunts talk about Precious Auntie and how lucky it is that she can't speak and embarrass them. LuLing realizes that the women will turn on Precious Auntie once the superstitious Great-Granny dies, and they no longer have to worry about the supposed curse. Knowing this makes LuLing feel horrible for mistreating her nursemaid.

LuLing is attracted to the possibility of wealth and respect that the dragon bones might bring her family. She doesn't understand how meaningful the bones are to Precious Auntie, who sees them as a symbol of the bonesetting traditions of her father—traditions that will die with her, since her inability to claim LuLing as her child prevents her from passing the tradition down to the next generation.



This section of LuLing's narrative slowly builds a case for how LuLing became (in her earlier words) evil. Her desire to be accepted by the extended Liu clan gradually persuades her to abandon her allegiance to Precious Auntie. Instead, she begins to fixate on Precious Auntie's flaws—her lower-class status, powerlessness, and extreme superstitious beliefs—while ignoring the love Precious Auntie has for her.



The bones Chang sold to the scientists likely came from Precious Auntie's dowry, but Precious Auntie's silence and lowly status prevent her from telling the truth about Chang's true character.



LuLing's refusal to believe Precious Auntie's claims about Chang reflect how wholly she has turned on her. Of course, if LuLing knew Precious Auntie's full story and saw herself as part of the legacy that Chang dishonored by stealing and selling the bones, she likely would be more sympathetic. However, because she remains ignorant about her connection to Precious Auntie and the whole truth surrounding Chang's attack, she can't fully appreciate how profoundly it hurts her to see Chang profit from her family's long-held traditions.



The following month, Great-Granny hits her head and dies. When Mr. Chang delivers the coffin, Precious Auntie curses him from her room. LuLing looks at the seemingly friendly man and finds herself doubting Precious Auntie's accusations about him yet again. Mr. Chang notices LuLing staring at him and compliments her on growing big. Wanting to impress Mr. Chang, she tells him about the bones she once had and promising to take him to the cave with Precious Auntie. When Father returns to pay Mr. Chang for the coffins, he appears pleased that someone as important as Mr. Chang is paying attention to LuLing.

LuLing's desire for acceptance supersedes her loyalty to Precious Auntie. She inadvertently offers to show Chang the hidden bones Precious Auntie believes are central to her ancestor's curse on her family. Chang's sudden interest in LuLing indicates that he sees her as a means to an end. To Chang, LuLing is a tool to procure him additional wealth, much like how he saw Precious Auntie years before, when she was beautiful and had the respectable status of being the daughter of a famous bonesetter. History is repeating itself, but LuLing's ignorance about that history leaves her unable to stop tragedy from striking again.



Great-Granny's funeral takes place a few days later. Fearing that the old woman's ghost is still around, Mother allows Precious Auntie to remain at the compound. A few months later, Mother receives a letter from Old Widow Lau, a cousin of hers who lives in Peking. Lau tells of a family interested in arranging a marriage with LuLing and explains that the two families are to meet at the ink shop in Peking to see if the match will work. Lau also explains that her daughter specifically ordered that Precious Auntie not accompany LuLing to Peking, since she thought Precious Auntie's ugliness would dissuade the family from approving the match.

Old Widow Lau's letter confirms the scheme Chang was plotting in his head as he stared at LuLing the other day: he wants to arrange a marriage between LuLing and himself or someone in his family, clearly wanting to gain possession of the dragon bones. Chang specifies that Precious Auntie must not attend the meeting between LuLing and her prospective in-laws because he knows that Precious Auntie knows the truth about him and might try to convince LuLing to reject his offer.



Mother decides that LuLing will go to Peking in a week. Precious Auntie urges LuLing to convince Mother to let Precious Auntie accompany LuLing to Peking, but LuLing ignores her, not wanting to upset Mother. In their room, Precious Auntie scolds LuLing and reminds her of the danger of going to Peking alone, but LuLing refuses to heed her warnings. A fight ensues, and LuLing tells Precious Auntie she's only alive because Baby Uncle's family pitied her, and that Baby Uncle was lucky he died before he could marry her.

LuLing's rejection of Precious Auntie reflects her desire that Precious Auntie have no place in the new life she will live, should the marriage proposal go through. She believes she has outgrown her anxious nursemaid and her superstitious beliefs about ghosts and curses. She wants to become her own person with her own future. There's an obvious parallel here between LuLing's desire for independence and Ruth's desire for independence. Seeing the similarities helps the reader understand why LuLing is so panicked when she sees Ruth adopt the same self-assured, naively confident behavior she displayed as a young girl.



The next morning, Precious Auntie refuses to help LuLing pack for her trip to Peking. When Mr. Wei comes by with his donkey to escort LuLing to the city, Precious Auntie refuses to see her off. LuLing's journey is long and arduous, and LuLing doesn't have any food to eat. They reach Peking later that afternoon. The big, bustling city overwhelms LuLing. Eventually, they arrive at Old Widow Lau's house. Lau criticizes LuLing's disheveled appearance and orders her to clean up for dinner, which is about to start. At dinner, LuLing feels lost and confused without Precious Auntie around to tell her which foods to eat and which foods to avoid. Later that night, she feels queasy. As LuLing prepares her cot for bed that night, she realizes this is the first time she's slept by herself.

Precious Auntie gives LuLing the cold shoulder much in the same way LuLing will give Ruth the cold shoulder when they argue many years into the future. LuLing's realization that she has never slept alone reveals how young and naïve she is. It recasts her bratty behavior toward Precious Auntie as reasonable, or, at least, undeserving of the extreme guilt she feels decades into the future. This emphasizes the tragedy of LuLing's life—of feeling the need to atone for things that she was too young to be fully responsible for when they occurred.



The following day, Old Widow Lau explodes at LuLing, who, without Precious Auntie to guide her, has packed all the wrong clothes for her meeting with her potential in-laws. Old Widow Lau hurriedly finds some old clothing for LuLing to borrow, and they depart for Father's ink shop.

At 5:00, Old Widow Lau and LuLing "accidentally" run into LuLing's prospective mother-in-law outside the ink shop. The woman is younger than Mother and wears lots of jewelry. Old Widow Lau points out the success of the family business, and Father tells the woman they have her husband to thank, since they buy their wood from him. At that moment, LuLing realizes her family has arranged for her to marry into Chang's family. She imagines Precious Auntie's displeasure but can't hold back her excitement, imagining how jealous GaoLing will be to hear that LuLing will marry into such a wealthy, important family.

The adults decide that Father, Old Widow Lau, and LuLing will visit a house in Peking that belongs to Chang's cousin. LuLing knows this means the Changs are seriously considering her as a prospect. Two nights later, they go to the house for a Viewing the Moon party. Mr. Chang is there, and he and Father discuss Peking Man. Chang addresses LuLing, suggesting that the two of them find some more of Peking Man together. LuLing eagerly agrees. The next day, LuLing returns to Immortal Heart, overjoyed at being accepted by the Changs and bringing honor to her family. Though she hasn't met the Changs' fourth son, she knows he is only two years older than her and apprentices in the coffin-making family business.

As Mr. Wei and LuLing near Immortal Heart, LuLing is overwhelmed by a sudden desire to see Precious Auntie. She runs inside the ink studio where Mother and GaoLing are working, but Mother hardly greets her, not bothering to stop her work when she informs LuLing that the Changs will likely accept her as a daughter-in-law. LuLing finds Precious Auntie working in the root cellar. Precious Auntie greets her affectionately, but LuLing finds herself recoiling from her touch.

When LuLing tells Precious Auntie about her engagement to Chang's son, Precious Auntie makes a sound like she is dying. She forbids LuLing from going through with the marriage and begins to beat her. LuLing fights back. Finally, she angrily turns away from Precious Auntie, insisting that she has to help Mother and GaoLing in the ink studio.

LuLing's inability to pack appropriate clothing further highlights how young and inexperienced she is. Again, this suggests that whatever responsibility she feels for her actions during this time are likely blown out of proportion by her immense guilt.



LuLing's attitude toward her potential wedding also highlights her young age. She's hardly mature enough to marry if her initial thoughts are about how jealous the marriage will make her sister. A patriarchal society has thus pushed LuLing into marriage before she's ready. She's even too young to discern how ill-prepared she is to undertake such an endeavor. Chang is interfering in LuLing's life to render her powerless and controlled just as he interfered in Precious Auntie's life years before. Again, history repeats itself.



LuLing's eagerness to please the Liu clan and finally gain their acceptance clouds her brain. It enables her to dive headfirst into what is clearly a scheme on Chang's end to acquire Precious Auntie's ancestral dragon bones and add to his wealth. In her efforts to distance herself from Precious Auntie, LuLing forgets one of the most important things her nursemaid (and mother) has taught her: to be curious and observant of the world around her, always asking questions and never taking things at face value.



LuLing rejects Precious Auntie, even though she, and not Mother, is the one who offers her love and affection. Perhaps this is why LuLing will later be more cautious about showing affection to her own daughter: she understands the pain of rejection she caused her own mother and can't bear to be hurt in the same way by Ruth, so she deprives Ruth of affection to deprive herself of Ruth's rejection.



LuLing's desire to marry Chang seems to stem more from an obstinate drive to disobey Precious Auntie. She wants to be in control of her own life. Ironically, the way Ruth believes she will achieve this control—marrying into a family with a history of violence and dishonesty—will only lessen her ability to control her own life.



PART TWO: GHOST

The Changs accept LuLing as their daughter-in-law and agree to recognize her as family even before the wedding, during the special ceremony that will be held during the Moon Festival to honor Mr. Chang's "scientific achievements." The aunts advise Mother to send LuLing to the Changs as soon as possible—before they have an opportunity to change her mind. At this point, neither LuLing nor the Changs know the truth about LuLing's birth. Mother orders LuLing to join the Changs before the Moon Festival. She and GaoLing cry tears of happiness for LuLing. In contrast, LuLing's relationship with Precious Auntie remains strained. When Precious Auntie isn't working in the ink studio, she sits at her table and writes, though about what, LuLing can only guess.

A few days before LuLing is scheduled to go to the Changs, Precious Auntie wakes LuLing, presenting her with a bag that contains the bound pages she'd been writing. Then, Precious Auntie leaves the room. LuLing reads the papers, which detail Precious Auntie's tragic life story. However, as soon as LuLing gets to the part where Precious Auntie criticizes Chang, she throws the papers to the floor and refuses to read any more—including the very end of the story, where Precious Auntie tells LuLing that she is her mother.

At dinner that night, Precious Auntie tries to feed LuLing, but LuLing rejects her. Later, when Mother and the aunts are embroidering LuLing's bridal clothes, Precious Auntie asks LuLing if she finished reading her story. LuLing answers yes, not wanting to fight with Precious Auntie in front of the rest of the family.

Later that evening, Precious Auntie asks LuLing if her thoughts toward her have changed now that she has read her story and knows the truth. To this day, LuLing can still remember her exact response to Precious Auntie: even if the Changs were all murderers, she'd still marry into her family to get away from Precious Auntie. Precious Auntie blows out the candle and doesn't say another word to LuLing.

The Changs' eagerness to welcome LuLing into their family likely stems from Chang's desire to acquire the remainder of the dragon bones. LuLing remains blind to this because her upcoming marriage to Chang's fourth son has finally given her the Lius' approval, evidenced by the tears of joy GaoLing and Mother cry in anticipation of the nuptials. The document Precious Auntie is writing is the manuscript that will eventually reveal to LuLing the truth of her parentage, but in LuLing's excitement, she could care less about the story that Precious Auntie puts such painstaking care into writing.



LuLing throws the manuscript aside because hearing the truth about Chang complicates her plans to acquire the honor, respect, and independence she believes she deserves. She effectively erases the parts of Precious Auntie's history that are inconvenient to her own path forward. In so doing, LuLing unwittingly deprives herself of the critical piece of information that Precious Auntie is her mother. This builds tension, since Precious Auntie now (incorrectly) believes that LuLing knows Precious Auntie is her mother, when in reality, LuLing remains ignorant about this detail.



LuLing's rejection now hurts even more, since Precious Auntie is under the impression that LuLing knows Precious Auntie is her mother and chooses to reject her anyway. LuLing's decision to lie to Precious Auntie about reading the manuscript could contribute to Precious Auntie's choice to die by suicide, which LuLing has already revealed occurred when she was 14, the age she is at this point in her narrative.



LuLing unwittingly tells Precious Auntie she sees the Changs—a murderous, untrustworthy, and wretched clan—as more her family than Precious Auntie. LuLing's rejection hurts Precious Auntie in ways LuLing cannot comprehend due to her failure to finish Precious Auntie's manuscript and understand that she is Precious Auntie's daughter.



When LuLing awakens the next morning, Precious Auntie is gone. LuLing isn't worried at first, but she grows concerned when Precious Auntie isn't at breakfast, either. Later, when the aunts, GaoLing, Mother, and LuLing enter the ink studio to work, the room is in shambles, and every surface is stained with ink. Suddenly, Mother shrieks. LuLing turns and sees Precious Auntie: her face is white, and her hand is still gripping the knife she used to slit her own throat.

LuLing can't remember much about the day. She remembers waking up in her room sometime later and initially forgetting that Precious Auntie is dead. LuLing suddenly remembers the horrific sight of Precious Auntie's body as she approaches the ink studio, but when she opens the door, she finds that someone has cleaned the room and removed the body. LuLing returns to her room and falls back asleep.

The next time LuLing wakes up, GaoLing is sitting at the edge of her bed. She has tears in her eyes and tells LuLing that they will always be sisters, no matter what. GaoLing explains to LuLing how yesterday, Mrs. Chang came over, angrily clutching a letter that Precious Auntie had delivered to their house. In the letter, Precious Auntie claimed that her ghost would haunt the Changs forever if the marriage between their son and LuLing proceeded. When Mother informs Mrs. Chang of Precious Auntie's suicide, Mrs. Chang runs away, terrified. Then, Mother walked to the studio and proceeded to kick Precious Auntie's body, angrily screaming at her for being ungrateful. She promises to sell LuLing into prostitution if Precious Auntie's ghost returns to haunt them. After that, GaoLing tells LuLing, Mother ordered for Precious Auntie's body to be thrown over the cliff.

After GaoLing leaves, LuLing finishes reading Precious Auntie's story and discovers, too late, its final words: "I am your mother." Later that day, she goes to the End of the Earth to search for Precious Auntie's body. At the bottom of the ravine, LuLing realizes that she has perpetuated the family curse: Chang had only wanted her to marry his son so he could have the dragon bones hidden in the Monkey's Jaw. LuLing frantically searches for Precious Auntie's bones but fails to find them

This scene is significant because it's a defining moment in LuLing's life—perhaps the defining moment. Precious Auntie's suicide is what convinces LuLing that she is cursed, evil, and unworthy of future love and happiness. It affects her well into her adult life and indirectly compromises her ability to show affection to her future daughter.



LuLing's story also parallels Precious Auntie's: just as Precious Auntie existed in a drugged, semi-conscious stupor in the days following Baby Uncle's and the Bonesetter's deaths, now LuLing exists in a similar state. Precious Auntie's body, like the corpses of Baby Uncle and the Bonesetter years before, is also removed before LuLing can appropriately honor and grieve for them.



GaoLing's promise to LuLing turns out to be true. Although the sisters have their disagreements as elderly women, GaoLing publicly maintains that they are sisters and treats her as such, attending family functions with LuLing and caring for her when dementia begins to break down LuLing's body. This scene is also important because it adds a layer of complexity to Precious Auntie's suicide. While Precious Auntie's despair likely was the immediate cause of her suicide, the death also protects LuLing by ensuring that the Changs call off the proposal for fear of Precious Auntie's vengeful ghost. Precious Auntie demonstrates resilience in death by sacrificing herself to protect her daughter, ensuring that LuLing has more opportunities to author her own life than Precious Auntie had to author her own.



This scene illustrates the other central origin of LuLing's belief in her curse: her failure to locate Precious Auntie's bones and give them a proper funeral. She inherits Precious Auntie's belief in curses. Just as Precious Auntie believed her ancestor cursed the family for removing his bones from the Monkey's Jaw, so too does LuLing believe Precious Auntie's ghost curses her for not returning her bones to that same cave. LuLing's belief in the curse is a warped way of continuing a family tradition and owning the familial ties she has discovered only too late. Now, instead of it being an honor to be a part of Precious Auntie's lineage, it's a burden and a curse.



LuLing remains unable to eat or move for nearly a week afterward. Precious Auntie visits her dreams and tells her she is doomed to stay unhappy for the rest of her life. The Changs revoke the marriage contract, and Mother stops pretending the LuLing is her daughter. Only GaoLing continues to treat LuLing with kindness.

Two weeks after Precious Auntie's suicide, Little Uncle returns from Peking, crying and disheveled. He informs the family that the ink shop has burned to the ground. He explains to Mother how Precious Auntie's ghost visited them last night. Father knocked over an oil lamp in his attempts to chase her away, and before they knew it, the entire shop was engulfed in flames. The fire destroyed the adjacent shops, too, and Mother knows the shopkeepers will make their family pay for the damages. Mother orders everyone to hide the valuables.

Father, Big Uncle, and their sons return the next day, looking haggard and sooty. Everyone is beside themselves and uncertain of the future: will they lose the house? Will they have to run away? GaoLing and LuLing cry together and promise to look after each other as sisters, no matter what happens. Unlike the rest of the family, GaoLing doesn't blame Precious Auntie or LuLing's birth for the misfortunes that have befallen the family. Instead, she tells LuLing that Precious Auntie is lucky to have died quickly, since the rest of them will undoubtedly face a slow, painful death by starvation and social ostracization.

The next day, a man comes to the house to deliver an official letter claiming the Liu clan's responsibility for the fire. As soon as the other shopkeepers assessed the cost of their damages, the magistrate would announce the debt the Lius would have to pay. He also warns them that the village has been informed of the complaint and will know to report the Lius, should they try to flee. Realizing that there is no way to change their fate, Mother announces that they'll blow through their fortune while they still can.

LuLing's belief in the curse is less a result of its actual existence than her choice to see fortune as misfortune. The tragic way she depicts her life story after Precious Auntie's death makes her interpretations subjective and geared toward proving the curse. In reality, the Changs' decision to call off the marriage is a fortuitous turn of events that spares LuLing from marrying into an evil, dishonest family. However, LuLing's biased way of spinning her story to make herself out to be a villain prevents her from seeing it this way.



The Lius' belief that Precious Auntie's ghost is to blame for the horrific fire gives them a reason to kick LuLing out. In reality, the fire was likely nothing more than an unfortunate accident, but their belief in fate and superstition ensure that they tell a story in which ghosts are to blame.



GaoLing's remarks demonstrate her dedication to LuLing. They also show that, unlike the rest of her family (and LuLing), she is less beholden to spiritual beliefs and superstition. Perhaps this mentality is what allows her to be more well-adjusted as an older woman many years into the future after she and LuLing emigrate to the U.S.



The Lius likely see the letter as solid proof of the curse Precious Auntie's ghost has supposedly placed on them. The ghost has destroyed their livelihood and sent them deeper into financial ruin by saddling them with an enormous debt. Mother's response to this bad news shows that she is a competent, resilient woman capable of making practical decisions on behalf of her family. Even though the men have most of the power in their patriarchal society, it's the women who put things into action and aid in their families' survival.



The next day, everyone goes to the market to buy the nicest fruits, sweets, and finest meats. GaoLing and LuLing make their way through the market. They eventually find themselves at Beggars Lane, which is full of miserable, disabled beggars. GaoLing wonders if this is the fate that awaits their family, too. A girl with no eyes approaches them and tells LuLing the ghost of her mother wants to speak to her. They tip the girl, who writes in the **sand** with a long, thin stick. “A dog howls, the moon rises,” writes the girl. LuLing instantly recognizes Precious Auntie’s nickname for her, Doggie. The rest of the message makes no sense to GaoLing, but LuLing thinks her mother is trying to shame LuLing for her betrayal.

When the girls return home, the whole family is gathered around a Taoist priest, who thinks a ghost haunts the house. The priest’s assistant explains that the priest is a Famous Catcher of Ghosts. The priest offers to capture the ghost for the Liu clan but says they need to demonstrate their “sincerity” first. Mother and Father give the priest silver ingots. Next, the priest asks for the girl whom the ghost loved, and Mother and Father gesture toward LuLing. The priest orders LuLing to run her comb through her hair nine times. He orders her to place the comb in a jar when she’s finished. The priest and the young man circle around LuLing as they chant and hum to themselves.

Suddenly, the assistant slams the lid of the jar first. The Catcher of Ghosts announces that he has captured the ghost. The next day, the family celebrates with a banquet, though nobody has much of an appetite. Mother hires a man to take photographs of the family. GaoLing insists that they include LuLing in one of the photos. A week later, Father calls for another banquet, for the magistrate has decided the Lius don’t owe any money. Apparently, the supposed valuable, ancient artifacts the shopkeepers claimed to have lost had been forgeries all along. Father takes this fortuitous development as proof that Precious Auntie’s ghost is truly gone.

That evening, everyone is happy, except for LuLing. The next morning, Mother informs LuLing that she is sending her to an orphanage and that Mr. Wei is already waiting out front to take her away. LuLing returns to her room to pack her small bundle of possessions. Before she leaves, GaoLing secretly gives LuLing her favorite jacket. She cries as she promises LuLing that she’ll come and find her one day. As LuLing leaves the compound in Mr. Wei’s cart, she thinks about the message Precious Auntie had conveyed through the blind beggar girl: “A dog howls, the moon rises. [...] In daylight, it’s as if the stars never existed.” LuLing stares at the sky and listens to her “howling” heart.

This scene contextualizes the tea-tray writing that Ruth does later in her life. LuLing’s past thus helps make sense of her choices in the present. The beggar girl’s message is relatively vague and could be interpreted many ways, but LuLing’s internalized guilt makes it impossible for her to see the message as anything other than an indication of Precious Auntie’s anger at her betrayal. In this way, LuLing rewrites her story—reimagines reality—to conform to her inner sense of shame.



The Catcher of Ghost’s insistence that the Lius demonstrate their “sincerity” by giving him money should be a tipoff that the priest is potentially taking advantage of them and benefiting financially from their anxiety. Still, their belief in Precious Auntie’s ghost blinds them to this possibility. They have rewritten reality around the belief that they must protect themselves against Precious Auntie’s curse if they ever want to reverse their bad fortune.



The photo Mother takes with GaoLing and LuLing is the one Ruth will frame and gift to the women years later at the family reunion dinner. This detail clarifies the statements Ruth had assumed were evidence of LuLing’s confusion. While there is a logical explanation for the magistrate’s change of heart regarding the Lius’ financial responsibility, their beliefs force them to reframe the decision and attribute it to supernatural causes.



The apparent lifting of Precious Auntie’s curse relieves the Lius of their duty to care for LuLing. The jacket GaoLing gives LuLing seems to be the jacket LuLing referred to in “Truth,” the novel’s opening section, when she was listing the many things she has lost throughout her life. Knowing the significance of the lost jacket helps the reader understand how hard it must have been for LuLing to lose it: it was the one thing that tied her to her only living relative who cared for her. When LuLing looks at the sky and considers the beggar girl’s message, it shows how she sees every aspect of her life and her surroundings through the lens of Precious Auntie’s curse. Her shame distorts her sense of the world. She can’t see through it.



PART TWO: DESTINY

The orphanage is in an old, abandoned monastery near Dragon Bone Hill. Eventually, two American missionaries approach LuLing. LuLing has never interacted with a foreigner before and finds herself unable to speak. The women talk to LuLing in Chinese and inform her that they didn't know she was coming. LuLing remains silent. Finally, LuLing writes Chinese characters in the air. Upon realizing LuLing can read and write, the women allow her to stay at the orphanage as a student and tutor, and she works as Teacher Pan's helper.

In addition to Teacher Pan, the monastery also employs Teacher Wang and Sister Yu. The missionary women's names are Miss Grutoff and Miss Towler, who is the orphanage's director. The foreign men who work there are scientists who were involved with finding the Peking Man's **bones**. The orphanage hosts around 70 girls, most of whom are illegitimate children like LuLing. All the girls look after one another in the orphanage.

Teacher Pan tells LuLing she's the best calligraphist ever to attend the school. He tells her she could've been a scholar if she'd been born a boy and admits that she's a better calligrapher than his son, Kai Jing. Kai Jing is a geologist. Although he had polio as a child, he received care from the best doctors and recovered with only a slight limp. The missionaries helped him obtain a scholarship to attend college in Peking, and he returned to be with his father and work in the quarry after his mother died.

One day, Teacher Pan takes some of the older girls to the quarry at Dragon Bone Hill. The girls bring cakes and tea to the scientists who are digging there. Kai Jing explains some of the artifacts the scientists have found there and how they know how old they are. Sometimes, they let the girls sift through the dug-up dirt. LuLing remembers the first time Kai Jing complimented her careful, precise work.

That LuLing secures a teaching position at the school shows that Precious Auntie's sacrifice to prevent LuLing from marrying into the Chang family is already benefitting her, enabling her to harness her knowledge to secure a job and personal empowerment rather than being disenfranchised and miserable by marrying into a cruel, dishonest family. Precious Auntie died so LuLing could have a better life than the one she had.



The orphanage represents an institution of (mostly) women and girls who persist and survive through their solidarity and dedication to supporting each other. Society has cast many of them aside due to their illegitimacy, so they must turn to each other for support instead.



At the orphanage, LuLing finds herself surrounded by people like Teacher Pan, who respect and admire her for her capabilities. In contrast, the fate she narrowly avoided of marrying into the Chang family would have placed her amidst people who are only interested in her so long as she can contribute to their wealth. This is further evidence of LuLing's luck, though she can only see her situation as cursed and unfortunate. Kai Jing is the man LuLing mentioned as being one of her husbands in the opening section, so it's likely that LuLing will meet Teacher Pan's son at some point during her stay at the orphanage.



Kai Jing and LuLing's relationship resembles Baby Uncle and Precious Auntie's relationship. It appears to be based on mutual respect and admiration for the other's intelligence and skillfulness. Moreover, it's a real romance instead of the transactional, symbolic one LuLing would have had with Chang's fourth son.



LuLing enjoys teaching painting and calligraphy at the orphanage. Her least favorite job is sweeping the floors and cleaning the chapel, since Sister Yu is constantly overcritical of her efforts. One day, Sister Yu tasks LuLing with removing the many bugs that infest the orphanage. LuLing does an excellent job and earns two hours of free time. She chooses to spend her time alone and takes Precious Auntie's story into an abandoned storeroom. To LuLing's surprise, when she opens a small pocket in the blue cloth that binds the story, she finds a small **oracle bone** Precious Auntie had shown her when she was a little girl, as well as an old photo of Precious Auntie when she was young, before her face was burnt.

After LuLing has been at the orphanage for two years, Miss Grutoff hands her a letter—from GaoLing. In the letter, GaoLing reveals that she married the fourth Chang son after the Changs called off the wedding between the son and LuLing. After marrying into the family, GaoLing realized how horrible they were. They never stop reminding her that she and her family are indebted to them, since the Changs loaned her family money to rebuild the ink shop. The Changs are also not as rich as everyone thinks and spend all their money on opium. GaoLing apologizes for not coming to see LuLing and advises her not to write back, since it will get GaoLing in trouble with her in-laws. She promises to send her another letter as soon as she can.

Next, LuLing recalls falling in love with Teacher Pan's son. Their romance begins one afternoon after class, when Kai Jing comes by on his bicycle, as he always does, to take his father back to his rooms. On this day, Kai Jing comes early and offers to help LuLing and Teacher Pan's class with the banners they are painting for the temple fair in the Mouth of the Mountain. LuLing is flattered when she realizes that Kai Jing is watching everything she writes and copying it exactly.

Later, Kai Jing accompanies LuLing to take the banners to the fair. As they walk, he shows her the book, *The Four Manifestations of Beauty*, which is about the four levels of ability required to master an art: Competent, Magnificent, Divine, and Effortless. Kai Jing tells her that he's been feeling "the beauty of Effortlessness" lately and asks if she feels the same way. LuLing knows Kai Jing speaks of their mutual love. They share a kiss.

Reading Precious Auntie's story helps LuLing feel closer to her mother. Precious Auntie's writing ensures that her voice and spirit live on after her death. The oracle bone connects LuLing to Precious Auntie but also to the broader family heritage she never had the chance to appreciate while Precious Auntie was alive due to her own ignorance about her identity.



GaoLing was always the favored child, but now she has met a fate considerably worse than LuLing's. GaoLing's letter shows LuLing the life she narrowly avoided by being sent away to the orphanage. Even so, LuLing's overwhelming, persistent shame over Precious Auntie's death keeps her from feeling thankful for her circumstances. She continues to see herself as cursed, even though her situation at the orphanage—where she has a job, the solidarity of other women, and personal agency—is clearly preferable to GaoLing's.



Kai Jing's attention flatters LuLing because it shows that he values her skills rather than her financial or social status. It's also special to LuLing that he appreciates her calligraphy specifically, because it's a skill she learned from Precious Auntie, so it's a way of symbolically honoring the mother who raised her.



Kai Jing's remark about feeling "the beauty of Effortlessness" reflects the authenticity of his and LuLing's romance. It's a genuine attraction more in line with the romance Precious Auntie and Baby Uncle had rather than the marriage LuLing would have had with Chang's son. LuLing is living the life Precious Auntie nearly had but was denied the chance to experience. LuLing's manuscript is interesting because while she presents it as evidence that she was cursed, so many moments she describes (such as this romance with Kai Jing) actually reveal how loved and blessed her life was, though her shame and unresolved grief often prevents her from seeing it this way.



PART TWO: EFFORTLESS

Kai Jing and LuLing have sex for the first time that summer. They meet in an abandoned storage room, and LuLing feels no shame for their “forbidden joy.” Afterward, Kai Jing feels regret for not having waited until they were married. Hearing him speak of marriage makes LuLing shriek with delight. When LuLing arrives at the main hall for breakfast the next day, everyone looks grim and mutters in hushed voices. Kai Jing informs LuLing that the Japanese are nearby Peking and that war is imminent. Sister Yu tells her the Japanese have captured the Marco Polo bridge.

Suddenly, the hall goes quiet. A woman stands in the doorway and asks for LuLing. It takes LuLing a moment before she recognizes GaoLing. The sisters embrace and dance with joy. LuLing realizes she hasn’t heard from her sister since she wrote the letter five years ago. LuLing fixes her sister a meal, and GaoLing fills her in on her life. She and Fu Nan, her husband, have been living in Peking. They have no children. The Changs now own the ink business. First Brother received orders to fight with the Nationalists, and Second Brother ran off to fight with the Communists. Mother’s hair has gone completely white, and she believes that Great-Granny’s voice is haunting her. Although the Catcher of the Ghosts has since been revealed to be a fraud, Precious Auntie’s ghost hasn’t returned.

GaoLing continues, explaining how she managed to find her way to the orphanage. Fu Nan, who is an opium addict, ordered her to go to Immortal Heart to demand more money from her family. Her train went as far as Wanping before Japanese forces intercepted it. GaoLing heard gunshots. Realizing she might die anyway, she decided to take her chances and run. The soldiers initially chased after her, but she somehow evaded capture. GaoLing walked for what felt like 12 hours before eventually finding her way to the orphanage. She asks LuLing what she should do and contemplates letting her horrible husband believe she’s been killed. LuLing insists that GaoLing stays with her.

Sister Yu initially objects to GaoLing staying there. She says that her own sister was married to an opium addict who bought drugs instead of paying for medical treatments, ultimately resulting in her death. LuLing can’t believe that Sister Yu has again managed to claim her own suffering is worse than everyone else’s.

It's a common pattern for LuLing's moments of joy to be followed by moments of tragedy or misfortune. That the Japanese invasion of Peking follows her happy evening with Kai Jing is evidence, to LuLing, that Precious Auntie's curse persists and will follow her wherever she goes. LuLing finds ways to explain unrelated events (like war) with superstitious logic to confirm her belief that she is cursed and must suffer. The incident with the bridge Sister Yu mentions refers to the Marco Polo bridge incident, which was a battle between the Japanese Imperial Army and the Chinese National Revolutionary Army that occurred in 1937. It was the latest in a series of battle that began after the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, and it marked the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War.



That the Catcher of Ghosts is revealed to be a fraud suggests that the Lius' (and LuLing's) fear of ghosts and curses are merely superstition and have no basis in reality. Despite this, they continue to uphold the spiritual beliefs that enable them to make sense of their situations and ascribe meaning to the misfortunes that befall them. On another note, GaoLing makes good on her promise to always see LuLing as a sister by tracking her down at the orphanage.



That GaoLing risks her life by running away from her husband to track down and go to LuLing, nearly avoiding capture by enemy soldiers in the process, shows her dedication to her sister. GaoLing isn't blindly loyal to her family and demonstrates that she is a more complex, noble character than the novel has previously established. She demonstrates integrity and a clear sense of morality by being loyal to LuLing.



Sister Yu's personal traumas leave her less sympathetic to others' suffering. This is similar to the harsh, outwardly unaffectionate demeanor LuLing adopts when she becomes a mother to Ruth later on.



Later, LuLing returns to her room to find GaoLing and Sister Yu in the midst of what appears to be a fiery argument. Eventually, LuLing realizes they're competing to see who can name the worst insult to give to the evil people who have wronged them throughout their lives. Later, GaoLing tells LuLing that Sister Yu is clever and entertaining. The next day, LuLing finds the women sitting in the teacher's dining room together, discussing Sister Yu's dead sister. Sister Yu expresses remorse that her sister hadn't learned to assert her worth while she was alive. It's for this reason that she sympathizes with the Communists, who have no patience for worshipping the past and believe in progress.

A few days later, LuLing walks in on GaoLing and Sister Yu hunched over a letter from the "Japanese Provisional Military Police," addressed to Chang Fu Nan, informing him of his wife's arrest. The letter claims that GaoLing confessed to the Japanese that she and her husband are both spies, and that the Japanese will be traveling to Chang Fu Nan's house to interrogate him. Sister Yu boasts that she wrote the words. GaoLing adds that she carved the official Japanese seal. LuLing remarks on the realistic characteristic of the letter and commends their efforts, though she worries what GaoLing's parents will think once Chang Fu Nan informs them of GaoLing's "capture." GaoLing ensures LuLing she plans to visit her parents once the roads are safer to travel.

GaoLing visits home next week. When she returns to the orphanage a month later to begin work as Sister Yu's assistant, she informs LuLing and Sister Yu that Fu Nan told nobody about the letter and ran off to join the army instead. She also informs her parents about LuLing's employment as a teacher and upcoming marriage to an intellectual, which made them very proud.

That winter, LuLing has a Chinese and an American wedding. She invites Mother and Father to the Chinese ceremony to be polite. She hopes they won't come, but they do, bringing many extended family members with them. Sister Yu thinks it's rude of the family to abandon LuLing at the orphanage and only return to take advantage of her wedding feast years later. Seeing her family confuses LuLing, and she can't decide if she's happy, sad, or angry. Two scientists, Dong and Chau, attend the wedding, as well. Since the war began, it's too dangerous to work in the quarry, and most scientists have fled to Peking. Kai Jing, Dong, and Chai are among the handful who remained behind to protect the quarry from the Japanese and the Communists.

GaoLing and Sister Yu eventually become friends, bonding over the hardships they have endured throughout their lives. Their game of competing to see who can come up with the worst insult for those who have harmed them is comical, but it also makes the deeper point that these women bond over their ability to remain resilient and empowered in the face of adversity. Insulting their transgressors enables them to reclaim ownership of their agency and author their own lives.



GaoLing and Sister Yu send the phony letter to Fu Nan to ensure that he doesn't go looking for GaoLing, and to torture him by making him fear (incorrectly) that the Japanese are planning to accost and imprison him. It's particularly significant that they use a letter to manipulate Fu Nan. Writing empowers the women and enables them to fight back against a man who has harmed GaoLing. It lets them seize control of the narrative.



GaoLing and Sister Yu's letter has its intended effect: without laying a hand on Fu Nan, they manipulate him into volunteering to join the army out of fear that the Japanese will capture him if he remains at home. They thus exact revenge against Fu Nan and his family's greed and cruelty by using their words.



Mother and Father only care about LuLing if they stand to benefit from her. They attend her wedding because LuLing's marriage to a reputable scientist lends her social credibility she didn't have when she was only an illegitimate, orphaned child. When she had no status, she was a burden and curse to them. Now that she has a more honorable reputation, though, they decide she's worth having in their lives. Their attendance might also be an attempt on their part to rewrite the past, trying to erase their cruel treatment of LuLing. On another note, LuLing likely has good reason to be apprehensive about Kai Jing's work in the quarry, given what readers know about his death. It's possible his work there somehow leads to his tragic end.



After their wedding ceremony, Kai Jing and LuLing retreat to their bedchamber—the same abandoned storeroom they’d gone to the first night they were together. This time, though, the students have painted the walls red and gold and pushed the statues to the side. LuLing and her husband enjoy their first free, sanctioned night together.

The next day, the newlyweds visit their in-laws. Teacher Pan laughs when LuLing visits his living quarters, serves him tea, and call him “Baba.” Next, Kai Jing and LuLing carry a framed picture of Precious Auntie to an altar, pour her tea, and light incense. LuLing feels a sudden, cold chill and wonders if the family curse has returned, since the dragon bones were never brought back to the Monkey’s Jaw. Later, Kai Jing informs LuLing that she needn’t worry, because there’s no such thing as curses; Precious Auntie only believed in them because she wasn’t exposed to new ideas, such as science. Kai Jing tells her that the bad things in her life happened for no reason at all—not because of a curse. LuLing loves Kai Jing and tries to take his advice to heart.

After the Japanese attack the Mouth of the Mountain, GaoLing and LuLing climb to the hilltop when they hear gunfire to see from which direction the explosions originate. Every night, GaoLing ensures her that the Japanese will never win here, since they are unaccustomed to fighting in the mountains. Meanwhile, vendors sneak past the barricades to sell their goods to the people who live up the mountain. GaoLing, LuLing, and Kai Jing bring the delicacies they buy to Teacher Pan’s sitting room in the evenings. Sister Yu, Dong, and Chau join them, and Teacher Pan plays records on his phonograph. LuLing remembers these nights as happy times.

By winter, they receive news that the Communist soldiers are falling ill and dying from disease. Fewer Communist troops have allowed the Japanese to venture deeper into the hills and closer to the orphanage. Now, it’s no longer safe to walk along the ridge road. Kai Jing and the other scientists continue to go to the quarry despite the heightened threat. Their trips make LuLing sick with worry.

When Kai Jing isn’t in the quarry, he teaches the girls at the orphanage. One day, he teaches them about evolution: how Peking Man learned to stand upright, walk, and speak. When one girl asks what language Peking Man spoke, Kai Jing tells her nobody can know for sure, since “you cannot leave behind spoken words.”

Once more, the novel demonstrates how Precious Auntie’s sacrifice enables LuLing to live the freer, happier life she never had the chance to lead. Precious Auntie’s romance with Baby Uncle was cut short before she could marry him. But LuLing can now experience love because Precious Auntie instilled in her a sense of resilience and independence, which has ultimately enabled her to survive the orphanage, thrive as a teacher, and enter into a loving relationship.



This scene is important in showing the loving, fulfilling family LuLing finds during her years at the orphanage. As an adult woman, she chooses to ignore all the love and good fortune she enjoyed in her younger years, seeing only the things she lost and fixating on those to feed her shame and perpetuate her belief that she is cursed and fated to be unhappy for the rest of her life. Kai Jing tries to dissuade LuLing from letting superstition rule her life. While he sees how important Precious Auntie’s wisdom is to LuLing, he also recognizes the ways this wisdom ends up harming her, since it makes her feel that the bad things that happen to her are somehow her fault. In reality, though, sometimes tragedy strikes for no reason at all.



One major difference between GaoLing and LuLing is GaoLing’s optimism. GaoLing tries to imagine ways in which favorable outcomes are possible (the Japanese won’t attack them because they are unaccustomed to fighting in the mountains) whereas LuLing constantly imagines worst-case scenarios. Similarly, GaoLing’s view of the world is more practical than LuLing’s, which is ruled by superstition.



More than the actual violence of war, LuLing fears for Kai Jing because she remains convinced that Precious Auntie’s curse prohibits her from experiencing happiness. To her mind, then, it’s only a matter of time before something happens to destroy her happy life with Kai Jing.



Kai Jing’s remark about Peking Man underscores the essential role writing plays in passing down the customs and beliefs of the past. The memory of spoken words fades with time because there is nothing tangible that exists for people to remember them by.



Later that night, in bed next to Kai Jing, LuLing wonders what the first spoken word might have been. She decides it must have been “ma,” for “that was the only word the baby needed.”

LuLing’s theory about the first spoken word emphasizes the central role that mothers play in the book. It also underscores her sense of loss: after Precious Auntie’s death, LuLing no longer has the only thing she needs. For this reason, the death is a wound that will never heal for her.



That spring, while the students are rehearsing a scene from [The Merchant of Venice](#), Teacher Pan bursts into the main hall and shouts that the Communists have captured Kai Jing and his fellow scientists. Teacher Pan and the scientists had gone down to the quarry. When they spotted soldiers at the bottom, they were initially unworried, since the soldiers were Communists, not Japanese. However, the soldiers criticized the scientists for “preserv[ing] the past” and ordered them to join their forces. The soldiers would have taken Teacher Pan, too, but they likely figured there wasn’t much value in bringing on a nearly blind old man.

The Communists are critical of “preserv[ing] the past” because it implicitly upholds systems and values of inequality that were standard features of old ways of life. Furthermore, fixating on the past takes energy away from working toward a better, more equal future. This is the opposite of LuLing’s stance: she is insistent on “preserv[ing] the past” and, in turn, almost proves the Communists right, since her commitment to old customs and beliefs inhibit her from living her fullest life. At the same time, the Communists’ capture of Kai Jing reinforces LuLing’s views on superstition: finally, the curse has acted against LuLing and destroyed her happiness by taking her husband from her.



Over the next two months, there is no word about Kai Jing and his men. LuLing grows thin and frail, and GaoLing has to force her to eat. She becomes convinced that Precious Auntie’s curse enabled the soldiers to take Kai Jing. Meanwhile, Miss Grutoff and Miss Towler refuse to let the girls go outside the compound, having heard stories of Japanese soldiers raping young girls. These days, much of the fighting occurs in the surrounding hills.

Kai Jing and his fellow scientists knowingly put their lives in danger by venturing into a war zone to do work in the quarry, so it’s perfectly logical (albeit tragic) that they were finally captured. However, LuLing’s attachment to Precious Auntie’s superstitious beliefs prevents her from seeing the capture objectively, and she can only reason that the capture is evidence of her curse.



Two months after Kai Jing’s capture, he, Dong, and Chau return to the orphanage. LuLing runs to him, and they passionately embrace. Kai Jing is thin, and his eyes appear blank. He tells everyone that the Japanese have taken over the surrounding hills and will come looking for them. Later on, Kai Jing and LuLing retreat to their bedchamber. Kai Jing holds LuLing and reminds her that there is no curse.

Kai Jing sees himself as a casualty of war and circumstance. His pragmatic view of the world is harder for LuLing to accept in light of the near-certain likelihood of his recapture by Japanese forces.



That evening, the Japanese come for Kai Jing, Dong, and Chau. Miss Grutoff bravely attempts to stop the soldiers from entering the orphanage, but they ignore her. Kai Jing, Dong, and Chau turn themselves in. A few days later, LuLing encounters GaoLing weeping in the main hall. GaoLing explains that the Japanese questioned the men around the clock about the Communists’ activities. When the men refused to confess, the Japanese lined them up and shot them with bayonets.

Kai Jing’s execution validates LuLing’s superstitious belief that she is fated to have an unhappy life.



PART TWO: CHARACTER

GaoLing tells LuLing the Japanese will come for all of them any day now, so she might as well hold off on killing herself so they can die together. LuLing reminds herself that she should also care for Teacher Pan and her students. Ultimately, Sister Yu is most convincing: she tells LuLing that she won't be able to join Kai Jing in Christian heaven if she dies by suicide. Reluctantly, LuLing decides to live and wait for the Japanese to take them. Meanwhile, she visits Kai Jing's resting place every day and places the **oracle bones** he'd dug up over the past few months atop his grave.

Soon after, Miss Towler dies, as well. Her death profoundly affects Miss Grutoff, who begins to sew American flags to memorialize her. When the Japanese finally come for them, they are in the main hall, in the middle of their Sunday worship. They shoot down Miss Grutoff's many flags, and the girls begin to cry. When the Japanese are done shooting the flags, they leave.

Miss Grutoff tells everyone what she learned from her friends on the ham radio a few days ago: the Americans are now fighting against the Japanese. She thinks this might ensure a faster victory for China. Everyone smiles, though nobody is convinced that this is true. Later that night, Miss Grutoff tells the teachers that she has also heard that Peking Man's bones have been lost or destroyed. The news shakes LuLing, who realizes that all Kai Jing's archaeological work has been for nothing.

The Japanese return the next day to take Miss Grutoff to a prisoner-of-war camp. Miss Grutoff cries to Teacher Pan not to let the students forget the lessons of the apostles. After the Japanese leave, Teacher Pan leads everyone to the main hall to show them what Miss Grutoff meant. He twists off the hand of the statue of the apostle. Inside the hand are pieces of silver, gold, and, most importantly, a list of former students who are now in Peking. When things become too dangerous at the orphanage, they will try to take the girls to stay with these students in Peking a few at a time. Each teacher is assigned to a different apostle statue, each of which is filled with refuge money.

Once more, GaoLing demonstrates a more practical approach to hardship and tragedy than LuLing, insisting that it is more logical for her to remain alive so the sisters can comfort each other in their final days. Ultimately, though, LuLing chooses to live not out of devotion to her sister but based on the spiritual or superstitious belief that she won't be able to join her dead husband in the afterlife if she dies by suicide. LuLing's decisions are consistently rooted in superstitious belief rather than her obligation or affection for other people.



Miss Grutoff's response to make flags after Miss Towler's death shows how essential memorializing and honoring the dead is to the grieving process. This reaffirms how difficult it was for LuLing not to find Precious Auntie's bones and return them to their proper resting place. It explains why her shame is so consuming.



In 1941, the Peking Man fossils were supposed to be transported from the Peking Union Medical College to the United States for safekeeping during the Second Sino-Japanese War. However, they were lost after a Japanese warship attacked the American cargo ship on which they were loaded in preparation for their overseas journey. The fossils remain lost to this day. To LuLing, the loss of these fossils is particularly tragic because it erases Kai Jing's story: the bravery he exhibited in doing his work and the great sacrifice he made to do it. With the tangible objects that tell his story erased from history, his sacrifice will soon fade from memory and cease to exist.



Miss Grutoff is another example of one of the resilient women who have supported LuLing and made sacrifices to aid in her survival. The disappearance of the Peking Man remains, which was briefly touched on in the previous scene, took place in 1941, which was the same year the Japanese Navy attacked Pearl Harbor, the U.S. naval base located in Honolulu, Hawaii. The attack marked the U.S. entry into World War Two. It's in response to this development that Japanese soldiers took Miss Grutoff, an American missionary, to a prisoner-of-war camp.



Three months after the Japanese take Miss Grutoff, Teacher Pan announces that it's time to leave. The teachers and older students each take a small number of girls. LuLing insists on being the last to go so that she can visit Kai Jing's grave as many times as possible. Despite her bravery, LuLing's time alone at the orphanage with her four assigned girls is terrifying. She constantly fears that the Japanese will come for her and the girls and prays nonstop. Finally, on their fourth day alone, she receives a message via radio to go at once: the trains are running. LuLing covers her face in porridge. When it dries against her skin, she looks like an old woman. She packs chicken blood in a thermos and sips some to appear that she is coughing up blood, thereby ensuring that no Japanese soldiers bother them as they make their journey.

Eventually, LuLing and the girls arrive in Peking, where they reunite with GaoLing. The girls settle in with former students. Over the next few years, some marry. GaoLing and LuLing live in the backroom of the old ink shop, and Teacher Pan and Sister Yu eventually join them. Meanwhile, Chang—the man LuLing now knows killed her father and grandfather—owns the shop and orders them to sell more ink. LuLing lives in the ink shop but plots her revenge.

The war ends in 1945. GaoLing consults with a fortune-teller to determine if her husband has died in the war but receives inconclusive feedback. GaoLing gets a more definitive answer the following afternoon, when Fu Nan returns to the ink shop. Fu Nan is still addicted to opium and informs GaoLing that he's sold the whole shop. Teacher Pan reasons they can leave and now that the war is over, but GaoLing refuses, determined to protect her family's ink shop and preserve their legacy.

That afternoon, Sister Yu leaves for the medical school and informs them that Miss Grutoff has been released from the prisoner-of-war camp but is very sick. LuLing, GaoLing, Sister Yu, and Teacher Pan visit Miss Grutoff, who is extremely weak and recovering at another foreigner's house. Miss Grutoff informs her visitors that the orphanage has been destroyed. Next, Miss Grutoff announces her plans to return to San Francisco to be treated by a doctor there. She asks if someone would be willing to accompany her there—they can arrange for them to obtain a visa.

LuLing's decision to remain behind to afford herself additional time with Kai Jing's grave shows how highly she values traditional beliefs about honoring the dead. With Kai Jing, she performs the ceremonial grieving she couldn't do with Precious Auntie. Risking her life to transport the younger orphaned girls to safety is LuLing's way of honoring and repaying the women who have enabled her to survive. LuLing demonstrates resilience and resourcefulness by using unconventional materials to disguise herself as an ill, older woman to avoid receiving unwanted attention from enemy Japanese soldiers.



It's especially difficult for LuLing to work for Chang now that she has read Precious Auntie's manuscript and realizes Chang's central involvement in Baby Uncle's and the Bonesetter's deaths—and, of course, now that she knows just how thoroughly Chang ruined Precious Auntie's life.



Unlike GaoLing and LuLing, who have made the best of the many hardships life has thrown their way, the Changs squander their wealth on opium and make reckless business decisions. GaoLing's decision to remain behind and protect her family's business is similar to how LuLing chose to stay at the orphanage and visit Kai Jing's grave. Like LuLing, GaoLing feels that she has an obligation to protect her family's legacy, even if it puts her in harm's way.



Even in her weakened state, Miss Grutoff goes out of her way to support her friends. The visa offers an opportunity to emigrate to the U.S. that would have been nearly impossible to obtain otherwise. It's notable that LuLing doesn't see this fortuitous turn of fate for the lucky twist that it is, choosing instead to fixate on the negative aspects and perpetuate the narrative that she is cursed and doomed to remain unhappy.



In the end, they decide that GaoLing will go first to escape her evil husband. She vows to sponsor LuLing's emigration as soon as she is able. In the meantime, LuLing will wait in Hong Kong for her sponsorship papers to process. LuLing is initially upset with GaoLing. Later that night, LuLing mourns her lost opportunity to escape, but she ultimately feels happy that GaoLing will be able to escape Fu Nan Chang. She decides to accept whatever her New Destiny has in store for her. Three days later, the friends hold a small gathering before they depart for Hong Kong. They hope to see one another again soon.

GaoLing's willingness to accept the visa shows that, while she clearly cares about LuLing, she is the less selfless of the two sisters. In contrast, LuLing has the chance to go to the U.S. but selflessly offers the visa to GaoLing instead. Once more, LuLing sees their contrasting fates as evidence of a curse rather than her accommodating nature and willful decision to act in ways that perpetuate her misery. At the same time, though, LuLing's actions also show her willingness to make sacrifices to help her sister, thus underscoring the fondness and close connection she feels with GaoLing.



PART TWO: FRAGRANCE

LuLing waits in Hong Kong for GaoLing to secure her a visa. The rooming house she lives in is located near a part of the city where fish are sold and smells awful. LuLing refers to this place as the Fragrant Harbor. Her side of the island, the Kowloon Walled City, is filled with Chinese who fled their motherland.

LuLing incurs much suffering and misery when she turns down the chance to emigrate to the U.S. Knowing that GaoLing has gone instead gives more context for the sometimes contentious, jealous relationship the sisters have as old women.



A month after GaoLing leaves for the U.S., she sends LuLing a letter containing bad news. Miss Grutoff died shortly after they arrived. In addition, she's discovered that she won't be able to sponsor LuLing as soon as they'd initially thought. GaoLing informs LuLing that she'll have to apply as a refugee, though the chances of being accepted are slim. Another option is for GaoLing to become a citizen first and then apply to sponsor LuLing. However, the latter option will be difficult since GaoLing will first need to improve her English and find a decent job. Finally, GaoLing can marry a citizen and become a citizen that way, which will be much faster. GaoLing encourages LuLing to stay strong and not lose hope. She ensures her that life in the U.S. isn't as idyllic as they'd hoped: she works all the time, though she earns very little money.

LuLing receives nothing but disappointment in return for her good deed in letting GaoLing travel to the U.S. first. LuLing's superstitious tendencies likely cast this as further evidence of Precious Auntie's curse. GaoLing's letter rubs salt in the wound, too. While her life in the U.S. surely can't be easy, it's probably not nearly as bad as LuLing's wretched living conditions in Hong Kong. GaoLing is less resilient than LuLing because she grew up in the sheltered, comfortable Liu household. LuLing is stronger because Precious Auntie raised her to be that way. While LuLing used to envy GaoLing for the way Mother favored her, it's apparent that LuLing's upbringing has made her the better-equipped of the two to weather the hardships of war and economic hardship that consume her life over the course of her early adulthood.



GaoLing also catches LuLing up on things back home in China: Father was furious when he learned that Fu Nan lost the Peking ink business. Meanwhile, Chang refuses to criticize his son's actions, reasoning that Fu Nan is a war hero and deserves respect. Without the income from the Peking shop, everyone struggles to make ends meet. LuLing finishes GaoLing's letter and realizes how hopeless her situation is. She admits she might be waiting in Hong Kong forever.

LuLing is resilient, but GaoLing's depressing letter causes her to lose hope. Although LuLing's life has been plagued by hardship, this is the first time she's truly been alone in her life, without the support of a sister, husband, mother, or mentor to support her and give her strength. This will be a significant moment for her. She can choose to wallow in self-pity and give in to her perceived curse, or she can redirect her focus toward the future, harnessing the positive traits Precious Auntie instilled in her—such as her confidence and independence—to fight to improve her circumstances.



The next day, LuLing packs a bag and heads to the train station but finds that she cannot afford a ticket to Peking. She resolves to pawn her valuables but realizes everything she has—Kai Jing’s notebook, GaoLing’s jacket, and Precious Auntie’s story and photograph—are valuable only to herself. Then, she remembers the **oracle bone**. She realizes the bone is her last chance to earn enough money to leave but finds herself unwilling to sell it just yet.

LuLing returns to her room and devises a new plan: she’ll find an even cheaper place to live, find a job, and save up money while waiting for the visa. If that doesn’t happen after a few months, she can return to Peking and work as a teacher. That same day, she finds a new room to live in, which she shares with two women. After that, she works as many odd jobs as she can manage. LuLing often moves, going wherever she can find a cheap enough place to live.

LuLing finds a job working as an English family’s maid. Her employers, the Flowers family, consists of two elderly women: Miss Patsy, and Miss Patsy’s mother, Lady Ina. Lady Ina’s late husband, Sir Flowers, had made his fortune shipping opium between India, China, and England. The women also keep Sir Flowers’s old parrot, Cuckoo, whose rather impressive grasp on the English language inspires LuLing to hone her own skills. LuLing remains with the Flowerses for two years. She receives letters from GaoLing every month. GaoLing writes about how hard life in San Francisco is. The church that had sponsored GaoLing’s visa found her an old woman named Mrs. Wu to live with, but Mrs. Wu acts “cheap” despite being very wealthy. LuLing can’t believe this is GaoLing’s idea of a “hard” life.

The following month, GaoLing writes with better news: she’s found two bachelors, brothers, who are willing to marry both sisters. GaoLing explains that one brother is studying to become a doctor while the other is studying to become a dentist. Soon after this, LuLing receives a letter from Sister Yu informing her that she’s better off not returning to Peking, for China’s civil war situation is getting worse. Furthermore, because the Nationalists are fighting against the Communists, LuLing’s connections to Kai Jing, who was considered a sympathizer with the Communists, will jeopardize her safety. At the same time, her employment with American missionaries will make her an enemy to the Nationalists.

Parting with the oracle bone is a highly symbolic decision for LuLing to undertake. Keeping the bone symbolizes LuLing’s devotion to the past, Precious Auntie, and their shared family lineage. To sell the bone, though, symbolizes LuLing’s decision to part with the past in an effort to give her the financial means to make a future for herself. Her unwillingness to part with the bone shows she isn’t ready to leave behind her past.



LuLing shows remarkable resilience by enduring horrific living and working conditions to try to make a better life for herself. This provides context that gives the reader more sympathy for the unhappy woman LuLing is later in life. In her youth, she tried in vain to work hard and hold out hope that her life would improve, only to be struck down by endless setbacks.



LuLing’s exasperation with GaoLing is warranted. Having to live with a stubborn old woman is clearly preferable and not as “hard” as LuLing’s life in Hong Kong. This context makes LuLing’s future bitterness toward GaoLing, when the sisters are old women in California, much more understandable.



These bachelors are the Young brothers, the older of whom will eventually become Ruth’s father. The conflict Sister Yu refers to is the Chinese Civil War, which lasted from 1927 to 1949. At this point, the victorious Chinese Communist Party gained control of mainland China and formed the People’s Republic of China. The second phase of the war began after World War Two and is known as the Chinese Communist Revolution. The novel interweaves details about the ongoing political turmoil to emphasize the immense difficulties LuLing endured before she emigrated to the U.S. Not only is she suffering from unresolved grief, but she is doing so against a backdrop of political and ideological chaos.



Later that day, when LuLing is in town to buy a new bird cage for Cuckoo, she runs into Fu Nan Chang, who looks horrible: his eyes are discolored, and he's missing an entire hand. Fu Nan demands to know where GaoLing is. LuLing tells him the truth about GaoLing emigrating to the U.S. Fu Nan threatens to inform the officials that LuLing isn't GaoLing's real sister, complicating GaoLing's ability to sponsor her visa unless LuLing agrees to give him GaoLing's contact information in America. LuLing stares at Fu Nan, barely comprehending that someone could be capable of such evil. She runs away from him as fast as possible, finishes her business in town, and returns home.

LuLing writes GaoLing that night and informs her of Fu Nan's threat, wanting her that he might try to alert the American authorities to the fact that GaoLing is already married, which would prevent her from going through with her American marriage. LuLing leaves to mail the letter the next day and runs into Fu Nan. He demands that LuLing give him money, implying that he'll betray her true identity if she denies him.

One day, Fu Nan stops appearing. LuLing wonders if he has died. The following week, LuLing receives GaoLing's response to her earlier letter. This time, she has excellent news: her fiancé's family, the Youngs, have the power to sponsor her as a Famous Visiting Artist. LuLing will have to pay her own way, but the Youngs have already completed the application.

Later that night, LuLing lights some incense and prays to Precious Auntie, begging her for forgiveness, for LuLing has decided that the time has come to sell her **oracle bone**. The money LuLing receives from the bone and her savings from working as a maid are enough to buy her a ticket in steerage. Finally, she is headed to the U.S., "a land without curses or ghosts."

PART THREE: CHAPTER ONE

Ruth can tell that Mr. Tang, the translator she hires to translate LuLing's story, loves LuLing, though he's yet to meet her in person. Tang is 80 and a survivor of World War II, the Chinese Civil War, the Cultural Revolution, and bypass surgery.

LuLing's illegitimate birth haunts her well beyond her departure from the Liu household. It's as though her existence is itself a curse by virtue of her illegitimate conception. Fu Nan's threats could have devastating consequences, but his apparent ineptitude and well-established drug habit would imply that LuLing needn't worry about him going through with them.



Whereas secrets once imposed unthinkable harm onto LuLing's life by depriving her of knowledge about her birth mother, now it is essential that she and GaoLing keep secrets to ensure their prosperity in the U.S. The life-or-death characteristic of many of the secrets in LuLing's life explains why she's so reticent about opening up with Ruth about her past. Her past experiences have taught her that speaking her truth can have grave consequences.



This is a big moment for LuLing. GaoLing's letter shows her that her suffering has paid off now that she has a real chance to emigrate to America. Perhaps she can really leave the past behind and make a happier life for herself in a new country.



In selling the oracle bone, LuLing symbolically gives up the past with the hope of securing a brighter future. Her hope that the U.S. can be "a land without curses or ghosts" reflects her desire to finally leave the past behind.



Part of Mr. Tang's love for LuLing might come from the fact that they have experienced firsthand the same wars and political upheaval that consumed China over the first half of the 20th century. Their similar pasts lay the groundwork for a powerful bond.



Meanwhile, Ruth has moved in with LuLing full-time. When she announces her plans to Art, she was annoyed when he acted as though she were overreacting. Art demanded to know whether any problems in their relationship contributed to Ruth's decision. Ruth initially insisted that her choice has nothing to do with them but faltered, admitting that she wasn't sure. She paused before expressing her dissatisfaction with the separate directions their lives have taken. At any rate, she informed him, LuLing was her priority now, and they could sort through their problems later.

Ruth lies to LuLing about her reasons for moving in with her, claiming to have a new work assignment writing a children's book about animals for which she'd like LuLing to contribute the illustrations. Ruth sees how comforted LuLing is by the request and can't believe she hasn't asked her to illustrate before. It would have been so simple to make her mother happy all these years. Ruth sleeps in her childhood bedroom and can't help but feel that there are two versions of her: Ruth 1969, and Ruth 1999.

LuLing and Ruth often talk about ghosts. Ruth takes out the old tea tray and offers to communicate with Precious Auntie, and LuLing always accepts Ruth's offer, though she pretends not to be too overeager. One night, LuLing asks Ruth what happened between her and Art. LuLing advises Ruth that the relationship failed because they hadn't married before moving in together, which was what she'd said when Ruth and Art had first moved in together. Ruth is impressed by what LuLing can remember. She disagrees with much of what LuLing says but realizes there's some truth to it: she has "felt like a leftover" to Art these past several years, always low on his list of priorities.

Furthermore, living apart from Art makes Ruth realize that their relationship has developed real problems: she recognizes how she's bent over backwards to "accommodate" him without expecting any accommodation in return. Suddenly, she finds herself feeling free and more content to be apart from him—a feeling she'd always thought she'd get after losing LuLing, not Art.

One night, when Ruth brings LuLing over to the flat to prepare dinner, Art draws near to hear and suggests she get GaoLing to watch LuLing while they retreat to the bedroom for a "conjugal visit." Ruth feels an instinctual pull toward Art but can't bring herself to give in to him. She tells him her mother will know what they're doing. Ruth feels let down when Art immediately walks away.

Ruth's frankness about her reasons for moving in with LuLing suggests a turning point in their relationship. It also marks a turning point in Ruth's ability to defend herself and open up to others. Her willingness to speak honestly about her dissatisfaction with her relationship with Art might be the impetus that enables them to heal and repair what is broken. Ruth's decision to make LuLing her priority reflects her renewed commitment to understanding her mother and past. She's now willing to make sacrifices on behalf of her mother, who has made countless sacrifices for her. For the first time in years, their relationship seems to be headed in the right direction.



Still, Ruth remains unable to be frank with LuLing about her reasons for moving back in. The sad aspect of this is that although Ruth might emotionally be ready to pursue a more open, honest relationship with LuLing, LuLing's dementia forces Ruth to lie to her mother to prevent her from getting agitated and confused.



Ruth goes out of her way to offer to do something for LuLing that she had previously only done when LuLing asked. Her attitude toward her mother shifts as she begins to see LuLing as a priority rather than a burden. Similarly, rather than disregarding LuLing's opinions about her relationship, Ruth considers them objectively and comes to see that her mother's observations have some truth to them.



Living apart from Art helps Ruth understand how unequal their relationship has become over the years. Her desire for acceptance led her to "accommodate" him repeatedly at the expense of her own needs.



Ruth has reversed her priorities since the beginning of the novel. She's beginning to appreciate the countless sacrifices LuLing has made in comparison to the limited sacrifices Art has made to accommodate her needs.



During the second month of their separation, Ruth suggests that Art come over to LuLing's for dinner sometime rather than Ruth having to bring LuLing over to the flat. After that, Art and the girls come over to LuLing's house twice a week. During one such visit, Dory complains about Art's cooking ineptitude and demands to know when Ruth is coming home. Ruth feels happy to know the girls miss her. Dory even asks if they can come over and stay at LuLing's, and a couple of weekends later, she and Fia camp out on an inflatable mattress in Ruth's bedroom. On another night, Ruth acquiesces to Art's request for a sleepover, though they only cuddle.

At the end of two months, Mr. Tang calls to tell Ruth that he's finished translating LuLing's story. He asks to deliver the papers himself, wanting to meet the woman who wrote them. Ruth warns Mr. Tang that LuLing might not be that same woman when he arrives, but Mr. Tang suspects that won't be the case.

Ruth bathes and dresses LuLing for dinner with Mr. Tang that night, informing her that her admirer from China will be visiting her. Mr. Tang arrives at 7:00, bearing the papers in one hand and a bag of oranges for LuLing in the other. LuLing compliments Mr. Tang's Beijing dialect of Chinese and suddenly becomes bashful, much to Ruth's delight. As LuLing and Mr. Tang begin to speak, LuLing seems to grow less confused. Mr. Tang asks LuLing about her life in China, and LuLing is overjoyed when he is familiar with Pan Kai Jing, Yenching University, and Peking Man. At the end of the evening, Mr. Tang asks to join them again, and LuLing excitedly invites him to come over tomorrow.

Dory's remark shows that Ruth's earlier anxieties about the girls not needing her were unwarranted. Ruth's stay at LuLing's place teaches Art and his daughters that they've taken Ruth for granted. On the other hand, Ruth has also become more receptive toward acknowledging the good things in her life and accepting love. She's more receptive of the girls' and Art's love because she believes that she deserves it.



Mr. Tang believes that LuLing's story will ensure that the woman she was before dementia took hold of her still lives on, even as her condition worsens. Implicit in his theory is the notion that writing has a permanence that outlasts the decaying body and persists across time. LuLing knows this, too, which is why she felt it necessary to commit her story to paper in the first place.



LuLing's bashfulness reflects her attraction to Mr. Tang, whose career as an intellectual possibly reminds her of her first husband, Kai Jing. LuLing's positive reaction to Mr. Tang pleases Ruth because it shows that LuLing is still willing to accept love into her life. Her mother has long been miserable and closed off from the world, yet Mr. Tang's willingness to listen to her story validates her experiences and shows her the value of opening up to others. LuLing's memory loss is bittersweet. Her dementia is by no means a fortunate development in her life. But the new distance it creates between LuLing and the memories that used to completely control her life and restrict her happiness gives her a new sort of freedom.



After Mr. Tang leaves, Ruth stays up late reading the pages he translated. The documents are supposed to contain the truth, yet Ruth finds that they only raise more questions than they answer. The papers suggest that LuLing is five years older than Ruth has always thought she was—which would mean that her much earlier response to Dr. Huey had been correct. The papers show Ruth that many of the things she'd assumed were signs of LuLing's deteriorating mental state have actually been right all along. Furthermore, they prove to her the loyalty GaoLing and LuLing have for each other, despite not being full sisters. Still, many things about LuLing's story sadden Ruth. She realizes that LuLing's desire to find and bury Precious Auntie's bones was her way of saying, "I'm sorry and I forgive you, too."

At long last, LuLing reads her mother's story. Unfortunately, like LuLing before her, Ruth reads the story too late to repair her relationship with her mother. Although LuLing is still alive, her illness means she and Ruth won't really be able to make amends, just as LuLing couldn't make amends with Precious Auntie by burying her bones. Still, reading the story is a profoundly meaningful experience for Ruth. It enables her to make peace in her own heart and begin letting go of her unresolved resentfulness toward LuLing for the way she treated Ruth in childhood. She also relates to her mother in a way she never has before. When Ruth remarks how LuLing's desire to bury Precious Auntie's bones was LuLing's way of saying, "I'm sorry and I forgive you, too," she repurposes the apology that she wrote in her journal as a teenager—something she couldn't bring herself to convey to LuLing in person. She sees herself, her mother, and Precious Auntie as flawed women who share as much trauma and hurt as they do tradition and pride. All though each woman has inflicted harm on another, they are still worthy of forgiveness and closure, and no wrongdoing is wretched enough to sever the familial ties that bind them to each other.



Ruth calls Art the next day to tell him about LuLing's story and expresses her wish that her mother would have told her these things years ago. Art pauses before admitting that he, too, wishes he'd said certain things long ago. He takes back what he'd said years ago, "about not wanting to have assumptions about love," though he initially misremembers Ruth being the one who said it. At any rate, he explains, he sees the error in this way of thinking and realizes he wants them to be able to rely on their long-term commitment to each other. Finally, Art admits that he didn't know what he'd had with Ruth until she moved out.

Ruth's newfound ability to be open with Art prompts Art to respond with a new openness toward Ruth. Oddly, her efforts to accommodate him and not create conflict were part of what created friction in their relationship all along. However, once Ruth is open with Art and begins to assert herself, conflict begins to lessen, and Art recognizes how important Ruth is to him. It was secrecy that drove them apart, just as secrecy drove Ruth and LuLing apart.



Ruth realizes she doesn't know how to respond to Art. On the one hand, he's speaking the words she's so longed to hear. At the same time, she realizes that hearing them now only makes her sad. She admits this to Art, who tells her that's okay. Before they hang up, Art expresses concern about Ruth's ability to care for LuLing and suggests they put her in an assisted living facility. Ruth balks at the suggestion but sees Art's concern as his efforts to show her he loves her. She agrees to consider assisted living, but only if LuLing is okay with it.

The old Ruth might have accepted Art's overtures of love to accommodate his wishes and make him happy, but the new Ruth prioritizes her own needs and pauses to consider whether she is interested in repairing her relationship with Art. Reading LuLing's manuscript puts Ruth more in touch with her family and herself.



Soon after, LuLing shows Ruth a legitimate-looking letter from the “California Department of Public Safety” concerning a radon leak. Ruth is impressed with Art’s design skills. The notice outlines the state’s plan to relocate tenants to a “free five-star” hotel experience at a nearby facility. LuLing agrees to the arrangement. Ruth calls Art to tell him his plan worked, though she feels guilty about tricking LuLing. Art insists on paying for at least the first three months.

This letter is another clever instance in which events from Ruth’s life parallel events from LuLing’s. Art’s letter from the “California Department of Public Safety” is a thematic variation on the forged letter from the Japanese Army that GaoLing and Sister Yu delivered to Fu Nan to trick him into believing Japanese soldiers had captured GaoLing. Creating these links shows how Ruth’s life is an extension of LuLing’s: the culmination of inherited traits, traumas, and circumstances.



Ruth and Art arrive at Mira Mar Manor to scope out the place before LuLing’s arrival. A sophisticated-looking man named Edward Patel greets them and gives them a facility tour. Mira Mar Manor is luxurious and impressive, and the old folks there seem happy. Still, Ruth remains reluctant to leave LuLing there. She breaks down when Mr. Patel describes the women acting out their maternal instincts on the orchid plants the facility supplies its residents.

Mr. Patel’s comment about the orchids moves Ruth because it reminds her of LuLing’s endearing love for her. LuLing’s illness puts Ruth in an incredibly difficult situation. She feels she owes it to LuLing to care for her in her old age, yet LuLing’s condition requires around-the-clock care that Ruth simply cannot provide.



Ruth and Art raise their concerns about LuLing’s dementia, and Mr. Patel ensures them the facility is equipped to handle such cases. Ruth is flabbergasted when Mr. Patel informs her of the cost—over \$3,000 per month—but Art informs her he’s willing to pay and that it’s worth it. Ruth tries to argue with Art, but ultimately, she has no choice but to simply accept and thank him for the help he’s offering her. Ruth and Art return to Mira Mar Manor with LuLing later. To Ruth’s surprise, her mother doesn’t seem opposed to staying there.

Art’s insistence on paying for LuLing’s stay reflects his overall development. In paying for LuLing’s treatment, he shows that he is willing to absorb Ruth’s life into his, taking on her challenges as though they are his.



PART THREE: CHAPTER TWO

The Youngs are celebrating GaoLing’s 77th birthday (really her 82nd) at her and Edmund’s home in Saratoga. Everyone is gathered outside around the pool. When GaoLing gets up to prepare some dishes in the kitchen, Ruth follows her inside. GaoLing starts to teach Ruth how to make tea eggs. Ruth pauses before asking GaoLing if she and LuLing made the eggs when they were living in orphanage. GaoLing seems surprised that LuLing has finally disclosed this part of her history to her daughter after so many years. Ruth tells GaoLing that she knows about Precious Auntie, too. GaoLing laughs as she chides her sister for her old-fashioned commitment to keeping old secrets. In the modern world, GaoLing reasons, nobody cares—though she admits, with a laugh, that she’s never told Edmund that she’s actually five years older than she publicly admits.

Even though Precious Auntie has been more successful in assimilating into Western culture and leaving the past behind, she still keeps some details—such as her real age—a secret. That only GaoLing and LuLing have known the whole truth of each other’s lives reflects the strength of their bond as sisters. After all these years, GaoLing has kept her promise to treat LuLing as a sister. GaoLing’s loyalty makes it all the more tragic that LuLing has chosen to see her life as full of sorrow, since she has always had people close to her who give her love and show her she is worthy of affection.



Finally, Ruth reaches the subject she's been wanting to discuss with GaoLing: Mira Mar Manor. GaoLing instantly rejects the idea of assisted living, and Ruth feel ashamed all over again. GaoLing claims that she'll take care of LuLing if Ruth won't, but Ruth reminds GaoLing of how much difficulty she'd had the last time she watched LuLing.

Dejected, Ruth changes the subject to ask GaoLing if she knows what became of the Changs. GaoLing scowls at the thought of her former in-laws and recalls that Fu Nan had likely died around 1960, and Chang had been publicly executed by the Communists nearly a decade before. Sister Yu ultimately became a high-ranking leader in the Communist Party, and Teacher Pan received an award in honor of his son, Pan Kai Jing, who died to protect the Communist Party. GaoLing tells Ruth that LuLing named her after Ruth Grutoff and Sister Yu, which Ruth had never known before. Ruth is touched by how much thought went into a name she'd spent so many years hating.

During their conversation, GaoLing mentions LuLing's Charles Schwab account in passing, which catches Ruth off guard. Ruth inquires further, and GaoLing explains that she and Edmund had placed LuLing's rightful half of Edmund and Edwin's inheritance in an account for her years ago. However, LuLing had always pretended that the money didn't exist. GaoLing confirms that some of the stock accounts align with the stocks Ruth, as "Precious Auntie," had suggested that LuLing invest in via the tea tray board. During all those writing-in-the-sand sessions, Ruth had never once considered that LuLing was asking for advice about actual stocks.

Ruth asks GaoLing how the stocks performed, and GaoLing declares LuLing to be an investing genius. Suddenly, Ruth feels hurt that LuLing had forbidden herself to enjoy her money out of some obligation to Precious Auntie. Finally, Ruth asks GaoLing for Precious Auntie's real name. "Bao Mu," is all GaoLing can offer, which just means "nursemaid." Ruth presses her aunt for Precious Auntie's real name, but she can't remember it, either. Ruth feels dejected, realizing she might never know her grandmother's true identity.

Dory interrupts Ruth and GaoLing's conversation when she rushes inside to inform them that LuLing fell in the pool and almost drowned. Ruth runs outside, horrified. Art carries LuLing out of the pool. LuLing claims to have spotted Precious Auntie at the bottom of the pool.

GaoLing feels torn between her obligations to her sister and her limited ability to give her the care she needs. It's possible, too, that GaoLing feels remorse for the times she abandoned LuLing—first when the Lius send LuLing away to the orphanage, and later when GaoLing leaves LuLing behind in Hong Kong to emigrate to the U.S.—and sees now as her chance to make things right with LuLing.



This section mainly fulfills a practical function of giving closure to numerous characters' storylines. Beyond this, the revelation that LuLing named Ruth after two women who played a significant role in LuLing's life further establishes Ruth's place in her family's history. Ruth spent much of her life in the same place as LuLing, not knowing the people she came from and lacking an appreciation for her ancestors' traditions. Knowing the women whose names she bares allows Ruth to see herself as an extension of these women: as having inherited their resilience, strength, and empowerment.



Ruth previously thought that she was the only one being deceptive while she and LuLing carried out the writing-in-the-sand sessions. GaoLing's admission about the Charles Schwab account shows Ruth that LuLing was keeping secrets of her own and acting on the phony investment advice "Precious Auntie" had given her.



This is another development that shows how LuLing's misery was less the consequence of Precious Auntie's curse as it was a self-imposed commitment to suffering. LuLing could have remedied her financial struggles had she allowed herself to see that she was deserving of comfort. Knowing LuLing's full story allows Ruth to feel sympathy for her mother's self-imposed frugality rather than bitterness at the way LuLing's choice deprived them of certain comforts when Ruth was growing up.



Even as her memory falters, LuLing holds tightly to the shame she feels about her betrayal of Precious Auntie. It's so embedded in her mind that it persists even as many other details of her life become faded and unreachable.



Ruth leaves LuLing at GaoLing's while she returns to her mother's apartment to pack the things she'll need for her new life at Mira Mar Manor. She wonders what to do about LuLing's scrolls, ink, and brushes.

Ruth wants LuLing to have access the tools that connect her to her past and familial lineage. At the same time, she wants her to help her mother move forward and forget the past in the short time she has left.



That evening, Ruth meets Art for dinner. They sit down at a booth, and Ruth is surprised when a waiter arrives carrying a bottle of champagne. Art reminds her that it's their anniversary. Ruth laughs, realizing she'd completely forgotten. Later that night, they return to their apartment. Before making love, Art expresses his desire for Ruth to share with him the parts of herself she has hidden all these years. Ruth laughs nervously, insisting that she never incidentally keeps anything from him. Art asks her why she always tries to push him away. Ruth thinks a moment and realizes she's afraid to feel pain and wants to feel safe.

This moment is significant for Ruth, who hasn't explicitly acknowledged how emotionally withdrawn she is and how this negatively impacts her ability to develop meaningful and fulfilling relationships with others. Ruth seems to recognize how she has inherited her mother's resistance to emotional vulnerability for fear of getting hurt. Growing up being disappointed by a mother who loved her but was incapable of showing that love taught Ruth to keep her own love bottled up inside, as well.



PART THREE: CHAPTER THREE

Ruth watches Mr. Tang kiss LuLing on the cheek in the Asian Art Museum. In the month since LuLing moved to Mira Mar Manor, the couple has been seeing a lot of each other. On weekends, they typically go to outings. This time, Mr. Tang surprised Ruth by inviting her and Art to join them at an exhibit on Chinese archaeology. When he asked them, he noted that there would be something at the museum that they'd all find highly interesting. However, Ruth is already happy satisfied from seeing LuLing so happy, and she admires the effortless with which Mr. Ting translates her innermost thoughts and feelings into words.

Losing her memory sets LuLing free from the past. She remembers her history but no longer fixates on the shame and guilt that for many years prohibited her from showing and accepting love. Mr. Tang's admiration for LuLing's history allows her to see her life's story in a new light and appreciate the resilience, self-worth, and strength Precious Auntie instilled in her that enabled her to travel to a new country and make a life for herself there.



Finally, they reach the exhibit Mr. Tang thinks they'll like. Ruth looks at the smooth, ivory-colored object before her. Before she can figure out what it is, LuLing voices the answer aloud: "**Oracle bone,**" she states in Chinese. LuLing turns to Art and explains, in Mandarin, how her mother had once found a bone like this. LuLing translates her explanation into English for Mr. Tang, who nods thoughtfully and adds that the bone is significant for LuLing, since her mother's father had been a bonesetter. LuLing agrees.

Ruth's improved relationship with LuLing is reflected in her happiness to translate LuLing's words for Mr. Tang. As a child, she'd considered this task to be a burden. Now, she gladly accepts the opportunity to help her mother. LuLing's healthier relationship to her past is reflected in the pride with which she acknowledges her grandfather's status as a famous bonesetter. She celebrates her place within this tradition rather than lamenting the curse her familial ties have forced upon her.



Suddenly, LuLing's eyes go blank. She pauses before speaking the name "Liu Xing," which was the name her father called her mother in a love poem he wrote for her. Ruth tells Art that "Liu Xing" means "shooting star" and tells him she'll fill him in on the details later. Carefully, while LuLing's mind focuses on names, Ruth asks her mother if she can remember her mother's family name. "Gu," answers LuLing, confidently. Ruth is thrilled, thinking the long-lost family name has finally resurfaced before realizing that Gu simply means "bone." Soon, LuLing's sharpness appears to fade. As Mr. Tang explains how emperors would use the **oracle bone** for answers about things like the weather, Ruth considers her own history of prophecy, recalling all the times she'd write the answers in the **tea tray** she thought her mother had wanted or needed to hear.

Ruth changes the subject to the Peking Man, whose bones were lost during the war. Mr. Tang can't say for sure whether the bones will ever be recovered but suggests that "mystery is a wonderful part of life."

Later that night, Ruth and Art lay in bed together and discuss Mr. Tang's relationship with LuLing. Ruth wonders how Mr. Tang, a cultured, intellectual man, can remain interested in her mother, whose disease makes it difficult for her to follow along with him. Art reasons that Mr. Tang fell in love with the girl of LuLing's memoir and can still detect that person in the LuLing that exists today. Art finds Mr. Tang and LuLing's bond to be more intimate than people who've known each other for years and gently conveys his interest in achieving that with Ruth, floating the idea of marriage.

Ruth remains silent, and Art stutters, telling her she doesn't have to give him a definite answer anytime soon. But Ruth pulls herself closer to Art, kisses him, and says she finds the idea "wonderful."

Finally, in a moment so fleeting it hardly stands out as significant, LuLing remembers her mother's family name, which she has spent her life trying to remember: Liu Xing. The moment passes as soon as it arrives, as LuLing's illness returns her to a state of forgetting. Sadly, LuLing's condition prevents her from holding on to this detail she's tried so hard to remember. At the same time, perhaps this is a healthier relationship to memory and the past. She can relish the beautiful moments when her mother's name comes to her effortlessly and unexpectedly, but she can also forget the times when the name won't come. Ruth's disappointment at hearing LuLing's answer regarding LuLing's surname, Gu, is because "Gu," which Ruth believes means "bone," refers to the bonesetter's occupation rather than his family name. Ruth assumes that LuLing is confused when she claims this was Precious Auntie's last name.



In speculating that "mystery is a wonderful part of life," Mr. Tang points to the opportunity that mystery affords one to piece together the details of one's life and author one's own story. While the fleetingness and unreliability of memory mean that one must constantly revise, edit, and translate that story, the process of creating it, revising it, and engaging with it is part of what makes life meaningful and full of wonder.



Art thinks that the voice that comes through in LuLing's words overpowers her disease's attempts to silence her. In writing her story, LuLing presents her true self to the world. Because she has done this in writing, this self is immortalized and will exist well after she is physically or mentally gone from the earth.



Ruth's use of "wonderful" echoes Mr. Tang's earlier comments about mystery making life "wonderful." Ruth's response implies that she is no longer afraid of making herself vulnerable to the unknown and is willing to jump into a marriage with Art, opening herself up to the possibility of being hurt, but also the possibility of experiencing love and connection.



Sometime later, Ruth speaks with GaoLing, who calls Ruth with the exciting news that she's finally discovered the name of Ruth's grandmother: Gu. Ruth feels disappointed and reminds her aunt that Gu only means bone. But GaoLing explains that there are many more meanings. When Ruth asks for a first name, GaoLing replies, Liu Xing. Ruth mishears GaoLing and things she has said Liu Xing ("Shooting Star"), but GaoLing explains that the name actually means "Remain True." GaoLing recalls how people who didn't like Precious Auntie did call her Liu Xing because the name had a negative connotation due to its association with comets and calamity--with stars that burn brightly but "burn[] up quick," which is precisely what happened to Precious Auntie.

Suddenly, Ruth remembers a story LuLing had written about in her account of her life, about Precious Auntie's tale of swallowing and being burned by a shooting star that dropped from the sky and fell into her mouth. Ruth cries when she realizes that she has finally uncovered the mystery of her grandmother's name: Gu Liu Xin.

EPILOGUE

It's August 12. Ruth sits in her cubbyhole and listens to foghorns blow outside. Though she sits silently, she has her voice, since "her ability to speak is not governed by curses or shooting stars or illness." Ruth knows this now and decides to be silent by choice. Instead, she chooses to speak through her writing. Ruth gazes at the photograph of Precious Auntie and wonders if she could ever have imagined having a granddaughter with a loving husband, two girls, a house, and a happy, good life.

LuLing had always been obsessed with dying, curses, and the past. Although Luling still remembers the past, she doesn't focus on the sad parts anymore. Now, she remembers the love Precious Auntie had for her, too.

GaoLing's admission proves that LuLing was correct in the museum the other day. It also contextualizes LuLing's story about shooting stars that Ruth recalled in Part One: One. Ruth realizes that LuLing has remembered her mother's name, if only unconsciously. She'd been hinting at it all these years in subtle ways. Additionally, LuLing's remark in the novel's opening section about the things that are "true" in her life, in which she anguishes about not remembering Precious Auntie's name, reflects this subconscious knowledge. LuLing worried that she had forgotten Precious Auntie's name, but it was with her all along.



Ruth realizes that many elements of LuLing's story confirm that Gu Liu Xin was Precious Auntie's real name. Her tears are bittersweet. Knowing Precious Auntie's name strengthens Ruth's ties to the past. This is especially important in light of Ruth's decision not to have children: she can celebrate her family by honoring those who came before her, and she doesn't need to have offspring to feel proud of who she is. But Ruth's tears are sad, too, because this realization comes too late for her to discuss it with LuLing, whose illness prevents her from engaging in meaningful conversations.



August 12 is normally when Ruth loses her ability to speak. This year, Ruth keeps her voice. Her remark that "her ability to speak is not governed by curses or shooting stars or illness" reflects her decision to cleanse herself of the inherited traumas that have kept her (and LuLing and Precious Auntie before her) stunted and beholden to fear, anxiety, and shame. Ruth's newfound confidence teaches her that she alone holds the power to author her life and use her voice.



LuLing's recovery mirrors Ruth's. Both women have chosen to forgive themselves for the hurt they have caused their mothers, and also to forgive their mothers for the hurt they have caused them in return. The love their mothers had for them rises above the dull memory of pain. They revise the past to resemble something they can live with in the present.



LuLing called Ruth the other day to apologize for the bad things she'd put her through in childhood. She expressed her wish that they both could forgive, forget, and move on together. Ruth cried after hanging up with her mother, but they were tears of happiness. As she stares at the photo of her Precious Auntie, Ruth thinks about all the women who have made her the woman she is today. She thinks about how "they wanted her to get rid of the curses." Ruth returns to her desk, which has "become[] her **sand** tray," and writes her life story: for her grandmother, her mother, and herself.

LuLing's apology is bittersweet for Ruth. On the one hand, it's what she's wanted to hear for years. On the other hand, it's coming years too late, and LuLing's dementia will likely prevent her from remembering the exchange. But Ruth somehow knows the apology is genuine, if fleeting. She accepts her mothers' efforts as enough, which is something she had been unwilling to do for much of her life. When Ruth observes how Precious Auntie and LuLing had "wanted her to get rid of the curses," she alludes to the sacrifices these women endured so their daughters might enjoy life on their own terms rather than remain beholden to the past. Seeing herself as a descendent of these resilient women gives Ruth the confidence to write her own book rather than revise the words of others. In committing her family's story to paper, she celebrates and makes peace with the women who gave her life, and she ensures that history remembers their voices, names, and stories.





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