SuperSummary™

The Gangster We Are All Looking For

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Summary

The Gangster We Are All Looking For, published in 2003, is a novel that takes the reader through the life of a young, unnamed girl—whom we will call "the Girl"—and her family, who have fled Vietnam in the wake of the war with America to live in San Diego, California. The book draws upon author lê thi diêm thúy's own experience as a Vietnamese refugee in America. The story begins with the Girl leaving Vietnam on a boat with her father and four strangers, or "uncles," and arriving as refugees in America—a foreign place with different customs that does not exactly welcome these immigrants wholeheartedly. They first live with Mel—the son of the man who sponsored them to come to America—and spend time with his mother, Mrs. Russell, who grieves for her recently-deceased husband. But after the Girl breaks a precious object, she and Ba—her father—are asked to leave and find a new home.

During the confusion of their departure from Vietnam, the Girls' mother was left behind on a beach in Vietnam. But eventually, the Girl's mother—known as Ma in Vietnamese—reunites with her family. They live as a family in a red apartment with a large swimming pool that delights Ma and fascinates the Girl, but the landlord fills it in after realizing the children of the mostly non-white, Vietnamese tenants are jumping into the pool from the balcony. Ma works as a seamstress and Ba as a welder, but they'd both rather be doing different things. The Girl witnesses violent fights between her Ma and Ba that result in her father slamming his fists into walls and her mother smashing chinaware. However, they also deeply love one another and are inseparable from each other. Meanwhile, the Girl experiences puberty and adolescent crushes. She also longs for her brother's companionship while her parents ignore her questions about what has happened to him. The members of the family face challenges as Vietnamese immigrants in America. Ma would like to start a restaurant, but they don't have the money for that. The Girl experiences isolation and racist slurs at school. Ba needs to rely on his daughter's English to get help starting his own gardening business.

The family moves between various places after leaving one apartment because the building manager had murdered a woman and another after being evicted because the landlord wants to rent the homes to wealthier families. As a child, the Girl she sees the world around her both with precise clarity—noting the types of trees in her neighborhood and the number of steps to her apartment—and also a certain naivete, such as failing to understand the cause of her

parents' fights or the nature of her brother's death. Although the family lives in America, Vietnam is not far from their minds, whether it's her father discussing memories of the war with a friend or her mother feeling that she has abandoned her parents.

As the book transitions into the Girl's adult years, the reader sees a more heightened understanding of her parents' relationship and their troubles—as well as her own mental scars. Her father's drunkenness, crying, and erratic behavior are seen as coping methods to handle a likely undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder from his time as a soldier, even if the Girl never explicitly says this. He is stuck in his ways and unable to change, even though he needs help. After living in chaotic households with her parents, the Girl leaves home as a teenager and never returns, eventually making her way to college on the East Coast and becoming a writer. She is always on the run and does not feel like she has a permanent home, nor does she feel like she can be close to anyone. Witnessing her parents' turmoil and experiencing her brother's death clearly leave an impact on her, as she is unable to face her own trauma head-on. She eventually takes the reader into the experiences of her parents living without her at home and the painful memories surrounding her brother's death in Vietnam.

Told through rich literary metaphors, shifting perspectives, and motifs, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* pays homage to the complex ways that families, particularly children, process trauma; the effects of war; the nature of belonging as an immigrant in America; and the Vietnamese-American experience.

Chapter Summaries & Analyses

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary: "suh-top!"

The first line of the chapter opens with a metaphor to water and the sea, when the unnamed protagonist (whom we will refer to as "the Girl" in this guide) describes the yellow houses of Linda Vista as where she and her family "eventually washed to shore" (3) in California after fleeing Vietnam. But it wasn't her family's first home in America. Before Linda Vista, they had lived in the Green Apartment and, before that, the Red Apartment. The narrator says that she and her family were separated before the Red Apartment, with her mother left behind on a Vietnamese beach and the Girl and her father (whom she refers to as "Ba" in Vietnamese) escaping on a fishing boat with four men. She calls these unknown men "uncles" in familial terms to convey respect for her elders. The uncles, Ba, and the Girl wind up on a U.S. naval ship and then in a refugee camp in Singapore. They experience a disorienting plane journey and taxi ride to their new home in America.

Here, the narrator provides backstory on Mr. Russell, an American who sponsors Ba, Girl, and the four uncles to immigrate to the U.S. Due to his time spent interacting with other cultures in the U.S. Navy, he's moved to help the refugees or "Vietnamese boat people" (4) after hearing about their plight. However, after Mr. Russell's death, the grief-stricken Mrs. Russell—his wife—persuades her son, Melvin ("Mel") to take in the refugees. With new gold and silver keys dangling from his belt, Mel welcomes them to America underneath a poster of a man and woman tanning on the beach underneath palm trees. On the refugees' first night in Mel's home, they overhear a tearful conversation between Mel and his mother, who are still processing Mr. Russell's death and the sudden influx of new people into their home. Ba tries to convince the uncles that Mel is a good person, stating: "If it wasn't for him [...] they would have sent us back the way we came" (7). The Girl is not entirely convinced; despite the language barrier between the refugees and their hosts, she can sense that something is amiss. Like the Russells, Ba is also tormented and cries at night under the palm trees.

Mel hires Ba and the four uncles to work on his maintenance crew. He asks them to touch up his properties after the paint has faded or make them "white again" (9). The Vietnamese men believe that white is an unlucky color associated with death. Ba asks, "Why white?"—to which Mel responds, "It's clean" (10). Meanwhile, the Girl contrasts Mel's forceful voice with Ba's

sad one to underscore their differing personalities. She continues on to describe how Mel began attending church services again with his mother after his father's death. Mrs. Russell often visits Mel's home after church, and in this way, becomes close to Ba and the Girl. Mrs. Russell purchases dresses and jewelry for the Girl. She also brings the father and daughter with her on trips to the snowy mountains. The Girl asks why Mrs. Russell doesn't take them to the beach, since Ma is there. Ba corrects his daughter, stating that her mother is on the beach in Vietnam. But as a child, the Girl does not comprehend the vast geographic distance between the two beaches. She asks: "What was the difference?" (13).

Mrs. Russell, whom the Girl begins referring to as "the grandmother," takes a photo of Ba and the Girl leaning against Mrs. Russell's blue car on the first mountain trip. Afterward, they venture into the woods. Mrs. Russell smiles and cries while tracing some letters carved into a tree, implying that this place has some special meaning for her. The Girl plays a game where she follows in her father's footsteps, leaving no trace of her own in the snow. They play hide-and-go-seek in the snow, bringing back memories of similar games played in the shadow of fishing boats back in Vietnam. The Girl uses plant and animal metaphors to describe her father's transformation from a "big rock" to hiding in the snow to a "tree" and finally to a "wild horse" (15) that gallops across the snow while she clings to its neck. While the Girl and Ba spend time with Mrs. Russell on Sundays, the uncles become acquainted with other Vietnamese people at the pool hall.

The Girl dislikes wearing the pastel-colored, "American" dresses and uncomfortable plastic sandals given to her by the grandmother. The girl and her father play, mimicking bird sounds by repeating the word "Who?" The uncles wake up and complain about the girl "cooing like a common pigeon" (17). Ba walks the Girl to school. Ba tells the Girl not to make so much noise because Mel had complained about her "chattering" in her sleep. Reflecting her quick wit, the Girl replies, "Dumb birds chatter. I don't chatter" (18). She hangs upside-down from the pole of a stop sign and looks at the children on the school playground. Her father tries to read the word STOP on the sign and instead pronounces it as "Suh-top!" (19), which serves as the title of this chapter. The Girl is the only Vietnamese student in her class. The teacher introduces the Girl by pointing to Vietnam or an "S-shaped curve" (19) on a globe—a shape which seems foreign to the Girl despite it being her country of birth.

On the school playground during recess, the Girl misses her older brother. Afterward, the children take naps on green plastic mats, but the Girl has a challenging time taking naps after her brother's departure. She stays awake and sees a blonde doll and plays a game with the

ceiling:

> The game involved looking for a seam to the sky, a thread I could pull. I told myself that if I could find the thread and focus on it hard enough with my eyes, I could tear the sky open and my mother, my brother, my grandfather, my flip-flips, my favorite shells, would all fall down to me (21).

One time, the Girl knocks over a bowl of plastic fruit during nap time, prompting the teacher to shush her: “Shhhh!” (21).

Mr. and Mrs. Russell have built up a collection of animal figurines—largely horses—which Mrs. Russell sends to Mel after Mr. Russell’s death. The uncles help Mel move a glass cabinet into his office. Mrs. Russell and Mel unpack boxes that contain horse figurines, a tobacco pipe, and other objects and place the items in the cabinet. On the way out of the office, the Girl brushes against a golden butterfly encased in glass, which sits on Mel’s desk. As part of the girl’s normal routine, she changes out of the dress and into jeans and a T-shirt after school. She also reads or colors, but after she spots the butterfly, she begins sneaking into the office to spend time with the glass animals. She hears a whispering noise from the glass, like “wings brushing against a windowpane” (25). She believes this noise to be the butterfly’s way of speaking. She tells Ba that the butterfly is trapped but wants to escape, as indicated by the noise it makes: “Shuh-shuh/shuh-shuh” (26). Ba shakes his head to rid his mind of the butterfly noises. The Girl explains the butterfly’s circumstances to the uncles. One of them says that the butterfly is dead, and its soul must have flown away. The girl asks how the butterfly can still cry. An uncle responds:“Your Ba cries in the garden every night and nothing comes of it” (27).

The Girl’s tenacious and childish innocence unfolds in her desire to help the glass horses: “[U]nless I set them right, they would remain that way forever. They were the dumbest animals I had ever met” (28). She shares stories of growing up in Vietnam with the animals, which include pigeons eating rice and roosters running on the beach with her. She also recalls a photo taken from the ship of Americans that had picked up Ba, the Girl, and the four uncles. The photo is of the boat that the refugees were using to escape Vietnam: “In the picture, our boat looks like a toy boat floating in a big bowl of water” (29). She speculates that that’s why the Americans laughed at the sight of the refugees. They laughed “at the sight of us so small” (29). She imparts other memories of America and Vietnam, but the horses don’t respond to

her stories. The Girl concludes that "[t]he uncles were unaware it wasn't the butterfly but rather these glass animals that had no soul" (31).

She relates another story about a recent dream, in which she steals a sign from a school crossing guard and uses it as makeshift boat after she turns on the faucets in the house. While she, Ba, and the uncles float away on the sign, the Girl sees her Ma standing on a beach through the glass disk which holds the butterfly. She swivels around on Mel's desk chair while trying to remember her Ma's face and brainstorming ways to free the butterfly. After she stops spinning, she sees a broken glass frame, which contains a photo of Mel and his mother—likely taken by Mr. Russell. The Girl then looks at Mr. Russell's pipe in the cabinet. The girl throws the disc at the wall but misses and hits the glass cabinet. Some of the horses shatter and others topple over. As Ba and the uncles rush into the office, the girl spins and searches for the butterfly. She hears noises which are familiar from scenes earlier in the chapter: "Shuh-shuh/shuh-shuh.Suh-top!/suh-top!Shuh-shuh/shuh-shuh.Suh-top!" (35).

Chapter 1 Analysis

Before the first chapter begins, the author defines a key concept that undergirds the book: "In Vietnamese, the word for water and the word for *a nation*, a country and a homeland are one and the same: *nước*" (pre-Chapter 1). She thereby signifies to the reader the importance of this recurring motif which weaves together the novel's various characters and threads. This water metaphor continues onto the first chapter, when Girl says this of the men with whom she escaped Vietnam on a boat across the South China Sea: "Ba and I were connected to the four uncles, not by blood but by water [...] we floated across the sea, first in the hold of a fishing boat, then in the hold of a U.S. Navy ship" (3). Water—and related vessels like boats—occur as commonplace language throughout the chapter, such as when Mel says: "I feel like I've inherited a boatload of people" (6), or when the Girl describes the turmoil of Ba's mind through his voice: "When I listen to it, I can see boats floating around in his head. Boats full of people trying to get somewhere" (10).

The Girl and Ba's turmoil due to separation from their family members and trauma from the war haunt them in separate ways. The Girl, due to her childlike ignorance, does not understand the vast gulf of oceans and miles separating America from Vietnam. Her stubbornness manifests; she believes that she can will her family members into existence through sheer force, such as when she imagines that she can pull a seam in the school's ceiling and make her brother, mother, and grandfather appear.

Her father copes with his trauma by crying profusely, to no avail. Ba seems trapped in these circumstances, much like the butterfly in the glass that the Girl tries to set free. This similarity between Ba and the butterfly is made clear when the Girl presses the butterfly onto some papers on Mel's desk and compares it to her father's "heavy head pressed down on the pillow at night, full of thoughts that dragged into nightmares when all he wanted was a dream as sweet and happy as the taste of jackfruit ice cream" (25). The reference to ice cream indicates the Girl's childlike manner of describing an adult's state of mind. The butterfly serves as a symbol of Ba's mental cage which ensnares him in his trauma as a refugee in a new land; a veteran of the Vietnamese war; a father separated from his son; and a husband separated from his spouse. It also serves as a symbol of Ma, whom the Girl believes to be trapped on a beach faraway in Vietnam. The Girl's attempt to free the butterfly indirectly represents an attempt to free her Ba and Ma from their plight.

There are other concrete symbols in the chapter, like Mr. Russell's dream in which he imagines a hand scooping up birds from some waves and scattering them beyond the horizon. This dream sequence serves as a symbol of the way he imagines the birds—representing the refugees, perhaps—as flocking to his benevolent presence beyond the horizon. After Mr. Russell dies, his tobacco pipe serves as a reminder of his memory to Mrs. Russell and Mel. Lastly, Mel's important-looking, jangling keys serve to illustrate his power and the way he projects that self-image over the refugees that he hosts. Also, the Girl is reminded of her mother when she sees the waves of the ocean on the poster at the airport, which functions as both a symbol of the distance between mother and daughter and the prosperity possible in America.

The challenging circumstances that Ba, the Girl, and the uncles find in America are exacerbated by the obstacles inherent in being refugees in a foreign land that does not always understand or welcome them. Readers also begin to see a divide between the white gatekeepers of mainstream America and the immigrant refugees that they reluctantly let in. The gap between these two groups prevents a thorough understanding of one another. This divide manifests in the classmates who whisper about the Girl's background as the only Vietnamese student. It manifests when the refugees are leaving Vietnam and trying to get passing ships to stop and help: "We remembered the ships that kept their distance. We remembered the people leaning over the decks of the ships to study us through their binoculars and not liking what they saw, turning away from our boat" (8).

Even when these white characters have the best of intentions, there still exists that divide between white America and the refugees. For example, although Mr. Russell is undoubtedly generous, he conflates the unique experiences within and among ethnic groups into one homogenized mass of "nameless, faceless bodies," which seems to be a theme among many of the white characters in the book: "In Mr. Russell's mind, the Vietnamese boat people merged with his memories of the Okinawans and the Samoans and even the Hawaiians" (4). Along those same lines, the refugees in this chapter also experience a sense of helplessness, as if they're being carried along by overwhelming forces, be it by the currents of the ocean on the boat or a taxi in a new world. They're operating wholly dependent on the whims of others, like Mel, a gatekeeper who allows them into America and later banishes them from his home.

The chapter also establishes the book's strong literary voice. In the chapter's opening pages, Ba, the uncles, and the Girl board a plane, moving "through clouds, ghost vapors, time zones" (4) on their way to the U.S. This short snippet highlights the author's literary style of succinctly summarizing trauma and disorientation that comes from fleeing violence and being forced to move to a new, unfamiliar land. Grief is also expressed through simile, such as when the tormented Ba cries while "staring at the moon like a lost dog" (8). These animal and plant metaphors are sprinkled throughout the chapter, such as when the Girl likens her American dress to a crumpled flower or describes the "dress rising up and down around [her] neck, like rooster feathers ruffling before a cockfight" (17). The Girl's descriptions of roosters and pigeons during her childhood in Vietnam help explain the Girl's affinity for animals and the related bird metaphors.

The author also uses metaphors of sound to contrast different characters, highlight relationships, and underscore deep-seated pain. The Girl describes Mel's domineering voice as one that "shines bright in your face like a flashlight aimed at your eyes when you're sleeping" (10). In contrast, Ba's voice "is water moving through a reed pipe in the middle of a sad tune" or "the tide of Ba's mind" (10). The troubled voice calls out and then answers in return—like the motion of a tide. The chapter's allegory for water also makes a return in these passages, reflecting its constant presence throughout the book. Sound also becomes a vehicle to bring scenes and relationships to life through repetition of specific phrases or words—otherwise known as onomatopoeia. Like the word "Who," The Girl asks: "Who wants to wear American dresses?" and runs around repeating the "Who?" (17). Her father does the same. These bird noises emphasize both the nature of their playful relationship and the way that the Girl uses games and sounds to make sense of her new, turbulent world. The word "Shh" appears when her teacher shushes the Girl during naptime and reappears when the Girl

hears the butterfly whispering to get out its glass prison. And of course, “Suh-top” forms a recurring motif as this title’s chapter, highlighting Ba’s experience as a first-generation immigrant struggling to understand a new language in this foreign land. The author also utilizes other senses like smell and touch to highlight the character’s experiences, such as when the Girl shares with the horses “the way [her] mother’s hair smelled warm at night or the way the playground slide felt cold in the morning” (30). Another literary device manifests through colors. The Girl’s keen observation skills are apparent in the way she notices the pigments and shades of several objects, from her pastel dresses to the yellow houses of Linda Vista to the green mats during naptime.

Lastly, this chapter introduces a literary device that will continue throughout the book: a shifting perspective that bounces between different characters. Although the Girl is the book’s main character, the narrative briefly reveals the perspectives of Ba, Mel, and Mrs. Russell. In other cases, there is a shift in point of view within characters, such as when the Girl changes from viewing Mel’s mother as the strange “Mrs. Russell” to “the grandmother,” who serves as a surrogate American family member. And in some cases, this shifting point of view is quite literal. The Girl likes seeing the world from different vantage points, like when she hangs upside down from the stop sign pole and observes the children “floating” toward the “pale blue sky” (18) while on the school playground.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary: “palm”

The Girl lists the plant life that grows in her neighborhood: palm and eucalyptus trees and white jasmine. Other girls make garlands out of the jasmine and wear them as the white flowers turn yellow with decay, but the jasmine’s fragrant scent remains. She describes the overwhelming heat of the sun during the day, which distorts various sensations. These sensations include the sound of children skipping rope, which reminds her of a broom cleaning a courtyard in another country. The reader can infer this to be Vietnam. This noise mingles with the sounds of a couple fighting. The scent of a ripe mango mingles with other odors: sweat, burning incense, clean clothes, and “apples and oranges quartered and offered, without any fuss, to both the dead and the living” (37). As day transitions to evening, the Girl—who speaks directly to the reader in the second person using the pronoun “you”—looks from the second story of her house to the swimming pool below as the memories of that day and all previous days return to her “like a school of fish” that “glide and flicker” (37) across the swimming pool.

The Girl returns to speaking in the first person through the pronouns “we” and “I.” She says the swimming pool is located in the courtyard next to the red apartment—the first home in which she, Ba, and Ma all live together in America. Ba finds the red apartment after Mel asks him and the Girl to depart his home. Ma joins them some time later. Despite not knowing how to drive, Ma grabs her pocketbook, takes Ba’s car keys one night, and hops into the Cadillac with her daughter. She crashes the car into the gate outside the red apartment. When Ba sees them, the mother defends herself, saying the “car was as big as a boat” (39). Ba returns the car to a family friend—an uncle from the previous chapter—who had originally gifted the car for Ma as a “Welcome to America” (40) present. Not knowing who broke the gates, the red apartment’s landlord develops a heightened animosity towards his tenants. The landlord spots an empty rice bag in a house on the same street. He recalls that a fire had destroyed the house, which had once been beautiful. He notes that the children in his building have taken to occupying the empty house. The landlord observes the nearby Church of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, which he compares to a castle with its looming towers. Somewhere in the red apartment, children cry and women speak “in a language the landlord didn’t understand” (42). He clears some leaves from the pool and goes to fix the washing machine.

The Girl describes her life with Ma and Ba in their one-bedroom apartment. Ma works as a seamstress from home, and Ba as a factory welder. Neither is content with their jobs. They all sleep in one room. A table with a lamp separates Ma and Ba’s bed from the Girl’s. The lamp bears a figure of a Chinese man holding a fishing pole. The Girl talks about boys in her apartment building who leap from the second floor of the building into the pool in the courtyard. Ma forbids the Girl to venture near the pool, saying that her daughter is “as small as a mouse” (44) and the pool is deep. Ma also issues warnings about the speed of cars, the dangers of sewing needles, and the sexual impulses of boys. But the Girl explains: “I wasn’t scared. I was curious” (44). She wonders what it would be like to jump as the boys do. She describes the boys’ playful antics and laughter upon diving. While her parents sleep, the Girl looks out the window and imagines fish, geckos, sand clouds, and horses. She wonders what it’s like to ride a horse.

The Girl and Ma go to the Chinese movie theater on the weekends. They watch movies with warriors who fight with swords and leap into the air. She impresses her mother by reading the violent subtitles in English. The Girl points her fingers like the warriors in the movie. Her mother cautions her, saying that her fingers will be fixed into that position if she’s not careful and “you’ll never be able to hold your chopsticks properly” (47). She compares her daughter’s

chicken pox scars to diamonds and urges her to marry someone who appreciates them. The daughter says she does not want to marry and instead would like to fly like the warriors in the film. The mother says that those people are just being "pulled along by invisible strings" though perhaps they once flew "a long time ago" (48).

The Jehovah's Witnesses come to the apartment to preach their religion. Ba tells them that they are Buddhists and shuts the door, even though Ma is a Catholic. The neighborhood children find the idyllic images of happy people in the Jehovah's Witnesses brochures hard to believe. The children play in the castle-like structure of the Church of the Jehovah's Witnesses by pretending to be the religious people in the brochures. The also wage fake wars and hurl cones from eucalyptus trees at one another.

Although the parents forbid their daughter from hanging out by the pool, Ma enjoys its presence because "it was nice to open the door and have some water" (51). During the evening hours, adults in the building sit on the terrace and chat about daily affairs while children—not including the Girl—play in the pool. The landlord arrives to install a new washing machine in the building when he catches a few boys jumping into the pool from a balcony. Afterward, a construction crew arrives, draining the pool of water and filling it with rocks. They plant a baby palm tree in the middle of the courtyard. Ba and Ma fight over the pool being drained; she thinks that what has replaced the water is ugly. Meanwhile, the Girl recalls vivid memories that she associates with the pool: "But what I remembered most were the boys, flying. I remembered their bodies arcing through the air and plunging down. I remembered how their hands parted the water and how as they disappeared, the last thing I would see were the pale soles of their feet" (55).

The Girl and her friend find the empty box that carried the new washing machine. They place it against a eucalyptus tree in the backyard of the abandoned house, and it becomes a new hangout spot known as "The Room."The parents call the abandoned home "the kids' house" (56). The Girl describes a variety of stained and destroyed furnishings in the house. She also spots photos of a couple, including a pale woman that sports red hair and looks unhealthy, although the Girl believes "her skin was probably soft to the touch" (56).

The children jump on a mattress in the house, pretending it can transport them "across oceans and into outer space" (57).Afterward, they buy candy and bike to a nearby playground. The children identify the scent of jasmine as they bike home. The Girl enters the Room alongside a boy. The boy puts his hand on her chest, and she responds by saying "Hey" (58).

She touches his arm and senses goosebumps forming. The voice of a mother—not her own—calling someone's name jolts the Girl out of the box, and she runs home with her sandals in her hand. Ma tells the Girl to wash her feet. The Girl thinks of the boy and places her fingers to her throat, imagining them as two sets of lips "feeling for a pulse" (59). At the Chinese movie theater, Ma runs into a man. Ma smiles at the man and tucks her hair behind her ear. After the man leaves, Ma explains to the Girl that he is a friend from Vietnam. The Girl asks if Ma knew the man when she was "young like me" and Ma replies, no, "a little older" (60). The Girl enters what she now calls the "kissing box" (60) with the same boy. Someone interrupts them and they leave.

The Girl witnesses Ma attempting to take off Ba's shoes on the bed while he is drunk. Ba pulls Ma to him in a loving embrace and she laughs at him playfully. The Girl enjoys watching her fingers make shapes in the dark: a fist, a bird's mouth, scissors, a page; a door that creaks as she closes it; running feet; and "a dive into deep water" (62). She describes the parties that a nearby uncle hosts, in which women cook, children play, and men drink. The family heads home from the party, and the car moves erratically at the curves in a road above eucalyptus trees. When the boy in the kissing room places his hand on her chest, she sees "[her] father's car sliding down the soft wall of the canyon" (63). She stops the boy and says "Hey" (63) as she did once before. She takes his hand and brings it to rest on the features of her face. She puts her lips to his palm and notes the sweet smell of his sweat. Noting the now-filled swimming pool, the Girl asks Ma what happens when someone sinks into water and does not return. Ma responds that she does not know. The Girl traces the lines on her palms and imagines they are trenches absent of people or rivers with uncertain direction. She sometimes feels no lines and imagines her palms as a desert, separated from the sky by only open space. She desires someone who would fall into this open space of her palms.

The Girl notes the features of a roller-coaster ride called the "Super-Loop" which stops at the top of the loop and momentarily leaves its passengers hanging upside down. She observes the people on the ground below as seeming strange and the ground itself looking like a picture—not something real. She describes her parents, who "jump around the house like two firecrackers" (66) during their chaotic fights. The girl places the blame for their fights on the sweltering heat and the absence of the pool. Ma grows upset when Ba is so drunk that he cannot kiss her. When her parents fight, the Girl sinks into the bathtub and pretends she is swimming in the ocean so that she can drown out their arguments. The parents try to appease their daughter after their fights with offers of candy and oranges.

The Girl notes that her mother sported long hair when she had just come to the U.S., but she cuts her hair that summer to appear more like a modern woman. Her mother doesn't want to be a seamstress any more. Ma sews bags of "houses, clouds, suns, trees and flowers" (68) that will be placed onto baby blankets in a factory. The Girl turns to Ba's work as a welder of space heaters. Ma wonders how the skinny space heaters can keep people warm and ignores Ba's explanations. Ba would prefer to be a gardener; he says that he could have "grown [them] a jungle in the courtyard" (69) in place of the palm tree.

The Girl and a friend lie in one of the towers of the Church of the Jehovah's Witnesses. She touches her breasts, which seem small to her and merely tickle her. Her friend is indignant and describes how her breasts hurt her. The friend says that the Girl resembles a boy—a brother of the Girl. She asks the Girl: "Is it true that you had a—" (71), but the Girl does not let her finish.

One day, Ma asks the Girl to purchase ice from the store for a party. The man running the grocery store says, "Hi there" (72), and the Girl repeats back the same phrase, comparing herself to a parrot. The Girl buys the ice and carries it home. She crosses the street and yells at a bum who refuses to cross the street. She sees the name RAMONE etched into the sidewalk along with the outlines of two palm prints. The Girl suddenly has the feeling that her brother is walking behind her. She wants to ask him questions, but says that "something kept [her] from going to him" (74). The feeling of her brother turns from warm to cold and becomes frightening. She runs home. The Girl tells her mother that she wanted to go to her brother, but her mother cuts her off and tells her to "Stop!" (76). When the father lifts the bag of ice from her arms, she sees that it has made her shirt wet and she can see the outline of her breasts, which now appear bigger, like "two fists full of sand" (76).The chapter concludes with the Girl weeping "into the desert of [her] palms" (77).

Chapter 2 Analysis

Animal metaphors continue to proliferate in this chapter. For example, the Girl likens herself to a parrot to make clear her ability to mirror other people's actions. Sound metaphors—like the girl describing Ma's elongation of the words "long time ago" (48) as similar to three stones being dropped consecutively into a well"—emerge in this chapter. sounds in general are used to create comic situations, such as the boy jumping into the pool who says "Meep meep!" (45) like the cartoon character of Roadrunner. Repetition of certain words to create a lasting impact on the reader is also a literary technique established in this chapter, such as when the

Girl invokes the phrase “I remembered” (55) multiple times to drive home the meaning of the pool when it was still full of water—full of life. Sunlight and moonlight also make things apparent in this chapter, such as when the girl sees things in the pool in the moonlight or when the sunlight reflects off a piece of glass and makes the road appear like a sparkly river. By extension, warmth—or heat—also figures prominently in this chapter, providing a means of connection, such as in the heat transmitted from skin to palm in the kissing room. The warmth can also disorient as it does in the beginning of the chapter when sounds and memories meld into one, and as it does after the Girl panics after feeling the heat of her brother, which quickly morphs into a chill down her spine.

Although shifting points of view among characters is common in this book, in this chapter, readers see a switch for the first time between the first-person usage of the word “I” and the second-person usage of the word “you.” This shift to “you” is an intentional literary device used in only a short section to better immerse the reader in the world of the red apartment so that we might feel as if we are looking over the second-floor railing into the pool in the courtyard ourselves, rather than the Girl. And the shifts in perspective from the Girl to the landlord illuminates a new perspective on the Vietnamese refugees that readers would be otherwise unable to glean from the Girl or her family.

Through the landlord, readers see a sort of latent racism, in which he negatively associates the reckless behavior of the boys jumping into the pool and the broken washing machines with their being Vietnamese refugees who let their children roam without supervision. This tendency to conflate refugees into one stereotype shows that while the Vietnamese immigrants have been physically accepted into the country, they are not always welcome, nor are “they” seen as Americans: “They were people who broke things; the washing machine, screen doors, kitchen sinks, windows, the back gate and now the front. And they let their children run wild” (41). Whiteness also appears a certain way from the perspective of the Girl when she sees a photo of a white woman with red hair in the abandoned house and assumes she has soft skin. Here, whiteness becomes the standard of beauty to emulate in America.

Readers also see a shift within the Girl as she undergoes puberty. For example, the Room or the cardboard box where she innocently plays with other children becomes the Kissing Box when she enters it with a boy and begins exploring her sexuality as adolescents do. She develops a heightened understanding of her growing body as she examines her breasts with a friend and becomes aware of the physical passion that Ma and Ba share in their love for each other. However, she still is a child and rejects notions like marriage when Ma tells her to marry

a man who appreciates her chicken pox scars. Although perhaps this rejection of conventional norms of marriage is not just due to childlike naivete, but an understanding of the dark side of marriage as seen in her parents' own relationship. But her understanding of adult relationships is still limited by her child-like naivete. She blames the weather and the now-filled-in swimming pool for their relationship woes, when clearly other more serious factors—such as her father's drunkenness and her mother's job dissatisfaction—contribute to the marital problems.

Simile also functions strongly in this chapter. A key example is when Ma encounters her old friend at the Chinese theater and is momentarily smiling, but then the two back away from each other like "a knot coming loose" (59) to demonstrate that their brief, but powerful connection is suddenly over. Symbols continue to pop up as well. Ma's pocketbook, which she carries with her everywhere, functions as a status symbol of power in America—much like Mel's keys in the previous chapter. The Cadillac functions as a symbol of American success and assimilation—a dream which is brought to a literal crashing halt when Ma backs it into the gates. And the Jehovah's Witness Tower functions as many things: a watchtower guarding the neighborhood, a place of heavenly refuge, and a fortress of war as emphasized by the children's staged fights there. As the Girl says, "When we got bored, Kingdom became about having fights and waging wars" (49).They often couldn't agree on which side had won, so they waged another war. This child-like statement illustrates the very real nature of why and how wars start in real-life. The eucalyptus tree—which we learn in a later chapter is common in Vietnam—also turns into a symbol of war when the children begin fighting with its cones.

And of course, the palm is the overarching symbol and title of this chapter.
There is the literal symbol of the palm tree, which is abundant in southern California and functions as a representation of America. When the pool is filled and replaced with the palm, the family loses the water which both separates but also binds them to Vietnam. They are stuck here in America now with this palm, which "looked as lonely as an island" (65). But palm takes on a double meaning as we see the girl's palms stroke the figure of a boy that she is attracted to her and as she traces the directionless lines on her hands. The lonely palm is not just an isolated tree—it is also the Girl herself. This becomes clear when the Girl momentarily faces the trauma of her brother's loss by clinging to a bag of ice. Afterward, she notices that she can't recognize her palms, which have been wrinkled by the ice. She cannot recognize herself. This emptiness that palms signify also manifest in other metaphors, such as comparisons to an empty desert or a lonely island.

The first reference to the dead also appears in this chapter, when the Girl mentions offering incense on the altar of the deceased. The Girl asks Ma about someone sinking into the water, which is more than just a passing morbid curiosity. Her question alludes to her brother's death, which readers will learn about later in the book. A passing mention of her brother is first made when the Girl's friend begins to inquire about her brother and the Girl shuts down the conversation. Similarly, she feels her brother beckoning her on a walk home from the store and she feels drawn to him but also stops herself from following him. Ma's reaction to the Girl mentioning the brother indicates the trauma surrounding the memory of him and how the family, including the Girl, has adopted a tactic of silence to avoid dealing with his memory. She dreads the lull of silence in her parents' fights and fills the tub with water to mask the quiet. The "quiet" happens in both the Kissing Box and when her parents fight, and it unsettles her: "And when the awful quiet came, I'd break it by filling the tub with more and more water" (67).

In this chapter, everything comes back to water, like the lines on the palm of the Girl's hand being compared to rivers, or when she looks at the world from upside-down in the roller coaster: "You could lift up a corner of that ground and there would be nothing beneath it. Except maybe water" (65). She compares bodies to water: "Beside me my parents long and dark bodies rising and falling like waves" (61). Water continues to undergird the book, and readers are getting closer to fully understanding why and how it shapes the Girl's life. Some of that understanding comes out in Ma's warnings to the Girl when she forbids her from playing in the pool. This highlights Ma's cautious nature versus the Girl's daring one. Ma issues other fantastical warnings, such as that swallowing fruit seeds will lead to trees sprouting inside of you. But the Girl is curious—not scared—of the world around her, which we see in her explorations of the abandoned house and the Kissing Room. Also, Ma's superstitious nature, which comes out in these conversations with the Girl, contrast with Ba's more practical sensibilities. This comes out in the conversation about space heaters, in which Ma worries that the space heaters that Ba welds will go out of business because they are too skinny, despite Ba's explanations of their functional sensibility.

The girl's attention to detail also reflects the curiosity of a child and possibly foreshadows her becoming a writer. She describes the 16 steps up to the apartment, as well as her parents sleeping and her mother's hair fanning out behind her. She describes the kind of items that they find in the abandoned house, which she describes with specificity, like "eight bent spoons" or "two chairs with missing legs" (56).Color continues to play a minor role in the

chapter and highlight the girl's attentive nature and the way she observes her world. When her mother sews items for blankets, the girl notes a white house, a brown roof, green grass, and "sun the yellow of lemons" (68). Readers also start to see the significance in names—or rather, the lack thereof. The Girl refuses to name herself, and we will not understand why that is the case until the end of the book. When a friend refers to her, the Girl merely says, "And she said my name" (71). Smells, such as the scent of jasmine as the children play and the scent of sweat in the Kissing Box, also add sensory details that bring the reader into the Girl's experience.

Lastly, readers become introduced to Ba's alcoholism and the effect that it has on his family, such as when he drunkenly drives his family home: "As my father drove us home, the Mercury Cougar lurched at each curve in the road, as if it wanted to leap toward the stands of eucalyptus in the canyon below" (62). From this line, we also get a sense that there is a great deal of falling in this chapter, whether it is the imagined sense of Ba's car falling into a ravine, boys falling into the pool, or someone falling into the empty space of the girl's palms to soothe her loneliness. Falling becomes a metaphor for the Girl's emotional dive in this chapter as she grapples with memories of her brother, puberty, and family issues.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary: "the gangster we are all looking for"

The Girl describes her perception of Vietnam through the lens of her grandparents: "Vietnam is a black-and-white photograph of my grandparents sitting in bamboo chairs in their front courtyard" (78). Her grandparents—who come from the south of Vietnam and are Catholic—disown Ma for marrying Ba. Ba is a "Buddhist gangster from the North" (79) and that factor likely plays a role in the grandparents' disapproval. Before meeting Ba, Ma had been courted by suitors who ran errands for her parents, but she says that she didn't understand what love was at the time. She says that "love came to her in a dark movie theater" (79) where she sees Ba for the first time. She's memorizes the features of his handsome face, which she recalls after being separated from her family. Ma dreams about the end of the war, smokes cigarettes with Ba, and is recklessly in love. These actions contrast with the image of the responsible daughter that she projects to her parents. She becomes sullen around her family and spends her nights thinking of Ba's hands and what Vietnam had been like prior to the war with America, which dropped chemicals onto the trees that left them empty of leaves.

The Girl's first memory of her father's face is a bit different. She remembers seeing him

through barbed wire at a military site in Vietnam. Ma calls his name—Anh Minh—through the wire in a loving manner: "She wants to be engulfed by him. Anh Minh, em My. Anh Min, em My" (82). When the gates open and her parents meet, the Girl says they act like they're "meeting for the first time, savoring the sound of a name, marveling at the bones of a face cupped by the bones of the hand" (82). Ba tells a story of his origins: he comes from a "semi-aristocratic northern family" (82) and cites his long second toe as proof of his aristocratic blood. Due to his "tall nose" (88)—uncommon among the Vietnamese—Ba claims to be the son of a French mistress of his Vietnamese father. After finding this out, Ba runs away to south Vietnam. However, no one can confirm Ba's story. Ma compares Ba's toes to two sets of five fishing boats, in which his long toe—the second boat—always leads.

The Girl describes her birth in an alley behind her grandparents' house. Her father is away fighting in the war with America. Her mother lives with her sister, who cares for the Girl's older brother. On the night the Girl is born, Ma leaves the house where she lives and walks alone across the beach. She feels intense labor pains. Ma looks at a long metal tube in front of the schoolhouse and pictures it as the "badly burnt arm of a dying giant buried in the sand" (86). Ma thinks of a girl who walked outside during a napalm bombing—a type of chemical warfare—and was killed, leaving her body to float in the sea. Ma cries thinking about the giant and the girl. Ma feels unsafe and tries to go inside the tube where she sometimes slept as a child, but her pregnant belly stops her from getting inside. The next subsection of this chapter refers to tall noses—presumably, the Girl's. An unknown voice says that "[t]all voices come from somewhere—" and another voice replies, "Not from here" (86). Ma refuses to entertain the judgmental accusations from strangers that the Girl's father is an American soldier, stating: "[S]he knows where she pulled me from" (87). War is dangerous, but those who survive it—like the Girl—are both a "curse and a miracle" (87).

We pivot now to Anh, who is the Girl's next-door-neighbor and friend. Ba refers to Anh as "the chicken egg girl" (88) because she sells eggs from a cart and her backyard is filled with chickens. The family lives in a yellow house on Westinghouse Street in Linda Vista, which is a village in San Diego. They reside in former Navy housing, which now houses many refugees from the Vietnam War. She says that the homes in Linda Vista are "painted in peeling shades of olive green, baby blue, and sun-baked yellow" (88). By contrast, the homes in the new Navy housing units in another part of Linda Vista seem to be filled with more affluent families. The children of these homes are given designations like "Most Popular, Most Beautiful, Most Likely to Succeed" (89) in school. However, the majority of students, who are Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian refugees, are not given any such positive designations in school. The

children in these new Navy housing units refer to their refugee classmates as the racist, generic moniker “Yang” (89), despite these children coming from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Ma says that Anh’s house reminds her of Vietnam because the blue tarp covering her backyard seems similar to the blue of the South China Sea bordering Vietnam. The Girl asks, “If the sky and sea can follow us here, why can’t people?” (89). Ma brushes off her question. Meanwhile, Ba has become a gardener and runs a business called “Tom’s Professional Gardening Service” and enlists his daughter’s help to serve as secretary for the business because she speaks English more fluently than he does. The Girl notes that their area is hot and that people often perceive the refugees’ homes as dirty. She also says that these strangers are not aware of the care that they’ve put into their homes through herb gardens filled with lemongrass or Ba’s staircase that he hand-built. She contrasts this home in Linda Vista with her previous home in the Green Apartment, which seems less welcoming with a clanging gate and steps plastered in fake grass. But what prompts them to leave the Green Apartment is the discovery that the building manager has murdered a woman. Ma does not want to live in the presence of the woman’s ghost, so they move to Linda Vista and find a community of “Vietnamese people like us, whose only sin was a little bit of gambling and sucking on fish bones and laughing hard and arguing loudly” (91).

Ma is upset with Ba for becoming drunk and gambling away their money, so she shaves her head. Ba offers her a blue baseball cap to cover her shaved head, which the Girl says Ma wears “like a real badass” (91). Some community members think Ma is crazy, but the Girl brushes off their judgments. A photo of Ma’s parents arrives from Vietnam—likely the one mentioned at the beginning of the chapter—and causes her to cry because she feels that she abandoned her parents. When Ba says that her parents forgive her, Ma tells him to remove his gangster hands. This causes Ba to become upset and punch the wall until they bleed. He yells, “Let me see the gangster! Let me see his hands!” (92). Ma throws dishes and plates out the window to relieve her anguish while the Girl gulps air in the hallway, traumatized by witnessing her parents’ turmoil. Ba sinks his bloodied hands into their home’s fish tank, gets into his car, and leaves. To stop the neighborhood children from staring at her parents’ troubling behavior, the Girl dances wildly to distract them and stares them down when they mock her. In an act of penance, Ma moves her parents symbolically into her home by placing their photo in the attic with the help of her daughter. Ba comes home drunk and rolls and cries on the rooftop, scaring the Girl. Ma gets on the rooftop with him. The Girl says, “And all night, two bodies rolled across my ceiling” (95).

An eviction notice arrives, but the family does not believe they can be kicked out of their home, so they throw it out. The notice says that the new owner of the buildings on the block intends to build new properties with higher rents that the current residents cannot afford. The owner puts up a fence, which Ba and a few uncles break through to retrieve their family's possessions after they've been evicted. Ma cries and wonders why a fence is always keeping them out and making them move from place to place. Ma realizes that she has left behind the photograph of her parents and says she has "left them to die" (98). She wants to go back to the home to collect the photograph, but Ba and the uncles don't understand. After the Girl's home is torn down, signs are put up describing the new family homes that will occupy the block. The Girl hears someone—likely her mother—calling "Ma/Ba, Ma/Ba" like "two butterfly wings rubbing against [her] ear" (99). She imagines the photo being crushed by the wrecking ball and says that there is blood in her throat as she recites this story.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The Girl says that when she looks at the photo of her older grandparents: "I always envision a beginning. To or toward, I don't know, but always a beginning" (78). There are many ways to interpret this statement, but one is that no matter our age, we always have the opportunity to start over and build a new future for ourselves, which reflects on the Girl's tendency to keep running and starting over towards a new beginning throughout her adult life in later chapters.

In this chapter, the importance of facial profiles emerges, particularly in the context of Ma's relationship with Ba and her daughter. Ma memorizes all the details of Ba's face, which serves as "a warm companion for her body on the edge of the sea" (80) as she resides in Vietnam separated from her family. This detail will become important later on in the book when Ma stares at the Girl's face while her father is away at war because she so closely resembles her husband whom she misses. Names also become increasingly significant in this chapter, such as when Ma utters her husband's name after a long separation: "His name becomes a tree she presses her body against [...] when she utters her own name, it is the second half of a verse that begins with his" (82). These lines also serve to illustrate how deeply in love these two are and how dependent they are on upon one another, even if that love is not always healthy. The Girl recognizes this joint nature of her parents when she says the went from being like two dogs chasing each other in their youth to "one dog, one tail" (95). She attests to the overwhelming power of her parents' love, which is so strong that the Girl is pulled along by that love like "the silken banner on the body of a kite" (82).

Like in previous sections, metaphors serve to illustrate the cinematic quality of this book and the strong depth of characters' emotions. We feel like we are the Girl and are better able to visualize scenes from the book to the precise language and literary metaphors, such as in this scene where the Girl imagines dead fishes after seeing her father sink his bloodied hands into their fish tank: "I am drinking up the spilt water and swallowing whole the beautiful tropical fish, their brilliant colors gliding across my tongue, before they can hit the ground, to cover themselves in dirt until only the whites of their eyes remain, blinking at the sun" (93). The Girl becomes like one of the fish, tormented by her parents' behavior, swimming in circles and unable to "see for all the blood" (93). Related water metaphors permeate this chapter. The sea—and by extension, the color blue—serves as a reminder of Vietnam through the swimming pool and the blue tarp over Anh's home. This sense of memory is shattered when they search for the "blue sea" in the wreckage of their home after the eviction and find a "flat world" (99) instead.

Readers also see the return of boat metaphors. Ma is abandoned alongside boats. Ba's toes are described as like boats. Children sit a topa tube like it's a "canopied raft" (85). These boat icons tie into the overwhelming effects of the war, which pervade this chapter and affects Ma in particular, who cries thinking of these dead bodies and feels frightened and alone in a world at war. The cruel effects of the war are succinctly summarized in this eloquent simile: "[W]ar is a bird with a broken wing flying over the countryside, trailing blood and burying crops in sorrow" (87).The trauma of war is transmitted directly to the Girl through her mother's grief and fright, which leads Ma to state that she could have thrown the Girl against a wall so she could cough up the war that is killing them. The Girl says that her mother carries around her burdens like "invisible bundles no one but she can reveal" (96).

But the Girl recognizes that there is no end to water, which she says "crosses oceans like a splintered boat" (87) in yet another poignant boat metaphor. The war precipitates the family's flight to America—the site of their new home despite the fact that it was America that destroyed their country. The war continues in the trauma it leaves behind in Ba, Ma, the Girl, and other refugees. This grief transfers to the Girl, who in addition to suffering from the loss of her own brother and upheaval to a new land, has to bear witness to her parents' trauma, saying:"I breathe in the breaking and the bleeding" (93). She carries on this trauma like the waves of the sea, unable to fully break from the weight of her family as her feet carry her "to and away from, to and away from, family" (96).

She illustrates how war makes people feel helpless like children, and how parenthood disrupts the bond between our child selves and adult selves. Ma wants to hide in the tube like she did when she was a child, but her pregnant belly—the obligations of motherhood—prevents her from returning to that childlike state. Her marriage to Ba at a young age and Ma's abandonment of her parents when she flees Vietnam also forces her prematurely into adulthood, leading Ma to call herself a "child" (92) when a photo from Vietnam reminds her of her fractured relationship with her parents. Ba's status as a gangster from North Vietnam tears a wedge between Ma and her family, and Ma references his gangster side whenever she wants to renounce him. Ba, in turn, becomes violent, thus reinforcing the gangster perception. The Girl, witnessing his violent behavior, declares: "When I grow up, I am going to be the gangster we are all looking for" (93), suggesting that trauma and learned behavior continues on to the next generation. When the wrecking ball crushes their home and the photo of the grandparents, it symbolically severs the connection between Ma and her parents, effectively burying their relationship into the ground.

This chapter reveals what it feels like to be an immigrant or an outsider from mainstream American culture. One example is the form requiring that building residents—who are largely from Southeast Asia where fish is common in the diet—not put "fish bones" (88) in the garbage disposal. The treatment of children at school comprised of majority refugee students from southeast Asia is another example. None of these children are seen by their peers or their teachers as being equals to their non-refugee peers. Once again, like how Mr. Russell conflates the Vietnamese refugees with the Samoans in the first chapter, here, the children conflate all the Asian children under the stereotypical moniker of "Yang" (89). "Yang" functions as a racial slur here to distinguish the Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian children from their non-Asian peers. These divisions also manifest in the silver fence erected to keep out the primarily Vietnamese tenants on the block in Linda Vista. It functions as a symbol of class and racial divides separating the Vietnamese refugees from the wider community, and a symbol of the forces at work that prevent people like Ma, Ba, and the Girl from having a permanent home—the American dream. There are also a few examples of how xenophobia forms within ethnic groups in Vietnam. For example, people spit at Ma and suspect the Girl is the daughter of an American soldier due to her "tall nose" (88), even though she inherited that from Ba.

The Girl also describes how their refugee status alienates them in more subtle ways, such as when she imagines that the strangers passing by their homes perceive them as dirty. Yet she challenges that xenophobia when she says that these strangers aren't aware of their lush

gardens full of herbs or the faux "Great Wall of China." These are objects that the Girl presents with pride for her culture and the home—the community—that her people have built here in America. But then, once she has been forced to leave her home, the Girl realizes that the Great Wall is just a piece of cardboard—a flimsy defense against outside forces who would do harm to her community, like the property owners who evicted her family. This otherness also surfaces when the family must mask their Vietnamese identity in order to survive or assimilate within white America. A key example is how Ba picks a stereotypically Anglo name (Tom) for his business, puts a photo of a generic man mowing lawns on his business cards, and has his young daughter—who speaks English more fluently than Ba—to serve as his secretary. The situation also illustrates the adult roles that immigrant children often occupy for their parents in America due to cultural and language barriers that their parents face. The Girl's strong-willed nature comes out in defense of herself and her family as well, such as when she stares at a boy mocking her "as if [her] eye is a bullet and he can be dead" (94).

Once again, colors play a role in this chapter, illustrating that all is not well in Linda Vista. There is a sense that the homes may be decrepit through the drab descriptions of brown and yellow houses, "same as ours, watching us like a sad twin" (88).Ghosts also pervade this chapter, such as the idea of the ghost of the murdered woman in the green apartment; the ghost of Ma's parents who haunt Ma for abandoning them; and the ghost of the Girl's brother, whose presence follows her as she walks home from the grocery store. Distance cannot stop these ghosts. When the Girl worries that she has pushed the photo of her grandparents too far out of reach in the attic, Ma says, "[S]ometimes you don't need to see or touch people to know they're there" (94). Her words can also refer to the Girl's dead brother, whom she feels despite not be able to touch or see him.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary: "the bones of birds"

The Girl encounters someone from her old neighborhood in Linda Vista and pretends not to know him, even when he says her name and calls her a liar. She says that her father—whom she now refers to as her father instead of Ba—taught her how to move forward even when the body is broken. Throughout the Girl's adolescence, her father fights imaginary enemies while drunk in the alley outside her window. When a neighbor yells at him, her father threatens to kill all the residents with a single shot. The Girl imagines the bullet piercing and pulling all of them close together, "suspended against the blue sky like a string of fish Ba hoists high from one end" (101).

One chilly fall night when she is 16, the Girl runs away from home while barefoot. In the spring, she encounters the aforementioned man who recognizes her. However, she isn't ready to return to her parents' turbulent home, so she keeps running. She wonders what season it is when she wakes up in a one-room apartment "thousands of miles away from the streets where [she] grew up" (102). Across the street from her apartment, the sun shines on a red brick building. She hears her father's voice calling from within it. She describes a black-and-white photograph of him looking warily toward the camera. The Girl discusses the numerous rumors about the roles her father may have occupied in the past: soldier; heroin addict; lady's man; a runaway from home; a member of a South Vietnamese army unit trained by Americans. His friends perish in the war, but somehow, he survives and makes his way to this life.

She thinks of her father in different scenarios: wearing a fedora befitting a gangster; pointing a gun toward an unknown figure in the dark; running away from his own father; and passed out in a cold sweat. She returns to a memory from her childhood in Vietnam, where her smiling father heads off somewhere—likely to war—and she fixates on a swinging branch of coconut tree that appears to wave and sigh at her like a person. Her earliest memories are filled with images of her father leaving. People tell her she resembles him in appearance and personality, including his temper and his charm. Because of the similarities between father and daughter, her mother will closely study the Girl's face, "as though floating just beneath [the Girl's] own gaze was the reflection of [her] father, hundreds of dark miles away" (105).

The Girl takes us back to the night her father carries her to the boat that will take her out of Vietnam. Her father is unable to go back for her mother and realizes that her voice must have been among those calling for help as they leave on the boat. This memory haunts him years after he reunites with his family. Her father works as a house painter, a welder, and then as a gardener in America. The Girl checks out books on plants for her father, and they learn about varieties of palm trees. The climate in southern California is similar to Vietnam and so similar trees like eucalyptus grow in both locations. He keeps his client's lawns green but does not interact much with them. He carries home roses from his work and jokingly announces that he has fruits for sale. She watches her father stare deeply at spaces on walls behind her: "[H]is eyes moving like an arrow through my hair, pinning me to my place" (107). They speak in terse conversations punctuated with silence, platitudes about the weather, and questions

about whether she has eaten already. The Girl goes to her room and leaves him sitting in the dark of the kitchen. When her mother returns from work, he accounts for the darkness by saying:“I lost track of the time” (108).

She returns to the night that she and her father leave Vietnam. She waits in the boat for him. He arrives and kisses her hair to comfort her even though she does not cry. The first night in the refugee camp in Singapore, she hears someone crying and realizes that the crying person is her father. She views a cloud crossing the moon and says that time has come to a stop, but then it continues “inexplicably, incredibly” (111). The next page shifts from the first-person narrative storytelling to a slightly satirical news announcement about a Vietnamese man and a girl—likely his daughter—roaming aimlessly around a grocery store and observing random objects without purchasing anything. They then leave the store. The chapter shifts back to the first-person point of view to describe how the Girl and her father walk sleeplessly around the neighborhood observing window displays during those first two years without Ma in America. They’re particularly impressed by the nicely-dressed, headless mannequins in a clothing boutique. They go to a bakery where the pastries are French, but the owner is Mexican. He listens to English tapes and practices speaking the language by saying “Hello” (112) to a bag of flour. They go to the grocery store and ride the bus to the beach, watching the empty city at 3 a.m.

Following Ma’s arrival to America and their move to Linda Vista, her father meets his closest friend, who is also a Vietnamese man. They drink beer and talk about their youthful past in Vietnam and about the war, particularly how its end felt like “waking from a long dream or a long nightmare” (113). They talk about other things in the past, such as the scent of the first rain after a period of drought or a particular fruit like dragon fruit. They also agree that the color red—possibly a representation of the bloodshed of the war—is in the past.

In the next section of the chapter, her father spells out his name—Minh—in English as he walks around the house. But the Girl notes that “before he could spell out his whole name, the letter preceding the one to appear would often be gone” (114), and he searches for the letters like a blind man unsure of the correct route. Without realizing it, her father digs a trench around a palm tree in a client’s garden. He also walks home drunk from a friend’s home. He orders himself to “Stand up straight!”(116)like a soldier. He throws items in a rage and brandishes knives before suddenly becoming still. The Girl observes her father so closely because she sees him as foreshadowing her own future. The Girl runs away, kicking down windows and doors to “get to the street, at any cost” (117). She sleeps on strangers’ lawns

and rooftops. Her father sees the Girl watching her through a window and catches her by the head, asking her what she saw. The Girl tries to repress memories of everything painful, but she can't shake the memory of her brother, "whose body lay just beyond reach, forming the shape of a distant shore" (118).

Prior to the Girl leaving home, her father gets her from a shelter where she is staying. In a session with counselors, her father apologizes not just "for what his hands had done" but what "his hands had not been able to do" (118). The counselors frown at him and the Girl thinks they have no place to judge her father, so she leaves the shelter with him. The Girl calls Ma to let her know that she is moving to the East Coast for college. Ma would like her to stay in San Diego. Ma asks if the Girl is hungry—what she says "in lieu of 'I love you'" (119). Ba visits the Girl in her dreams. In one dream, they share a room. She pretends to be asleep, but she can tell that he is leaving forever. He sports a blue trench coat and a fedora. He disappears through a door without needing to open it. In what appears to be reality, the Girl returns to pick a fight with her father, only to find that his hands are covered in dirt and profusely swollen—presumably due to one of his rages. This sight pains the Girl. Years later, her father calls the Girl on the phone and asks for help in English followed by the word "Ba" in Vietnamese. Although she is shaken by his tearful pleas, the Girl does not know how to ease his pain. She says that people like her father "crumble into their own shadows" (122).

The Girl cycles through her memories of her past. These include visiting the Mexican bakery and the house on Westinghouse Street in Linda Vista; waiting among the homeless to apply for immigration documents; and her father dancing in a canyon as the scent of eucalyptus wafts overhead. The Girl recalls a party that her father took her to in Florida Canyon. During the party, she grows bored and walks outside, where she sees her drunken father swaying through the window. He laughs as his dance moves pick up pace. His laughter turns to sobs. The Girl thinks of the bones of birds and a "prized pebble in in [her] palm" (124). She makes her hand into a fist and presses it to her body.

Chapter 4 Analysis

In this chapter, the Girl moves from childhood to teenage years and eventually to adulthood, abandoning any pretense of childhood innocence as she seeks to escape the intergenerational trauma of her family. But they always find a way back to her, such as when her father appears in her dreams or when he unexpectedly calls her asking for help. In previous chapters, physical distance and vast tracts of sea could not prevent the Girl and her parents from remembering the everyday memories of Vietnam, the trauma of the war, and her

brother's death, which come back to haunt them. Likewise, despite traveling across the country, the Girl cannot escape the yoke of her family. She realizes that bonds don't cease just because you live in separate places.

Like in previous chapters, names continue to haunt the Girl in "the bones of birds."She keeps herself at bay from her own name, refusing to acknowledge the painful memories associated with it, even when a resident of her old neighborhood calls: "I let that name fall all around me, never once sticking to me. […] I kept moving as the lilting syllables of my name fell around me like licks of flame that extinguished on contact, never catching" (100). It's a notable stylistic and symbolic literary technique on the part of the author to leave the reader in the dark about the Girl's real name, and the reason for this will be made clear in the author's note. The previous sentence also contains a metaphor for fire. These fiery metaphors continue even after the Girl runs away from home, when she describes the turbulent situation in her home as akin to a "house that was one fire" (103).

It's also telling that the Girl runs away while barefoot in a sort of direct refusal to her mother's request in a previous chapter that she put on shoes after playing outside. The Girl demarcates the passage of time by seasons. In previous chapters, she focuses on the heat of the summer. Here, she references the cold autumn night and the blooming jacarandas that indicate spring has come. And then she runs through the seasons like a blur to indicate a number of years have passed: "I ran past the summer and into another fall, another spring, another summer, and I kept running" (102). Similar to repetition of phrases like "I remember" in previous chapters, the Girl repeats in this chapter the phrase "I fly" (123) to illustrate that she is metaphorically—if not literally—flying over the memories of her family's past. "I fly over the coastline of our town in Vietnam […] I fly over Westinghouse Street and see the pink condominiums with their fenced-in swimming pools built after they kicked us out of our house" (123).

Ba's trauma, which is possibly an undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to his status as a Vietnam War veteran, becomes abundantly clear in this chapter. It is one of the primary reasons that compels the Girl to leave her parents' house. A part of Ba is still stuck in the past as a soldier in Vietnam. The Girl observes: "I listened as he tackled the air, wrestled invisible enemies to the ground, punched his own shadow" (100). His trauma also stems from his abandonment of his wife on the beach in Vietnam, which we understand when the Girls

explains: “[E]ven after our family was reunited, my father would remember those voices as a seawall between Vietnam and America or as a kind of floating net, each voice linked to the next by a knot of grief” (105).

Ba’s habit of staring at strange places off in the distance, “as though watching storm clouds gather on the horizon” (107) may also be a sign of PTSD or behavior from his days as a soldier that he is unable to relinquish. The same could be said for how he orders himself around like a soldier while drunk. The after effects of the war also manifest in the way that he instinctually digs a trench—a relic of the war—around a palm tree. They manifest in his habitual drunkenness—a way to numb the pain—and his violent outbursts. Despite her father’s assertions to his friend that the war is in the past, it is evident that it lives on his mind and actions every day. He floats in an out of consciousness of reality; Girl compares him to a train whistle saying: “I’m here and gone, here and gone!” (124). Despite his rages, the way the Girl describes him makes him seem brittle and frail—like the birds of bones, as referenced in the chapter’s title.

This chapter, more so than any other, underscores how similar the Girl is to her father—like father, like daughter. He is a runaway trying to escape his past and his family; he is “fast and light on his feet” (103) like the Girl. He combines wariness with defiance. He passes on to her his methods of coping with emotional pain, such as moving forward by ignoring the root cause of one’s trauma. These comparisons between father and daughter start in childhood, when women in the village in Vietnam tell her: “You have his eyes, his nose, his dark skin, his silence” (104). And the Girl herself closely examines her father, “certain [she] saw [her] future in him” (116), suggesting the inevitability that we will inherit our parents’ traits—including the less-than-pleasant ones.

Yet the Girl also asserts that their ways of coping with trauma differ and thus establishes that she is her own person. Whereas her father retreats inward and is unable to change his circumstances, the Girl forces a change in her situation: she runs away from anyone she could grow close to, “shattering to the bone whatever dared come too near to [her]” (117). But she and her father are still alike. Like him, she tries to forget painful memories of the past like the refugee camp; being new immigrants in America; and “the bruises that blossomed on the people” (118) who suffer from her father’s rages. This sense of distance from her past also manifests in the language shift from the personal “Ba” to the impersonal “my father” used in this chapter.

Despite the distance between them, they do momentarily bond together to defend themselves against those who would critique them, such as when the Girl leaves the judgmental counselors and holds her father's hand, "running to the car as though [they] were escaping together again" (119). Ba and the Girl are perpetually linked by their pain, even though the Girl is at a loss as to how help her father, which pains her. Her mother is less of a presence in this chapter, but her love for her daughter manifests despite the distance—both physical and mental—between them when she asks her daughter whether she is hungry—her way of showing love. We also begin to see a growing physical and emotional distance between her parents, as her mother dismissively says that she'll pass on her daughter's telephone message to her husband whenever he returns from wherever he has escaped to this time.

This chapter also makes clear the separation between members of different socioeconomic and ethnic groups in America. Although her father performs work for upper-class California residents, there is no interaction between him and his clients. It is purely a transactional relationship: "So long as he kept the grass green, there was no reason for them to meet" (106).The challenges of the immigrant experience continue to play a strong role in this chapter, as her father tries with difficulty to spell out his name in English. Their experience as immigrants to America also brings occasional moments of lighthearted fun, such as when the Girl and her father delight in observing the wide array of items in a stationery store. However, the headless mannequins subtly indicate the class divisions within America by their "crisp clothes" and the Girl's observations that they would be the kind of humans with "straight, white teeth and no bones, only muscles" (111). These are the things that money can buy in America. Another immigrant's experience of grappling with assimilation and making it in America is evident through the example of the Mexican bakery owner, who sells French pastries and practices learning English on cassette tapes while he works. But there are limits to even the power of language, as when the Girl says of helping her father: "I could say nothing—in any language—to make him stop" (122).

Darkness also acts as a recurring motif in this chapter. It first appears when her father sits in the darkness letting the day pass by as he's lost in his thoughts. It reappears again when the Girl describes the darkness as they set out from Vietnam on the boat. The darkness serves as a rather literal symbol of the emotional turmoil that has been cast on members of the family by the trauma induced by the war. The darkness appears a third time when the Girl realizes her father is crying and a cloud covers the moon for a moment, and she says that "time stopped" (109) before continuing. There is no going back from this moment when the trauma of the war—and the separation her family will endure—first becomes apparent to the Girl.

However, the fact that she mentions that time continues on is significant. The short statement indicates that despite whatever darkness befalls her, she will continue to move forward.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary: “nước”

The phone rings as her father watches firemen put out wildfires on the television screen. The phone keeps ringing as he watches scenes from a flood. Then he watches two politicians shaking hands. And then a scene of a woman wearing a blue kerchief and standing in a green field emerges. She speaks in a foreign language, points to the ground, and slowly shakes her head. The phone keeps ringing. He waters the potted plants on the stairs and a dog that he rescued from the side of the highway comes running out. The phone stops ringing.

The story abruptly shifts to state that the body of the Girl’s brother was pulled from the South China Sea 20 years ago. The body lies on the beach afterward, surrounded by friends and family. She says the moment is warped and lingers like “summer heat” (127). Her grandfather appears on the beach and picks up her brother. He carries her brother across the courtyard and into the house. That night, the Girl spots the lights on the fishermen’s squid boats as they float at sea, which calm her when she has trouble sleeping. She looks at her brother’s body and wishes that the women in the courtyard would stop crying and turn off the oil lamps so she and her brother can sleep.

We return to Linda Vista, where the Girl describes her father watering potted plants like desert rose on the steps of the apartment. The father thinks back on the television images of the charred remains of people’s homes from the fires and the woman in the field of grass, wondering what she was looking at. Meanwhile, the dog chases its tail on the steps. He recalls seeing a white dog by barking by a hillside as if protecting it, which compels him to take the animal home. He re-enters the apartment and finally realizes the intensity of the volume of the television, so he turns it down.

The Girl shifts back to Vietnam, where her mother is surrounded by women who tell her that her dead son is filled with “bad water” (131) and she may lose all her children to that same fate because the bad water has been brought inside the house. Her mother thinks of her husband who is in a reeducation camp for Vietnamese soldiers that fought for the Americans. She goes to the well in the courtyard. She sees her reflection in the bucket of water, grows

upset, and pushes it back into the well. The sound of the bucket hitting the water fills her with “a violent sense of pleasure” (131), as if she is punishing the water for hurting her son. Her father—the Girl’s grandfather—reaches out to embrace her, but she imagines blood and water rushing out from his hands and she runs past him.

The Girl’s father sits on a bed in San Diego. He’ll head to the Vietnamese restaurant at midnight where his wife works to pick her up. He thinks the restaurant overcharges for bowls of pho—a type of Vietnamese soup—for American customers. He also thinks his wife is underpaid. His wife wants her own restaurant, but they can’t afford that. He offers her to work as a gardener with him, but she says, “You’re very particular. I would be afraid of watering the plants wrong” (133). Nonetheless, he pictures them gardening in old age in a town in Vietnam far from the sea.

The narrative flashes back in time in Vietnam. The women who warned about the bad water return to pray for the dead child while chickens strut behind them. The Girl’s brother lies on a straw mat in the house. She thinks her grandfather might tell her brother to get up, but he does not. She and her grandfather play a game where he pretends to pluck a star from the sky and place it in her palm. The Girl throws the pretend star toward her brother in hopes that it will make him move.

The narrative returns to the Girl's father lying in bed in Linda Vista while the phone rings and the dog jumps. He focuses on the dog and ignores the fact that “someone was calling for him” (135). The next scene flashes back to Vietnam, where the Girl's mother tries to persuade a Vietnamese soldier to allow her husband to return for the funeral. The soldier is unsympathetic as he observes her mother crying. He hears the anger in her voice when she tells him to leave. Shifting back to the Girl’s father, we learn that he avoids the calls because he fears it is his estranged father calling from Vietnam.

Back in Vietnam, her mother argues with the Girl’s grandfather about his decision to bring the boy into the house. She asks the Girl’s grandfather if the body was heavy. She guesses that the water was heavy and made the boy so. In Linda Vista, her father ignores the phone ringing by going fishing, even though signs state that it is illegal to fish there. He says that if the police come by, he’ll pretend not to understand English. He reflects on how he came to the U.S. more than twenty years ago and had hardly left the city of San Diego since. He contrasts the bright lights of the city with the dark water at his feet.

In Vietnam, the narrative depicts the funeral of the dead son from the perspective of the child himself. He laughs at the funeral activities like people dressed in white—a color for mourning in Vietnam—and at the incense blowing everywhere. He sees his sister trying to squirm away from his mother, who clutches her daughter's hand. His sister just wants to find her brother, who she thinks is hiding behind a tombstone.

Switching to her father in California, the Girl describes her father driving and seeing homeless people. He picks up her mother as she stands by a stop sign and considers stepping into the light illuminated by a lamppost. We learn about how her father was dropped off at the side of a highway upon release from the re-education camp. He walks to his in-laws' home. He wishes he could shed his clothes along with "the entire war [...] like a useless skin" (144). He reminds himself that his son is dead and that he should not blame the sea. He arrives at the house, where Ma is astonished to see him. Meanwhile, the Girl peers intently into the well, looking for something that she has lost. Back in California, her mother asks her father if he is okay since he bears a troubled expression on his face. She closes her eyes in the car—not to nap, but to avoid her husband's strange expression.

In Vietnam, the Girl hears women gossip about how the Girl's brother died. He jumped between boats and likely slipped and hit his head, falling into a watery hole. In her imagination, the hole becomes an underwater house like theirs, except with fish instead of chicken. She says that her brother became "as smooth and brilliant as polished bone" (146) like the sea shells that her grandfather gave her—shells which her brother wanted. She says her brother glows underwater and that "his light would only shine brighter" (146) with time. She wants her brother to return, but will hold onto the shells and says, "I could wait forever" (146).

In California, her mother says that apartment living is like living in a village with its shared spaces and everyone knowing each other's business. The people in the building know that her parents have a daughter who writes stories on the East Coast. They imagine that she speaks English well. While the Girl stops looking for her brother, she still imagines him next to her and dancing with her in courtyards in Vietnam. But when they go to America, she imagines that she's left him behind with her grandfather and that both have them fallen into deep sleep for years in a house now covered with branches.

In the apartment, her mother turns on the lights and makes tea. Her father watches television with the sound off, strains the tea into glasses, and pours water into the dog's bowl. The Girl

reflects on the items that her mother sends home to Vietnam when they first move to America: money, soaps, shampoos, and cloth. She does this so that relatives back home can sell items on the black market that emerges in Vietnam after the war. But the Girl imagines her aunts back in Vietnam using the money to get horsemen who can tear through the branches around her family's home and wake up her brother and grandfather. She imagines herself guarding this house and protecting them.

Back in California, her mother asks her father what happened in the news. Her father thinks back on the women with the kerchief in the green field that he compares to a rice paddy in Vietnam. He thinks that the woman was pointing to bodies buried underneath the field, and that's why she was crying. However, her father only tells her mother about the weather. He jokes that the San Diego mayor will honor all Vietnamese women in Linda Vista who are married to gardeners. She laughs at his joke, calls him by his name, and kisses him.

The Girl returns to her old home in Vietnam as an adult and sees that no branches cover it as she imagined. However, despite knowing as an adult that her brother is dead, she still half-believes that he will reappear alongside her, as she has always felt him to be there. She heads to the town's beach and watches schoolboys play soccer. When she is unable to sleep that night, she returns to the beach and swims straight out as far as she can go.

In California, the Girl's father is also unable to sleep and gets a glass of water while looking at the moon. He thinks about his wife being on her feet all day long and recalls a poem he once recited to her, which says that a man would "pull the moon out of the sky and turn it into a pool" (156) so that the woman he loves could wash her feet. He thinks about the woman in the green field, and imagines that she, like a gardener, will not be at ease until she has dug up the field. The field reminds him of bodies floating in rice paddies in Vietnam.

In the final scene of the chapter, the narrative shifts to the family's first spring together in California. Ba drives the family to the beach at night. The sea appears dark, but after the crash of each wave, flickers of light emerge onto the beach. The lights turn out to be small silver fish. The father points to the fish "as if [they] knew them" (158). The Girl states what they all remember from the scene by reciting one line from her mother's point of view, one from her father's point of view, and one line from her point of view. Then she runs off "like a dog unleashed, toward the lights" (158).

Chapter 5 Analysis

In this chapter, the narrative returns to the Girl's childlike point of view as readers are taken through the memories surrounding her brother's death. This naivete manifests in her failure to grasp her brother's death immediately—like when she imagines her grandfather might tell her brother to get up or when she wants the women to stop crying so she and her brother can sleep—and the grief of those around her. Death encompasses such a finality that a child is unable to understand it. This leads to a pitting of imagination against reality. The Girl, who is unwilling to accept that her brother is dead, invents a story of him sleeping with her grandfather in the house. The Girl believes that she alone can protect the two of them. The reality, of course, is much different. That tension comes to a head when the Girl returns to her childhood home in Vietnam and says that setting foot in the house is like "stepping into a pool of water" (153). However, the chapter also underscores a message: that time does not erase loss, but in some ways, can actually magnify the pain of that loss as the years go on. It's hard for the Girl, who half-expects her brother to return to her any day. It's hard for her mother and father too, and they express that confusion in a variety of traumatizing ways years after their child's death.

These memories of the Girl's brother are interwoven with memories of her father, who continues to deal with his PTSD in various ways, such as fostering a dog, watering plants, and obsessing over a woman whose field reminds him of the rice paddies and bodies back in Vietnam. He also fails to deal with his PTSD, such as when he avoids picking up the phone on the off-chance someone from Vietnam will call and let in memories of his home country, "which would come coursing through the wires and enter his body like a riot of blood" (138). On a related note, there are glimpses in this chapter of the effects of the war on Vietnam, as when a soldier callously refuses to let the Girl's father out of the re-education camp for the son's funeral: "A whole country has to be rebuilt. Does she expect everything to stop simply because she hadn't taken care to keep her own child from wandering too far into the water?" (137).

It's also notable that while her father and mother once seemed inseparable, here (as in the previous chapter) they are presented more apart than they are together. Whereas the Girl once described her father and her mother as like merged into one dog chasing its tail, now, her father has his own stray dog, whom he finds on the side of the highway, much like how he was dropped off at the side of the highway in Vietnam after the war. The dog serves as a

symbol of her father, who now chases his own tail like the stray dog. Clearly, the strain of years of trauma and fighting, the loss of one child by death and another by abandonment—all of this has taken a toll on their marriage.

When we read the scenes with her mother yearning for her husband as she is separated from him while enduring war and the loss of her son, readers can also better understand why the two were so attached to each other in the earlier days of their marriage. The separation between these two is highlighted by the chapter's shifts in time between the mother in Vietnam in the aftermath of the war and the father in California many years later. They also no longer appear to actively fight, but instead bury their troubles under the surface. However, there is still clearly love between them after all these years, as seen when her father makes jokes to his wife in their bedroom and she kisses him.

Heat has been a recurring motif throughout the book. The description of heat hovering around her brother's body and warping the moment is a callback to an earlier chapter where heat blends memories of summer together in Linda Vista. The opposite of fire could be described as water, which washes out fire. Water has arguably been the most important motif throughout the book, but it takes on additional meaning in this chapter—the title of which means "water" in Vietnamese—as we learn that the Girl's brother drowned, filling him with supposedly "bad water" that taints the rest of the family by extension. Water bears a heavy weight that hangs on the characters—sometimes literally, as in the scene when her mother remarks that it was the water in her son's body that made him heavy.

It is more evident now why the Girl's mother refuses to let her play in the swimming pool and why she is perhaps overly cautious in restricting the Girl's activities. Essentially, her mother's behavior is an expression of guilt for not preventing her son's death. She behaves the way she does out of fear of losing the Girl like she lost her son. We also see this disdain for water manifest in the father, who feels most rooted when he's digging around earth and soil and dreams of living in a place in the countryside "miles from the sight or the sound or the smell of the sea" (133). But the Girl bridges the gap between herself and the water when she returns to Vietnam and swims in the sea—the same sea in which her brother drowned. This merging continues in the chapter's final scene, which switches back and forth between calling the Girl's parents "Ma"/"Ba" and "my mother"/"my father." This language shift suggests that a reconciliation is happening between the Girl's child self and adult self.

As always, the Girl's attention to minute details adds richness to the scenes in this chapter,

making them feel more realistic through their specificity. These include details like the boy who scratches her dead brother's left ankle while he lies on the beach or the grandfather kicking open the gate to the courtyard and sending the chickens scattering as he carries the boy into the house. Other literary devices that make a return in this chapter include the tension between darkness—represented in this chapter by water or the sea—and light, as seen in the scene where her mother stands in the dark but appears to consider stepping into the light of the lamp. But if she steps into the light, she steps away from Ba, who remains ensnared in the darkness. The lights also take on added significance when the Girl describes her brother shining underwater; we realize that his spiritual light is also symbolized through the physical lights around them, reminding the Girl and her parents of his presence. He's also symbolized by the seashells that the Girl holds onto in memory of him. And then he's symbolized a final time in the bright lights of the fish that turn up on the seashore in San Diego, which the girl runs toward in search of her brother.

Author's Note

Author's Note Summary

The author, lê thi diem thúy, states that her given formal name is Trang, and the formal name of older sister was Thúy. Their nicknames were Big Girl and Little Girl. The author departed Vietnam by boat with her father, who incorrectly wrote the wrong birthdate and name (Thúy) for his daughter on their identifying paperwork when they were picked up by a Navy ship. Her mother corrected the birth date but wanted the author to keep the formal name of her sister, Thúy. This is because the author's older sister Thúy drowned in a refugee camp in Malaysia. The mother felt that her father's mistake was fortuitous because it allowed "a part of [her] older sister to come to this country with [them]" (160). The author says that she decided to publish using her full name in Vietnamese and in lowercase—not common in America or Vietnam—because she "had finally managed to break the name down, rebuild it and reclaim it as [her] own" (160).

Author's Note Analysis

In this brief section, readers gain a little insight into the author's past and a lot of context for the book. Although this book is a novel, it is clearly based in part on the author's lived experience—including the traumas—of being a Vietnamese refugee in America and losing an older sibling. She mentions that she was picked up with her father by a Navy boat, just like the Girl. Her sister drowned, again like the Girl's brother. The book's jacket cover states that she

lives in Massachusetts, so she is a writer who lives on the East Coast, like the adult version of the Girl in the book. And perhaps most importantly, the grief that lê thi diem thúy has carried over her name, which “crowded two daughters, one dead and one living” (160), becomes manifest in her refusal to state the Girl’s name. With the author’s note, readers can finally understand the significance of names—or lack thereof—in the book with this piece of the author’s history. The tactic of keeping chapter titles lowercase is not just a literary device, but one rooted in the author’s own identity.

Character Analysis

The Girl

The book begins with narration from a child protagonist who is unnamed throughout the novel, though we have referred to her in this guide by the shorthand of "the Girl" for ease of description. She is a child at the outset of the novel who has fled from post-war Vietnam with her father and some strangers to a foreign country: America. She expresses in a child-like way the settings of her new home while wondering about her mother back in Vietnam and her deceased brother, whom she does not quite fully understand is dead due to her parents' silence around the matter. She senses the presence of his spirit with her everywhere in the U.S. The Girl is a curious child who observes the world around her in great detail. She is a spirited young girl who resembles her father in both appearance and stubborn temperament. She has an affinity for animals and plants.

As the novel progresses and the Girl goes from child to teenager to adult, readers see the tension and eventual dissolution of her relationship with her parents due to their violent fights and inability to cope with their trauma, which they have passed on to their daughter. Eventually, she runs away from home and goes to college on the East Coast—as far from California as she can get without crossing the ocean—and becomes a writer. She still maintains infrequent contact with her parents, but does not know how to help them, especially Ba, which pains her. Eventually, she returns to Vietnam and the site of her old family house and swims in the same sea where her brother died. She acknowledges that she has not fully reckoned with his death, which has haunted the Girl her entire life.

Ma

The Girl's mother is referred to by the Vietnamese term "Ma" in earlier chapters and simply "her mother" in later chapters. She is a South Vietnamese Catholic teenager who falls in love with Ba despite her parents' disapproval but has to raise her daughter and son on her own after her husband goes off to fight in the war in Vietnam. She is left behind on a beach in Vietnam by accident, leaving her alone as Ba and the Girl flee to the U.S. Eventually, she rejoins them in California. She considers herself a modern woman and cuts her hair short. Although she works as a seamstress and later as a worker in a Vietnamese restaurant, she would rather do something more independent like running her own restaurant. Due to the trauma of losing her son, she offers strange and overly cautious advice to the Girl. She fights

with her husband due to his drunken behavior and blames him for many of the ills in her life, but she still is inseparable from him, nonetheless. She feels guilt over the death of her son, trauma from the war, and for leaving her parents behind in Vietnam.

Ba

The Girl's father is referred to by the Vietnamese term "Ba" in earlier chapters and simply "her father" in later chapters. He is a Buddhist "gangster" (79) from North Vietnam. Not much is known about his past, but he claims to have semi-aristocratic lineage and that his mother was a French mistress to his Vietnamese father, hence his "tall nose" (88) that is not common among Vietnamese individuals. He is estranged from his family and runs away from them. He meets Ma and they marry, but he has to go off to war to fight for the Americans against other Vietnamese soldiers. After the war is over and the Americans leave, Ba is entered into a re-education camp for Vietnamese soldiers who fought for the Americans. His son dies while he is in the camp. He flees with his daughter to the U.S., where they live for some years until Ma is able to join them. He suffers from both the trauma over leaving his wife by accident in Vietnam and his violent experiences as a solider in the war. This trauma manifests in the form of PTSD and coping mechanisms like habitual drunkenness and erratic behavior. His behavior and unwillingness to change create turmoil with his relationships, notably with his wife and daughter.

Brother

The unnamed older brother of the Girl drowns in Vietnam prior to the family moving to the U.S. The Girl is deeply traumatized by her brother's death and asks her parents questions about the nature of his drowning, but they don't answer her. As a child, the Girl does not understand that her brother has died and thinks she has left him behind in Vietnam. His presence lingers with the Girl like a ghost for years after his death, even when she is an adult. His death forms the basis for the family's relationship to water and serves as a reminder of all that they have left behind—or lost—in Vietnam.

Mr. Russell

Mr. Russell is a retired Navy veteran who decides to sponsor Vietnamese refugees to live in the U.S. after having a prophetic dream. He is sympathetic to their plight but tends to stereotype non-Americans as one mass of helpless faces that need saving. His wife and son honor his wishes to sponsor the refugees after his death.

Mel

Mel is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Russell. Following his late father's wishes, he sponsors Ba, the Girl, and the four uncles to live with him. Ba and the four uncles work as maintenance workers on his crew. He brings in drawers of Mr. Russell's belongings like toy horses and a butterfly encased in glass into his office space. After the Girl breaks some of the items while trying to free the butterfly, Mel asks her and her father to find somewhere else to live.

Mrs. Russell

Mrs. Russell is the kind widow of Mr. Russell as well as Mel's mother. She grieves her husband after his death. For a time, she grows close to Ba and the Girl, taking them with her every Sunday to the mountains, where father and daughter play in the snow. The Girl eventually refers to Mrs. Russell as "the grandmother" due to the older woman's kindness and attentiveness.

The Uncles

The uncles are four men who flee on the same boat as Ba and the Girl from Vietnam. They are all picked up by the same U.S. naval ship and taken to live with Mel in the U.S. The Girl asks them questions about Mr. Russell's home and occasionally removes the shoes of the uncles when they drunkenly pass out in bed. Although they are not relatives of Ba and the Girl and are actually strangers to them, the Girl refers to them using the kinship term of "uncles" in a sign of respect for their older age.

The Landlord

The non-Vietnamese landlord of the red apartment oversees where Ma, Ba, and the Girl first live together as a family. He comes to replace the building's washing machine and grows irate when he finds that children have been jumping into the swimming pool from the second floor, so he fills in the pool with rocks and a single palm tree. His refusal to understand his tenants and his characterization of them in sweeping stereotypes based on their immigrant status is an indication of the xenophobia that the Vietnamese refugees experience in America.

Grandparents

The Girl's grandparents—Ma's mother and father—first appear in a black-and-white photograph sent from Vietnam. They adore Ma and look down upon Ba, whom they do not think is worthy of their daughter. After moving to the U.S., Ma feels guilty that she has left her parents behind in Vietnam. The grandfather plays a significant role in the novel because he recovers the body of the Girl's brother from the beach and brings the boy inside the family house, leading townsfolk to gossip that the child has brought "bad water" or a sort of bad omen upon the family.

We don't know much about Ba's family, other than that he is estranged from them and that he says his father is Vietnamese and his mother is French.

Anh

Referred to as the "chicken egg girl" (88) by Ba, Anh lives next door to the Girl in Linda Vista. She has chickens in her backyard, and she sells eggs every day out of a cart. Ma likes the blue tarp covering her house because it reminds her of the South China Sea near Vietnam.

Mexican Bakery Owner

When the Girl and her father are unable to sleep during their early years in America, they take the bus around town and walk around the shops late at night. They pass by a French bakery, which they call a Mexican bakery because the owner is from Mexico. He practices speaking English, learning from a cassette tape as he prepares dough.

The Boy in the Kissing Box

This a boy with whom the Girl has her first nascent romantic encounters in a cardboard box known as the Kissing Box, catalyzing her understanding of sexuality as she undergoes puberty.

Dog

In the book's final chapter, Ba adopts a white dog that he finds guarding a hillside on the side of the highway, which is similar to how Ba was dropped off at the side of a highway after his time in a re-education camp in Vietnam. The dog becomes both a surrogate companion and a symbol of Ba himself, who is self-destructing due to his PTSD like a dog chasing his own tail.

Themes

PTSD and the Intergenerational Trauma of War

While many contemporary novels have focused on the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) suffered by American soldiers returning home from war in Vietnam, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* offers a window into an overlooked topic: the impact of trauma on Vietnamese soldiers in the war. Ba fights as a Vietnamese soldier for the American forces and witnesses wide scale death and suffering. He receives no thanks for his service and instead is forced into a re-education camp run by the Vietnamese forces after the war. He misses the birth of his daughter and the death of his son. And he is forced to temporarily abandon his wife on a beach in Vietnam so that he can escape with his daughter to safety.

All of these traumatic events haunt Ba for years after they occur. Instead of speaking about these traumas, Ba adopts a soldierly stoicism and turns to other coping methods: crying, drinking, and engaging in violent and erratic behavior. He does finds moments of peace when he is gardening, but his mind is still troubled. He'll often stare off into the distance and become lost in his own thoughts. Ma, too, suffers from the trauma of failing to prevent her son's death, and she in turn adopts the tactic of silence to deal with her grief. Neither of the parents' coping tactics are healthy, and they end up engaging in countless fights over their inability to support one another.

The novel also addresses another nuance to trauma, which is particularly relevant for refugee families who have suffered great physical and emotional upheaval: trauma passes down through the generations. PTSD affects family members perhaps just as much as it does the person suffering. We see this when the Girl describes her father drunkenly saying that he will kill them all. She then imagines the bullet piercing and pulling all of them close together, "suspended against the blue sky like a string of fish Ba hoists high from one end" (101). Children are especially vulnerable, since they take cues from their parents when learning how to behave in the world.

Not only does the Girl have to bear witness to her parents' fights and silence, but their failure to deal with their trauma teaches the Girl unhealthy short-term coping methods. Ba teaches her to move forward by ignoring the root cause of one's trauma and pushing through the pain. Eventually, the Girl realizes that her family situation is toxic and is unlikely to change, so she

makes a change by removing herself from the household and running away. But her trauma continues in the way she is unable to grow close to anyone due to the pain suffered in her childhood. It continues in the way that she dreams of Ba and hurts that she cannot help him as his daughter. Despite their pain, the characters do make small strides forward. Ba finally admits that he needs help to his daughter. And the Girl returns to the site of her first trauma: her brother's drowning in Vietnam. By swimming in the same sea where he drowned, she is able to begin to come to grips with the trauma of death, even though it will perhaps always haunt her.

The Significance of Sound

Although the Girl deploys all of the five senses to bring her story to life, sound is by far the most prominent. The use of sound adds richness and texture to the story and even adds some light humor to an otherwise very dark and serious story. Some examples include the boys in the pool making noises like a cartoon character or the Girl mimicking a store owner's words and comparing herself to a parrot. And in particular, the repetition of sounds—or certain phrases—has symbolic meaning in the novel. Take the title of the first chapter: "suh-top!" This phase is repeated throughout the chapter and has multiple meanings. The first and most obvious is that Ba is reading the word "stop" on a stop sign and mispronounces it as he is still learning how to articulate words in English. The spelling out of this sound the way Ba pronounces it highlights for the reader the challenge of a new immigrant struggling to adjust to a foreign tongue. But we also hear Ba say it to the Girl after she has thrown the butterfly encased in glass and is spinning around, which is a more serious situation than the previous one with the stop sign. The use of the same word in different contexts shows how language takes on additional meaning through repetition. Sound intertwines with names as well in this novel, so when the mother enunciates her husband's name "Anh Minh," we understand better the love she bears for her husband.

By extension, silence also serves an important function in this novel. Growing up in a chaotic home where she often witnesses angry fights, the Girl escapes to the bathtub to drown out her parents' voices. But she dreads the quiet that comes with the silence underwater. The "quiet" happens in both the Kissing Box and when her parents fight, and it unsettles her: "And when the awful quiet came, I'd break it by filling the tub with more and more water" (67). The quiet may disturb the Girl because it reminds her of the silence around her brother's death. In this novel, much is revealed through what is unsaid. Numerous times, the Girl tries to bring up her brother, only for her mother to shut her down or fail to answer questions. This indicates that there is an unspoken rule among the parents not to talk about the Girl's brother, and this

is a rule the Girl breaks in her natural desire to understand what happened to her brother. Silence is a coping tactic for Ma to deal with the trauma of losing her son. Silence is also a coping tactic for her father to not talk about the war or the past and instead bury his pain. And eventually, the Girl becomes silent and stops talking to her parents, choosing to run away.

Whiteness, Belonging, and America

From the very moment Ba and the Girl are laughed at by U.S. soldiers on a naval ship, the author implies a vast separation between native-born Americans and Vietnamese refugees. This separation manifests in the form of American imperialism, which tears apart Vietnam in the war and then laughs at refugees who choose to flee for America. It manifests in the power structures that privilege white men like Mel and leave the Vietnamese refugees at the mercy of a system that makes it difficult for lower-income immigrants to achieve the American dream of success. It also manifests in the structural inequalities and class divides in America, which lead the Vietnamese immigrants to live in poorly-maintained neighborhoods while the Girl's wealthier classmates live in a nicer neighborhood with well-maintained lawns. And it manifests in the everyday racism in the novel, such as the boys at the Girl's school calling all the Asian children "Yang" (89).

The family is perceived as foreign or "other," which the Girl picks up on even at a young age, because she is isolated as the only Vietnamese girl in a classroom of students that know little about her culture. This divide between immigrant and non-immigrant is even expressed in the language of the novel, when the word "American" is used to connote non-Vietnamese—and likely white, native-born—residents of the U.S. By contrast, the Vietnamese refugees are referred to as "Vietnamese." This reflects how their fellow countrymen still do not see the refugees as fully American, and perhaps how the refugees themselves struggle to feel fully American in a society that doesn't understand them—and in some cases actively resents and exploits them. We see this unfold when the new building owner in Linda Vista assumes his mostly lower-income, Asian tenants will not be able to afford the rent and evicts them, knowing that they have little means to defend themselves.

Ma and Ba seem to have a tacit understanding that to fit in—or belong—in America means adopting to modes of whiteness and mainstream norms. Mel emphasizes this unintentionally when he urges the uncles to paint in the color white because "It's clean" (10). Whiteness is the norm in America. This is understood when the Mexican bakery owner learns English on

cassette tapes and serves French pastries for an American clientele instead of desserts from his native country. It is understood in the restaurant where Ma works, which overcharges for pho to attract white Americans. It is also understood when Ba names his gardening service "Tom's Professional Gardening Service" and has his daughter—who speaks English better than he does—serve as his secretary.

Despite the family's efforts, they still are standing on the fringes of a mainstream society that will not fully welcome or embrace them. The Girl acknowledges this reality when she says people look down upon her neighbors and the peeling paint on their houses: "Some people think it's dirty but they don't know much about us" (90). However, she challenges the assumptions of the dominant white society by presenting her Vietnamese community with pride: "They haven't seen our gardens full of lemongrass, mint, cilantro and basil [...] How about the Great Wall of China that snakes like a river from the top of the steep hill off Crandall Drive to the slightly curving bottom? Who has seen this?" (90).

The Concept of Time and Memory

One of the most interesting literary devices in the novel is the author's choice to shift back and forth between geographic locations, time zones, and characters. Instead of proceeding in a linear fashion from the Girl's childhood in Vietnam to her returning as an adult to Vietnam, the novel starts and stops between different memories in America and different memories in Vietnam at different points in time. In doing this, the author creates a disorienting narrative that leads the reader to question what is real and what is imagined. But eventually, these multiple timelines mash up to a complete whole, leaving readers with perhaps a more satisfying reading experience than if they had proceeded straight from the beginning of the Girl's life to the present day. For example, the author does not talk often about ages—except when she mentions that the Girl leaves home at age 16—leading the reader to infer that the Girl is becoming an adolescent through mentions of puberty and a growing adult awareness of her parents' problems. She also builds suspense to the novel's major reveal: the Girl's brother died in Vietnam, and his death still haunts the family to this day.

This narrative tactic also leads the reader to question the very nature of how we process time and how things do—or do not change—as the years go on. For example, when the Girl witnesses her father crying at the refugee camp in Singapore and she finally realizes that the situation is very bad, she sees a cloud cover the moon. She then perceives that time has come to a standstill before it continues "inexplicably, incredibly" (111). Time is momentarily frozen in this moment of trauma, but the Girl is able to move forward, and time progresses,

showing that no matter our circumstances, time trudges on. It trudges on as the Girl flees home and as months turn into seasons, which turn into years. The exact amount of time that has passed is left uncertain because it doesn't really matter. All we need to know is that a large amount of time has passed, and yet Ba still suffers from his PTSD and the Girl still suffers from intergenerational trauma due to her family's turbulent situation.

Ultimately, the Girl utters this line near the end of the novel: "I don't know how time moves or which of our sorrows or our desires it is able to wash away. I return after twenty years still expecting my brother to step out of the sea" (154). Counter to the common saying that time heals all wounds, the Girl knows that memories or traumas can actually become strengthened with time if they are not dealt with properly. This happens when her family fails to properly explain to her the nature of her brother's death, which torments her into her adult years. It happens when Ba fails to find healthy coping methods for dealing with PTSD and instead takes it out on his family.

The novel also moves between different characters at various stages in their lives. This allows us to see progression and character development not only from the child version of the Girl to the adult version, but also from Ba as a young soldier to an older man struggling with PTSD. We also see Ma transition to a young woman in love and reeling with her husband away at war to a middle-aged woman frustrated with her husband's inability to change. It also affords the reader multiple perspectives on the same issue. We see how Ba's drunken violence impacts himself, Ma, and the Girl, because we hear from all three perspectives. Readers see not only how the Girl delights in seeing the boys in the red apartment jump from the balcony into the pool, but also how the landlord resents his mostly Vietnamese tenants for their children's behavior and thinks of them in offensive stereotypes. People can have different memories of the same events, as shown effectively through these varying points of view in the novel.

The Meaning of a Home and Family

Even though it is never explicitly discussed, home has a dual meaning in *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*. The characters seek a place where one is not only physically safe—i.e. a shelter—but also a place where they can establish a permanent home. Although the war is now over, the father has been traumatized by his time as a soldier and the country is suffering, as we see from the words of the army representative who speaks to Ma after her

son's death and the fact that Ma sends goods from America for her relatives to sell on the black market in Vietnam. Ma, Ba, and the Girl escape that hardship to try find a new home in America.

Their immigrant status complicates their ability to secure a home, and they are evicted or forced out of their dwellings time and time again. This desire to build a home in America also intermingles with the complexity of being an immigrant and leaving behind their homeland of Vietnam. When the black-and-white photograph of her parents arrives, Ma feels guilty that she has left her parents behind in her pursuit of safety for herself and her family. The establishment of a new home does not erase all ties to the old one, as we see when the Girl remembers the chickens playing in the courtyard in Vietnam or when Ma appreciates things—like the swimming pool or the blue tarp over Anh's house—that remind her of the South China Sea.

There is also the emotional sense of a home: a place where one feels safe and loved with their family. Ba never quite achieves this sense of home in the U.S., because part of him is stuck in the memories of the war in Vietnam. His issues fracture his relationship with his wife, which ripple down to his daughter, who runs away to escape from "that house that was on fire" (102). His actions create a chaotic household environment for the Girl to grow up in, challenging the common adage that home is where the heart is. Even when she is with her family, who obviously loves her, their love still does not feel like home to the Girl. The Girl is impacted by her upbringing and avoids any inclination to establish a permanent home as an adult, preferring to sleep on strangers' lawns or on rooftops as opposed to her own bed. Until the characters address their various traumas—which the Girl begins to do when she returns to her childhood house in Vietnam—they cannot find a sense of home or permanent belonging.

Symbols & Motifs

Water (nước)/the Sea

Of all the symbols in the book, water—and by extension, the sea—is the most prominent and powerful. Its forces shape the lives of the main characters for better and for worse. Water is so important that the word for it in Vietnamese (*nước*) means "homeland" or "nation" as well, as the author mentions at the beginning of the book. The book's entire scope is shaped by three water-related events: the death of the Girl's brother by drowning in the sea; the flight of the Girl and Ba by boat in the South China Sea; and the family's move across the ocean to America, in which a body of water separates them from Vietnam.

Because of the family's traumatic incidents, water—and the sea—take on dark, negative elements, such as when Ba goes fishing and describes the water at his feet as the only dark spot in the city, or when Ma describes the water in her dead son as a heavy burden: "It was the water. The water was heavy" (139). Ma feels guilt over not protecting her son. Ma projects these feelings into anger at water, such as when she violently pushes a bucket of water back into the family well after seeing her reflection in it. Likewise, Ba must also remind himself not to blame the water for his son's death. His disdain for the water is reflected in his choosing to work in the earth or soil as a gardener and his desire to move to a town far from the sea. Ironically, the family ends up in a city—San Diego—that also lies on the ocean, bringing them a constant reminder of their pain.

While the ocean separates them from Vietnam, it also binds them to it with memories of their homeland. These memories are not always unwelcome. On rare occasions, water can take on a positive connotation, such as when Ma likes the swimming pool or the blue tarp over Anh's house because they remind her of the South China Sea and fill her with memories of home in Vietnam. However, the Girl, who doesn't fully grasp what the ocean means in the context of her brother's death, is curious about the water. She wishes to swim with the other children in the swimming pool despite her mother forbidding her daughter to do so, and she observes the boys diving into the pool with fascination. The Girl sinks into a bathtub full of water to drown out her parent's screaming. At the end of the novel, the adult Girl swims into the same sea in which her brother drowned. For the Girl, water is not something to be avoided or feared, but a source of comfort.

Boats

Related to the sea, boats (and boat-like imagery) appear on numerous occasions in the book, from the fishing boats in Vietnam to the children sitting atop a tube like they're riding on a raft. From the Girl and Ba's escape on a boat out of Vietnam, we see how boats can function as vessels to guide the family out of the darkness of the water and the effects of the war. Boats provide a sense of safety; it is only once the Girl's brother slips between the boats that he drowns. Ma compares Ba's toes to boats that will lead them to a different life. Boats are able to cross seas and bridge the gaps that oceans create between Vietnam and America. But the boats are not available to everyone, as seen when Ba abandons Ma by accident among a chorus of voices that are trying to escape onto the boats as well. And not all boats are created equal, as seen when the U.S. naval officers laugh from their big ship down at the smaller boat of the refugees. Boats are powerful symbols of salvation with many layers in the novel.

The Cadillac

The Cadillac is one of the ultimate status symbols of American wealth in the mid-late 20th century. Ba gets a Cadillac from his friend who works at car dealership as a present to welcome Ma to America. But Ma crashes the car into the gate outside their building, prompting Ba to return it. The crash of the Cadillac symbolizes the crushing of the American dream for the family and highlights how difficult it is lower-income refugees to become upwardly mobile and find their place in mainstream white America.

Woman in the Green Field

One day, the Girl's father stumbles upon an image of a woman in a foreign country on television. She wears a blue kerchief and stands in a grassy field, crying as she points to the ground. The father becomes fixated with her. He imposes his own memories of the Vietnam war on her and assumes that she is looking to dig up bodies from the ground, much like a gardener would unearth soil to grow plants. He says that he would go help her if he could. The woman functions as a symbol of his unresolved trauma due to the war, which causes him to compare the grassy field of the women to rice paddies in Vietnam where he saw dead bodies floating in the water.

The Butterfly

The Girl becomes fascinated with a butterfly encased in glass on a shelf in Mel's office. She becomes convinced that the butterfly is alive because she hears a whispering noise from the glass, like "wings brushing against a windowpane" (25). She tells Ba that the butterfly is trapped but wants to escape. The uncles compare the butterfly's crying to Ba's crying, and in this moment, we understand that the butterfly becomes a symbol for Ba—as well as other characters in the book—who are trapped in the circumstances and unable to take flight. The Girl's unsuccessful attempt to free the dead butterfly can be seen as her way of trying to free herself and her family from their own painful circumstances.

The Glass Animals

Unlike the butterfly, the glass animals—many of them horses—are unable to speak, according to the Girl. She concludes that "[t]he uncles were unaware it wasn't the butterfly but rather these glass animals that had no soul" (31). Decorative items like the glass animals are seen as objects that people with means accumulate in America, but the Girl exposes these decorative animals as hollow, empty artifacts that are devoid of meaning.

Gold and Silver Keys

When the Girl meets Mel at the airport, one of the first things she notices is a set of silver and gold keys dangling from his belt and making noise. He carries them like they are important; the Girl notes that they look important. The keys serve as a shiny symbol of Mel's power and status over the refugees. He is the gatekeeper who allows them to come into America and he employs them and houses them—at least temporarily. The keys jangling signal his powerful presence.

Ma's Purse

Ma's purse is a symbol of aspirational power. Although she often doesn't have a use for it, she takes her purse with her wherever she goes as a means of touting the appearance of money. Although the pursue is somewhat similar to Mel's keys, it is also different in that Ma's purse is largely an illusion. In reality, she does not hold much wealth—or power—as a lower-income refugee from Vietnam in America.

Trees/Flora

As a gardener, trees and plant life serve as a symbol of contentment for Ba. The only time he seems to be at peace is when he is gardening and nurturing life, even though he is unable to nurture himself. Plants take on a different meaning for the Girl, who references three specific kinds repeatedly: eucalyptus, jasmine, and palms. Eucalyptus—which can be found in both southern California and Vietnam—serve as a symbol of war, both in Vietnam and in the children's imaginations when they hurl eucalyptus cones at one another in play fights. The Kissing box—a site of emotional turbulence—is also placed against a eucalyptus tree.

The fragrance of jasmine flowers hangs in the air as the neighborhood children play. Jasmines serve as a symbol of innocence, which decays as the flowers fade from white to yellow and as the children age into adolescence. Finally, the palm trees, which are widespread throughout southern California, serve as symbols of happiness, prosperity, and the American dream. We see this when the Girl arrives at the airport and looks at a poster of a woman tanning under palm trees. But this happiness often eludes the family members, and the palm tree can sometimes function as a mockery of their pain and isolation in America. For example, the landlord in the red apartment replaces the swimming pool with a palm tree, thereby replacing their connection to the sea and Vietnam via the swimming pool with a lonely tree that none of them like.

Birds

The Girl reduces much of the world around her to metaphors—specifically to animals. Many of them involve birds, including a chapter entitled "the bones of birds" in which her father—due to his inability to handle his PTSD—appears frail like the bones of birds. The Girl also imagines flying over the memories of her past like a bird and flying away from her family altogether. Birds also appear as symbols—likely representing the refugees—in Mr. Russell's dream, when he imagines them flying beyond the horizon and perhaps flying to him in America. Ultimately, birds function in the novel as a symbol of flight and escape.

Faces/Profiles

In this book, faces are seen as something akin to a gateway into a person's thoughts and deepest feelings. They are fundamental to establishing and maintaining connections. There are innocent examples of this when the Girl guides the hand of the boy in the Kissing Room

down her face to establish a romantic spark. And then are more profound connections, such as when Ma falls in love with Ba after seeing his face in a movie theater and imagines his face to keep her company after she's been separated from her husband and child. This connection to her husband extends even through the Girl's face, who closely resembles her husband. Her mother will look into her daughter's face when he is away at war, trying to ascertain through some divine magic of her profile whether he is safe.

Light and Darkness

In the book, lights are associated with positive forces and darkness with sorrow, specifically, sorrow associated with water. We see this contrast between light and dark when the Girl sees her father crying in the refugee camp at the same time that the moon is enveloped in clouds, creating darkness. It is also evident when her father is fishing at the pier and sees the bright city lights, which stand in contrast with the dark water at his feet. The darkness seems to be engulfing her father. By contrast, when he goes to pick up his wife, he sees her considering whether to step into the light of a lamppost and leave behind the darkness.

Later on, it is also revealed that the lights in the book are a physical representation of the spirit of the Girl's dead brother, whom the Girl describes as glowing in his watery home or grave where he drowned. She says that "his light would only shine brighter"(146)with time, symbolizing how his memory will stay with them over the years. The Girl rushes toward the lights of the silver fish in the book's final chapter, which serve as both an allegory for the Girl searching for her brother and, perhaps, light winning out over darkness.

Fences and Walls

Upon being evicted from their home and seeing a fence erected outside their former home, Ma cries out: "I want to know, why—why there's always a fence. Why there's always someone on the outside wanting someone…something on the inside and between them…this…sharp fence" (97). The fence comes to symbolize the gatekeepers of mainstream American society who shut lower-income immigrants out of the American dream. Likewise, when the Girl mentions that someone in her largely Asian community has built a replica Great Wall of China around their neighborhood, this serves as a symbol of the defenses that the refugees have put up to defend themselves and their culture. However, when we learn that this wall is actually made of cardboard, it is clear how helpless these walls or defenses are against the forces that shape mainstream white America, which ultimately tear down this community and build new condominiums for richer tenants.

Important Quotes

1. "In Vietnamese, the word for *water* and the word for *a nation*, a country and a homeland are one and the same: *nước*."
(Pre-Table of Contents, Page 1)

The title of the novel's final chapter, nước, is also a theme that runs throughout the book: water represents the homeland of Vietnam—and all the complex memories associated with it—for the Girl, Ma, and Ba. As a nation surrounded by water, nước signifies Vietnam, but the word's emotional resonance for the family is what makes this an important line from the novel.

2. "'Why white?' Mel said, 'It's clean.'"
(Chapter 1, Page 10)

Although Mel is talking about white paint being a clean color for a wall, he's actually getting at something deeper that the book underscores: the meaning of whiteness in America. White is seen as the norm. By the very color of their skin, the non-white Vietnamese—who see white as a color of mourning—are shut out of that mainstream American culture and are perceived as outsiders.

3. "Ba's voice echoes from deep down like a frog singing at the bottom of a well. His voice is water moving through a reed pipe in the middle of a sad tune. And the sad voice is always asking and answering itself. It calls out and then comes running in. It is the tide of my Ba's mind. When I listen to it, I can see boats floating around in his head. Boats full of people trying to get somewhere."
(Chapter 1, Page 10)

This is the Girl's childlike way of describing her father's sorrows and trauma, which manifest in his sad voice. She interprets the crowded memories of his haunted mind as akin to boats trying to get somewhere, much like the boat that they took to flee Vietnam.

4. "'If there's no soul, how can the butterfly cry for help?' I asked. 'But what does crying mean in this country? Your Ba cries in the garden every night and nothing comes of it.'"
(Chapter 1, Page 27)

The Girl is describing the butterfly trapped in glass, which she thinks should be freed because it has a soul and can cry for help. But the uncles whom she relates this story to are unsympathetic to the butterfly's supposed cries. They use Ba as an example, implying that this country—the U.S.—does not care for the sorrows of Vietnamese refugees trapped in their trauma.

5. "Maybe the Americans on the ship were laughing at us. Maybe that's why it took them so long to lower the ladder. Maybe they laughed so hard at the sight of us so small, they started to roll around the deck like spilled marbles and they had to help one another to their feet and recall their own names—Emmett, Mike, Ron—and where they were from—Oakland, California; Youngstown, Ohio; Shinston, West Virginia—before they could let us climb up and say our names—Lan, Cuong, Hoang—and where we were from—Phan Thiet, Binh Thuan." (Chapter 1, Page 29)

In this passage, the Girl describes the U.S. naval officers who pick up her, Ba, and the uncles from their small boat on which they fled Vietnam. She insightfully depicts their own sense of American superiority over the Vietnamese refugees, which she surmises leads them to laugh at her and Ba.

6. "People look like they're flying but in fact they're being pulled along by invisible strings." (Chapter 2, Pages 47 - 48)

This line refers to Ma's explanation of the actors in the Chinese movie who look like they're flying, when really, invisible or small strings are pulling them into the air. This could be seen as a metaphor for the Girl, who wishes to exercise her free will to fly like the actors or fly like one of the birds she sees in the sky. Instead, she is being pulled along in her life by invisible forces that she does not yet understand.

7. "Vietnam is a black-and-white photograph of my grandparents sitting in bamboo chairs in their front courtyard [...] when I think of this portrait of my grandparents in their last years, I always envision a beginning. To or toward what, I don't know, but always a beginning." (Chapter 3, Page 78)

This passage can be interpreted in a variety of ways. First, the Girl remembers Vietnam primarily through the lens of whom she has left behind there, which include her grandparents. Ma gets a black-and-white photo of the Girl's grandparents in the mail. When the Girl says

that she envisions a beginning, it can perhaps mean that despite their age, there is still a chance for a new future for her grandparents—and for herself. We can always change the course of our future and chart a new beginning, despite our past.

8. “Over and over, she calls him to her, ‘Anh Minh, Anh Minh.’ His name becomes a tree she presses her body against [...] when she utters her own name, it is the second half of a verse that begins with his.”
(Chapter 3, Page 82)

Ma calls out Ba’s name after she is reunited with him following the war. The way she lovingly calls out his name shows the significance of names in creating bonds between important people in our lives. Moreover, the passage makes clear the inseparable bond between these two people.

9. “‘My family’s a garden full of dreamers lying on their backs, staring at the sky, drunk and choking on their dreams.’”
(Chapter 3, Pages 83 - 84)

Ba says this line in reference to his estranged parents and siblings. He implies that his family was comprised of impractical people who spent their lives failing in pursuit of a dream instead of waking up to reality. Due to that upbringing, by contrast, Ba is very practical, choosing modest jobs and not aiming for lofty goals in life. However, ironically, he is still stuck in dreams—or rather, nightmares—of the war in Vietnam.

10. “War has no beginning and no end. It crosses oceans like a splintered boat filled with people singing a sad song.”
(Chapter 3, Page 87)

After witnessing the trauma that her parents both suffer due to the war in Vietnam, the Girl understands that there is no escape from war, which can continue to haunt people across distances and across time.

11. "If the sky and sea can follow us here, why can’t people?’”
(Chapter 3, Page 89)

The Girl asks this question of Ma, who declines to give an answer. What the Girl means by this seemingly innocent question: why can't her brother follow them from Vietnam to the U.S.? She fails to understand that her brother has died, and that is why he cannot rejoin them in California.

12. "Some people think it's dirty but they don't know much about us. They haven't seen our gardens full of lemongrass, mint, cilantro and basil [...] How about the Great Wall of China that snakes like a river from the top of the steep hill off Crandall Drive to the slightly curving bottom? Who has seen this?"
(Chapter 3, Page 90)

This quote highlights the divisions between the Vietnamese refugees and the wider American public, who often demonstrate xenophobic attitudes their immigrant neighbors on the basis of their lower-income status and ethnicity. The Girl defends her Vietnamese community by describing the care they have taken with their herb gardens and the walls they have built.

13. "When I grow up I am going to be the gangster we are all looking for."
(Chapter 3, Page 93)

Ba is often described as a gangster from North Vietnam, and in some ways, he lives up to that reputation through his violent behavior. Because she is similar to her father, the Girl sees her future in Ba and believes she will grow up to be a gangster and mirror his own behavior. She later tries to escape this destiny by running away and forging her own life.

14. "'I want to know, why—why there's always a fence. Why there's always someone on the outside wanting someone…something on the inside and between them…this…sharp fence.'"
(Chapter 3, Page 97)

Ma is upset after the family has been evicted from their house in Linda Vista, which marks yet another upheaval in the family's life after they've had to move several times already. She refers to the fence put up around their former home, but what she really refers to is how there is always someone—in this case, a greedy landlord—locking them as Vietnamese refugees out of the American dream and the chance of a permanent home.

15. “I hadn’t yet found a way to return to where my parents waited, in that house that was on fire. As it turned out, I ran past the summer into another fall, another spring, another summer, and I kept on running.”
(Chapter 3, Page 102)

After witnessing so much disturbing behavior in her parents’ home, the Girl finally decides as a teenager to flee the situation. But she is unable to bring herself to return, and so she keeps running away from them as the years go on and she becomes as an adult. Her way of coping with trauma is to run from it.

16. “In this picture, what reveals him most is the will to give nothing away.”
(Chapter 3, Page 103)

This is a description of a photo of Ba as a younger man. In the photo, he is wary and forms a fist with his hand. His stubborn nature and habit of isolating himself and his thoughts from the world around him manifest in this black-and-white photograph.

17. “Years later, even after our family was reunited, my father would remember those voices as a seawall between Vietnam and America or as a kind of floating net, each voice linked to the next by a knot of grief.”
(Chapter 3, Page 105)

Ba recalls voices of countless Vietnamese individuals also trying to flee as he gets into a boat with his daughter and leaves the country. It is only after he has left that he realizes one of them is his wife, whom he has left behind. This memory haunts him even across oceans, even many years later, after he has moved to America and is reunited with his wife.

18. “In this way, she tried to divine all the answers to her questions about his well-being. As though floating just beneath my own gaze was the reflection of my father, hundreds of dark miles away.”
(Chapter 3, Page 105)

Faces are an important symbol in this book, and perhaps no more important is the Girl’s. The Girl resembles her father closely, so while her father is off at war, her mother will look into her daughter’s face and try to imagine her husband safe and sound. This physical appearance also correlates with similarities in personality between father and daughter.

19. "'He couldn't have been heavy. He was just a little boy. It was the water, wasn't it? It was the water. The water was heavy.'"
(Chapter 4, Page 139)

Ma is racked with guilt and shame over the death of her son. She consoles herself by blaming the water, which she says made the boy heavy when her grandfather carried him off the beach.

20. "The stillness of my body led Ba to understand that I had just lost something in the water, something I could not see much less retrieve."
(Chapter 4, Page 144)

Ba returns home in Vietnam after being released from re-education camp, but the Girl does not notice, as she is staring deep in the family well. She has lost her brother in the water—due to his drowning—and is searching for him, not fully realizing that he is no longer alive.

21. "I wanted him to come back, but I too was stubborn. I hid the shells in my hand. I thought, if need be, I could wait forever. The shells were mine."
(Chapter 4, Page 146)

The Girl clutches some shells that were given to her by her grandfather—shells that her brother wanted. Although she misses her brother, she is still a stubborn little girl who wants to hold onto her shells, highlighting both the Girl's serious side and her immature nature as a child.

22. "I don't know how time moves or which of our sorrows or our desires it is able to wash away. I return after twenty years still expecting my brother to step out of the sea."
(Chapter 4, Page 154)

The Girl here challenges the common notion that time heals all wounds, instead stating that our traumas and desires can become heightened with time. She has not fully recovered from her brother's death, and perhaps she never will stop yearning for her older brother.

23. "Like a gardener, she would feel for everything with her fingertips, sometimes caressing what her hands came across, gently shaking the soil loose from the roots, at other times pulling up in one motion what needed to be torn away."

(Chapter 4, Page 156)

Ba becomes fixated on an image of a woman he sees on television who stands in a green field while crying and pointing to the ground. Stuck in his own memories of bodies that floated in rice paddies in Vietnam during the war—and the similarities of these rice paddies to the green field of the woman—he projects his own life experiences onto that of the woman. He imagines that she is digging through the field to find these bodies, much like he digs through the soil as a gardener.

24. "He said the word 'moon' aloud, in English. Often when he said a word in English, he would think of how his daughter might say it."
(Chapter 4, Page 157)

Although father and daughter are separated after the Girl runs away, he still thinks of her. The Girl has always had excellent English-language skills and helps her parents as a child with her language abilities. Her father's struggle to learn English has presented challenges to him as an immigrant in America, so he thinks of his daughter when trying to learn the language.

25. "My mother saw my father's mistake as propitious; it allowed a part of my older sister to come to this country with us. And so I kept my sister's name and wore it like a borrowed garment, one in which my mother crowded two daughters, one dead and one living."
(Author's Note, Page 160)

We are now hearing from the author, lê thi diêm thúy. She speaks of her father misstating her formal or given name on her immigration papers as her dead older sister's name. Her mother, however, asks that Thúy keep her sister's name to preserve her memory. This places a heavy burden upon the author, who feels the weight of her sister in her name. We now better understand the significance of names in this book and why the reader never learns the Girl's name.

Essay Topics

1. The American dream remains an elusive figment throughout the book. Describe the ways members of the family both buy into and reject the American dream. Furthermore, how does America both accept and reject them as immigrants and refugees?

2. Like the butterfly in the glass disc in Mel's home, the novel's three main characters are all trapped in their own circumstances. Pick two of the following characters (Girl, Ma, or Ba) and compare and contrast how and why each is "trapped" during the course of the novel.

3. Flora and fauna figure prominently in the book as metaphors for the characters' thoughts, feelings, and circumstances. How do these earthly creatures serve to flesh out the characters' personalities and deepen the readers' empathy? Focus on 2 to 3 specific animal/plant symbols to illustrate your point.

4. Water, or *nước*, drives the story behind *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*. Construct an argument describing how water shapes the life of the book's main characters and what it means to them. Is it a positive or negative force? Both? Use at least 3 to 4 concrete examples to support your claim.

5. The ways in which we handle trauma and PTSD is one of the book's core themes. How does war, death, and upheaval to a new country affect these characters, and how do they cope with the trauma? Pick one character to illustrate your point by describing the coping mechanisms they develop to deal with (or avoid) trauma.

6. Names are one of the primary ways that humans identify themselves in society. And yet, only some of the book's characters have formal names. Others have nicknames, and others receive no name at all. How do names (or lack thereof) serve as symbols of the relationships between characters as well as demonstrate the shifting point of view in the novel? Cite 2 to 3 specific examples.

7. The Girl utilizes the five senses—sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste—to bring the novel to life. Pick one of the senses and describe how the Girl uses it to enhance scenes and create a specific emotion/feeling. Cite 3 to 4 specific examples.

8. The protagonist's brother looms like a ghost over the family. Describe how each of the three central members—Ba, Ma, and the Girl—cope with the loss of their family member, and discuss how his death affects their relationships with one another.

9. The novel shifts perspectives between numerous characters. What effect does this shift in perspective have upon the reader? And why does the author present the reader with multiple points of view of the same circumstances? Cite 3 to 4 specific passages from the book to support your claim.

10. The novel progresses in a non-linear fashion, shifting between moments in various characters' lives and flashing between America and Vietnam. What purpose does this non-linear timeline serve in the novel? Use 3 to 4 scenes/passages from the novel to make your point.