The Namesake

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JHUMPA LAHIRI

Jhumpa Lahiri grew up in Kingston, Rhode Island, often visiting relatives in Calcutta. She studied English at Barnard, graduating in 1989, and went on to receive multiple degrees from Boston University, including an M.A. in English, an MFA in Creative Writing, and M.A. in Comparative Literature, and a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies. In 2001 she married Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush, Senior Editor of *Time* Latin America, and with whom she now resides in Rome, Italy, along with their two children. Her first collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, won the Pulitzer Prize.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

New immigration legislation introduced in 1965 and 1990, which created and then expanded permanent work visas for highly skilled laborers and students (like Ashoke), led to a surge in Indian immigration to the United States. As a result, the population of Indian immigrants in America increased ten-fold between 1980 and 2013.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Interpreter of Maladies (Lahiri's collection of short stories) covers many similar themes, addressing the experience of India immigrants to America. Other works by prize-winning contemporary authors like Amy Tan, Khaled Hosseini, and Junot Diaz examine the immigrant experience more generally. *The Namesake* is also influenced by the works of Nikolai Gogol, particularly *The Overcoat*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Namesake*
- **When Written:** 2003
- **Where Written:** First published in part by the New Yorker, in June 2003
- **When Published:** September, 2003
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Contemporary Immigrant Fiction, Bildungsroman
- **Setting:** Calcutta; Massachusetts; New York
- **Climax:** Debatably, in a novel whose scope spans three decades, the climax comes when Gogol's father, Ashoke, dies unexpectedly, causing Gogol to return toward his family, leave Maxine, and ultimately marry Moushumi.
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient narrator, sometimes with the added perspective of a specific character

EXTRA CREDIT

Pet Names Lahiri herself goes by her Indian 'pet name' after feeling embarrassed in kindergarten when her teacher had difficulty pronouncing her true name – she has said that this was one inspiration for the story of Gogol/Nikhil.

Film Version There is a popular movie adaptation of *The Namesake* starring Kal Penn as Gogol Ganguli.

PLOT SUMMARY

The Namesake is the story of two generations of the Gangulis, a family of Indian immigrants to the United States.

When we first meet Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli they are living in a small apartment in Cambridge, Massachusetts, about to welcome their first child into the world. The young couple met through an arranged marriage in Calcutta, India, where Ashima had lived her whole life before leaving to accompany Ashoke as he studies engineering at M.I.T. Ashoke has been set on traveling abroad ever since a terrible **train** accident a few years previous, which he barely survived. He was discovered by the rescue party because of the blowing pages of the **book** he had been reading when the train derailed—a copy of *The Collected Stories of Nikolai Gogol*. For Ashima, however, the journey abroad has proven difficult. She feels lonely and homesick in America, clinging to letters from her family and devising makeshift Indian recipes with the ingredients she can scrounge together.

Soon their son is born, in the foreign environment of the American hospital. Ashoke reflects on how lucky this boy is—the baby receives the present of a book from a Bengali friend—and how different his life will be from Ashoke's own. Ashima, too, is struck by how different her son's life will be, but she pities him because he will grow up alone, without the extended family that was so central to her own development. The couple waits for their son's "good name" to come in a letter from Ashima's grandmother in India, but in the meantime they must give the hospital a temporary "pet name," and so they settle on "Gogol," the writer whose book saved Ashoke's life and made possible this new one.

The novel then tracks Gogol's growth, as the family moves into a small suburban town when Ashoke is hired as an assistant professor at the local university. Gogol becomes central to his mother's life, filling some of the loneliness she feels for India. When he begins kindergarten, his parents decide that his "good

name" will be Nikhil—Ashima's grandmother had suffered a stroke, so her naming letter was lost in the mail—but at school Gogol continues to be called by his "pet name," frightened by the idea of changing it. His sister Sonali (Sonia) is born, and the two siblings begin to bond as the carriers of American influence in the house. The two children, with their natural, unaccented English and socialization in the American school system, are the reason for Ashoke and Ashima's adoption of Christmas and of certain American food items. At the same time, Ashoke and Ashima take their children to regular gatherings of their Bengali friends in America, and the family takes extended trips to Calcutta, at one point living with relatives for an eight-month period. During this trip, Sonia and Gogol feel like outsiders. India is a foreign place to them, even as they see their parents' joy at being home.

Gogol grows to despise his name, and is deeply embarrassed by his namesake—the author Nikolai Gogol—and by the fact that the name is not linked to any part of his identity. He does not yet know the story of his father's train accident. When he is eighteen, he decides to legally change his name to Nikhil, and when he leaves home for Yale this is the name that will follow him. It is as Nikhil that he meets his first love, Ruth, an English major who never meets his parents, even though the two are together for more than two years. They break up after Ruth spends a semester (and then a summer) abroad in England. Nikhil's escape from the world of "Gogol" is still incomplete, though, as every other weekend he travels home, where his family stubbornly persists in calling him by his pet name.

The escape is pushed one step further when, living in New York after having finished an architecture degree at Columbia, Gogol falls in love with a sophisticated young art historian named Maxine Ratliff, who lives with her elegant and wealthy parents, Gerard and Lydia. Gogol moves into their house, which becomes almost a replacement for his own home. He is fascinated by the Ratliffs, whose vacation home in New Hampshire, with its own family **graveyard**, is emblematic of the ease, security, and solidity he has never felt growing up divided between two cultures.

His escape with Maxine's family is cut short when his father dies, unexpectedly, of a heart attack. Ashoke had been living in Ohio on a teaching fellowship, and so was far from his wife and children at the time. Struck by the tragedy of this loss, Gogol returns to his family, finding comfort in the Bengali traditions he had once rebelled against. He drifts away from Maxine, who was never a part of that world, and the two stop seeing one another. Later, returning to New York, he goes on a date (suggested by his mother) with one of the other Bengali children present at the many gatherings of his childhood—Moushumi Mazoomdar. The two hit it off, surprised at the ways in which their familiarity and similar backgrounds draw them together, since both have tried hard to distance themselves from their past. Soon enough, they are married at a large Bengali ceremony in New Jersey.

Although they are happy enough at first, soon small remembrances of Moushumi's past with her ex-fiancé Graham begin to trouble their relationship. Moushumi, a French Ph.D. candidate at NYU, has always sought independence, and cannot help but feel that marrying Gogol was in some way "settling." In the end, she has an affair with an old crush, Dimitri Desjardins, and she and Gogol are divorced. In the novel's last chapter, we see the family coming together again, Sonia accompanied by her new fiancé Ben, to celebrate one final Bengali Christmas Eve in their home, which has been sold. Ashima has decided to live for six months of every year in Calcutta. Reflective and sad that this link to his past is evaporating, Gogol finds a book in his room—a copy of *The Collected Stories of Nikolai Gogol* that his father had given him as a birthday present years before, when all Gogol had wanted was to escape that name. Now that there will soon be no one left to call him by it, he feels a desire to reach out toward his past once more, and he sits down on his childhood bed to read his father's favorite story.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Ashoke Ganguli (Mithu) – a caring father to Gogol and Sonia, and husband to Ashima. Ashoke grew up in Calcutta. An avid bookworm, he especially loves Russian novels. His life is changed forever when, during a **train** journey to visit his grandparents, a major accident strikes – he barely survives the train wreck, and is fished from the wreckage only after rescue crews see the pages of the book that he had been reading – by Nikolai Gogol – blowing in the wind. After a long and difficult recovery, he vows to travel abroad. He goes on to become a PhD student at M.I.T., and later a professor of engineering. His pet name, by which he is known at home in India, is Mithu.

Ashima Ganguli (Monu) – mother to Gogol and Sonia, and wife to Ashoke. Ashima is the family member most attached to the traditions of India, and who is most homesick for her family. After her arranged marriage to Ashoke, she moves with him to Cambridge. Although she has difficulty adapting to life in America, her children become a source of comfort and purpose as they make their home there – even if their American ways sometimes mystify and frustrate her. Ashima becomes a locus of Bengali immigrant activities, organizing gatherings at traditional holidays and sharing recipes that approximate Indian dishes with the American ingredients available. Her pet name, by which she is known at home in India, is Monu.

Gogol/Nikhil Ganguli – The story's main protagonist, Gogol is the son of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli. Growing up in a suburban town in Massachusetts, with intermittent, long trips to Calcutta, Gogol quickly becomes conscious of the difference

between his parents' culture and the world in which he lives. He comes to hate the name Gogol, embarrassed by its unique oddity. When he turns eighteen, before leaving for Yale, he legally changes his name to Nikhil – the 'good name' his parents had initially intended for him to be called after he began school as a kindergartener. He later becomes an architect in New York after earning a postgraduate degree at Columbia University. He has three important romantic relationships throughout the novel – with Ruth, Maxine, and then Moushumi – that mirror his development, as he rebels against, and then returns to, his family life and cultural heritage.

Sonali (Sonia) Ganguli – Gogol's younger sister, who calls him, affectionately, "Goggles." She too struggles with the divide between her American friends and her Indian background, and moves to California for college. After their father dies, though, Sonia moves back in with Ashima to take care of her. She becomes engaged to Ben, a Jewish-Chinese journalist in Boston, and the two are planning a wedding in Calcutta at the end of the novel.

Moushumi Mazoomdar – The Bengali woman who marries Gogol, Moushumi was one of the children present at the many gatherings of Bengali friends in their childhood. She grew up in London, and had a British accent when she and Gogol first met, always preferring her books to the television that the other kids were watching. Their parents set them up after Moushumi breaks off an engagement to Graham just before their wedding. She is a PhD student at NYU during her brief marriage to Gogol, having lived in Paris after college. Moushumi and Gogol share the experience of having a complicated connection to their family and history, which brings them together, but is too limited to support a real relationship. She brings the marriage with Gogol to an end by cheating on him with Dimitri Desjardins.

Maxine Ratliff – Gogol's second significant girlfriend, a recent graduate from Barnard, where she studied art history. She lives with her parents in a beautiful apartment in New York. Gogol falls in love with her effortless beauty and elegant, old money lifestyle. He is most entranced by the security of her family's life, with their annual summer trips to the ancestral home in New Hampshire, where a family cemetery contains the graves of multiple generations of Ratliffs. She and Gogol break up after the death of his father, when he is pulled back toward his family and begins to feel that she is an outsider, refusing to allow her to accompany them to India for Ashoke's funeral.

Ruth – Gogol's first girlfriend, an English major at Yale whom he meets on the **train** home to Boston. The year after she and Gogol start dating (and become nearly inseparable), she decides to study abroad for a semester at Oxford, and then extends her stay over the summer. Although they stay together during her absence, when Ruth returns it becomes clear that something has changed between them, and they break up.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Patty – A friendly nurse at the hospital where Gogol is born.

Dr. Ashley – The handsome doctor who delivers Gogol.

Ghosh – A friendly, portly Bengali businessman with whom Ashoke strikes up a conversation on the **train** that eventually crashes. He urges Ashoke to travel the world while he is still young and free.

Dr. Gupta – A post-doctoral fellow at M.I.T. and friend to the Ganguli family. He visits the hospital on the day that Gogol is born, and gives him an illustrated **book** of Mother Goose rhymes.

Dilip Nandi – A Bengali friend of the Gangulis, present at Gogol's birth and at his annaprasan.

Maya Nandi – A Bengali friend of the Gangulis, Dilip's wife, whom Gogol calls Maya Mashi, as if she were his aunt.

Mr. Wilcox – The man in charge of compiling birth certificates at the hospital where Gogol is born. His full name is Howard Wilcox III.

Alan Montgomery – A professor of sociology at Harvard who lives upstairs from the Gangulis at their first home in Cambridge with his wife and two children.

Judy Montgomery – Alan's wife, she works at a women's health collective a few days a week.

Rana – Ashima's brother, who lives in Calcutta.

Candace Lapidus – The principal at the school where Gogol begins kindergarten.

Mr. Lawson – Gogol's junior year English teacher, a cult figure among the students.

Kim – A girl that Gogol meets at a college party while he is still in high school. Kim is the first girl that Gogol has ever kissed, and the first person to whom he introduces himself as Nikhil.

Amit – Gogol's distant cousin, who speaks on a panel at Yale about the experience of American-born Indians.

Evan – A draftsman at the architecture firm where Nikhil works in New York after graduating from Columbia.

Lydia Ratliff – Maxine's mother. Gogol is enamored with her beauty and elegance. She is a curator of textiles at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Gerald Ratliff – The father of Maxine, and a lawyer in the city. He is a cultured and elegant man.

Hank and Edith Ratliff – Maxine's grandparents, who live on the lake in New Hampshire.

Bridget – A married architecture student in the same review class as Gogol, with whom he has a physical relationship after breaking up with Maxine.

Graham – An investment banker, and Moushumi's first fiancé, whom she breaks up with just before their wedding. They met

in Paris, and then lived together in New York.

Astrid – A friend of Moushumi's, who attended Brown with her. She teaches film theory at the New School.

Donald – Astrid's husband, a painter of small still life portraits. He is also an old friend of Graham.

Alice – An administrative assistant at NYU, thirty years old, who dies unexpectedly of an aneurysm one morning at the office.

Dimitri Desjardins – An old crush of Moushumi's, he is an adjunct professor of German literature. He has an affair with her, ending her marriage to Gogol.

Ben – Ben is Sonia's fiancé. He is half-Jewish, half-Chinese, an editor at the Boston *Globe*, and was raised in Newton, Massachusetts.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE INDIAN IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

The experiences of the Ganguli family in America—a country that for some of them is an intensely foreign environment—offer a glimpse of life as an Indian immigrant to the United States.

What is familiar for most readers in America is deeply unfamiliar to Ashoke and Ashima, who therefore provide a unique perspective on seemingly everyday things within American society. Husband and wife have differing reactions to the barrage of new customs that greets them in America, and together they embody two sides of the immigrant experience. Ashoke is often amused and fascinated by the world around him in America, and prospers first as a student and then as a professor. Although he remains attached to the family's Bengali traditions, he has always been inclined to travel, and is not actively homesick. Ashima, on the other hand, misses her life in India intensely, and often finds life in Massachusetts to be cold and lonely. She finds it difficult to understand the customs of those around her, and clings to her correspondence with her family in India, as well as the family she has in America: her husband and children. Ashima in many ways anchors the narrative, providing an emotional center and working most actively to hold her family together and maintain their Bengali traditions. The intense isolation she often feels demonstrates the difficulty that can be involved in fitting into an entirely new culture while struggling to retain one's own cultural heritage.

Gogol, Sonia, and later Moushumi then represent the next generation of immigrants, the first American-born generation, for whom assimilation—the process of adapting to American culture—comes much more naturally. The Ganguli children grow up speaking English natively, unlike their parents, and are much more interested in American food and pop culture, since they have attended American schools their whole lives. For them, it is *India* that seems foreign. On their visits to family, they are homesick for American food and confused by common Indian rituals. However, their divided loyalties often lead to an internal struggle for a unified identity.

This shift, within one generation, is a common theme in immigrant fiction, and raises questions about the gradual disappearance of the home culture. Is assimilation the best option? The tension between retaining past traditions and moving into an "American" future is one that underlies much of *The Namesake*. Although they are born American, the members of the second generation (Gogol and Sonia) remain in the category of "outsider" or "other" to the majority of Americans, who focus on the foreign background to which Gogol and Sonia themselves may or may not feel any connection at all. Gogol encounters this feeling most acutely when a guest at a dinner party in New Hampshire assumes that he was born in India. If they are, by force of circumstance, outsiders in both of the cultures to which they owe allegiance, where, if anywhere, can the members of this generation find their home? The quest for a home—like the quest for a true name—is at the core of the decisions made by Gogol, and then by Moushumi later in the story.

FAMILY, TRADITION, AND RITUAL

The importance of family in *The Namesake* cannot be overstated. The novel is centered around the Ganguli family, and the ways in which two very different generations interact with one another.

For Ashoke and Ashima, the concept of a family life is inherited directly from their background in India, where entire families share the same home for generations, are deeply invested in one another's lives, and reinforce their connection to one another through a whole range of traditions and rituals. These include naming, marriage, death, and the numerous holidays in between. Although in America Ashoke and Ashima are largely cut off from their true relatives in India, the extended "family" of fellow Bengali immigrants helps to maintain these traditions, celebrating Indian holidays with the appropriate ceremony and cooking authentic Indian food as best they can with the ingredients available to them.

For the parents in the novel, then, family is a constant force, something to be relied on, and that which naturally defines one's identity. For Gogol and Sonia, however, who grow up outside of India, family becomes a symbol of those things that are foreign to their normal lives in America, something that pulls their identity away from what they are learning in school

and from American society. The traditions and rituals of the Bengali community seem like empty ceremonies to the children, who are growing up in a culture that views these traditions as alien. They are more interested in Christmas than the rituals of an Indian coming-of-age ceremony.

Family is always a defining force, however, even if it is one that both siblings seem to want to escape sometimes. Ashima and Ashoke provide the solid foundation that both siblings can rely on and inevitably return to, even if they spend increasing periods of time apart. When this foundation is shaken by the death of Ashoke, it is in family that the siblings find their comfort, returning to the traditions of their past. As Gogol reflects in the last chapter, among all of the accidents that have shaped their lives, the only constant has been a connection to one another.

INDEPENDENCE, REBELLION, AND GROWING UP

Gogol's struggle for independence from the family that he sometimes finds embarrassing is a major feature of the novel. *The Namesake* fits some definitions of a *Bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age novel, with Gogol as the protagonist who grows up over the course of the story.

Although our view into the life of Ashoke and Ashima makes them central to the novel, it is Gogol who becomes the main protagonist, and whose development we follow most closely. As in many books in the *Bildungsroman* category, *The Namesake* tracks Gogol's growth from a baby into a young man, examining his education and the various events that form him along the way.

Gogol is an independent thinker, and he actively rebels against certain things in his life that link him to a place (India) he feels less connected to than his parents do. His choice to legally change his name, which he does on his own before leaving for Yale, demonstrates this independence and spirit of rebellion. The people he meets from that point in the novel forward will know him only as Nikhil—and he is annoyed and embarrassed when his parents, visiting his college, forget the change and call him Gogol. After leaving for college, Nikhil/Gogol visits home less frequently. He starts carving out an independent life for himself in New York, one that involves a rebellious (since his parents would not approve of it) romantic attachment to Maxine. It is only after the death of his father that family again becomes a central facet of Nikhil/Gogol's life, so that when his mother, Ashima, is packing up their family home and preparing to leave for India, he wonders how he will be able to cope with being so far from her.

By tracking the episodes in Gogol's life, from his departure from the family home to his professional development, his major romantic connections, and the death of his father, Lahiri provides a perspective that gives the reader a chance to imagine the motivations behind each of Gogol's choices, and to observe the ways in which he reacts to the challenges he faces. As one example, we see his love of architecture being triggered by an early visit to the Taj Mahal, and then watch this inspire his drawing of his family home, which first connects him to Ruth, his first love, and then to his later life as an architect. This guessing-game of cause and effect is one in which the reader has the power to interpret Gogol's decisions in more than one way, and Lahiri provides us with lots of material for discussion.

IDENTITY AND NAMING

As its title suggests, at its core *The Namesake* tackles the question of forming one's own identity, and explores the power that a name can carry.

Gogol's decision to change his name to Nikhil before leaving home for college demonstrates his desire to take control over his own identity. The name Gogol, which "Nikhil" finds so distasteful, is a direct result of the literal identity confusion at his birth, when the letter sent from India that contained his "true name" was lost in the mail. "Gogol" is also a name that holds deep meaning for Ashoke, since it was a book of short stories by Gogol, the Russian author, that saved his life during a fateful **train** crash —but this meaning is not conveyed to Gogol/Nikhil during his childhood.

As the other theme outlines make clear, the main tension that drives Gogol/Nikhil's identity confusion is the divide between his family's Indian heritage and his own desire for an independent, modern American lifestyle.

The episodes in Gogol/Nikhil's development on display in the novel reveal a constant striving for a clear identity, a struggle which is made difficult by the divided world in which he grows up. Many of the choices that he makes seem motivated by a desire to live life as a "normal" American, and to escape the influence of his family. Gogol's relationship to Maxine, for example, an upper class New Yorker who lives at home with her stylish and modern parents, evolves to the point of offering Gogol an alternative home. He vacations with Maxine's family instead of returning home to visit his own, and embeds himself in their rituals. The identity that she and her family represent is clearly a very seductive one.

However, there are also moments—like after the death of his father, or when he decides to marry Moushumi—that Gogol seems to be reaching back toward his roots. Although his marriage to Moushumi ends in divorce, the book's conclusion, as Gogol sits down to finally read the book of his namesake's short stories that his father had given him long ago, suggests a new acceptance of his past, and a willingness to allow his background to become a part of his identity.

Naming, and nicknames, are also a symbol of the bonds shared by different characters throughout the novel, and they carry weight as markers of those bonds. When Ashoke and Ashima

return to Calcutta on family vacations, they become "Mithu" and "Monu," and are transformed into more confident versions of themselves. Sonia calls Gogol "Goggles," Maxine is "Max" to Gogol—whom she knows as Nikhil—and to Dimitri, Moushumi is known as "Mouse." This abundance of names is also a sign of the various worlds that the main characters of Lahiri's novel inhabit simultaneously—often in a way that causes internal division, but which can also provide a form of comfort.

LOVE AND MARRIAGE

The novel examines the nature of love and marriage by providing an intimate view into a series of Gogol's romantic relationships, which are seen alongside the enduring, arranged marriage of his parents.

Gogol's story is grounded in the marriage of his parents, Ashoke and Ashima, whose conception of love is founded in their shared past in India. Characterized by clearly defined gender roles and less openly displayed affection, but also a deep sense of loyalty and companionship, this relationship can be contrasted with Gogol's romantic experiences. While Gogol has intense, influential, and openly sexual relationships with three different women over the course of the novel—outside of, and then, briefly, within a marriage—Ashima and Ashoke are one another's sole romantic partners in life, as evidenced by the first meeting between them, which was arranged by Ashima's family.

This reflects a difference between the two generations about the concept of married life. Gogol uses love as another means of rebelling against his past and trying to form his own identity, and the women he is drawn to at different points in the novel match his attitude toward that past. For him, love is something to be found independently. For Ashima and Ashoke, marriage was not an exercise in independence or forming identity, but was instead another step in the traditional Indian path in life, and one that led toward companionship and the growth of a family.

Although there is a traditional separation between Ashima and Ashoke that may appear as distance to an American reader—as in the moment of Gogol's birth, when Ashoke waits outside the room while Ashima delivers his son—the intimacy between the two of them is clear from the respect and care they take with one another. By contrast, the relationship between Moushumi and Gogol is driven by Moushumi's desire—which is greater even than Gogol's own—to conform to a certain image of a modern American. She and Gogol never seem to relax into the idea that they might find their identity in one another, and dinner parties with her friends in Brooklyn, where Gogol feels awkward and out of place, signal a divide between them. Moushomi's dissatisfaction with the marriage eventually leads to infidelity, and the two are divorced. Their need for independence is greater than their sense of loyalty or commitment to a family identity.

Ultimately, Lahiri seems to support a balance of these two drives when it comes to love and marriage. It is important that one feel capable of defining one's identity independently, because love pursued as a means of finding stability or escape seems to fail, but it is equally important, and requires a different kind of courage, to attach oneself to a world created in collaboration with another person.

SYMBOLS

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

TRAINS

Trains appear again and again in Lahiri's novel, and twice a train accident plays a significant role in the story. The first is the devastating accident in Ashoke's past, which he barely survives, and the second is when an unknown person commits suicide on the tracks of a train that is carrying Gogol home from Yale. The presence of trains in the novel seems to be a reminder of the constant and inevitable forward motion of life, which advances and accumulates outside of anyone's control, as Gogol reflects at the end of the novel. It is on a train that Gogol meets Ruth, and on a train that he discovers Moushumi's affair. Trains also represent motion, travel, and distance, and are a reminder that the novel's main characters are divided between homes, constantly unsettled.

BOOKS

Books play an important role in many key scenes in the novel, beginning in the first chapter with the young Ashoke's all-consuming love for them—a love that saves his life, and gives Gogol his name—and ending with Gogol's chance discovery of the book his father had given him for his birthday more than a decade before. Books are records of the past and carriers of names, as in the case of Moushumi's inscribed books from Graham or Dimitri, or Ashima's books of addresses. They also can grant a reader the power to travel—an idea made literal by Gogol's purchase of an Italian guidebook.

GRAVES AND GRAVEYARDS

In a few moments in the novel, Gogol thinks with longing of the idea of a grave—a place that will bear his legacy into the future, and give him or his family a permanent physical anchor in space. In reality, he knows they will never have such a grave, since in the Hindu tradition their bodies will be cremated. Gogol is first struck by this desire on a fieldtrip to a graveyard of early American settlers, whose odd names give him a sense of kinship with these early immigrants.

The feeling reoccurs when he sees the Ratliff's family graveyard and pictures Maxine returning to this place to bury her parents.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Houghton Mifflin edition of *The Namesake* published in 2003.

Chapter 1 Quotes

Ashima has been consuming this concoction throughout her pregnancy, a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and on railway platforms throughout India, spilling from newspaper cones. Even now that there is barely space inside her, it is the one thing she craves. Tasting from a cupped palm, she frowns; as usual there's something missing.

Related Characters: Ashima Ganguli (Monu)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Ashima is preparing a rough approximation of a traditional Indian street food using ingredients she can cobble together in her Cambridge apartment. This snack is partly a pregnant craving, a symbol of motherhood, and partly a symbol of a deeper, all-consuming craving for the homeland that she has only recently left behind to join her husband, Ashoke, in America. The snack represents much more than just nourishment—a life left behind—and so it leaves her feeling lonelier than before, even as it also gives her a brief reminder of what life in the wildly different world that she grew up in was like. In India the snack is superabundant, "spilling" from newspaper cones on every corner; America, by contrast, is a wasteland for Ashima, not the land of plenty that Ashoke sees. She has a persistent sense that something is missing, not just from this culinary experiment, but from her life as a whole in this new land.

By beginning the novel with Ashima's perspective, Lahiri grounds her tale in the solid foundation provided by this traditionally-minded, stubborn matriarch. Her discomfort and struggle to find a home in the United States help humanize her, creating sympathy for Ashima, who will remain the solid heart of the Ganguli family, even as it grows apart.

When she calls out to Ashoke, she doesn't say his name. Ashima never thinks of her husband's name when she thinks of her husband, even though she knows perfectly well what it is. She has adopted his surname but refuses, for propriety's sake, to utter his first. It's not the type of thing Bengali wives do. Like a kiss or caress in a Hindi movie, a husband's name is something intimate and therefore unspoken, cleverly patched over. And so … she utters the interrogative that has come to replace it, which translates roughly as "Are you listening to me?"

Related Characters: Ashima Ganguli (Monu) (speaker), Ashoke Ganguli (Mithu)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Ashima and Ashoke are still awaiting the arrival of their firstborn son, and the reader is given a glimpse into their relationship when Ashima calls to her husband without using his name. This is a product of tradition, since the name is considered an intimate aspect of a romantic relationship—the novel's first hint of the importance of naming in Indian culture. Ashima is devoted to tradition, and to "propriety," wary of the customs of the country that she has entered into, where first names are used indiscriminately.There is a gentle, humble quality to the phrase she uses in place of Ashoke's name, but it is still a strikingly formal phrase, from an American standpoint.

Ashima and Ashoke had an arranged marriage, and at this point they are still growing comfortable with one another, so much of what holds them together is a shared culture and a devotion to tradition, rather than a specific affection—although that love will come, and is already growing. Ashima, especially, has a reverence for this formal, respectful relationship, which might be considered unromantic from a modern American perspective. Later in the novel, she will be scandalized by the open affection that her children show for their own romantic partners.

Ashima had never heard of Boston, or of fiber optics. She was asked whether she was willing to fly on a plane and then if she was capable of living in a city characterized by severe, snowy winters, alone. "Won't he be there?" she'd asked, pointing to the man whose shoes she'd briefly occupied, but who had yet to say a word to her.

Related Characters: Ashima Ganguli (Monu) (speaker),

Ashoke Ganguli (Mithu)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

The narrative perspective flashes back to the first time that Ashima met Ashoke, when he visited her house as a potential suitor for a marriage arranged by their parents. Asked to undertake a massive journey across the world, Ashima's courageous response shows a deep trust, and also a naivete regarding relationships and the world at large. The two have never met before, never spoken, but will soon embark on a lifetime together, in sometimes difficult, lonely circumstances. From her question, which does not even address Ashoke, it is clear that Ashima does not even know her future husband's name—and yet she is willing to stake her future on their pending marriage. This vision of love, in which individual choice is not an important factor, will seem impossible to understand to the pair's future children, who grow up in America with Western ideas of love and romance.

A moment before this meeting, Ashima put her feet in Ashoke's shoes, seemingly entranced by their foreignness, their connection to this man who might become her husband. This moment of girlish excitement is a glimpse of the sentimental, young Ashima who will become a stern matriarch later in the novel.

"Lucky boy," Ashoke remarks, turning the beautifully sewn pages. "Only a few hours old and already the owner of books." What a difference, he thinks, from the childhood he has known. Ashima thinks the same, though for different reasons. For as grateful as she feels for the company… these acquaintances are only substitutes for the people who really ought to be surrounding them. Without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, the baby's birth, like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true. As she strokes and suckles and studies her son, she can't help but pity him. She has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived.

Related Characters: Ashoke Ganguli (Mithu) (speaker), Gogol/Nikhil Ganguli, Ashima Ganguli (Monu)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, we see the major divide between Ashoke and Ashima in their attitude toward America, their new home as a young family. Family friends of the Gangulis have just presented the youngest member of this family, their firstborn son—who is still without a name—with a beautifully illustrated children's book. Ashoke, who has always loved literature, sees this as proof that his new son has been born into a land of prosperity and happiness, where anything can happen. He marvels at how different his son's first moments are from his own past, growing up without access to such luxuries.

While Ashoke celebrates this difference, Ashima is struck by a deep sadness to see everything that her son lacks in this new country. For Ashima, family is the most important thing in life, and to be born alone, without one's extended family, is a great tragedy. Without her family, Ashima is left floundering in the world, unable to function outside of the traditional family structures she knows so well. She has a sense of foreboding and worry for her son, who will grow up without any access to these structures.

This is the house Ashoke had brought Ashima to eighteen months ago, late one February night after her arrival at Logan Airport. In the dark, through the windows of the taxi, wide awake from jet lag, she could barely make out a thing, apart from heaps of broken snow glowing like shattered, bluish white bricks on the ground. It wasn't until morning, stepping briefly outside wearing a pair of Ashoke's socks under her thin-soled slippers, the frigid New England chill piercing her inner ears and jaw, that she'd had her first real glimpse of America: Leafless trees with ice-covered branches. Dog urine and excrement embedded in the snow banks. Not a soul on the street.

Related Characters: Ashoke Ganguli (Mithu), Ashima Ganguli (Monu)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

This quote offers a flashback to Ashima's first impression of her new home with Ashoke in America. It is clear that this a completely alien landscape for the bewildered Ashima, who is fresh off the plane from India. While there is a general

stereotype that for those who immigrate here, America is seen as a golden land of opportunity—and Ashoke takes this view—for Ashima, the frozen New England suburb is a dismal, ugly, and unwelcoming place, a violent shock to her system echoed by the frigid chill that pierces her body when she ventures outside.

Her thin-soled slippers, traditional Indian footwear, show that she is completely unready for this new climate. The fact that she wraps her feet in her new husband's socks is also an echo of the moment before their first encounter, when she tried on his shoes in secret—and a hint at the growing intimacy between the couple. This is a small comfort, though, when Ashima is faced with what from her perspective are the desolate, empty, excrement-filled streets of Cambridge, so different from the warm, bustling streets she knows in India.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect.

Related Characters: Ashima Ganguli (Monu)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49-50

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Ashima is continuing to adjust to her life as an immigrant in America, moving into a new stage now after the birth of Gogol. In this rich metaphor, she compares life as an outsider to a “lifelong pregnancy,” a sort of perpetual state of limbo when she feels suspended, apart from the world. She expects her normal life to resume once this period is over, but the pregnancy of immigrant life has no set term—and so she is in a constant state of discomfort, of unrest, and of intense responsibility without the option to rest and feel "normal." There is something productive and fertile about this waiting, since it brings new opportunities into the world for her children, but for Ashima herself the opportunities of this new life pale in comparison to the perpetual discomfort of being an outsider, feeling forever in between two worlds.

The reaction of those around her to Ashima's status as an immigrant also contributes to her sense that this is a "sort of lifelong pregnancy"—she is made to feel remarkable or odd, like she needs to be taken care of by those who view her always as an outsider.

❝ But Gogol is attached to them. For reasons he cannot explain or necessarily understand, these ancient Puritan spirits, these very first immigrants to America, these bearers of unthinkable, obsolete names, have spoken to him, so much so that in spite of his mother’s disgust he refuses to throw them away.

Related Characters: Gogol/Nikhil Ganguli (speaker), Ashima Ganguli (Monu)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

Gogol has just returned from a class field trip to a Puritan graveyard, which was full of the odd names of early immigrants to America. Gogol took rubbings of these graves, much to the dismay of his mother, Ashima, who sees this act as disrespectful and has told him to throw them away. However, in an act of rebellion—one of his first—Gogol decides to keep the grave rubbings spite of his mother's wishes.

Gogol identifies with the dead Puritans on two levels: first, as immigrants to America, a reminder that almost everyone here arrived from somewhere else, and second as the bearers of strange, now-unheard-of names like his own. Already Gogol is looking for a "namesake," and he finds an odd sense of kinship with these dead Puritans and their ancient names.

Ashima, now Monu, weeps with relief, and Ashoke, now Mithu, kisses his brothers on both cheeks, holds their heads in his hands. Gogol and Sonia know these people, but they do not feel close to them as their parents do. Within minutes, before their eyes Ashoke and Ashima slip into bolder, less complicated versions of themselves, their voices louder, their smiles wider, revealing a confidence that Gogol and Sonia never see on Pemberton Road. "I'm scared, Goggles," Sonia whispers to her brother in English, seeking his hand and refusing to let go.

Related Characters: Sonali (Sonia) Ganguli (speaker), Ashima Ganguli (Monu), Ashoke Ganguli (Mithu), Gogol/Nikhil Ganguli

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 81-82

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes the scene as the Ganguli family arrives in India for an extended visit. Here, the divide between the two immigrant generations within the family is clearly illustrated. For Ashima and Ashoke, who grew up in India, this is an intensely emotional, joyous homecoming that signals a return to the identity with which they feel most comfortable. The parents are transformed, shedding the worry and insecurity that comes with life as an immigrant in the United States, and embracing their extended family. This transformation is signaled in part by the recovery of their old pet names, Monu and Mithu, traditional Indian pet names that signal their close relationship to these family members, from whom they have been separated for so long, divorced from their former identities.

Gogol and Sonia, on the other hand, who were born in America, are frightened by what to them is a strange and foreign land, populated with strange people whose customs are not their own. They too share pet names that signal their closeness to one another—not the traditional Indian ones of their parents, but Americanized nicknames like "Goggles." Already, within one generation, the children have become foreigners in the land of their parents.

Chapter 5 Quotes

There is only one complication: he doesn't feel like Nikhil. Not yet. Part of the problem is that the people who now know him as Nikhil have no idea that he used to be Gogol. They know him only in the present, not at all in the past. But after eighteen years of Gogol, two months of Nikhil feel scant, inconsequential. At times he feels as if he's cast himself in a play, acting the part of twins, indistinguishable to the naked eye yet fundamentally different.

Related Characters: Gogol/Nikhil Ganguli

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes as Gogol—now Nikhil—begins to adapt to the new identity he has created for himself at Yale, rejecting the name he grew to despise as a teenager. Legally, his name is no longer Gogol, since he went through the process of changing it in court, rebelling against his parents' wishes. What he is beginning to realize here, though, is that while he has changed his name, the parts of his identity that he wished to rebel against still haunt him. Changing his name was an attempt to form a new identity, but ultimately a superficial one. This new identity is further undermined by the fact that it is a sort of lie—he alone knows he has made this change, since his university friends have only known him as Nikhil. He feels like an impostor as a result of this secrecy, unable to reveal what had been a major part of his identity before arriving in this new community. Of course, the only person aware of this inner conflict is Nikhil himself.

This sense that Nikhil has that he is acting in a play as twins who are "indistinguishable to the naked eye yet fundamentally different" underlines how uncomfortable he feels "performing" what to him is a new and strange identity. It also suggests he is beginning to understand that there is something about identity that transcends name and appearance, and is recognizing that experience and tradition can be key components of one's identity as well.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ At times… he is conscious of the fact that his immersion in Maxine's family is a betrayal of his own. It isn't simply the fact that his parents don't know about Maxine… it is his knowledge that apart from their affluence, Gerald and Lydia are secure in a way his parents will never be. He cannot imagine his parents sitting at Lydia and Gerald's table, enjoying Lydia's cooking, appreciating Gerald's selection of wine. He cannot imagine them contributing to one of their dinner party conversations. And yet here he is, night after night, a welcome addition to the Ratliff's universe, doing just that.

Related Characters: Maxine Ratliff, Lydia Ratliff, Gerald Ratliff, Ashoke Ganguli (Mithu), Ashima Ganguli (Monu), Gogol/Nikhil Ganguli

Related Themes:

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes Gogol's moments of inner conflict about the new home he has found for himself in New York, in his girlfriend's townhouse with the sophisticated and elegant Ratliff family. Maxine's parents, Gerald and Lydia, who are at the head of this new home, are opposite in every way from Gogol's own parents—they are embedded in the American upper class, secure in their wealth and whiteness, openly affectionate with one another, and luxurious in their taste. Feeling so at home here, Gogol is aware of the immense distance that separates this lifestyle from the one he grew up with. He is fundamentally different from his parents, has had radically different life experiences than them, and can now enter a world that will never be theirs. This power is at once intoxicating and disorienting for Gogol, who has worked hard to distance himself from his roots, rebelling against his parents' lifestyle and isolating himself in New York with Maxine. Yet now that he is successful in his rebellion, Gogol finds himself feeling guilty about his success.

Gogol's relationship with Maxine has also been linked from the start with his struggle to form an identity. Gogol—or Nikhil, now—has transformed himself since meeting her, changing his lifestyle to match hers and reveling in the new sense of home and belonging that she is able to give him, for a time.

❝ The family seems to possess every piece of the landscape, not only the house itself but every tree and blade of grass. Nothing is locked, not the main house, or the cabin that he and Maxine sleep in. Anyone could walk in. He thinks of the alarm system that now is installed in his parents' house, wonders why they cannot relax about their physical surroundings in the same way. The Ratliffs own the moon that floats over the lake, and the sun and the clouds. It is a place that has been good to them, as much a part of them as a member of the family. The idea of returning year after year to a single place appeals to Gogol deeply.

Related Characters: Ashoke Ganguli (Mithu), Ashima Ganguli (Monu), Maxine Ratliff, Gerald Ratliff, Lydia Ratliff, Gogol/Nikhil Ganguli

Related Themes:

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Gogol describes the Ratliff's summer home, which strikes him as a sort of paradise on earth. What attracts Gogol so intensely to this place is its sense of permanence and security, the all-pervading certainty that comes, in his mind, with an ancestral home like this one and the wealth and class of the family that inhabits it. Gogol has never felt so entirely at home, since he has always been torn between two identities—the Indian heritage of his parents and the American culture he has grown up in. The Ratliff family's identity is monolithic, by contrast, linked to this place by an ancient family burying ground that anchors them physically to the American landscape, within which they have thrived. It is the startling sense of ownership that comes with this security, so in contrast to his parents' own petty worrying, that gives Gogol the impression that the entire forest belongs to the Ratliffs: they are at home here. Never having had a home like this, Gogol is entranced by what he sees, and the identity that this place represents is a major part of what motivates his romantic interest in Maxine. His choice to be here is a rebellion against his parents, and everything they represent.

He returns to bed, squeezing in beside Maxine's warm, sleeping body, and drapes his arm around her narrow waist, fits his knees behind hers. Through the window he sees that dawn is creeping into the sky, only a handful of stars still visible, the shapes of the surrounding pines and cabins growing distinct. A bird begins to call. And then he remembers that his parents can't possibly reach him: he has not given them the number, and the Ratliffs are unlisted. That here at Maxine's side, in this cloistered wilderness, he is free.

Related Characters: Ashoke Ganguli (Mithu), Ashima Ganguli (Monu), Maxine Ratliff, Gogol/Nikhil Ganguli

Related Themes:

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, we see Gogol at the peak of his sense of security with Maxine—a sense that will not last long, since a fateful phone call announcing his father's death is on its way, despite Gogol's belief that here, at last, he is unreachable. The image of Gogol pressing his body into Maxine's for comfort is a useful illustration of the way that he uses romantic love as a means of chasing security and a stable identity. The idyllic, peaceful imagery of nature gives a sense of serene beauty, in strict contrast to the angst and insecurity that Gogol has felt for much of his life. His coming here, and creating for himself a new life and a new home with Maxine, is a rebellion against the home that he grew up in. Here, at last, there is no way that that old life can reach him—or so he thinks—and no one who can remind him of his former identity as "Gogol"; to everyone in this "cloistered wilderness" he is finally only Nikhil.

Chapter 7 Quotes

She passes over two pages filled only with the addresses of her daughter, and then her son. She has given birth to vagabonds. She is the keeper of all these names and numbers now, numbers she once knew by heart, numbers and addresses her children no longer remember.

Related Characters: Ashima Ganguli (Monu), Sonali (Sonia) Ganguli, Gogol/Nikhil Ganguli

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the novel returns to following Ashima's perspective, as she writes out Christmas cards on behalf of the scattered members of her family, scanning through her address book and reflecting on her children's nomadic lifestyles. Ashima is living alone for the first time in her life, separated from Ashoke, who received a fellowship to teach in Cleveland. Lonely at home, she is amazed at how comfortable her children have become—from her perspectiv— with their lack of any permanent home. There is a sense that Ashima feels that her children are strangers to her, insofar as this strange nation they grew up in gave them habits, sensibilities, and customs that she finds entirely foreign.

Nonetheless, Ashima has remained the reliable center point for her wandering children, serving as a beacon of tradition and family life, endeavoring to keep the family connected to its heritage and to one another. Her children take this service for granted at this point in their lives, but that won't remain the case forever.In a few moments Ashima will receive the fateful call, telling her that Ashoke has died, and then she will truly be the only keeper of the memories of her children, who will feel a new need to rediscover their first home as they mourn their father.

Now, sitting together at the kitchen table at six-thirty every evening, the hour feeling more like midnight through the window, his father's chair empty, this meatless meal is the only thing that makes sense. There is no question of skipping this meal; on the contrary, for ten evenings the three of them are strangely hungry, eager to taste the blandness on their plates.

Related Characters: Sonali (Sonia) Ganguli, Ashima Ganguli (Monu), Gogol/Nikhil Ganguli

Related Themes:

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, we see the Ganguli family learning to live together without Ashoke, who has recently died. The remaining family members are eating their nightly meal, a traditional meatless and bland dish consumed after the death of a loved one. Gogol's perspective leads the narrative again here, as the mourning protagonist notices a significant shift in his own attitude toward the Indian traditions he has scorned and discarded for so long. He now welcomes the comfort that this ritual provides, the connection that it gives him to his family, and to his father's heritage.

The family's mourning for Ashoke is intense, leading to days that feel immensely long (so that six-thirty is more like midnight) and empty. Their ritualized togetherness is a comfortable relief, an automatic exercise that links them together, when they have recently been scattered.

Chapter 8 Quotes

It is the photograph more than anything that draws Gogol back to the house again and again, and one day, stepping out of the bathroom on his way to bed and glancing at his father's smiling face, he realizes that this is the closest thing his father has to a grave.

Related Characters: Ashoke Ganguli (Mithu), Gogol/Nikhil Ganguli

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Gogol pauses before a photograph of his father, a physical reminder of this man who is no longer a physical part of Gogol's life. Because, in accordance with Indian tradition, Ashoke's body was cremated, this photograph—which received an anointment of oil and a garland of flowers during Ashoke's funeral—is in fact the closest thing to a physical grave that exists for Gogol's father. Ashoke was always the photographer in the family, eager to preserve the memory of their family vacations, and Gogol was a reluctant subject of these photos—now, however, he appreciates the concrete link this photo gives him to his father's memory.

Gogol has always felt a distinct lack of anchor in his life, and has been fascinated by graveyards because of the clear, solid link to the past that they provide for family members and descendants of those buried within them. Although he cannot have a grave for Ashoke, this photo makes the Ganguli home in Massachusetts a site of family history, a sort of anchor that changes Gogol's relationship to his mother and his past. He is eager to hold on to this past, now that he has seen how it can fall away from him without warning.

It strikes him that there is no term for what they once were to each other. Their parents were friends, not they. She is a family acquaintance but she is not family. Their contact until tonight has been artificial, imposed, something like his relationship to his cousins in India but lacking even the justification of blood ties. Until they'd met tonight, he had never seen her outside the context of her family, or she his. He decides that it is her very familiarity that makes him curious about her, and as he begins to walk west, to the subway, he wonders when he might see her again.

Related Characters: Moushumi Mazoomdar, Gogol/Nikhil Ganguli

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

Here we see the beginning of Gogol's newest romantic interest after an early encounter with Moushumi. Gogol is now swinging in the opposite direction of his previous relationships, still searching for identity in his romantic life but now looking to connect again with his roots, rather than cut himself off from them as he had with Maxine. This new instinct seems to be a reaction to the death of his father, which was accompanied by a newfound interest in the traditions of his family and an anxiety that he was throwing away a major part of his identity by essentially abandoning his family for Maxine.

Now, Gogol has done what would have been unthinkable for him at nearly any other point in his life—gone on a blind date arranged by his mother. This arrangement echoes the Indian tradition, and suggests that Gogol is ready now to listen to Ashima, whom he has been so embarrassed of since his teenage years. Moushumi and Gogol are linked by their Indian heritage (and their parents' friendships), but also by their shared heritage as first-generation Americans, who grew up with the same half-executed traditions and the same desire to escape from these remnants of their family's customs.

Chapter 9 Quotes

"I had it engraved," she says, and when he turns the flask over he sees the letters NG. He remembers poking his head into Sonia's room years ago, telling her about his decision to change his name to Nikhil. She'd been thirteen or so, doing her homework on her bed. "You can't do that," she'd told him then, shaking her head, and when he'd asked her why not she'd simply said, "Because you can't. Because you're Gogol."

Related Characters: Sonali (Sonia) Ganguli (speaker), Gogol/Nikhil Ganguli

Related Themes:

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Sonia offers Gogol a wedding gift before his wedding to Moushumi: an engraved flask with his (chosen) initials, NG. This moment of togetherness demonstrates the extent to which Sonia has also grown over the years, coming to understand and empathize with her brother's struggle to form an identity. The idea that he could take control of his name, establishing his own identity, had seemed impossible to her as a young teen, but now Sonia is expressing her support for Google's decision to change his name to Nikhil all those years ago.

The flask is a distinctly American gift, too, given that both of the Ganguli siblings' parents abstain from alcohol. This illustrates the kinship in rebellion that connects Sonia and Gogol/Nikhil, a connection that reflects the strength and importance of family for the siblings even outside of the traditional Indian system, where Ashima and Ashoke's families lived together in a single home and were inseparable for life.

He'd confessed to her that he still felt guilty at times for changing his name, more so now that his father was dead. And she'd assured him that it was understandable, that anyone in his place would have done the same. But now it's become a joke to her. Suddenly he regrets having ever told Moushumi; he wonders whether she'll proclaim the story of his father's accident to the table as well. By morning, half the people in the room will have forgotten. It will be a tiny, odd fact about him, an anecdote, perhaps, for a future dinner party. This is what upsets him most.

Related Characters: Ashoke Ganguli (Mithu), Moushumi Mazoomdar, Gogol/Nikhil Ganguli

Related Themes:

Page Number: 244

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, a rift grows between Gogol and Moushumi after she tells the story of his name change (from Gogol to Nikhil) to the room at a dinner party with a set of intellectual friends of hers that he despises. This is an emotional betrayal, from Gogol's perspective, since the story was an intensely private one, with a huge amount of significance for Gogol. Moushumi treats it like a funny aside to her friends, which leaves Gogol with the unshakeable feeling that she misunderstood its importance, or is belittling something that, for him, is a major part of his identity. He had believed that this conflicted relationship to his past and identity confusion was something that Moushumi, as a fellow first-generation American from similar circumstances, would understand. The disappointment and regret that Gogol feels in this moment might extend to his decision to marry Moushumi—it seems clear now that the two of them are different in many ways, and that his reasons for marrying her, in search of a part of his identity he thought he had lost, may not have been sufficient to keep them together.

Chapter 10 Quotes

She believed that he would be incapable of hurting her as Graham had. After years of clandestine relationships, it felt refreshing to court in a fishbowl, to have the support of her parents from the very start, the inevitability of an unquestioned future, of marriage, drawing them along. And yet the familiarity that had once drawn her to him has begun to keep her at bay. Though she knows it's not his fault, she can't help but associate him, at times, with a sense of resignation, with the very life she has resisted, has struggled so mightily to leave behind.

Related Characters: Gogol/Nikhil Ganguli, Moushumi Mazoomdar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 250

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Lahiri begins to follow Moushumi's perspective, and this quote reveals her growing dissatisfaction with Gogol, and the ways in which Moushumi's reasons for marrying him in the first place echo the rebellious, conflicting quest for an identity that Gogol regularly manifests in his own romantic choices. For years, Moushumi made every effort to rebel against the expectation that had been placed on her since she was only a young girl: that she would marry a suitable Indian man. Counterintuitively, it then seems that Moushumi's decision to marry Gogol was in some ways a rebellion against her own rebellious instincts, driven by fear and sadness after she was left on her wedding day by her previous fiance,

Graham. Now, though, the lack of danger that had drawn her to Gogol, and his association with a stable identity from her past, is increasingly driving her away again. As Gogol's own relationship choices have shown, identity confusion renders finding meaningful love especially difficult.

She wonders if she is the only woman in her family ever to have betrayed her husband, to have been unfaithful. This is what upsets her most to admit: that the affair causes her to feel strangely at peace, the complication of it calming her, structuring her day.

Related Characters: Gogol/Nikhil Ganguli, Moushumi Mazoomdar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 266

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Moushumi considers her feelings in the wake of an affair that she has struck up with an old flame of hers, Dimitri Desjardins. Oddly enough, this rebellious act—an act of betrayal, essentially—is comfortable for Moushumi, who is becoming faithful again to her own sense of identity as a rebellious, sensual, modern woman. In mourning after her failed wedding, Moushumi had then found Gogol, who was also in mourning, still recovering from the death of his father. For both of them, marriage became a means of trying on an identity they had previously rejected. Moushumi, though, comes to regret her choice, since her identity as an intellectual, cosmopolitan woman feels at odds with Gogol's, or at least with the return to a traditional Indian heritage that he represents for her. Instability and transgression, then, are key parts of Moushumi's identity, and so she returns to them with this affair in a way that feels almost like a homecoming. She is guilty, and thinks of her family's reaction with unease, but is only fueled on by these feelings, since they render her act all the more rebellious.

Chapter 12 Quotes

Ashima feels lonely suddenly, horribly, permanently alone, and briefly, turned away from the mirror, she sobs for her husband. She feels overwhelmed by the thought of the move she is about to make, to the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign. She feels both impatience and indifference for all the days she still must live, for something tells her she will not go quickly as her husband did.

Related Characters: Ashoke Ganguli (Mithu), Ashima Ganguli (Monu)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 278

Explanation and Analysis

Lahiri returns to Ashima's perspective, and describes her experience of life alone in the house now that Ashoke has passed away. Ashima has decided to move back to India to be with what remains of her extended family, and is also mourning the loss of this home she has built with such dogged perseverance in America. For her whole life, Ashima has lived with either her family in India or her husband Ashoke, and now she is entering a new period of her life, in which she will need to find other forms of companionship. In this moment she is afraid of that new period, but resigned to it at the same time, sensing that she still has many years left to live.

The depth of Ashima's emotion is an indication of just how deeply she loved her husband, and the extent to which their lives were intimately intertwined. This is the best example of true love in the novel, and it blossomed from a traditional arranged marriage, founded in family and custom.

And then the house will be occupied by strangers, and there will be no trace that they were ever there, no house to enter, no name in the telephone directory. Nothing to signify the years his family has lived here, no evidence of the effort, the achievement it had been. It's hard to believe that his mother is really going, that for months she will be so far. He wonders how his parents had done it, leaving their respective families behind, seeing them so seldom, dwelling unconnected, in a perpetual state of expectation, of longing.

Related Characters: Ashoke Ganguli (Mithu), Ashima Ganguli (Monu), Gogol/Nikhil Ganguli

Related Themes:

Page Number: 281

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Gogol imagines the house he grew up in being passed along to a new family, now that his mother has made the decision to move back to India for six months of each year. The anchor that his father's photograph had been in this place will be removed, and the house—such a major part

of his past and present identity—will be transferred away as if it had never belonged to the Gangulis, with no remnant of their name to mark its history. Gogol now has a new appreciation for his parents' struggle, as immigrants, to turn this house into a home, and a different kind of respect for them accompanies it. Now that he is losing his childhood home, he can finally understand how difficult it must have been for them to leave theirs and come here to America, sacrificing stability and comfort to live in the isolation of this new country. Gogol finally sees how important family and a family home are in life, forming the roots of a stable identity—and, ironically, it is in this moment that his roots are being removed. Still, his greater self-awareness about the importance of his roots and increasing reconciliation with his heritage suggests hope for his continued search for a meaningful identity.

❝ It is as if a building he'd been responsible for designing had collapsed for all to see. And yet he can't really blame her. They had both acted on the same impulse, that was their mistake. They had both sought comfort in each other, in their shared world, perhaps for the sake of novelty, or out of fear that that world was slowly dying. Still, he wonders how he's arrived at all this… His time with her seems like a permanent part of him that no longer has any relevance, or currency. As if that time were a name he'd ceased to use.

Related Characters: Moushumi Mazoomdar, Gogol/Nikhil Ganguli

Related Themes:

Page Number: 284

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Gogol reflects on the end of his marriage to Moushumi. Their relationship collapses finally after he discovers her affair with Dimitri, and ends in a way that is deeply embarrassing for him, since their union had been celebrated so publicly by friends and family. He diagnoses the reasons behind the failure of their marriage here, recognizing that their reasons for marrying were fundamentally flawed; both of them sought stability and identity in the other, without having formed a stable identity for themselves first. It was a relationship built out of fear, nostalgia, and curiosity, rather than true love. Now that part of his life feels strangely and inexplicably distant from Gogol.

By describing this time as if it "were a name he'd ceased to use," Gogol again underlines the significance of names—the various names that reflect a variety of distinct identities, formed in cooperation with the people who use them. Monu and Mithu, for instance, the Indian familial pet names of Ashoke and Ashima, only exist in the context of those characters' relationships to their families back home. Now that the context of Gogol's relationship to Moushumi has evaporated, their time together has no more meaning, since what meaning it had for him was formed in cooperation with her.

❝ Without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he himself lives, Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so, cease to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace. It provides no solace at all.

Related Characters: Gogol/Nikhil Ganguli

Related Themes:

Page Number: 289

Explanation and Analysis

In the final moments of Lahiri's novel, Gogol reflects on the new phase of life that he is about to enter. In many ways, he has worked for years to reach this point; finally his hated first name, Gogol, will vanish from existence, since no one who still clings to its significance will remain in his life. The fact that Gogol—now Nikhil—links this ending of his name to the lips of his lost loved ones underlines the extent to which he now understands that names, and identities, are formed and take meaning not on their own but in cooperation with a community of people.

What would have been a victorious moment for the young Gogol, so desperate to escape his name, takes on a tragic character here. Gogol has gained a renewed appreciation for the different communities that he wished for so long to flee, and especially for his childhood, the traces of which are disappearing now that his father has died, his mother is leaving the country, and their home is being sold. The sadness that Gogol/Nikhil feels is a sign that he has grown up, so that rebellion is not the chief aim in his life. He then decides to read the book of Gogol's stories that his father, Ashoke, gave him so long ago, finally making an effort to connect with a part of his identity that he had previously ignored.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

CHAPTER 1

The year is 1968. Ashima Ganguli, nearly nine months pregnant, is preparing a makeshift version of a popular Indian snack, for which she has an insatiable craving. She uses onion, spices, Rice Krispies, and Planters peanuts, but cannot quite manage to recreate the taste she so misses. As she reaches for another onion, she begins to go into the very early stages of labor, and calls out for her husband, Ashoke, although according to her custom she does not use his first name.

Ashima is desperate to find something familiar to lean on in this unknown land. The strange mix of American ingredients approximates the taste she craves, but also emphasizes just how far away she is from her native culture. Her call to Ashoke is the first sign of the kind of love that is present in their marriage, which is more traditional than the relationships their children will have. It also brings up the importance of names in the novel.

Together they take a taxi to the hospital, where the nurses replace Ashima's traditional sari with a hospital gown that she feels is too short. Her doctor informs them that the labor will take some time, and Ashoke leaves Ashima alone with the other women in the room. She hears one of the other women's husbands saying that he loves his wife, and Ashima reflects that this kind of affection will never appear in her relationship to Ashoke. She wonders if she is the only Indian present in this hospital filled with American strangers, until a twitch from the baby inside her reminds her that she is not alone after all.

Ashima is now further isolated within the hospital, and the switch from sari to immodest hospital gown amplifies her discomfort. Lahiri also uses the interactions between openly affectionate American husbands and wives to provide a contrast with the restrained, but deeply loyal relationship shared by Ashoke and Ashima.

The watch on Ashima's wrist, a wedding gift from her family, fills her with thoughts of home as she calculates on her fingers what time it is in India right now. If she were there, this baby would be born in the home, not a hospital. She pictures what each member of her family is doing at this hour, immersing herself in the memory of her house until a view of the Charles River outside jolts her back to her reality in America.

Lahiri uses the watch to remind the reader of the immense physical distance that separates the recently immigrated Ashima from her home in India, as she also reflects on the cultural distance dividing herself from the Americans around her. She finds comfort in the memory of home, even as she feels alienated by her present.

Throughout the day in the hospital, Ashima is reassured by Dr. Ashley and her nurse, Patty, that everything is expected to be normal. But to Ashima, nothing feels normal about raising a child in a strange country, without her family. She rereads a Bengali magazine containing an illustration by her father, and then drifts into her memories of him. She is then interrupted by Patty, who accompanies her on a brief walk. Ashima makes a grammatical mistake in telling Patty that she hopes her baby will have only "ten finger and ten toe," and is embarrassed by Patty's smiling reaction, especially since Ashima had been a student of English back in Calcutta.

The kind and professional hospital staff cannot bridge the gap that divides them from Ashima. As she has for the past several months in her isolation at home, Ashima finds comfort in the physical remnants of her past life in India. The mistake that Ashima makes in translating an idiom from her native Bengali into English heightens her sense of embarrassment and loneliness.

Drifting back, again, to her memories of Calcutta, Ashima recalls the first time she met her husband Ashoke. The meeting had been arranged by their families, and as she stood outside the room listening to her parents sing her praises, Ashima gave in to a strange urge to slip her feet into the shoes that the visiting Ashoke had removed in the entryway, as per Bengali tradition—exotic, leather specimens from the U.S.A. Later, in the room with Ashoke and their two families, she is asked whether she can imagine living in snowy Boston, alone. "Won't he be there?" she responds, pointing to Ashoke. They become betrothed.

The mechanics of an arranged marriage may seem foreign to an American reader, but they reveal the particular foundation of Ashoke and Ashima's marriage. Ashima's urge to put on Ashoke's shoes in secret indicates a romantic curiosity and boldness that ultimately drives her decision to accept this marriage proposal, one which will take her far from home, and which she may later regret. She accepts before she even knows her husband's name, showing deep trust in tradition.

Ashima continues to reminisce, recalling her elaborate wedding preparations with joy and describing her new life in America with Ashoke. She has learned about his special fondness for potatoes, his careful approach to clothing, and his loyalty to his family back in India, to whom he sends a portion of his paycheck. In the evenings, when he returns from work, Ashima tells him about her daily adventures in the strange world of Cambridge, Massachusetts, with its unblemished rice and pistachio ice cream.

This is a first glimpse of Ashima's love of ritual and tradition, and a window into her process of falling in love with Ashoke after their arranged marriage. As she learns more about him, their intimacy deepens. His support for his family endears him to her, and he becomes her trusted companion in the strange adventure of living in America.

Ashoke has returned to the hospital waiting room, having been warned that the baby could come at "any minute." He reads the newspaper, reflecting on just how quickly the time has passed since his wife first noticed her pregnancy. He wipes his glasses with the handkerchief embroidered by his mother and begins pacing nervously with the other expectant fathers. Although they all have cigars or champagne to celebrate the announcement, Ashoke is empty-handed. He does not smoke or drink, and "it has never occurred to him to buy his wife flowers."

Reading is a comfort to Ashoke, a carryover from his childhood as a bookworm. The small detail of his handkerchief is a reminder of the families back in India that are always present in some way for both Ashoke and Ashima. His distance from the traditions of the other fathers – with their champagne, cigars, and flowers – again emphasizes the cultural divide.

Ashoke continues to read the paper as he walks, limping slightly. This habit is carried on from his childhood, when he read voraciously everywhere he went, immune to distractions. He especially enjoyed Russian authors, which his grandfather read aloud to him in English translations as a boy. One day, when Ashoke was 22, he set out on a **train** journey to visit his grandfather, who, now blind, had requested that Ashoke read to him. He promised that Ashoke could take his collection of antique **books** home with him afterward—a treasure Ashoke had long desired.

The curiosity for exotic places that eventually led to Ashoke's immigration to America was born within the pages of these foreign books, books which also taught him English. Ashoke's journey is typical of the traditional Bengali respect for family. The slight limp in his walk is a hint of what is to come, foreshadowing the tragic events related in the coming pages.

On the journey to his grandparents' home in the North, Ashoke brings only one **book**—a collection of short stories by Nikolai Gogol that his grandfather had given him upon his graduation from high school. He reads his favorite story, *The Overcoat*, laughing at the strange names suggested at its main character's christening. Another passenger in his coach, Ghosh, strikes up a conversation. He has just returned from Britain after two years because his wife was too homesick for India, and urges Ashoke to travel while he is still young and free. Ashoke replies that, with the aid of his books, he can travel anywhere.

"Gogol" will become the novel's most important name – the "namesake" of the title – and its introduction here is significant. It is purposefully blended with Ashoke's laughter at the story's protagonist's strange names, a sign of the embarrassment his son will face later in the novel. Ashoke's conversation with Ghosh is also significant to his later life, and the reader – knowing that Ashoke will in fact follow Ghosh's advice by traveling abroad – is left to wonder what will change Ashoke's mind.

The other passengers in his cabin go to sleep, but Ashoke stays up late into the night, reading and taking in the sounds of the **train**. Suddenly, the train derails, knocked off the track by what some later believe to have been deliberate sabotage, killing hundreds. The area where the accident occurred is so isolated that no rescuers arrived for over an hour. Ashoke is trapped beneath the wreckage and unable to call out. It is only when the fluttering pages of his **book** finally attract the attention of a rescuer that he is found, still clutching one page.

This episode changes Ashoke's life forever, spurring him to travel abroad and make the most of a life that now seems miraculous. It is notable that nothing in the book would have been possible without Ashoke's chance survival – the first in a series of accidents that, Gogol will later note, compose the lives of the Ganguli family. Ashoke is saved by the book, in a way, inspiring his name for his son – although Gogol won't know the truth about his namesake until he is in college.

For the next year, Ashoke lay flat in bed, unable even to feed himself, listening to the sounds from the busy streets. When he was strong enough to avoid the nightmares that haunted his sleep, he read late at night, but he would no longer touch the **novels** of his childhood. Instead, he read his engineering texts, keeping up with schoolwork as best he could, remembering Ghosh's command to travel. A year later he finished college and secretly applied to continue his studies abroad, only telling his heartbroken parents after he had been accepted on fellowship.

Ashoke abandons his books, because they remind him of the accident and of the possibilities that are closed off to him now that he is confined to bed. A fire seems to have been born within him, though, one that will drive him to create the life abroad that is recounted in Lahiri's novel. This yearning for independence from his family is mirrored later in the novel by his son's secret relationships and life in New York.

Although he has now left India, the memory of the **train** crash still haunts Ashoke at times. He feels lucky to have survived, and considers his life to be broken into three births—two in India, and one in America. He is grateful to his ancestors for this bounty, for his nearly newborn child, and to Gogol, the writer whose **book** saved his life. At this moment, Patty enters the room.

Ashoke is deeply conscious of his cultural roots while still optimistic about life in America. He feels a reverence for tradition and family, but also a sense of fortune in this foreign land, born from his childhood reading and his new gratitude for life. This highlights a difference between Ashoke's outlook about America and Ashima's.

CHAPTER 2

The baby is born! After Ashima recovers from the intensity of childbirth, Ashoke enters to find her and the baby, whose name card reads only "Baby Boy Ganguli." As Ashoke takes the baby from Ashima's arms into his own, the baby cries out, and both parents react with alarm, but Patty laughingly reassures them. She leaves them alone, and Ashoke gently explores the strangely tiny body of his child, initially "more perplexed than moved," as Ashima watches proudly. She falls asleep, and Ashoke is struck by the beautiful miracle of his son—a second miracle to match his own rescue from the **train**.

The anonymous name card is a first indication of the long search for a suitable name that will haunt his child. This is a pivotal moment in the married life of Ashoke and Ashima—the opening of a new chapter for them—and Lahiri brings out the slightly comical naivety of a new parent. This will be another in a series of important events that change the family forever.

Three others visit the new family in the hospital, all Bengali friends whom Ashima and Ashoke have met in Cambridge. Dr. Gupta, a post-doc at M.I.T., gives the baby an illustrated **book** of Mother Goose rhymes, which Ashoke appreciates, marveling at how different this boy's childhood will be from his own. Ashima is having the same thought as her husband, but instead of considering her child to be blessed, she pities him. She feels deeply lonely without her family there at his birth, and is heartbroken that he will grow up without them.

Here is the clearest illustration of the different immigrant experiences of Ashoke and Ashima – the optimism of Ashoke in their new country alongside Ashima's longing for their old one. Both perspectives carry weight – while it may be true that Gogol will have access to opportunities unique to America, there is also a sense of loss of the culture that formed his parents.

Neither of their families back in India has a working telephone, so they send a telegram with the news. In accordance with the Indian tradition, Ashima's grandmother is entrusted with the naming of their child, and she has sent a letter with two names, one for a boy, and one for a girl. The letter has not yet arrived, but they are happy to wait. In the meantime, they can use a pet name—a *daknam*—which is the name that every Bengali is called within their family. Unlike the "good names" or *bhalonam*, which carry important meanings, these pet names are chosen randomly.

The concept of the traditional Indian "pet name" and "good name" is vital to the story's development. The split between public and private personas created by these two names foreshadows the cultural split between life at home and life in the world that Sonia and Gogol will experience. The idea that names are given life by the people who use them is also important, since it means that identity is, at least in part, determined by one's family.

Patty reenters the room as they are calling the baby by one of these potential pet names—Buro, meaning old man—and asks if this is their name for him. Ashima—whom the nurses have now nicknamed "Jell-O-and-Ice-Cream Lady," since she doesn't eat the chicken in its skin that is provided by the hospital—explains that her grandmother will be choosing the real name. When Patty asks if she will be arriving soon, Ashima laughs, struck by the absurdity of this thought. For the next three days, Ashima is cared for in the hospital, and shown how to care for the baby.

This introduction of nicknames is used to highlight the difference between the Indian visitors and Patty. The nurses have their own nickname for Ashima, based on their misunderstanding of her eating habits, which are driven by her cultural preference for skinless chicken. Patty also misunderstands the difference between pet names and the still-to-be-determined "good name"—a problem that Gogol will also face later on.

On the fourth day, Ashima and the baby are to be discharged, but the hospital's compiler of birth certificates, Mr. Wilcox, explains that before they can leave they must choose a name. They try to explain the situation, but Mr. Wilcox presses them to choose, asking whether they have any "backups"—a word that Ashima does not recognize. They have never thought of an alternative, and are unmoved by Mr. Wilcox's suggestion that they name their son after a relative in accordance with European tradition (he reveals that his true name is Howard Wilcox III). In India, individual names are sacred.

Confronted now by Mr. Wilcox, a representative of American bureaucracy, Ashima and Ashoke are caught off guard. Naming means something very different for the Gangulis—it is tied to identity in a way that would make reusing someone else's name comical. They have absolute faith in the eventual arrival of Ashima's grandmother's letter—in family and traditions—and are unused to the accelerated pace of naming in America.

Mr. Wilcox suggests they name their son after someone of importance to them, and then he leaves the room. Suddenly, Ashoke has an idea, and reaches out to his son, calling him Gogol for the first time. Ashima approves of the choice, aware of its importance for her husband, and thinking of it only as a temporary, pet name. The name now set, Patty wishes them well, and Dr. Gupta takes a photo of the new family as they exit the hospital, headed home.

Here, then, is the fateful selection of a name that will cause the protagonist much angst later in the novel: Gogol, a name that is neither Indian nor American, but Russian. The reassurances that this will be only a temporary name already ring false – now that the deed is done, their son's name is somehow outside of their control.

The Ganguli home at this moment is an apartment on the first story of a slightly run-down, salmon-colored house near Harvard. This is the house to which Ashoke first brought Ashima, on a street of similarly pastel homes, although it was not until morning that she first saw it clearly, when she emerged into the freezing February air to glimpse dog excrement in the snow and not a soul in sight. She is disappointed by the house, which is not at all like what she had seen in American movies—it is drafty, dreary, and contains cockroaches—but she hides her disappointment, writing home about the gas-burning stove and the water clean enough to drink from the tap.

The dreary description of their house in Cambridge, which fails to live up to Ashima's expectations, is a comment on the gap between the image of America that many immigrants have before they arrive – an image formed from stories they have heard, and American media they may have encountered – and the reality that awaits them, as many struggle financially, at least initially. Cambridge is almost a wasteland in Ashima's eyes – but she carefully hides this from her family back home.

Above them live Judy and Alan Montgomery, along with their two children. Alan is a sociology professor at Harvard, and Ashoke is confused by his flip-flops and threadbare trousers, since he himself often wears a jacket and tie to meetings with his advisor. The couple is progressive—their car covered in bumper stickers—in a way that sometimes mystifies the Gangulis. They leave their children at home unsupervised, and the one glimpse of their apartment Ashima has had horrified her with its clutter of **books**, bottles, and dirty plates.

Judy and Alan provide a stark contrast to Ashoke and Ashima in the way they conduct their lives. It is strange for Ashoke and Ashima, who have only ever lived in the same house as their closest families, to share a living space with such puzzling strangers. Ashima is particularly shocked by the way the Montgomery children are left alone, and by the spectacular mess in their apartment. The alcohol, too, is totally foreign for her.

Dr. Gupta gives them a ride home, and as they enter their apartment with its unmade bed, Ashima is struck by its dreariness. She misses the hospital, but most of all she misses her home in India, where a traditional servant would have had the responsibility of cleaning the house. "I can't do this," she tells Ashoke, and when he attempts to reassure her she makes her meaning clear: she tells him to hurry up and finish their degree so that they can return home and raise their child in India.

This is the one time in the novel that we see Ashima openly ask Ashoke to move their family back to Calcutta. The couple is divided on this point, as we have already seen, but Ashima is overwhelmed by the prospect of raising her baby here, alone, along with the responsibility of cleaning the house – a totally different kind of motherhood from what she would experience in India.

Observing his wife, Ashoke sees that their time in America has already taken a toll. He knows she is homesick, and remembers the words of Ghosh, who had been made to return home from London by his own homesick wife. They are interrupted by the arrival of the Montgomerys, who have brought some of their old baby supplies and champagne to celebrate, though Ashoke and Ashima only pretend to drink it. A box of disposable diapers takes the place of Ashima's family photos on the dressing table.

Ashima's reluctance to "assimilate" in America was foretold, all too accurately, by Ghosh, whose advice has been engraved in Ashoke's mind since the accident. Again, the ritual of champagne divides the couple from their American neighbors, although they play along to fit in. The diapers replace Ashima's family photo, as her children will come to replace her missing family.

Three days later, everyone has returned to work as usual, and Ashima is alone with Gogol for first time. She cries all day, feeling desperately alone. When she calls Ashoke to ask him to bring home rice—she has tried to borrow from Judy, but her rice is brown—there is no answer. Ashima takes Gogol out in his pram to buy some herself, and when she is out she receives compliments from American strangers on her new baby. Slowly the routine of caring for Gogol fills her day, gives a pattern to what had before been a mass of idle hours filled with homesickness. She cooks with him, sings him Bengali songs, and begins a photo album, seeing pieces of her family in his face.

This intense depression that Ashima feels is common among young mothers – and it is much more isolating for her to be experiencing it alone, far from her family and familiar culture. As Ashima begins to find some agency, however, Gogol becomes her new and constant companion in her adventures out into the world, and he starts to fill the void left by her family. The forwardness of American strangers is off-putting for Ashima, but she is also flattered by them.

Ashima eagerly awaits the mail each day, bringing letters from her family in India, written in an alphabet that is now absent from her everyday life. She responds with careful descriptions of her son's development, telling them that she and Ashoke are planning a trip to India after Gogol turns one. She does not tell them of their pediatrician's warning that he will need a whole new set of immunizations against tropical disease.

That something so unnoticed and ever-present as the written alphabet is transformed in Ashima's life is a reminder to the reader of just how foreign this land must feel for her. Ashima works to keep her connection to family in India alive, investing her emotions there instead of in America. Gogol, though, is a foreigner to India, as the doctor's warning suggests.

When Gogol has his first ear infection and they see his pet name on the prescription, Ashima and Ashoke are reminded that the letter from Ashima's grandmother has not yet arrived. The next day, they hear from her father that her grandmother has had a stroke and is partially paralyzed. Ashima is inconsolable, remembering her last visit to her grandmother—who rightly predicted that America would never change her traditional Indian ways—when she told Ashima to enjoy her life in America.

This begins the series of events that will disrupt the parents' plan to change Gogol's name. Their unhurried, blind faith has persisted until now. The illness of Ashima's grandmother only makes the pain of Ashima's absence from India all the more acute. The grandmother had blessed her journey to the States as a welcome adventure, even as it carried her far away.

The community of Bengali friends in Cambridge is ever growing, as young PhD students like Ashoke fly back to Calcutta and return with wives to start their families in America. Ashima welcomes these bewildered young brides, sharing recipes to approximate Indian dishes and discussing Indian politics, music, and movies. When Gogol is six months old, the community is large enough for a proper gathering in honor of his annaprasan, his rice ceremony—the first time he will eat solid food. Dilip Nandi, a friend, plays the part of Ashima's brother, and he feeds Gogol, who is dressed in a pale yellow Punjabi from his grandmother in Calcutta.

Now Ashima begins to assume a role that will follow her for years – that of hostess and advisor to newly-arrived immigrant women. Like Gogol's, this too will give Ashima's life some welcome purpose. The community of immigrants is bound together by the common cultural backgrounds of its members, and their shared struggle to adapt to America. They become one another's missing family, as in this ceremony, while the missing family itself is represented by clothes and gifts.

Gogol has been decorated according to Indian tradition, with kohl and sandalwood paste. Ten traditional dishes are arranged in front of him, including a warm rice pudding called "payesh" that Ashima will prepare for him at each birthday alongside a slice of bakery cake. The guests photograph the frowning Gogol. Judy and Alan are the only non-Bengalis present. Gogol eats eagerly during the makeshift ceremony, which brings tears to Ashima's eyes. At its conclusion, he must choose between a clump of cold Cambridge soil, a ballpoint pen, and a dollar bill, to see if he will be a landowner, scholar, or businessman. Some call for him to take the dollar, since an American must be rich, while Ashoke urges him to take the pen. Gogol frowns, taking nothing, and begins to cry.

Ashima has taken pleasure in recreating the traditions of her homeland here. The pairing of payesh with American birthday cake is symbolic of the mix (and clash) of the two cultures to which Gogol owes allegiance, a duality that will follow him all his life. The three objects, although traditional in their symbolic value, are plucked almost comically from their American environment. Ashoke has hopes that his son will be a bookworm, as he was, but already we see Gogol's frustration in the face of indecision begin to emerge. He is a sensitive child, and will become a sensitive young adult.

Gogol continues to grow, repeating words in two languages, as his parents prepare their first trip to India over winter break at M.I.T. They search for a good name to use on his passport, having given up hope of receiving the letter. Ashima knits identical sweater vests for all of her male relatives, with one special cardigan for her father, and buys him a set of expensive paintbrushes at the Harvard COOP (he is an artist). She goes shopping downtown one day, pushing Gogol and buying dozens of small gifts in anticipation of their trip. She is so engrossed in her vision of it that she nearly misses her stop, and in her rush to exit the **train** she leaves all of her purchases behind. Humiliated, she is amazed when Ashoke's call to the MBTA lost and found leads to the objects' safe return.

This division between two languages is a sign of the division between two cultures that will later haunt Gogol. Many immigrant children grow up bilingual, and must negotiate the way that each language is a part of their life. The search for Gogol's name continues, and the sense that it will be in vain grows. Ashima's intense anticipation of their visit is shown in her eager preparations. She is so distracted by her anticipation that she loses all her carefully chosen gifts—but their return makes her feel connected to Cambridge for the first time.

One night a call from India wakes them, and before Ashoke tells her the news Ashima feels instinctively that her grandmother has died. She begins to comfort Gogol, who has been awakened by the phone's ring. When the phone is handed to her, Ashima's dread is mixed with excitement at hearing her mother call her by her pet name, Monu. However, the voice she hears is her brother Rana's. They talk for a few minutes, but Rana's pauses suggest to her that there is something he is not saying—and there is no reason he would call unless something is wrong. She presses Ashoke, who seems deeply tired, for more information. He holds her tightly against the bed and tells her the real reason for the call: her father is dead.

This is an enormous tragedy in Ashima's life, as her reverence and love for her father has been emphasized in every memory of her family that we've seen. The excitement that she feels to be called by her pet name – even while also expecting bad news – is another sign of the intense familial bond that names can create. The "Monu" side of Ashima is only made real by her Indian family. Rana is too heartbroken to tell her the bad news over the phone, so we see in this moment how much the trust has grown between Ashima and Ashoke.

They leave for India six weeks earlier than planned to attend the funeral. With no time to find a good name, they get an express passport with the name Gogol Ganguli. Before they leave, Ashima takes the stroller and a bag with the paintbrushes and cardigan for her father on the **train** to Central Square, and deliberately leaves them behind. As they sit on the plane, she checks her watch, calculating the time in India, but refusing to picture her mourning family. Telling him that she no longer wants to go, Ashima turns to the window as Ashoke takes her hand and the plane takes off, Gogol screaming with the change in air pressure.

This event, too, thwarts the couple's continued search for a "good name" for their son. Ashima's symbolic release of her father's presence is important – she could have returned the paintbrushes, the most expensive of the gifts she has purchased, but this gesture is instead a more tragic and poignant farewell. Now that she is returning to India at last, Ashima cannot imagine arriving to find her father gone. Gogol is pained by this journey, one that he will take many times.

CHAPTER 3

It is 1971, and the Ganguli family has moved outside of Boston, where they are the only Bengalis in a small, typically Northeastern university town. Ashoke has been hired as an assistant professor of electrical engineering, with his own office and a shared secretary, an elderly widow whom he cannot help but compare to his own mother. For his mother, however, this job would be a shameful one, far from her grandchildren. Ashoke loves his job, reveling in his new title. Every Friday he heads to the library to read the international papers and enjoys seeing his son's name in the Russian literature section.

In some ways this suburban town is even more foreign to the Gangulis, as it is less multicultural than Boston. Ashoke is thriving, however, as his hopes for life in America begin to yield fruit. Although some things, like the position of his office's secretary, still seem wrong to him, he is content in his new life, and returns to his childhood habit of reading.

For Ashima the move is even more drastic than the one from Calcutta to Cambridge. In the suburbs, there is no more opportunity for independent shopping and walking in the city. The new town has no real sidewalks and no public transportation. She continues to mix her pregnancy snack, uninterested in learning to drive. Being a foreigner, she has come to realize, is like being permanently pregnant—"a perpetual wait, a constant burden," which elicits curiosity, pity, and respect from strangers.

The agency that Ashima had found by venturing into the city with Gogol is no more. She is now essentially trapped in their new home, without access to transportation, and so she returns to the comfort of her traditional snack. This comparison of the immigrant experience to pregnancy is a compelling one – a constant, uncomfortable expectation, and one which implies the question of what, exactly, will emerge from this experience.

When Ashima does leave the house, it is to wander around the university campus with Gogol, or to sell homemade samosas at a once-weekly bake sale with other professors' wives. When Gogol turns four, she drops him off at the nursery three mornings a week, and misses him desperately in the hours that she is alone. To pass the time, she reads or writes letters in the public library, sometimes wandering into the children's room where a photo of Gogol is pinned to the bulletin board.

In the hours she is without Gogol, Ashima is adrift, lost without access to her family in India or in America. Her weekly interactions with the other professors' wives are also telling – in a way she is defined by the food she makes and by her cultural background. Gogol is at home here, though, with his photo pinned up in the public library.

Two years later, the couple have saved enough money to move out of the university apartment and buy a house in the town. They visit a number of houses occupied by Americans with plastic wading pools, where shoes are worn inside and pets roam the house. Eventually they buy a new, two-story colonial house and move their things across town in a U-Haul, surprised at how much they have accumulated since crossing the ocean with a single suitcase each. They prepare the house, taking photographs of Gogol posing in each room to send back to India.

These houses seem so foreign to Ashima and Ashoke - in small but significant ways - while so normal to the average American reader. The lives they have created in America are already present in the accumulated stuff that will be moved into their new home. Showing this place to their family back home is essential to their moving process.

They hang a painting by Ashima's father in the living room. Gogol has his own room, filled with American toys bought at yard sales. Many of their things are bought at yard sales, a concept that had initially struck Ashima as shameful, but which Ashoke points out that even his chairman at the university embraces. The yard is still unfinished, and some of Gogol's first memories are made playing on its uneven, rocky ground before grass is planted.

Ashima's deceased father's presence here is important to what makes their family function – even if he will never visit. The American toys that fill Gogol's room, and its separation from his parents, begins the process of increasing independence that will lead to Gogol feeling, at times, that his own parents are foreign and strange.

In the evenings the family goes on exploratory drives around the small town, on rural back roads, or to the beach. The back seat of their car is still sheathed in plastic, the ashtrays still sealed. They arrive at the beach when most families have already left, and Gogol digs in the sand or watches, rapt, as his father flies a kite, or his mother laughingly steps into the ocean a few inches.

The special care taken with new purchases is, Lahiri suggests, a typically Indian approach to things that, to them, are more precious than they are to their American neighbors. By now it's almost expected that the family's beach time, which is so peaceful and idyllic, is also somewhat out-of-sync with the rest of the families.

The August that Gogol turns five, Ashima becomes pregnant again. Bedridden and nauseated once more, she spends much of her days watching American daytime television or reading to Gogol, educating him about his Indian heritage or teaching him to recite Bengali poetry. She is always careful to make him watch Sesame Street as well, to keep up with his English lessons at nursery. At night Ashoke cooks, a strange sight for Gogol, and the two eat together while Ashima is in her bedroom avoiding the smell. Gogol has learned by now how to eat properly with his hands, but does not want to eat without his mother. His father is firm, however, reminding him that when he was Gogol's age "he ate tin."

Here, again, is a clear example of the mixing of American and Bengali cultures that forms Gogol's childhood. At the same time that Ashima encourages Gogol's discovery of Bengali poetry, she also forces him to watch Sesame Street to learn English. The role reversal his parents undertake while Ashima is bedridden is strange to Gogol, since their normal roles are, in keeping with tradition, so set. Ashoke's reminder that when he was Gogol's age "he ate tin" is a reminder to his son of the difference in their origins.

That September, of 1973, Gogol is driven to kindergarten for the first time by his father. He starts a week late, having stayed home sick, not eager to leave home and begin life at this new school. His parents have decided that as he begins school he must begin to be called by his good name, which they have finally chosen: Nikhil, meaning "he who is entire, encompassing all." Ashima consented when Ashoke suggested it, still secretly heartbroken by the disappearance of her grandmother's letter. Gogol is not happy about the new name, even though his parents assure him that it will only be for the outside world, and they press him to practice its spelling.

This entry into school marks another pivotal moment in Gogol's development. His parents' decision to give him the name Nikhil is, by this point, only frightening and disorienting for him. The name's meaning—"entire, all-encompassing"—is a hopeful way of thinking about the ways that Gogol's life spans two different worlds—but in reality, this straddling of two cultures will lead to more division than unity in Gogol's life.

They are greeted by the principal, Candace Lapidus, who assures them that missing the first week is not a problem, and asks whether they know the other two Indian children at the school—but they do not. She asks Gogol how old she is, calling him by his new name, Nikhil, although she pronounces it differently than his parents have, but he does not respond. To spur his response, Ashoke resorts to speaking to his son in English for the first time, but forgets and calls him Gogol. When Mrs. Lapidus notices the name, she asks Ashoke why his legal name is different from the one they have written down on the registration forms, and she is unimpressed by his explanation. After Ashoke leaves, Mrs. Lapidus asks Gogol which name he prefers, and when he responds that he would rather be called Gogol, she tears up his registration to write a new one.

The principal, like Mr. Wilcox at the hospital, is another representative of American bureaucracy who in some way thwarts the plans of Ashoke and Ashima. Mrs. Lapidus's disregard for the couple's wishes, although perhaps understandable given Gogol's reluctance to be called Nikhil, also indicates that she does not take the Gangulis very seriously, and is in some ways more swayed by the "American" Gogol, despite his young age. This is a phenomenon that will follow him and his parents later in the novel. The general confusion around naming, and the division between a good name and pet name, will continue to haunt Gogol as well.

Gogol's class is filled with children who go by nicknames—Andy, Sandy, Billy, Lizzy—and is very different from the disciplined schools his parents remember. The only ritual is the pledge of allegiance to the American flag each morning. Mrs. Lapidus sends a letter home with Gogol explaining that because of his preference he will have the name "Gogol" at school. Both parents to wonder why their own preference means nothing, but neither wishes to press the issue, and so Gogol remains Gogol. He writes this name over and over, on every assignment, as a signature at the bottom of every art piece, and in the front cover of his **textbooks**.

Ashima and Ashoke's inability to push back against Mrs. Lapidus's decision is not something that an average American family would have felt – but the Gangulis are less able to express their resistance, or at least feel less entitled to. These small defeats add up, in the life of an immigrant. All of the nicknames, typically American names, that surround Gogol, and his pledge of allegiance to the flag, foretell the ways that this environment will further distance him from his parents.

Gogol's sister is born in May, and this time the labor is quick. Gogol is left at home with a neighbor and then their friend Maya Nandi, whom he refers to as "Maya Mashi" as if she were his aunt. He draws a family portrait with the new baby, labeling it with all their names, although he does not know the baby's. The next day he is brought to the hospital to visit them, and he sees his sister, the only baby there with a shock of black hair. He gives his mother the drawing and she tells him the baby's name: Sonali. His parents had prepared beforehand this time, with options for a boy or girl, and had learned that pet names could cause confusion or be misinterpreted by schools, so she will have only this one name.

The name "Maya Mashi" would be the traditional Indian term for "Aunt Maya," highlighting the ways in which these Bengali immigrants become family to one another through necessity. Gogol's drawing emphasizes the importance of naming in families. His parents' newfound understanding that one must prepare a name beforehand shows that they have learned from their experience with Gogol—and Sonali will benefit as a result, not having a "pet name" to haunt her all her life.

Over time, Sonali does develop a nickname—Sonia—which gives her links to Europe, Russia, and South America. As she becomes more responsive, Gogol enjoys playing with her, and helps his mother to care for her. He entertains Sonia in the back of the car on Saturday evenings, when the Gangulis head to the weekly gatherings of Bengali migrants. Most of them have now moved into homes in the suburbs like the Gangulis. Children play together or watch T.V. downstairs at these events, talking to one another in English while their parents speak in Bengali overhead. At Sonia's annaprasan she, unlike Gogol, refuses to eat anything, and when offered the three objects, she plays in the dirt while threatening to eat the dollar bill. One guest says, "this one is the true American."

Sonia's nickname is much more forgiving than Gogol's, as it actually confers more American "normalcy," rather than less. The bond between brother and sister is important and will continue to grow, as these second-generation Indian-Americans share their experiences of both Indian and American culture and the unique blend of both that forms their identity. Sonia is perhaps one step further away from India even than Gogol, since she doesn't eat the traditional dishes at all, and rejects the annaprasan ceremony in general.

At the same time that the couple's New England life becomes more full of Bengali friends, the life that they have left behind dwindles, as family members—those who still call Ashoke and Ashima by their pet names "Monu" and "Mithu"—pass away. They are left parentless within a decade of their arrival, and Gogol and Sonia are awoken by the news in the middle of night, embarrassed by their parents' tears over people they barely know. Even those who are still alive seem invisible, because they are so distant. Their visits to Calcutta every few years feel like a dream, and with their return to the relatively large house in Massachusetts, they feel like the only Gangulis in the world again, certain that no one from home will ever see this other world that is now theirs.

As their families back home fall away in ways that Sonia and Gogol, who have never or rarely met these relatives, cannot identify with, a piece of Ashoke and Ashima's identity is also lost – as symbolized by the slow disappearance of their pet names. The distance is confounding for them, and loneliness is their reality – a loneliness that is slowly filled by the makeshift family of Bengali immigrants who gather regularly in a rotating series of houses. Although the Gangulis can visit home, it is much more difficult for their Indian relatives to travel here.

Increasingly, to an outside observer, there is little difference between the Gangulis and their neighbors. They buy a barbecue and gardening supplies—always consulting their Bengali friends for guidance—and learn to roast turkey, even if it is spiced with Indian flavors. For Sonia and Gogol's sake they take up the ceremonies of Easter, build snowmen, and celebrate Christmas in the American way. The children are much more impressed by these holidays, at which they receive presents and are let off from school, than by the Indian ones they are dragged to two Saturdays a year, in halls rented by the Bengali community, where they throw marigold petals at cardboard effigies.

Slowly the Gangulis are adapting to the American world they now inhabit, even as their ties to their old world are tragically severed by distance or death. For Sonia and Gogol, on the other hand, America is much more familiar and present for them than the Bengali world in which their parents grew up. The "cardboard effigies" of the holidays their parents organize cannot compare to the normalized American holidays, which are accommodated for in the calendar and celebrated by all their peers.

Ashoke and Ashima give in to America in other ways as well. Although Ashima sticks to her traditional clothing, Ashoke relinquishes tailored suits in favor of readymade, and no longer wears a tie to the university. He trades fountain pens for ballpoint, buys packs of six Bic razors, and even removes his wristwatch. They allow Sonia and Gogol to fill their cart with American groceries, and once a week Ashima cooks an American dinner—often Hamburger Helper—as a treat.

Ashoke and Ashima clearly adapt differently, with Ashoke being more open to the new world they inhabit, changing his habits in small but significant ways. Sonia and Gogol are agents of this change, ambassadors for the American tastes that their exposure to friends at school and advertisements on television have conditioned them to enjoy.

At the same time, the couple make an effort to expose their children to Indian culture, taking them to the movies when the Apu trilogy is playing, or to a Kathakali dance or sitar performance. Gogol is sent to Bengali language and culture lessons on Saturday in the home of one of their friends. They are unsettled by their children's perfect American accents. Gogol resents being made to learn the Bengali alphabet at these lessons, with their limited materials on Indian history—designed for five-year-olds and printed on paper that he notices resembles the toilet paper at his school—since it makes him miss a drawing class at the library every other week.

The meager resources that are cobbled together by the Bengali community to sustain their culture are, like the cardboard effigies at the Gangulis' makeshift holiday ceremonies, unable to compete with their children's experience in American schools. That Gogol and Sonia's accents are perfectly American is a further sign of their separation from the generation of their parents, who will forever have that marker of their foreignness.

Young Gogol has no problem with his name. He recognizes it in signs saying "Go Left, Go Right, Go Slow," he learns from his father that it belongs to a famous Russian author, and he has learned to help substitute teachers with its pronunciation before they ask. The other kids teased him at first, but this has worn off, and now it is a normal part of his life at school. His last name, Ganguli, is still odd, however. He was astonished when, on a visit to Calcutta, he saw a page full of Gangulis in the phonebook, and he wanted to tear it out as a souvenir—an idea that made his cousin laugh. Gogol sees it everywhere in Calcutta, and his father explains that it is a remnant of British colonialism, an Anglicized form of the real Indian name Gangopadhyay.

Although we see the ways in which Gogol has adapted himself to the experience of correcting substitutes—a relatable experience for anyone with a foreign-sounding name—the ways that he stands out from his classmates because of his name foreshadow the sense of isolation Gogol will feel later on because of it. This isolation is reversed when, in Calcutta, he sees this page of Gangulis in the phonebook. Here he would be more "normal," even if Ganguli, too, has been changed from its first Indian origins.

Ashoke puts their family name in gold letters on their mailbox, and one morning Gogol sees that someone has vandalized it, changing it so that it reads GANGRENE. He is sickened, feeling somehow that this act is directed more at his parents than at he and his sister. Gogol is aware by now of the cashiers who smirk at his parents' accents, preferring to talk to him instead, as if his parents were deaf. But his father shrugs off the insult, and they drive to the store to replace the letters.

This instance of local racism, based in the Ganguli family name, is damaging for the young Gogol, even as Ashoke shrugs it off – perhaps suggesting that multiple "microaggressions" like this have led Ashoke to develop a tolerance for the things he cannot combat. The cashiers' smirking ways are part of this series of microaggressions, and show the divide between the "American" Gogol and his parents.

One day, when Gogol is eleven, his name's peculiarity is highlighted when the class takes a field trip, first to the historical home of a poet, and then to a graveyard where the writer is buried. The students are asked to make rubbings of the inscriptions with newsprint and crayons, and they run off in search of their own names. Gogol knows his will not be among them, knows that he will be cremated as he has seen in Calcutta, that no headstone will ever bear his name in America. He walks from **grave** to grave, uncovering names that he realizes are odd and rare now (just like his, notes a chaperone): Abijah, Anguish, Peregrine, Ezekiel, Uriah. He had never thought before that names could die over time.

While this field trip into the presumed past of the American students in Gogol's class highlights his difference from them on the one hand, it is also comforting for Gogol to find that the odd names of these early American pioneers –who were immigrants themselves, though they are rarely labeled as such – resemble his name in their rarity. Gogol is enthused by this monument to America's past, which he now is able to feel a direct connection to – even if he regrets that he himself, because of Hindu cremation rituals, will never have his name permanently engraved like these.

Ashima is horrified at the nature of this field trip—for her, death is not something trivial to be played with. Only in America—a phrase that is becoming common with her—would people make grave rubbings like these. She refuses to hang them on the fridge, the first time she has done so with Gogol's artwork, but he in turn refuses to throw them away. Gogol feels an attachment to these Puritans, the first immigrants to America, and their odd names. He hides them away in his room, where they will remain for years to come.

Ashima's shock at what Gogol is being taught in school reveals how her son's education and development is, in many ways, totally beyond her control. Gogol's decision to disobey his mother and keep the rubbings illustrates just how important that strange sense of connection to the names of those early immigrants is for him.

CHAPTER 4

It is now 1984, Gogol's fourteenth birthday party. As usual the family is hosting a group of Bengali friends. Ashima has cooked for days—a prospect she finds easier than when she had hosted a few of Gogol's American friends for a low-key party, with half claiming to be allergic to milk and all refusing to eat their crusts. Forty guests come, wives in dazzling saris, husbands in pants and polo shirts. Gogol is older than most of the kids, but too young to be with the adults. The closest to his age is a girl named Moushumi, recently arrived from England, but they have nothing in common. She rubs "7 Up"-flavored balm on her lips and reads *Pride and Prejudice* while the others watch television. The children pester her to speak in her British accent, so she says "I detest American television," to their delight, and then wanders away.

The contrast between Gogol's low-key American birthday party – still innately stressful to Ashima, for whom these small foreigners are inexplicable – and the giant celebration of their Bengali friends, which Gogol himself slightly resents, is indicative of how much, by this point in his development, the gap between Gogol's home culture and his life in the outside world has grown to frustrate him. He is further isolated by his in-between age – not yet an adult, but older than most children. The significant introduction of Moushumi, in its careful detail, foreshadows her role much later in the novel.

After the guests leave, Gogol opens their presents—dictionaries, calculators, sweaters, and a card made with Magic Markers from Sonia that reads "Happy Birthday Goggles," her nickname for him. Most of the gifts, which do not interest him, are set aside by his mother to give to cousins back in India. He retreats to his room to listen to the Beatles, an album he received from one of his American friends. Ashoke then enters with a gift, which is unusual—he has never bought Gogol a present other than the ones Ashima gives him.

These gifts from the Bengali "relatives" feel anonymous, and are uninteresting to Gogol – but of course they are perfect for their family back in India. Sonia's nickname for Gogol is a sign of their close relationship, as pet names had also been in his parents' generation. Gogol isolates himself with the Beatles, an emblem of his immersion in Western culture, before being interrupted by Ashoke.

When he opens it, Gogol finds *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol*, a special copy ordered from a small press in England. Ashoke waits expectantly, but Gogol is unimpressed—he does not know the story of his father's **train** accident. He flips through, relieved to find no resemblance between himself and the author's picture in the front. By now he has begun to hate his name, resenting its odd origins and always having to explain it. He wishes he could change or erase it, but finds it everywhere he goes. He cannot imagine asking out a girl, saying "Hi, it's Gogol." He blames his parents, but also himself, since he had the chance to be called Nikhil in kindergarten.

This book, written by Gogol's namesake, is very important to Ashoke, but means nothing to his son, who has never understood the true origins of his name. Gogol's change in feelings towards his name—foreshadowed earlier in the novel—has now come to pass. As he struggles to form his identity in these early teenage years, the name feels like an obstacle to his development, even impeding his ability to talk to girls – an important developmental step.

Ashoke notices the ways in which his son is growing up and beginning to resemble him and his wife. Ashoke begins to explain to Gogol why he feels a "special kinship" for Gogol (the writer), telling his son that the author spent most of his adult life outside his homeland, just like him. He considers telling Gogol about the **train** accident, but his son has grown impatient and turned up the Beatles, and as he looks around the room Ashoke notices a cassette of traditional Indian music he bought for Gogol still in its wrapper. The memory of the train is distant for him now, and this is a day to celebrate life, not death—so he says good night. Gogol locks the door behind him, slotting the book up onto a shelf, and reflecting that since Gogol is actually the author's last name, no one in the world really shares his name—not even his namesake.

Physically, Gogol is growing into a copy of Ashoke and Ashima, but culturally they are by now quite different, a fact that Gogol's music choice drives home for Ashoke. That Ashoke's connection to Gogol is partly based in their shared immigrant experience fails to resonate with Gogol, who does not want to think of himself as an immigrant – for him, America is his home country. Ashoke's decision not to reveal the story of the train accident only increases the divide between father and son, as well as the sense of isolation Gogol comes to feel more and more regarding his name. It seems that no one in the world, not even his namesake himself, has the first name Gogol – an intensely lonely thought.

The next year, Ashoke is up for a sabbatical, and so he and Ashima decide that the family will spend eight months in Calcutta. Gogol is dismayed—he doesn't want to miss school, even though his parents point out he has never had trouble catching up in the past. His guidance counselor suggests that he stay in the U.S. with a relative until the school year has ended, but Ashima points out that they have no relatives in America. So they leave, **textbooks** packed and shipped away to an address—his father's home in Calcutta—that makes Gogol uneasy.

This decision to go abroad – natural for Ashoke and Ashima, who are going "home" – is world-shattering for Gogol, whose home is in America. Against the objections of his guidance counselor, the family persists in their decision, shipping away Gogol's textbooks to his father's home in Calcutta. This new address unsettles Gogol because it is a reminder that Pemberton Road is not their only (or perhaps, true) home.

It is Christmas Day when they take the plane, and Sonia still expects to see the tree when she comes downstairs, but there are only suitcases. At the airport, Ashoke hands in their two U.S. passports and two American ones, asking for two Hindu meals. Gogol is seated away from his family and orders a Bloody Mary secretly, tasting alcohol for the first time. Usually excited by the many countries they traverse, he feels frustrated now that Calcutta is their only destination. He feels he has already seen everything there is to see there, but has never been to Disneyland or the Grand Canyon. He relishes the final meal on the plane as Bengali conversation begins to take over on the final leg of their journey, knowing that for the next eight months the food will not be quite the same.

Traveling on Christmas Day is something that the children – like most average Americans – would never consider, and Sonia is particularly disturbed by this disruption of her holiday. Their separate passports and meal preferences illustrate the basic break between generations. Gogol is old enough now to question this trip, resenting that they have never traveled inside America, or elsewhere in the world – India somehow feels both foreign and boring to him now. The Bloody Mary that Gogol orders foreshadows a rebellious, independent streak.

When they arrive, they are swallowed by the embraces of their relatives, whose special names Gogol and Sonia must take care to remember. Ashoke and Ashima feel emotional at the reunion, but their children are unmoved. While their parents become more confident, the children are ill at ease, even frightened. They stand out in their bright American sneakers, and take time to readjust to sleeping in mosquito nets and bathing with tin cups of water. Gogol watches his aunt, who runs the household, and sees the room in which his family would have lived, all together on the same four-poster bed.

The distance between the children and their parents is again made clear by this struggle to remember Ashoke and Ashima's pet names, which for Ashoke and Ashima are second nature. While Ashoke and Ashima acquire the confidence that comes from being home and away from the unfamiliar, often unfriendly America, Gogol and Sonia feel like foreigners in this place. It is strange to see the world they might have lived in, in an alternate version of their lives.

The family moves among the houses of various relatives, the parents fitting in with their old lives while the children feel like outcasts. Sonia has read the **books** she brought dozens of times by the end of their stay. Gogol brought his sneakers, hoping to run, but finds it impossible in the streets of the city—the one time he tries, his aunt sends a servant to follow him so that he doesn't get lost. He sketches the skyline through their window, feeling close only to Sonia, the only other one who shares his craving for American food and music.

Here it is the second generation who are isolated, and therefore bond with one another, just as the first-generation Bengali immigrants in America find one another. Like her father once did, Sonia relies on her books to "travel" back to America. Gogol is such a foreigner that a servant must help him find his way through the streets—streets that might have been his home if his parents hadn't left.

In the summer they go on a trip around India, the children's first. They take the **train**, and experience Agra almost as if they are tourists from the West. They are all particularly struck by the Taj Mahal, which Gogol attempts to sketch, but cannot recreate to his satisfaction. He immerses himself in the guidebook, learning the history of Mughal architecture as they visit a succession of tombs. Later, on their way back to Calcutta, Sonia has an allergic reaction to jackfruit. In another compartment of the train, a man is stabbed in his sleep and robbed, reminding Ashoke of the fateful accident from his past.

This early episode sparks an interest in architecture that will follow Gogol all the way through the novel, and it is notable that his interest comes from a monument that represents a link to his Indian past. In many ways, though, this trip around India reinforces the sense that the Gangulis are now tourists in what was once their native land—their child is allergic to a common food, and they visit monuments with white travelers.

When they return to Calcutta, both Gogol and Sonia fall terribly ill. Their relatives blame their discomfort on the air, the wind, the rice—these children were not made to live in a poor country. By the time both are recovered it is nearly time to leave. Presents are bought, goodbyes are said, and the family departs before dawn. Gogol sees Ashima's sadness as the plane leaves, but he mostly feels relieved, eagerly eating his in-flight breakfast and listening to top-forty songs.

The illness of the children is a physical rejection of the environment that to them is foreign – as their relatives conclude, these are children of a rich nation. Even though he can see his mother's sadness at their departure, Gogol himself is anxious to return to the comforts of his American lifestyle, further highlighting the distance that separates one generation from another.

In the first few days the lack of noise in their large home feels odd, but quickly Gogol and Sonia return to normal, eating peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches, taking hot showers, and quarreling as they please. In September Gogol returns to school to start junior year, immersed in the usual American classes, with a particularly charismatic English teacher named Mr. Lawson. He is the first teacher Gogol has had who recognizes his name for what it is without asking questions. When he announces that they will spend a quarter on the short story, Gogol dreads the inevitable discussion of "The Overcoat," feeling deeply embarrassed.

The quickness with which Gogol and Sonia fall back into their old habits upon returning to America stands out in stark contrast to the slow, drawn out period of adaptation that their parents endured when they first arrived – and continue to experience now. Gogol returns to his education, and his angst over his name intensifies. He never read the book his father gave him on his fourteenth birthday, and is now horrified that it is intruding into his life once again.

When the day of the lecture comes, Gogol reluctantly copies down the biographical notes Mr. Lawson provides. When he goes into details of the author's depression, revealing that many believe he died a virgin, and giving the gory details of his suicide by starvation, Gogol burns with embarrassment, even though his classmates seem not to care. Gogol has refused to read the assigned short story, and he never opened the **book** his father gave him on his birthday.

Gogol's rejection of his namesake is instinctual. It's true that he is now learning of several reasons why the author is, perhaps, an embarrassing choice – but he hated the name before this lecture, and without ever having made an effort to read Nikolai Gogol's stories. Gogol's rejection is based, therefore, in the name's lack of connection to the world he wants to live in.

Gogol does not date in high school, a fact that his parents never question—they have never been on a date in their lives—but he does experiment in other ways, occasionally smoking pot or sneaking away to a movie. One weekend, when his parents are away overnight, he accompanies friends to a college party, The friends slowly drift apart after finding a beer, and Gogol meets a girl named Kim. He doesn't reveal his name when they shake hands. When she presses him, he tells her that his name is Nikhil, using that name for the first time. Kim says it is a lovely name, and he kisses her—his first kiss.

This is another pivotal moment in Gogol's development—the first time he kisses a girl, coinciding with the first time he uses the name Nikhil. Both are gestures of independence, and mark an attempt to take control over his own growth and identity. The scene is a rebellious one, of which Gogol's parents would never approve – normal enough for an American teenager, but weighty for Gogol. Romance will continue to be a driver of Gogol's identity.

CHAPTER 5

Gogol has become convinced that he should change his name, as so many—immigrants, revolutionaries, actors, even Nikolai Gogol himself—have done before him. And so in the summer of 1986, before leaving for Yale, he rides the **train** on his own into Boston, wearing a tie. At the courthouse, with its grand marbled interior, he practices writing his new name in the margins of the newspaper.

This is the next step in Gogol's assertion of control over his identity, a rebellious gesture that is key in his development. The image of a young, formal Gogol, making his way alone to Boston, represents the end of his obedient existence under his parents' roof.

Gogol had decided to change his name a few months before, when he saw a quiz about famous people whose real names were forgotten. He asked his parents over dinner, but they tell him that it would be too much hassle to arrange the change, and that Gogol has become his good name now. He tries to convince them that his name should be Bengali, not Russian, and that no one takes him seriously. When Ashoke asks whom he is referring to, he offers a vague reply, secretly aware that it is only he himself who feels embarrassed by this name. Eventually Ashoke consents, telling him to do as he wishes, because in America "anything is possible."

A name, reasons Gogol, is not something that is set in stone. His appeal to his parents, that his name should be Bengali, is more an attempt to persuade and mollify them than it is a genuine desire to identify with his Indian heritage. He is just instinctually opposed to the uniqueness of "Gogol," which he believes to be the source of all of the frustration and embarrassment he feels—feelings that are a result of his divided sense of identity, created by the split in his cultural background.

Now, form in hand, Gogol appears before a judge to legalize the change. He is nervous, but carries his project through. When the judge asks for the reason behind his decision, he considers telling him the whole saga of his life, but instead responds simply that he has always hated the name Gogol. Within ten minutes it is done, and Gogol feels like a new man. He is still Gogol to everyone who knows him, however, for the next three weeks until he leaves for college, as he will be at home and on holidays forever. When he leaves for Yale, though, his life as Nikhil truly begins. He diligently changes his name in the university's register, and his new friends never know him as Gogol. His name is only one of the new things in the whole new world of college life.

Earlier representatives of American bureaucracy had thwarted his parents requests, but the culturally American Gogol is able to come away with the result he had desired – even if he was unable to express the true reason for that desire. Despite the legal change, Gogol begins to realize that names are also created and given meaning by the people who use them. The division between his life at home and in public will now be marked by which name is used to refer to him.

As Nikhil, he finds independence from his family—exploring new music, getting a fake ID, and taking classes outside of the majors—pre-med, engineering, law—that he is expected to pursue. He loses his virginity one night to a girl from a party whose name he cannot remember. He cannot shed the memory of his old name, though. At times he feels as though he were acting a part, and he lives in fear that his old name will be discovered. When his parents, at his request, refer to him as Nikhil to his friends, it sounds wrong, like when they speak to him in English instead of Bengali.

This newfound identity is one that Gogol works independently to create for himself, and one that allows him to experiment in ways that he had not at home. The name Gogol still haunts him, though. His relationship to the name Nikhil is in some ways forced, an inorganic shift in his identity that feels strange when placed in the context of his family. Although Nikhil is the more Bengali of his two names, it comes to represent his American identity.

Every other weekend he takes the **train** home to his family, morphing back into Gogol. When he is home, however, he is distracted, and misses his life at school. He watches as Sonia dies her jeans black, and sees her becoming a true American teenager, arguing with Ashima over her hairstyle choices. Sometimes the two are dragged along to a gathering of Bengalis. Once Gogol refers to Yale as home by accident, and his mother is outraged. She still does not feel that Pemberton Road is her home, and she has been in America for nearly twenty years now. But Gogol feels most at home at Yale now—he has fallen in love with its Gothic architecture, sketching buildings for the introductory architecture class he takes in the spring semester.

Gogol's life continues to be divided between these two spheres – physically, culturally, and in terms of his name, a basic component of his identity whose confusion causes him frustration. He is searching for a single home, and in some ways finds it at Yale – a fact that mystifies Ashima. This brief glimpse of Sonia's development hints at some of the differences in the lives of second-generation immigrant women versus men, an idea that will recur later in the story of Moushumi. Gogol's continued love for architecture foreshadows his future career.

On one crowded **train** ride home, Gogol meets a girl named Ruth, and the two of them talk the whole journey, discussing their backgrounds. Ruth's parents are divorced, and she was raised on a commune, a past that seems fascinating to Gogol. Meanwhile Ruth expresses genuine interest in his visits to Calcutta, something he has never discussed with another American. Gogol is smitten, and the following week they meet for coffee, beginning to develop a friendship that Gogol hopes will blossom into more. One afternoon they find themselves alone, and from that moment on they are inseparable, studying together every evening. A few weeks into their relationship, they have sex, and it is intimate, loving, and personal.

Ruth is the first in a series of women who will influence Gogol's identity, and whom he will work with to shape that identity. He is attracted to her background, which is very different from his own. His crush is endearing, and when it develops into something more we see some of the frustration and angst that haunts Gogol fall away in this new relationship. He has had sex once before, but this time, with Ruth, it is a whole new experience – she affirms him as a whole, valuable person.

All too soon they are apart for the winter holidays, and Gogol thinks of Ruth constantly. She had invited him to her house in Maine, but if he went he would have to tell his parents about Ruth, which he is not prepared to do. He cannot imagine her in his home, where he is still known as Gogol. They spend one day together in Cambridge, wandering Harvard Square, kissing, and exchanging gifts. They even look at the first house where the Gangulis lived in America.

Now it is Gogol who feels what it is like to be separated from someone he loves, as his parents have been for so long. Ruth is separate from his home, and he enjoys that. She is the first person to give his new name real meaning, thus affirming that part of his identity. Their visit to Cambridge is a retracing of Gogol's roots.

By the next year Gogol's parents know about Ruth, but they are not interested in meeting her. Sonia, who has her own secret boyfriend, is the only member of the family who goes to see her one day in New Haven. Gogol is angered by his parents' disapproval, pitying them for having never been young and in love as he is. That spring Ruth takes a semester abroad in Oxford, and he feels lost, longing for her as his parents once longed for their families.

This conflict around relationships with American men or women is one that is shared by many children of Indian immigrants, as we will see with Moushumi and Sonia. Ashoke and Ashima's conception of love and dating is fundamentally different from Gogol's. Ruth's distance in Oxford is another echo of the separation his parents once felt.

One day Gogol attends a panel discussion about Indian novels written in English, since one of the panel members, Amit, is a distant cousin, and Ashima insists he go. The discussion centers on "ABCDs," or "American-born confused deshis" (meaning Indians), and the audience is filled with the type—a group that Gogol has avoided at school, along with the questions of identity and conflict that the term implies. After the discussion, he must remind his cousin that his name is Nikhil now, not Gogol.

Although the novel has been addressing the fundamental experience of Gogol as an "ABCD," he himself has never explicitly confronted that split in his identity, and he feels uncomfortable in a room full of people whose work raises questions about it – a discomfort compounded by the fact that his cousin Amit brings the name Gogol to Yale, which is the realm of Nikhil only.

For Thanksgiving of senior year, Gogol takes the **train** up to Boston alone. Although he and Ruth spent the first few days after her delayed return together, when they returned to campus they broke up, and now they avoid each other. On Gogol's journey, the train suddenly slows, the lights dimmed as the conductor runs between the cabins. Later Gogol is shaken to discover there was a suicide on the track. He arrives at the station in his hometown late, where Ashoke has been waiting nervously for three hours, thinking of his own accident.

Another key development in Gogol's life is related as he rides the train, by now a central motif in his life – he is forever moving between homes, between names, between identities. The reader, who knows about Ashoke's accident while Gogol does not, suspects the depth of worry that his father will feel in way that Gogol cannot yet understand.

In the driveway before they enter the house, Ashoke decides to tell Gogol about that accident, and the true origins of his name. His son is stunned, and feels lied to, almost betrayed. He apologizes, asking whether his name still reminds his father of that night. After a moment of silence, Ashoke responds, telling him that Gogol reminds him of everything good that came after.

This revelation strikes Gogol deeply, since it relates to the name that has been a source of frustration for him his whole life, and which he has clearly never fully understood. Thus it feels like a piece of his identity has been hidden from him. Ashoke reassures him, but Gogol is still traumatized.

CHAPTER 6

It is 1994, and Gogol lives in New York now, having just graduated from the architecture program at Columbia. He works for a successful architecture firm and lives in a small studio in Morningside Heights, the first apartment he has ever had to himself. His parents are distressed by his small paycheck, and they occasionally send him money in the mail. They had hoped he would go to M.I.T., but he didn't want to go back to Massachusetts and be in their world. Gogol had visited New York while at Yale, and once with his parents to visit Bengali friends in Queens, although they did not visit any landmarks at the time.

This leap forward in time catapults us into Gogol's new life in New York. As his trip to the Taj Mahal foreshadowed, he has become an architect, and is now living independently – with continued support from his anxious parents. Gogol's choice to be in New York is an explicit rejection of their world, and a striking out on his own. New York, that emblem of American culture, fascinates him in a way that his parents cannot understand.

One night a draftsman from his firm, Evan, invites Gogol to a party. Gogol assumes it will be a large, anonymous affair, but when they arrive, only a few people are left in the Tribeca loft. Gogol meets a striking girl named Maxine Ratliff, who studied art history at Barnard, and they begin to flirt. The next morning she calls him and invites him to dinner at her house, warning him that she lives with her parents and laughing off his worry that they will mind him coming over.

The entrance of Maxine into Gogol's life is the beginning of a new era in his quest for a stable identity. The fact that Maxine lives with her parents is one sign of how different she is from him – while he has been working to find independence from his family, hers is a source of stability and the affirmation of identity, something that Gogol will be intensely drawn to.

When he arrives at the house with a bottle of wine, he is stunned by its Greek Revival architecture. Maxine greets him at the door after a few minutes, looking carelessly alluring, and leads him into the grand kitchen and dining area, where Gogol meets her mother, Lydia. He is awestruck by her elegance and the beauty of the house as Maxine gives him a tour. At dinner he meets Gerald, her father, as he is included in the careful ritual of the luxuriant, lingering family meal, so different from the ones he remembers from his own home. They discuss art, culture, his background, and India, emptying three bottles of wine. Maxine and Gogol hit it off, left alone to clean up afterward.

The opulence of Maxine's home is intoxicating for Gogol, whose tiny studio and middle-class background have not prepared him for the easy wealth of her family. He is also attracted to the rituals of this life, so different from those of his past home. The wine stands in stark contrast to his parents' traditional refusal of alcohol, and the easy, unhurried meal is the opposite of those his mother has prepared him. This place has a secure and stable identity that Gogol will long for as he pursues Maxine.

Almost effortlessly, Gogol becomes integrated into their lives. He is in love with Maxine, and with her lifestyle—expensive, rhythmic, elegant. The biggest difference between them, he feels, is not her messiness, but that she has never wished to be anyone else. She is always comfortable and without regrets as she discusses ex-boyfriends. Her relationship with her parents, one of admiration and emulation, is also completely different from his own. Gerald and Lydia, who are openly affectionate, remind Gogol of the distance in his own parents' relationship, a distance that had always seemed normal, inevitable. When one day Maxine complains about his studio, asking him to move in with her, Gogol happily agrees, leaving just a nameless mailbox and an answering machine behind.

Maxine is innately comfortable in her own skin, a sensation that Gogol, who has always felt the friction of a divided identity, is immediately drawn to. While Gogol is prone to regret, indecision, and embarrassment, Maxine is casually confident, having never experienced any real alienation or insecurity. Gogol also envies Maxine's easy and close relationship to her parents, contrasting it with the cultural distance that separates him from Ashoke and Ashima. Gerald and Lydia are emblematic of the kind of love—an affectionate, American kind—that Gogol's parents never displayed openly.

Gogol soon makes a home of the Ratliffs' house, running in the mornings with Gerald, taking their dog Silas out for walks, and helping them to prepare for dinner parties—minimalistic, elegant affairs that contrast in his mind with the noisy Bengali gatherings of his youth. At times Gogol feels conscious that his life there is somehow a betrayal of his parents, who do not know about Maxine, and who would never be comfortable in a place like this one.

As Gogol leaves behind his connection to his home – symbolized by the answering machine in his now empty apartment – he takes on this new identity willingly, becoming a natural part of the Ratliff family in a way that inspires some guilt within him. His parents could never live in this world, and he enjoys that.

Gerald and Lydia leave for their annual summer trip to New Hampshire, leaving Maxine and Gogol alone in the hot New York house, which they quickly colonize, making love in every room. In the evenings, Gogol swats at bugs and wishes for the mosquito nets he used to use in Calcutta. He does not go home all summer, using his busy work schedule as an excuse while spending all of his free time with Maxine.

Maxine and Gogol's impulse to have sex in every room is a slight rebellion even for Maxine, who gets along with her parents so well. Gogol's separation from his home grows as he uses a romantic relationship to make this new home a vital part of his identity – even as the mosquitoes constitute an annoying reminder of his past.

Finally Ashima calls him at work late one evening, asking him to come home and say goodbye to Ashoke before he leaves for a prestigious nine-month teaching fellowship in Ohio. Gogol is annoyed that she has called, at first lying and then admitting that he had already planned to leave with his girlfriend to meet her parents in New Hampshire. His mother pauses, hurt, and asks his girlfriend's name. She is confused when he says "Max," his nickname for Maxine. "That's a boy's name," she replies.

Ashima's call to Gogol's office annoys him like the mosquitoes, breaking into the dream of his new life with Maxine. Ashima's misunderstanding of the name Max is a sign of the cultural gap that separates her from Gogol's world—and another instance of names as important motifs.

Gogol agrees that they will stop off at Pemberton Road for lunch on their way to New Hampshire. He warns Maxine that they will not be able to touch or kiss in front of his parents, and that there will be no wine with lunch—Ashima and Ashoke do not even own a corkscrew. Maxine is amused by the rules, and when they arrive he sees that his suburban home is totally foreign to her. She has brought a gift basket Gogol knows his parents will never open. Maxine admires Ashima's sari, telling her that her own mother, Lydia, is a curator of textiles at the Met. Ashima does not understand that she is referring to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

This meeting of the two worlds Gogol inhabits – as Gogol and as Nikhil – is intensely awkward for him, a fact that Maxine is hardly aware of. As with many children of immigrants, he is embarrassed by his parents' traditional attitudes about love, and by having to explain them to Maxine. The gap between Maxine and Gogol's parents is perfectly illustrated by Ashima's misunderstanding of what the Met is – common cultural knowledge for most Americans.

Ashoke enters and insists that they move their rental car into the driveway so that it is not in the way of harm. Gogol is embarrassed by their fear of disaster and by the too-formal lunch they have prepared, but Maxine is charming as ever. Ashima is pleasantly surprised to hear she lives with her parents, a custom she misses. When it is time for them to leave, Gogol's parents are a bit embarrassed by Maxine's affectionate goodbye hugs. When his father says goodbye, Maxine notices he uses the name "Gogol," which she has never heard before, but later, in the car, Gogol—whom she only knows as Nikhil—says it's nothing. Gogol is relieved to be back in her world, headed to a corner of the country he has never visited before.

This encounter exposes the many small but important things that separate Maxine and the "new" Gogol from Ashoke and Ashima—from the way they express affection to the way they host guests. This is agonizing for Gogol, although again Maxine seems unaware of his embarrassment. He is keen to return to the safety of the new identity he has created with Maxine and her parents, and so barely takes the time to say farewell to his father, who is leaving for a fellowship in the Midwest – a decision that will haunt Gogol later in the novel.

They arrive at the beautiful lakeside house down a remote dirt road and find Gerald and Lydia, lounging with their **books**. Gogol and Maxine take up residence in a small, unfinished cabin outside the main house. Gogol has never had a vacation like this, which feels like camping. They spend all day in their bathing suits together, with visits from Maxine's grandparents, Hank and Edith. On his runs around the lake with Gerald, Gogol sees the Ratliff family **graveyard**, where generations of the family are buried—where Maxine will be buried someday. At night he and Maxine go skinny-dipping in the lake, and make love on the grassy shore.

The Ratliff's lakeside home, even more than their luxurious house in Manhattan, is a paradise for Gogol. This is an ancestral site for their family, as the graveyard makes clear, and so fulfills his fantasy for a settled, strong identity rooted in the past of a place. These traditions and family ties are similar to what Gogol's parents might have provided him had he grown up in Calcutta (minus the graves). When he is here, though, Bengali traditions only seem alien and distracting to Gogol.

Gogol falls in love with the pattern of the days here, disconnected from the world. He draws the Ratliffs' house, a drawing that they put on the mantelpiece and promise to frame. He is amazed at the sense of belonging that they have in this landscape, the secure feeling that allows them to leave all their doors unlocked—in contrast to his own parents, who have just installed an alarm at their home on Pemberton Road. The Ratliffs own even the moon above the lake, Gogol feels, and he is deeply drawn to the idea of returning to a single place year after year. This type of vacation is the opposite of the family road trips, expeditions from motel to motel, from his own memory.

Gogol's drawing, treasured by the Ratliffs, is an echo of the drawings he used to place on his parents' fridge at home, and another sign that this place has become his new home. He is amazed by their belonging in this landscape, where he and his parents have always felt insecure and alien. Every element of this place contrasts with Gogol's memory of childhood with the Gangulis, a childhood that he now associates with the insecurity, embarrassment, and frustration of a divided identity he wishes to escape.

On one canoe journey across the lake, Maxine confides that this is where she lost her virginity, when she was fourteen. He thinks of his life at fourteen, when he was still Gogol—he has told her about this name now, which for her is merely a cute and forgettable fact from his past—and how different it was. Gogol pictures her past and future in this place: growing old, burying her parents in the family **graveyard**, teaching her children to swim in the lake.

Again we see the way in which Gogol's attraction to Maxine is partly a product of the differences between them. His love for her is in some ways an expression of his own rejection of himself, and his desire to be fully "Nikhil." The detail of his pet name is unimportant to Maxine, which suggests the extent to which he has hidden this part of himself.

They celebrate Gogol's twenty-seventh birthday there, the first time he has not been with his parents on his birthday. Friends from around the lake come, and Gogol has an awkward interaction with one woman who asks at what age he moved to America from India. She seems confused to hear that he was born in Boston. As the toast is called and the party sings "Happy Birthday," Gogol thinks briefly of his parents, but he does not call them. He is awoken that night by the sound of ringing in the main house and stumbles out of bed, mortified that Gerald and Lydia will be woken up by his parents, but it is just a dream. He remembers that his parents do not have his number—that here in the wilderness with Maxine, he is finally free.

The birthday party is in some ways the climax of Gogol's acceptance into this second family, for which he has rejected his own. The illusion of a ringing telephone signals the slight guilt that Gogol still feels at having abandoned his family so completely, as well as foreshadowing the phone call that will, in the next chapter, disrupt his fantasy. The casual racism of the partygoer, who assumes Gogol is Indian-born, is another reminder that this life is, in fact, a fantasy—the privileges of "old money," whiteness, and an American heritage will never truly belong to Gogol.

CHAPTER 7

Ashima sits at her kitchen table, addressing Christmas cards to her Bengali friends, the names spread across three different address **books** that chronicle their life in America. While she usually buys discounted, secular holiday cards, this year she was inspired by a **book** at the library to make her own, with a bejeweled elephant on the front that is copied from one of her father's letters. Now that she is alone, with Ashoke teaching in Ohio, she has time for such crafts.

Here are two perfect illustrations of Ashima's experience in America: first, books of names and addresses that contain the names of her real family and of the second family of Bengali immigrants she has formed, and second, this handmade Christmas card, which avoids the imagery of Christmas in favor of an elephant from her father—even while reluctantly accepting the holiday itself.

Ashima feels lonely in the dark house, and is frightened by small sounds. She has started a part-time position at the library, her first job, and is now friendly with the other women who work there, many of whom have grown children also and are divorced—they gossip about the perils of middle-age dating. Ashoke visits every three weekends, paying the bills, raking the leaves, and putting gas in the car. While he is away they speak on the phone every night at 8 p.m.

Without Ashoke, Ashima is truly alone for the first time, and is beginning to adapt to the situation. Her job and her new American friends are both signs that the unchanging Ashima is, in fact, starting to shift in subtle ways to find her place in America. Her love for Ashoke is ritualized, regular, and familiar: a deep part of her.

One afternoon, Ashoke calls earlier than usual, from a hospital in Ohio. Ashima is frightened, but he reassures her it is just a stomach pain, probably from food the night before. He asks her to arrange an appointment with their doctor at home for the next week. She returns to the cards, signing them with the names of each of her children, her husband, and her own. She writes Gogol instead of Nikhil, even though she knows he would object. She addresses a card to each of her children, reflecting on her inability to accept Maxine as a potential daughter-in-law. She passes two pages of addresses for Sonia and Gogol, amazed by how many homes each has already had, but for them it is normal. Ashima is looking forward to the family being together at Christmas, and hurt that no one had returned for Thanksgiving this year.

This seemingly harmless pain alarms Ashima, as well as the reader, who might suspect that there is more to the story. We can witness now, from Ashima's perspective, her stubborn refusal to call Gogol by his chosen name, or to accept Maxine. She is amazed by the vagabond children she has raised, with the many addresses each has had now living only in the pages of this book, of which she is the keeper. Christmas, a holiday that once meant nothing to her, is now an important marker in the calendar of her life in America, and with her children.

Ashima's thoughts are interrupted by a call from what she thinks is a telemarketer, mispronouncing her last name as usual. She hangs up and returns to work. Later, worried about Ashoke, she tries to contact the hospital, spelling her name out letter by letter for the operator. When she is finally connected, she is annoyed with the intern who answers, and when the young woman tells her that her husband has "expired," a word she associates with library cards, it takes her several seconds to understand. The intern explains that Ashoke has died from a heart attack, and Ashima hangs up the phone, shaking violently. She stares at the cards, each with her husband's name, and then finds her son's number in the address **book**—under G for Ganguli and for Gogol.

The small series of battles that must be fought daily regarding her foreign-sounding name is something that Ashima is now numb to, as she pushes her way through to the hospital. The news of Ashoke's death is sudden and impossible to comprehend – especially as it is delivered with a word—"expired"—that seems totally dehumanizing. The cards, which Ashima has carefully signed on behalf of her family, are now a shocking reminder of the way that family has been irreparably changed. Her first thought is of her son, whom she will always know as Gogol.

Sonia flies back from San Francisco to be with Ashima, while Gogol flies to Cleveland. Maxine had offered to accompany him, but he refused. He had not heard the news for hours, as he was out at a party and then at dinner with Maxine. When they returned, Gerald, calling him "Nick," told him that his mother had called. Now Gogol is at the hospital where his father died, identifying the strange, dead body. He is given the clothes his father had been wearing, and a small used novel with someone else's name written in the cover. Gogol tells the hospital to send his father's ashes home, and is shown the bed where he died.

The family shifts into action, all of their lives now changed forever. Gogol is called away from the fantasy he had built for himself with Maxine, where he is now "Nick" – a further sign of the new, Americanized identity he has built himself there. He is shell-shocked by the experience of identifying his father's body, and by all of these small, familiar items that belonged to him. It is his turn, now, to tell the hospital bureaucrat his father's name.

Gogol drives his father's abandoned rental car back to his empty apartment, saddened by the uniformity of the complex. The apartment is sparse and simple, with a single picture of Gogol, Ashima, and Sonia on the refrigerator. He begins to dispose of the few items that are there, feeling some guilt when he throws away the food, as he knows his father would disapprove. He takes everything salvageable downstairs to a table for donations, saving only a few photos. For the rest of that day, he makes the necessary phone calls—to the rental car company, the university, the utilities. Everyone is sympathetic. By the time he has finished and ordered a pizza to eat for the first time that day, it is already nighttime.

As he witnesses the simplicity of his father's life in Ohio, Gogol is struck by the memories contained within this space that had been home, even briefly, to Ashoke, and how his father had treasured the very family that Gogol has been trying to escape. Gogol goes automatically through the process of closing out his father's life here, comfortably navigating the American structures that once mystified his parents. The intensity of his grief is shown in his forgetting to eat anything until the day is almost over.

Gogol calls home, but Sonia and Ashima are already asleep. He calls Maxine, who regrets not having come with him. Gogol remembers that the last time he saw Ashoke had been with her, on their way to New Hampshire. Maxine is shocked to hear that he plans to spend the night in the apartment. He agrees to get a hotel, but after he has hung up he changes his mind. He drifts in and out of sleep for the rest of the night, dreaming of his father's life there.

That his first call is to his family is a sign of the shift his father's death has caused within Gogol. This is followed by his decision to disobey the advice – the command – of Maxine that he not stay in the apartment overnight. There is a new, fundamental misunderstanding between them, amplified because Maxine knows nothing of this side of Gogol's identity.

The next morning, after disposing of the last few things, Gogol boards a flight to Boston, dreading the moment when he must face his mother and sister. He remembers the grief of Ashoke and Ashima when they lost their own parents. He remembers his father shaving his head in the Bengali tradition, and how he had laughed at his father's strange appearance, while Sonia, still a baby, had cried. Now Ashima has shampooed the vermillion from her hair's part and removed her iron wedding bracelet. For the first week after Gogol returns home, the house is always full of Bengali visitors, there to comfort the grieving family. Calls of condolence come from friends all over the country.

Gogol begins to feel more distant from Maxine, but this mourning experience unites him to his memories of his parents' grief at their own parents' death. What had seemed foreign and inexplicable to him then is now painfully understandable. The Bengali community gathers around the grieving family, a source of support in their time of tragedy. The Gangulis have spread roots in America more than they knew.

They observe the traditional ten days of mourning, eating only rice and dal. Gogol remembers being annoyed by this custom as a child, but now these meals in their regularity are the only thing that makes sense to him. Although most of the day is spent with the sympathetic guests, for these meals it is only the three remaining family members who eat together. On the eleventh day there is a religious ceremony, a gathering of Bengali friends which feels like so many other gatherings that have come before. Maxine drives up from New York, but feels out of place. She asks Gogol whether he still plans to go with her to the lake over New Year's Eve. Calling him Nikhil, she tells him that getting away could do him good. Gogol is cold and distant, feeling how different they are, and angered by her suggestion that he "get away."

This is another example of the ways in which Ashoke's sudden death causes Gogol to return to the comfort of his parents' culture. The traditional mourning meal, which would have made him feel embarrassed or alienated years earlier, now becomes a cherished ritual. The religious gathering, a first funeral for Ashoke, emphasizes the foreignness of Maxine, whom Gogol never allowed access to this world. She knows him as Nikhil, but everyone here sees him only as Gogol. The differences between them—which had at first attracted Gogol to Maxine—now begin to drive a wedge between them. Gogol even rejects her offer of returning to the home that had recently been his paradise.

For the next few weeks, the family lives together on Pemberton Road, completing many small and necessary tasks—changing the name on the mortgage, driving to town to shop for groceries or to visit Bengali friends. In January, Gogol returns to New York while Sonia stays in Massachusetts with Ashima. The two women come to see Gogol off at the **train** station. It feels strange for him to leave, and to return to Maxine. A sharp turn in the tracks reminds him of the train accident that nearly killed his father.

Bonded by the experience of this tragedy, the Gangulis struggle to make sense of their loss. Sonia leaves behind her life in California to stay with her mother—a sign of the renewed importance that the second generation is placing on the first, now that its fragility has rendered it precious. The train's turning emphasizes the ways that this accident of Ashoke's death has been formative for them all.

As the **train** hugs the coastline, Gogol remembers a past journey to Cape Cod, and walking with his father all the way to the tip of a breakwater, despite Ashima's worried calls. He recalls every detail, like the way his father's footprints in the sand turned outward because of his slight limp. When they reached the end, surrounded by sea, Ashoke realized he had forgotten the camera. "We will have to remember it, then," he says, telling the young Gogol to always remember this journey "to a place where there was nowhere left to go."

The intensity and poignancy of this memory in some ways represents a new awareness in Gogol—that he was in fact formed by his family, and does have an identity rooted in moments like the one he is now remembering. This is an identity that he can no longer afford to reject unthinkingly, not now that its fragility has been revealed by his father's loss.

CHAPTER 8

It has been a year since Ashoke's death. Gogol and Maxine are no longer together—the argument that ended their unraveling relationship had to do with him opposing her desire to accompany his family to India for the funeral. He returns home now every weekend, drawn to the framed photograph of his father on the wall, the closest thing Ashoke has to a **grave**. Ashima's mourning has caused her to age quickly, and Sonia now lives with and takes care of her. Gogol is enrolled in a course at Columbia again, preparing to take the registration exam that will make him a fully-licensed architect in his own right.

Maxine and Gogol separate, less as a result of her inherent distance from his family than because Gogol has himself worked to maintain this distance, and now cannot imagine bridging it. With no grave to visit, Gogol finds himself returning home, the place where the most memories of his father still live, and reconnecting to the family he had once rebelled against. He is preparing to take another step toward adulthood.

Out for drinks with his classmates one night, Gogol begins talking with an architecture student named Bridget. She is married, and her husband is a professor in Boston. They begin an affair, never seeing one another aside from the evenings of their review class. It is only when Gogol is on the **train** home to Boston, and a train going the opposite direction passes by, that he begins to feel guilty, wondering whether Bridget's husband is sitting on the southbound train.

This brief affair in Gogol's life is a means for him to release his pent-up emotion without, this time, any implication for his own identity – he is essentially anonymous and nameless for once. The moment of guilt on the train, though, foreshadows the moment when, later in the novel, he will learn (on a train) of his own wife's secret affair.

Ashima has begun to ask questions about Gogol's romantic situation, even suggesting that he patch things up with Maxine. Gogol knows that Ashima hopes he will settle down soon, but he tries to keep from being annoyed—as he might have been before Ashoke's death. One day Ashima mentions a girl Gogol used to know, a Bengali named Moushumi Mazoomdar, who had broken off an engagement the year before and "could use a friend." The first time she gives him the phone number, he only pretends to write it down, but when she persists Gogol agrees to meet with Moushumi.

This new pressure from his mother is a product of her fear that Gogol will not settle down, and that the Ganguli name will end with him. The idea of immigrant parents setting up their reluctant children is a common theme in immigrant literature, as the parents work to keep alive the fragile communities formed between immigrants of the same culture in a foreign land. Love and family are not separate in the view of Ashima's generation, as both are rooted in tradition.

Moushumi is waiting for him in a bar in the East Village, reading a **book** in French. Their conversation starts with a discussion of his new name, and the fact that she was taught as a child to call him Gogol Dada, or cousin Gogol—a past link that makes them both feel a bit awkward. Moushumi remembers his house, and his family, and she apologizes for missing Ashoke's funeral. She had been in Paris at the time, after graduating from Brown, and is now a PhD candidate in French Literature at NYU. She talks frankly of her "prenuptial disaster," and then they change the subject to the last time they saw each other, at Gogol's graduation party, when they didn't speak.

Gogol is not expecting anything to come from this meeting, as he has spent his whole life trying to rebel against his mother and the culture that he shares with Moushumi. Gogol's romantic nature, which has been a tool of rebellion and identity formation in the past, is now driving him back toward the identity he associates with his family, and with his father.

As the bar fills up, they decide to leave, and then, spontaneously, to have dinner. They walk to a small French restaurant, where Gogol insists on paying the bill, and then he walks Moushumi home, surprised at how much he is enjoying himself. On the way back to his apartment he makes the indulgent decision to take a cab, eager to reflect on the date alone. The driver is speaking in Bengali on his cell phone, and as they near his apartment, Gogol leans forward and, speaking Bengali, points out the right address. Gogol leaves a generous tip and steps out of the car.

Their date seems on the one hand spontaneous, and on the other, fated and inevitable. Their backgrounds are remarkably similar, since they share the common experiences of second-generation Indian-Americans. Gogol is becoming more reconciled to his heritage, as seen in his interactions with the driver, which in the past would have made him feel embarrassed or out of place.

In the next few days, Gogol recalls images of Moushumi from years ago that he had forgotten—the books she always brought along to the parties, her seriousness at a young age. He is secretly pleased that she has seen his house and tasted Ashima's cooking. He remembers a Christmas spent in her home, arranging an anonymous gift exchange, and Moushumi reluctantly playing the piano at her mother's insistence.

The things that attract Gogol to Moushumi are entirely opposite from the things that drew him to Maxine. Instead of hoping to escape his past, he is now increasingly drawn to it, reminded by his father's death of just how fragile his links to that past are. He is now actively searching for memories that he had previously sought to forget.

A week later they have lunch, meeting at his work, where Gogol shows her around the office proudly. They go to an Italian restaurant he knows, and she orders the same meal he does, eating approvingly. They talk about her dissertation, and that Christmas party years before. Moushumi tells him that playing the piano was always a fantasy her mother had for her, never something she wanted to do. As they pay the bill, the waiter asks Gogol if Moushumi is his sister—a question that embarrasses but pleases them both.

Gogol dwells on all of the details of their interaction, signaling his growing excitement about Moushumi. He and Moushumi bond over their shared attempts to escape the commandeering influence of their parents – even as they are essentially giving in to that influence by seeing one another. Their similarities draw them together, which is a new feeling for both.

They walk out into the cold New York winter. Moushumi sees Gogol shivering, and insists that they go to buy a hat. He enjoys the way she watches him try it on, and she then buys it as a present. At the counter, he sees her eyeing a beautiful, expensive hat, which she tries on, but leaves behind. Gogol returns to work, but when his day is done he returns to the store and buys the hat from the knowing saleswoman. He hides it in his closet, having decided to give it to her as a birthday present before he even knows when her birthday is. That weekend, at home, he looks through family photo albums and finds Moushumi in the background of an old birthday photo.

They are already beginning to care for one another like a married couple would, even on this very early date – and Gogol's choice to buy the hat reflects the inevitable future of their relationship, one that is almost fated by their background. It is simultaneously a very spontaneous act and one that assumes long-term stability in their relationship. Moushumi's presence in the family photo album is the clearest link yet between this woman and Gogol's family, which has now become the center of his life.

The next weekend Gogol goes to Moushumi's apartment for dinner, bringing a bunch of sunflowers. She looks for a place to put them on the countertops, which are filled with the ingredients for the meal she is cooking, and asks him to get a vase from a high shelf. They begin cooking together, making coq au vin, with Moushumi acknowledging that her mother would be appalled that she isn't cooking Indian food. Steam from the pot fogs her glasses, and as Gogol helps her take them off, he leans in for a kiss. They go to the bedroom, where they make love "as if they've known each other's bodies for years." They are roused from bed by the smell of burnt chicken, and sprint naked into the kitchen. In the end they order Chinese.

This domestic scene is, again, already a glimpse into what their married life will presumably look like. They are rebelling from their parents and their past in small ways – in their choice of meal, for example – but in more important ways – like their choice of romantic partner – they are following the path their parents have set out for them. Love and sex again become a means for Gogol to assert his identity, although this time they involve returning to his Bengali heritage.

Within three months their lives become intimately intertwined. When they go out to dinner, they sometimes make comments in Bengali to avoid being overheard. Even as they get to know one another, Gogol feels he already knows her life—he can picture Moushumi's house, the parties, the family dynamics, as if they were his own. They talk of their trips to Calcutta, and of being misidentified as Greek, Egyptian, or Mexican. She tells him nostalgically of her life in Britain, and of the paranoia of her parents upon moving to America.

This list of those things they have had to endure separately brings them together still further. They have shared experiences of the casual racism of being mistaken for another ethnicity, and of the frustration each has felt with their overly paranoid and overbearing mothers. Moushumi has some experiences that Gogol lacks, however – her autonomous life in London, and in Paris.

Moushumi admits that Gogol is exactly the type of man she has avoided all her life. From a young age, there was pressure in her family to marry a Bengali, but she had made a pact never to do so. Instead she remained single and lonely throughout college, forming intense crushes on her teachers. Her rebellion at Brown was academic—although she studied chemistry as expected, she secretly double majored in French, a culture she turned to in defiance of the other two that tried to lay their claim on her.

Here is a glimpse again into the particular dynamic of growing up as a second-generation immigrant woman, whose romantic life is tightly controlled. Like Gogol, Moushumi rebels from this mold, but like Gogol, that mold still shaped the person she is today, despite her best efforts. This pact never to marry a Bengali man will return later, when Moushumi begins to feel that she has "given up" in choosing Gogol as a husband.

After graduation Moushumi moved to Paris, despite her parents' protests, and after years of loneliness fell into a series of passionate affairs with men who wooed her with expensive presents. She worked at a language center with American expatriates, where she met Graham, an investment banker, and fell in love. They lived together in secret in New York for a time, before Graham met her family. By this point, her parents were more accepting of an American husband, and one night she impulsively asked him to marry her. He accepted, gave her his grandmother's ring, and flew with her to Calcutta to meet her extended family, charming them all.

This moment of more extreme rebellion in Moushumi's past mirrors the height of Gogol's rebellion in the woods with Maxine. Like Gogol, Moushumi has used love as a way to assert her independence from a past that she felt trapped by. This recounting of her history with Graham raises some alarm bells, creating a suspicion that Moushumi still has some feelings for her ex-fiancé—as if Gogol is in some way a backup plan, after her first choice backfired.

Graham agreed to a Hindu wedding, and all of the preparations were made, with the announcement made in the local paper. Then one night a few weeks before the wedding, at a dinner with friends, Moushumi heard him discussing their time in Calcutta, complaining about the lack of alcohol, the endless relatives, their provincial ways. Walking home afterward, they began to argue. For Moushumi, it was fine that *she* reject her past, but hearing these things from *him* felt like a betrayal. Moushumi threw his grandmother's ring into the street, and then Graham slapped her across the face. By the end of the week he had moved out, the wedding was canceled, and she dropped out of the rest of the semester at NYU, taking a trip to the emergency room after swallowing half a bottle of pills.

Moushumi herself has rejected the traditions of her parents' culture, but she cannot endure that Graham would reject them—he doesn't understand them, and so has no right to criticize them out of hand. This suggests that, like Gogol, Moushumi is still loyal to her past in a deep, unshakeable way. The end of that relationship is swift and violent, suggesting that, as with Gogol and Maxine, the relationship between Moushumi and Graham may have been shallow in many ways – driven by Moushumi's quest for an identity that rejected her past, and for that reason always incomplete.

Moushumi recovered slowly, watching television and movies all day, living in Brooklyn for a time with another couple. It was painful for her to see them together every day. She worked until she could afford to rent another studio, and was grateful to be alone. She grew thin, subsisting on Triscuits and raita, but was determined to stay at NYU, and when summer ended she worked hard to catch up. She began to date again, intermittently—and then she met Gogol.

The depth of this wound, and the fact that it was inflicted relatively recently, is another warning sign that Moushumi's relationship to Gogol may be a too-hasty attempt at healing. This period of mourning resembles in some ways Gogol's shock in the aftermath of his father's death. Tragedy brought them both back to their roots, and to each other.

CHAPTER 9

Within the year they are married, at a hotel in New Jersey close to her parents' home. They might both have preferred a smaller American wedding, one outdoors and with jazz, but their parents invite close to 300 people, taking control of the planning of the wedding themselves. Gogol and Moushumi largely acquiesce as just punishment for having listened to their mothers and having gotten together in the first place. They drive to the hotel together and then separate into their families for the last time. Gogol wears an old Punjabi of Ashoke's, and Ashima is dressed up for the first time since her husband's death. Sonia gives Gogol a birthday gift, a red flask with the initials "NG" on it, and Gogol remembers her refusal to accept his decision to change his name when she was thirteen.

Though both Moushumi and Gogol are accustomed to rebellion, at this point both have become obedient to the wishes of their families and are eager to be married. Although they are already essentially living together, they maintain the illusion of separation once they arrive at the wedding venue. The trappings of his past, and of his father, follow Gogol throughout this ceremony. The gift from Sonia is a thoughtful acknowledgement – from an ally who understands the struggle of growing up as a child of immigrants – of the care that Gogol has taken in forging his own identity.

During the watered-down Hindu ceremony, as rice is poured into a fire that the hotel's management will not allow to be lit, Gogol reflects upon the courage of his parents, who never spoke until after they were married in a ceremony like this one. Gogol and Moushumi follow the instructions of their Bengali relatives, barely looking at each other through the evening's rituals, and sneaking one quick kiss later on. The food at the banquet, on tables that are too gaudy for Moushumi's taste, is labeled for the American guests. As photos are taken, Gogol is aware that they are fulfilling a collective fantasy for these Bengali immigrants by marrying one another. He is also aware that most of the preparations are left over from Moushumi's last wedding.

Here again is a watered-down, makeshift version of the ceremonies that both families and the many Bengali guests know from home – but which are foreign to Gogol and Moushumi, who need instructions on how to follow the ritual. That the hotel management will not allow them to light the traditional flame is a perfect example of the small but significant ways that their heritage is stifled by this foreign environment. Still, the wedding represents a triumph for this tight-knit community of immigrants, a sign of hope for the future.

As they both unwind in their hotel room afterward, Gogol remembers his engagement proposal. It was on Moushumi's birthday, at an inn in the country, and he had presented the ring along with the hat he had bought her months before. In the end the hat was more of a surprise than the ring, as from the beginning, marriage was expected. After Moushumi has showered, they make love, even though both are exhausted, and afterward Gogol feels he can relax for the first time. They open the champagne, going through the cards and checks from their guests. Moushumi had wanted to avoid registering for gifts again, after the disaster of her first wedding. The checks are addressed to them both, some referring to him as Nikhil and some as Gogol. Although the cards say Moushumi Ganguli, she has chosen to keep her own last name, to Gogol's slight regret.

This reflection on the inevitability of their marriage, which was expected from the moment they started dating, is paired with the in-the-moment experience of an expected action – sex on their wedding night – that is for both, at this point, just another part of the ritual they have been taking part in almost automatically all day. Unlike their parents, the young couple drinks champagne, and so are fully American in that way. The confusion of names on their wedding gifts is a sign that even with this move, Gogol has not escaped the problem of a divided identity. Their marriage will never be quite like that of his parents, as Moushumi's choice to keep her name suggests.

With the money from their guests, they put down a security deposit on a beautiful one-bedroom apartment on the Lower East Side that is slightly above their price range. They cook with produce from a farmers' market, occasionally beating the too-sensitive fire alarm with the handle of a broom. They merge bank accounts, host dinner parties—small, classy affairs different from those of their childhood—and when they are craving Indian food they trek out to Jackson Diner in Queens. Sometimes in the apartment Gogol finds remnants of Graham, like an inscription in a book of poetry, or a postcard. Gogol has a nagging worry that he represents some sort of defeat for Moushumi. The most pressing reminder of Graham is her white wedding dress, never worn, which is stuffed into a bag in their closet.

Moushumi and Gogol now form a life together, and with our omniscient perspective as readers, we can compare it to the early days of Ashima's marriage to Ashoke. Gogol and Moushumi's is a firmly American relationship, but relics of their past remain, in the occasional craving for Indian food or in small ornaments in their apartment. The white wedding dress is an ominous sign of Moushumi's continuing attachment to the rebellious past she gave up to marry Gogol. Graham's name haunts their relationship in the inscriptions Gogol finds, foreshadowing future trouble.

In March they visit Paris together, where Moushumi is presenting an academic paper. The weather is gray, and Gogol feels acutely the eyes of passing men watching his wife. It is his first time in Europe, and they visit monuments together, but he has the feeling that Moushumi would rather be at the conference or visiting friends. He is mute at dinner with her French companions, feeling useless and out of place. Finally he decides to set off on his own to see the city, while she works on her paper. Everything he sees is beautiful beyond description, but he is depressed that none of it is new to Moushumi. He is jealous of her life here, so separate and independent. At their final dinner she seems sad to be leaving, and is slightly distant but beautiful. Gogol takes out his camera for a picture, but she refuses. She doesn't want to be mistaken for a tourist.

This visit to Paris is another hint that the seemingly perfect beginnings of Moushumi and Gogol's relationship might be starting to wear off. This is a part of Moushumi's identity to which Gogol has no access, in the same way that Maxine had no access to Gogol's Indian heritage. Here in France, Gogol is entirely a foreigner – and Moushumi's slight embarrassment over his attempts to take photos is reminiscent of their past embarrassment when their parents, foreigners in America, would make their foreignness too apparent by tripping over an English phrase or committing a social faux pas.

It is May, and Gogol and Moushumi are at a dinner party in Brooklyn, at the home of Moushumi's hip friends Astrid and Donald, which is under renovation. Gogol resents them slightly, feeling that they represent the type of couple Moushumi wishes to be—coolly confident hosts, invested in artisanal meats and breads that Gogol finds pretentious. The guests are scholars or artists, all married, which still surprises him. The academic talk, discussions of a Brecht play performed in the nude, of the benefits of a gluten free diet—all of this annoys an already hungry Gogol. He sees Moushumi lighting a cigarette and he grimaces. This habit of hers has begun to distress him.

Jumping forward again slightly, we see that the friction between Gogol and Moushumi has now increased—as earlier episodes might have foretold. This world of academics is foreign to Gogol, and he finds it off-putting, but it is a core part of Moushumi's identity. His annoyance at her smoking habits is a world away from the descriptions of Moushumi smoking in the early days of their relationship, when it was something sensual and endearing.

For some reason that Gogol cannot understand, the approval of these people is important to Moushumi, and he has noticed that after these parties she is always slightly depressed when they return home, and often starts an argument. Gogol blames this on her upcoming exams. Most annoyingly for him, though, is the fact that it is through Donald and Astrid that Moushumi met Graham. The four of them even used to go away on vacation together. Once, Gogol hears Astrid slip up and call him Graham.

The couple's connection to Graham is a further hint that Donald and Astrid's presence will be toxic for Moushumi's marriage. They represent a part of her identity that she is unwilling to give up, and which she often finds more compelling than her life with Gogol. That Astrid uses Graham's name to refer to Gogol is a clear warning sign, especially in a novel where the link between naming and identity is so important.

At the moment the conversation has turned to baby names—the names of Popes, nonsense names—and baby name books are passed around the table. Gogol feels his bond with Moushumi return for a moment, because neither of them will be in these books. He is disconcerted, however, to realize that he does not know what her name means. He wanders upstairs, through the renovations, and into the kitchen where Donald is finally starting to cook. Gogol offers to help, and the two of them talk. Donald reveals that it was here that Moushumi came after her break-up with Graham. This only increases Gogol's hatred for the place.

The theme of naming takes center stage here, and with it a sense of the bond between Moushumi and Gogol, whose "unique" names separate them from their companions – they are united in their isolation. Gogol's realization that he does not know what Moushumi's name means suggests that their relationship is shallower than he had imagined. With this, along with the memory of Graham that haunts this place, Lahiri is creating a very strong sense that something is not quite right in their marriage.

Returning downstairs, Gogol finds the name conversation still continuing, and sees that Moushumi is somewhat drunk. Suddenly she announces to the room that Gogol, whom they know as Nikhil, changed his name. Everyone is silent, confused, and Gogol is furious, but she is oblivious to this. He tells them he was born as Gogol, and the group absorbs this information, asking him why his parents chose that name. He thinks of the train accident, regrets telling Moushumi about this part of his life, and ends up mumbling that his father was a fan of the author. Then he announces that there is no such thing as the perfect name, that children should have the right to name themselves when they turn 18, and before that, simple pronouns should suffice. Gogol then remembers a book of Moushumi's, an unhappy love story translated from the French, in which the main characters were referred to only as He and She, and he wishes his life were so simple.

Moushumi's revelation to the group, which to Gogol is a stinging, deep betrayal, is offered in a casual, offhand way that suggests that she does not understand the intense frustration that surrounded his attempts to break free from his pet name, or the work he has done to form his own identity as Nikhil. Those assembled here can never understand that side of him, and he feels put on display even trying to explain. His pronouncement that the perfect name does not exist – not an observation that the group welcomes – is an expression of his own experience. He feels it is unjust that such a fundamental part of one's identity should be completely outside of one's control.

CHAPTER 10

As this chapter begins, we notice that the narration seems to be taking on more of Moushumi's perspective, referring to Gogol as Nikhil. Her parents call to wish the couple a happy first anniversary before they have even had a chance to say it to one another. They are also celebrating Moushumi's successful oral exams, heading to a restaurant in midtown recommended by Donald and Astrid. Moushumi has also been awarded a fellowship to study in France, but she has kept that a secret from Gogol, as she is unable to leave now that she is married. She has kept a few secrets from him recently, like sometimes going out to restaurants alone when she has told him she is studying. She feels a need to remember that she can be independent, that she will not, as her mother did, become reliant on her husband.

This shift in perspective allows us to follow Moushumi as the protagonist for a time, giving us a window into her point of view. It is significant that, although every other chapter refers to Gogol as Gogol, in this chapter he is "Nikhil" – a sign that this part of his identity lives more prominently in Moushumi. The secrets she is keeping from him are yet another warning sign that their marriage is not fated to endure for decades, as Ashoke and Ashima's did. These secrets are driven by Moushumi's need to feel independent, and her fear of any love that creates reliance.

They've both dressed up for dinner, and Moushumi wears the black dress from the first night they made love in her apartment. She remembers their first date, and being surprised by the instant attraction she felt. She liked that he'd changed his name from Gogol to Nikhil—it made him somehow new. But he does not remember the dress when she asks him about it. As they walk to the restaurant, stopping to look in store windows, she reflects on Gogol's familiarity, his kindness, and their easy courtship with her parents' approval. The things that had drawn her to him initially are now beginning to make her feel distant, and she cannot help but associate Gogol with a sense of resignation, of giving in to a life she had always hoped to avoid.

While in a way, Moushumi's choice to date Gogol had felt rebellious at the beginning of her relationship – since she was disobeying the pact she had made with herself never to date a Bengali man – now the wider context of their relationship, as a resignation to her parents wishes, is beginning to haunt Moushumi's feelings for him. The excitement of their early love is wearing off, as evidenced by Gogol's forgetting the origins of the black dress she is wearing tonight.

When they finally find the hidden restaurant, it is not what Moushumi had hoped for, and she is distressed by the Bangladeshi bus boys who serve the bread. She wishes they could leave, but it is too late. The food is unsatisfying, and she feels too sober, her discomfort growing. She tries to hide this from Gogol (whom she thinks of as Nikhil), but he begins to lose patience. As they leave, she is struck by an urge to go somewhere else and eat a pizza.

With the added benefit of Moushumi's perspective in the narration, her unhappiness and bitterness now come into the foreground. Gogol is mystified by her moodiness, but even small reminders of her past, like the Bangladeshi waiters, aggravate Moushumi significantly, along with the disappointing meal.

A new semester at NYU begins, but Moushumi is officially finished with classes. She is teaching a section of beginning French, and looks forward to the shocked looks on her students' faces when she reveals that she is not French herself, but is from New Jersey. Moushumi rises early for her 8 a.m. section, enjoying the new routine, and ponders what life will be like when she has to leave the city for her first real job, only flying back on weekends. The prospect is an attractive one, as it seems to offer a new beginning.

Moushumi has found comfort in this third identity as a French teacher. This is a reflection of the way that her time in Paris was a rebellious quest to forge her own path – a path she has now abandoned in some ways. The fact that she is looking forward to the independence of a long-distance relationship reveals her dissatisfaction with married life.

When Moushumi arrives at the department there is an ambulance there, and she is shocked to find that an administrative assistant named Alice, a thirty-year-old woman, has died of an aneurysm. As Moushumi readies herself for class, she finds comfort in sorting the mail, a job that Alice will never do again. Suddenly she sees a name that surprises her, and takes the letter into her office. She opens the envelope, staring at the name at the top of the resumé: Dimitri Desjardins. She remembers being enthralled just by the name when they first met, years before. From the resumé she learns what he's been doing for the last decade—earning his Ph.D. in German literature from the University of Heidelberg.

Once again, an unexpected death or accident creates a pivot point in a main character's life. The death of Alice, who is not far from Moushumi's age, is a reminder to her that life is short. This, in combination with her rediscovery of the seductively-named Dimitri Desjardins, creates the perfect conditions for the beginning of an affair. Dimitri is very different from Gogol—he is a member of the academic circles where Moushumi feels most at home, and where Gogol will always be an outsider.

Moushumi had met Dimitri years before, at the end of high school, on a chartered bus from Princeton to D.C. for an anti-apartheid rally. He was 27 at the time, and had traveled extensively after college. He gave her a nickname to replace Moushumi, calling her "Mouse." As everyone fell asleep, he very slowly unbuttoned her skirt, but as she turned to him for the kiss that would be her first, he stopped, whispering that she will break a lot of hearts, and then turned away, ignoring her for the rest of the trip.

This intense first experience with sex – although nothing really happens physically – sparks a curiosity in the young Moushumi that has not yet been satisfied. At the time, Dimitri represented a complete rebellion from the cloistered life Moushumi had lived at home, his cultured intelligence a strong draw for the young bookworm. The nickname he gave her is also a sign of their continuing connection, and almost a gesture of ownership – he offers her a new identity, which she craves desperately.

Moushumi returned to Princeton every day afterward, finally finding Dimitri and going on her very first date, to a Godard film. When she asked him to her senior prom, though, he condescendingly declined, treating her like a child. Afterward she saw him with another date sometimes at the movies. Once, when his date wasn't listening, he told Moushumi she looked great. At Brown, she received occasional postcards written from Europe, books he thought she would enjoy, or late night phone calls, but these eventually tapered off.

Their relationship doesn't come to any sort of conclusion or yield any particular romance – but it leaves open the possibility of a future connection, a possibility encouraged by Dimitri's sporadic communication from abroad. We know that young Moushumi will end up moving to Paris, and wonder how much Dimitri's European adventures influence this choice, as Moushumi (like Gogol) pursues her new identity through love.

Now, sitting in her office, Moushumi reads his cover letter and inserts a missing period. She photocopies the résumé and returns it to the correct mailbox. She debates whether to record his phone number, and ends up writing just the numbers under the letter "D"—without the name, it doesn't feel like a betrayal. At home, she searches out a **book** Dimitri had inscribed to her by Stendhal, unable at first to find it in the mess of books shared by her and Gogol. She finally finds it, and begins to reread it at every opportunity, reading in bed until Gogol comes to join her.

If Dimitri is nameless in Moushumi's address book, then somehow he feels less real – another sign of the power that names have in this novel. Nevertheless, Moushumi returns home in search of Dimitri's name in a book, which offers her a chance to explore her feelings for him without acting on them yet. This secret rebellion is hidden from Gogol, who is oblivious to her discovery of the résumé and the existence of Dimitri.

The next week Moushumi calls him. She has reread all of Dimitri's postcards, telling herself she is reconnecting with an old friend, but keeping it a secret from Gogol. They begin to see each other twice a week in his apartment, eating elaborately cooked meals, drinking wine, and smoking before having sex. Dimitri is aging and slightly gray-haired, but she is undeniably attracted to him and his European sophistication. Being with him twice a week feels like being in Paris—anonymous, independent. With Dimitri she refers to Gogol only as "my husband."

Now it is Gogol's name that Moushumi avoids, as she falls quickly into this affair with Dimitri. It represents everything that Gogol does not offer her—a window into her rebellious past in Europe and a continuation of this rebellion into the present. Gogol has now become associated with the familial side of her identity, a complacency she seeks to escape in her relationship with the sophisticated Dimitri.

At home, Gogol suspects nothing. Moushumi is worried at first, but their nighttime routine of dinner, television, and then sleep does not change. She has trouble sleeping, though, and one night, as the construction below keeps her awake, she feels intense anger at Gogol for sleeping through it. When rain begins to pour, pelting the windows, she rouses him to see it. She weeps the next morning at the sight of the leaks in the ceiling, but Gogol is mystified by her sadness, remembering nothing from the night before.

The division between the couple grows, as Gogol's failure to notice the small changes in Moushumi only confirms her sense that they are not really meant to be together, and that he can never understand her. While this realization saddens her, she makes no attempt to make him understand, continuing to hide her affair and true feelings from the oblivious Gogol.

After a month of Mondays and Wednesdays, Moushumi begins to escape to Dimitri's on Fridays as well. She wonders whether she is the first woman in her family to ever be unfaithful, and is amazed by how easy it feels. Left alone in Dimitri's apartment one day, she scans his bookshelves, recognizing many titles. She takes out a **book** of photographs of Paris by Atget, looking over the landmarks from that city of her past. She is interrupted by the key turning in the door as Dimitri returns.

Moushumi's commitment to this other identity deepens. She sinks all too easily into the world of Dimitri, the world of Paris – as contained within the book by Atget – that he knows as she does. By now, rebellion – and rebellion through love – is second nature to Moushumi, an instinctual drive she has felt since childhood, when she used books to escape her commandeering family.

CHAPTER 11

Gogol wakes up late one morning alone in bed—Moushumi is away at a conference for the weekend, and the heat has malfunctioned, leaving their apartment freezing cold. He tries to work from home, but decides to go in to the office, leaving her a note. Alone at work, he glances at his desk, where the calendar reminds him that this Friday will be the fourth anniversary of his father's death. Alongside it are photos of his family and of Moushumi.

This chapter switches back to following Gogol's path, but now the reader knows what he doesn't – that his wife is having an affair. This creates a sense of suspense, as we foresee the pain of that discovery and contrast it with the normalcy of his current actions. The fact that Gogol measures time relative to his father's death shows us just how impactful it was.

As he works, he thinks of Thanksgiving dinner the week before. Gogol and Moushumi had cooked in their apartment, and her parents, Ashima, Sonia, and Sonia's boyfriend Ben joined them, all speaking in English for Ben's sake. Seeing Sonia and Ben, happy and in love, amplifies questions he has been asking himself recently about Moushumi's happiness with their marriage. Gogol is dreading Christmas, a fact that he thinks make him finally an adult. He doesn't know what to buy for his wife.

The suspense continues – we learn that Gogol has begun to question Moushumi's happiness, but doesn't suspect her affair. Their Thanksgiving in New York is particularly heartbreaking, since it shows that Gogol believes he has managed to form what he thinks is a stable home, a place that fuses his family and Indian heritage with the American lifestyle he grew up with. On a basic level, however, there is a disconnect between him and Moushumi, as illustrated by his puzzling over her Christmas present.

Inspired by the idea of planning a trip to Italy, Gogol buys Moushumi a guidebook and begins to walk home, frightened momentarily by a flock of pigeons that seem strangely out of place in the trees of a park. He buys some of her favorite food and walks home. The doorman tells him with a smile that his wife has just returned, and Gogol's heart swells at the thought of her. He hides the **book** in the pocket of his jacket and calls the elevator.

The guidebook, a promise of a brighter future, cheers Gogol's spirits – although the uncanny sight of pigeons in a tree (instead of on the ground or a roof) is disconcerting to him: especially his realization that seeing birds in a tree is disconcerting in the first place. This is an image of identity confusion that resonates with Gogol's long struggle to find where he belongs. Again, Lahiri builds suspense for when the affair will become known.

CHAPTER 12

It is Christmas eve in the year 2000, and Ashima is sitting at the kitchen table, preparing her signature croquettes for an upcoming party—the first since her husband's death, and the last before she moves from the house at Pemberton Road, which has been sold to a young American family. Hearing their plans for renovation, she had hesitated, but in the end went through with the sale. She has decided to spend six months in India and six in America for the rest of her life. In Calcutta she will live with her brother Rana and his family, in America she will split her time between her children and Bengali friends.

Leaping ahead in time again, we find that Ashima has made a choice to live half of the year in India, and half in America. This illustrates the divided identity she has come to inhabit comfortably, after many years of difficulty. Ashima cooking is an image that mirrors the first page of the novel. The house that has been home to the Gangulis in America will soon be relinquished to another young family, acquiring a new identity separate from them.

One reason for moving is the marriage of Sonia to Ben, which is scheduled to take place in Calcutta next year. Ashima looks kindly on this marriage—Ben makes Sonia happy in a way that Moushumi never did with Gogol, a match she still feels guilty for encouraging. They are divorced now, not having felt constrained, as the previous generation would have, to stay together, to settle.

Sonia and Ben offer hope that a happy multicultural marriage can exist, in a novel that has witnessed the disintegration of many romantic relationships – including, we now learn, that of Moushumi and Gogol. Ashima's perspective emphasizes the difference in point of view that still separates her from her children.

Now, for these last few hours, Ashima is alone in her home, a state of existence she has grown used to. She is no longer the same Ashima she once was, and will be returning to Calcutta with an American passport. Still, she looks forward to a world where she does not have to make her own croquettes, or cobble together homemade yogurt from half-and-half. She finishes the last croquette and looks at the food she has prepared with anticipation. She has enjoyed cleaning and preparing for this last gathering, a welcome relief from the slow task of packing up her life room by room.

Ashima, who for much of the novel has seemed to be the unchanging core of the Ganguli family, the one least willing to adapt herself to life in America, has changed in spite of her stubbornness. In a way, her growing acceptance of this part of her identity mirrors her son's growing acceptance of his Indian heritage. Still, Ashima looks forward to the comforts of those Indian tastes she has been trying to recreate for her whole life in America.

Upstairs in the bathroom before showering, imagining life as a grandmother, Ashima suddenly starts sobbing in memory of her husband and fear for what is to come, this journey to a place she has missed for so long, and which is now in its own way foreign. She will miss parts of her life in America, like her children, the library, throwing parties, and the memories of her husband. Steeling herself, Ashima puts on a thick pink robe, a gift from her husband, no doubt picked out by one of her children. She does not fault Ashoke for this fact, which could seem like a lack of care. She no longer wonders what it would have been like to fall in love before being married, instead of afterward. Now the robe is a reminder of the life they built together here.

Ashima, adapted at last to this American environment in a few important ways, is now caught between two cultures just as her children have been. The most important things connecting her to America are her children and the memories of the life she built in this country with Ashoke. She reflects on the difference between her marriage and her children's romantic relationships. Her embrace of the robe feels like an acknowledgment of the loving familiarity that grew between her and Ashoke over the years, until each depended on the other.

No one greets Gogol at the **train**, so he waits at the station, reflecting on his mother's upcoming move, and the loss of his childhood home. Soon there will be no more reminder of his past here, and his mother will be far away. For the first time, Gogol feels he understands what it must have been like for Ashima and Ashoke to leave their past life in India, and he wonders if he has the same strength. He has never lived more than a four-hour journey from home, he realizes, a journey he has made again and again. It was on the train that he first discovered Moushumi's affair, when she slipped up and mentioned Dimitri. He had felt the same betrayal as when Ashoke told him about the train accident, but none of the accompanying tenderness, only anger.

Once again, it is on a train that an event that will shape Gogol's future takes place. It is Dimitri's name, slipped accidentally into conversation, that alerts him—the name makes Dimitri present at last. In the aftermath of that moment, however, Gogol seems mature in a new way – he is able to reflect on his links to this vanishing childhood home, relating it to his parents' experience of leaving India. With all of the effort he has put in to escaping, he has never actually gone very far from this home, and is not sure how he will cope with its loss.

Gogol and Moushumi were then trapped together on the **train**, and then at the Christmas celebration at his home. Moushumi revealed the whole story, and for the first time Gogol found himself more upset at another man's name than his own. Moushumi left the apartment after that weekend, and Gogol removed the rest of her things from their home, just as he had done after his father's death. Gogol went alone on the trip to Venice that he had planned for them to take together, and he sketched its buildings. A year later, the shock is gone, but sometimes the shame persists—although he cannot blame Moushumi. He knows they both acted out of the same mistaken impulse, looking for comfort in a world they feared was dying out. His time with her now feels empty of meaning, "like a name he'd ceased to use."

This offhand comment – that for the first time Gogol is more upset at another man's name than his own – carries more significance than it seems to at first. Gogol does not feel that the blame for his failed marriage falls primarily on his shoulders, and the self-loathing that has accompanied his relationship to the name "Gogol" does not resurface here—showing his growth and self-confidence. His process of mourning, involving a trip to Italy, is much more positive and based in a sense of independent growth than any of his other breakups have been. Gogol understands the mistake that drew him and Moushumi together: an attempt to use one another to form an identity.

Sonia and Ben arrive, and Sonia greets Gogol, saying, "Welcome home, Goggles." They go to the house and assemble the artificial Christmas tree, decorated with ornaments they made as children. They put up the stockings and drink champagne from Styrofoam cups. That night Ashima will fill their stockings, according to the rules of Christmas her children have taught her—rules that Sonia rejected one year after taking a Hinduism class in college, a fact they tease her for now.

Sonia's nickname for her brother immediately evokes their close relationship, recalling the Indian tradition of pet names, but with an Americanized twist. The champagne, which even Ashima sips, is a sign of celebration, and the Styrofoam is typical of their lifestyle here – so different from the world of Maxine or Moushumi, but so comfortable and familiar. This glimpse of Sonia's own struggle with her heritage suggests that she has gone through similar identity crises to what we have seen Gogol face throughout the novel.

The guests begin to arrive, chattering in Bengali and expressing their regret at Ashima's departure. Gogol realizes that Ashima has been the force that gathers them all together for these occasions, and it is Ashima they have relied on to translate American customs, customs that she only knows because of Gogol and Sonia. Ben is overwhelmed by all of the new names, but Gogol reassures him that he will never need to know them all—he refers to them all as *meshos* and *mashis*, uncles and aunts.

Ashima's importance in the community shows the purpose she found for herself in America, as a sort of matriarch who fought to maintain their ties to Bengali culture. The newcomer, Ben, is introduced to the crowd in a way that Maxine never was – suggesting that Sonia is allowing him to see every side of her identity. Gogol's comment about the names shows that, in the end, the relationships matter more.

Gogol reflects that their life has been formed by a series of accidents—first Ashoke's **train** accident, inspiring him to move to America, then the disappearance of the letter containing his good name and the accident of his being named Gogol. His marriage feels like an accident as well, and worst of all is the death of his father—but it is these things that endure, that have brought them here today. Ashima interrupts Gogol's thoughts to ask him to fetch the camera, and he goes upstairs to find his father's Nikon. He is distressed by how empty all the rooms are.

The reader has a privileged view of this series of accidents to which Gogol is referring – in many ways, Lahiri's novel has presented these accidents and asked the reader to string them together into a narrative, a process that Gogol is now starting to undertake himself. Gogol's mature reflection is somber, but he doesn't seem to regret the negative things that have brought him to this point. He is only now beginning to accept that the things that have formed him are outside of his control.

Gogol takes the camera into his old room to load a new battery, and is struck by how much is the same here, as he has yet to clean out the room. Ashima has warned him that all of his books will be donated to the library where she works. Gogol pokes through a box of them, and one **book** catches his eye. It is the copy of *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol* that his father had given him years before, still unread. He finds the inscription, and reflects that soon there will be no one left to call him Gogol. His father is dead, and his mother is leaving. The thought is an unhappy one.

The rediscovery of this book, so important to Ashoke and ignored for so long by the rebellious Gogol, spurs an important reflection: soon, no one in America will think of him as Gogol. He will have finally escaped this name – but the loss of that part of him is no longer his dearest wish, and he will even miss it.

Gogol closes the door and sits down with the **book**, which has been saved as if by chance from being lost, just as Ashoke had been saved from the **train** accident years ago. Gogol reads the author's bio—in ten years he will be 43, the age Nikolai Gogol died. Gogol wonders if he will remarry, and have children. There is a chance that the new architecture firm he is about to start working for will someday take on his name—Nikhil Ganguli—but the name Gogol will not live on.

This book's survival is another in the series of accidents that, Gogol reflects, have formed his life. He is growing older, but has still not yet found the stable identity he has been seeking. While the architecture firm will grant his new name some permanence, his links to the name Gogol, and its connection to his father, will eventually be lost.

Gogol opens to the first story in the **book**, "The Overcoat." Soon Ashima will come to find him, wondering where he has been, scolding him, urging him to come and take his photos. He will descend the staircase and help to serve the food, and then to clean the plates, watching his mother give away leftovers in the cooking pots themselves. But for now, Gogol settles against the headboard and begins to read.

Finally Gogol overcomes his instinctual rejection of his namesake, beginning the process of accepting this part of his identity. At the same time, reading the book (in his childhood room, no less) is like following in Ashoke's footsteps, and so Gogol finds that connection to his heritage and his lost father in his own unique way, after a long path of avoiding that heritage. The house will still be sold, and this physical link to Gogol's past is falling away, but on a deeper level, in this moment Gogol is opening himself up to every part of his identity for the very first time.

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